Critical Hits

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Writers on Gaming and the Alternate Worlds We Inhabit

EDITED BY

Carmen Maria Machado

AND

J. Robert Lennon

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In my first memory of the medium, I am standing behind Eric and he has black hair. His mother couldn't have watched me more than a handful of times in my childhood, but I can visualize the living room vestibule where we are standing as clearly as if it's my own house. I'm probably seven? It must be around 1993. I remember that Eric is playing *Super Mario Bros.*, but only because my little brother's name is Mario and I make the connection with confusion. Eric offers to let me play, once, and I hold the controller like the alien object it is. I try to move Mario and somehow die immediately. Eric takes the controller back and keeps going. I watch. I am always watching.

I was not allowed to play video games as a kid. My mother was scornful of them, talked about them the way she talked about all television that wasn't PBS. (Only bad parents, she said, allowed their kids' brains to rot that way.) It would never be allowed in our house. In *her* house, she clarified.

By the time my brother came along—and got old enough to want, and ask for, such things—she had relaxed on this point, for reasons unknown. For him, anyway. My bad parents gifted him a Game Boy for some holiday; later, a PS2. Sometimes I borrowed the Game Boy and took it to the bathroom and played *Pokémon* all night. And sometimes he let me play alongside him. But it never lasted very long. I wasn't any good. I didn't feel a rhythm when I played; I had no intuitive sense of the process. It did not feel like reading or writing. It felt like being asked to perform a dance I'd never heard of.

But I still enjoyed it. I enjoyed the sense of being lost; the clarity of solving a puzzle; the pleasure of turning a corner into some new wonder.[1] I enjoyed it so much that when we eventually got a computer—I was twelve, almost thirteen—I took my babysitting and birthday money to Electronics Boutique in the Lehigh Valley Mall.[2] Drunk with power—my parents didn't quite understand that computer games were simply video games on the computer, and had not had the foresight to dissuade it—I bought *3-D Dinosaur Adventure* (came with its own 3D glasses!); *Myst* and its ilk (iconic); *Theme Park* (when you went bankrupt, a cutscene showed your businessman protagonist jumping off a ledge in the reflection of a family photo on his desk); a series called *Eagle Eye Mysteries* (Encyclopedia Brown by way of the Boxcar Children); a historical mystery called *Titanic: Adventure Out of Time*; *Oregon Trail* and its many sequels (needs no introduction; I always started the game as a doctor and packed a harmonica and was notorious for misfiring my gun and injuring someone in my wagon party).

In the college dorms, I lived next to a room of seasoned gamers, who played so much *Halo 2* that I am certain the sound of its gunfire would put me to sleep at this very moment. The gamers, who became dear friends, patiently tried to help me play several times, but I found myself utterly unable to aim or shoot and would stand in a corner and fire maniacally at the walls until the scrimmage mercifully ended. Later, when a few of us moved into a house together, I got hooked on the Elder Scrolls game *Oblivion* and played as a fistfighting cat-person; I spent so much time on it I began to dream that I was my Khajiit self, running around the Cyrodiil landscape coldcocking every random character who crossed my path.

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1. It also cannot be denied that the fact that it was being discouraged—at all, and along gendered lines—made it that much more appealing.

2. Or, to be more precise, me and my babysitting and birthday money *were taken to* the Lehigh Valley Mall, where I said I intended to go somewhere far more in-character, like Waldenbooks for the newest *Animorphs* installment or Natural Wonders for a velveteen satchel of tumbled semi-precious stones. I did that, too—of course—but first Electronics Boutique, with its floor-to-ceiling racks of shimmering jewel cases.

When I dated my first and worst boyfriend, I was completely enamored with his copy of *Fable II*, an open-world fantasy RPG with a series of charming features I adored, including a companion dog and the ability—as a buff female melee fighter—to have sex with and father children with other women. I liked the game so much I put off a necessary breakup until I'd finished the main plot.

Another boyfriend—the second and best—could not believe I'd never played *Portal*. In his bedroom, he sat me at his elaborate PC setup, slipped huge headphones over my ears. "What are you going to do while I play this?" I asked, and he smiled. "Just watch," he said. I shrugged and started playing, and shrieking with delight, and marveling over the physics of the thing. Every so often I'd turn around and he'd be watching me; he seemed genuinely pleased.

Years later, in grad school and on the heels of the end of a horrific relationship, I returned to Elder Scrolls—this time, *Skyrim*—and played on my friend EJ's couch. He gently ribbed me about my obsessive collecting of in-game foodstuffs; I explained that it felt insane to walk past anything and not pick it. "See?" I said as I raided a garden full of cabbages,[3] feeling serotonin cascade through my brain. Eventually EJ sweetly fell asleep on the futon next to me; I played until the sun came up and walked home through the streets of Iowa City feeling calmer than I had in a year. When I eventually slept, I dreamt of the collecting by Ralston Creek: the banks littered with plates and bowls, books and armor, herbs and dried goods, all to be added to an inventory with infinite space.

After school, when I moved to Philadelphia, I would often take a bus into New York and stay with my friend Tony, who had a PS4. It was next to Tony—who, like my old boyfriend, seemed content to

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3. Recently, on a trip to Krakow, I was touring a basilica with two Polish dykes and talking with them about—what else?—topping and bottoming. How you know what you *are*. When the conversation meandered toward video games, one of them said, "Oh, that's another way you can tell. Are you a killer, or a collector? Tops prefer to kill; bottoms collect." I though back to *Skyrim* and my cabbages. Then to my love of melee combat; the way it felt to run swinging into a crowd of enemies. "I like . . . both?" I said, taking a photo of the vaulted ceiling crowded with stars. "Aha," she laughed. "A switch."

watch me play, and genuinely happy to be sharing something that also gave him pleasure—that I played *The Last of Us*, *P.T.*, *Until Dawn*, and the beginning of what has become one of my favorite franchises, *Life Is Strange*. On his couch, I decided to buy a Playstation of my own, and after that played video games the way a hungry woman sits at a table full of food—hardly knowing where to start; grinning wildly at the satisfaction of her voracious appetite. I played RPGs, puzzle games, first-person shooters. Indie games that played like ergodic novels; games with obscure and impossible-to-parse lore. Horror games that made me scream and throw the controller in terror. Games that made me sob. Games I played without really understanding them. Games hard enough that I had to watch play-throughs on YouTube and cheese specific bosses to advance. Games so buggy I had to delete them. Games I didn't finish. Games I got stupidly good at. Games I've replayed many times since. There was *Horizon Zero Dawn* and its sequel. *Hollow Knight*. *Resident Evil: Biohazard*; *Resident Evil: Village*. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and *Assassin's Creed* (*Odyssey* and *Valhalla*). *Ghost of Tsushima*, *Death Stranding*, *The Last of Us* (again), *The Last of Us Part II*. *Control*, *Far Cry*, *Fallout*. *Alien: Isolation*. *Red Dead Redemption 2*. *We Happy Few*, *Vampyr*, *Prey*, *The Last Guardian*. All of the *BioShock* games. *Life Is Strange*, *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, *Life Is Strange 2*, *Life Is Strange: True Colors*. *Everyone's Gone to the Rapture*. *Stardew Valley*. *Witcher 3*. Needing more—and wanting to be able to play at a residency or traveling, if the mood struck me—I downloaded Steam on my computer and played *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *The Beginner's Guide*, *Broken Age*, *Dear Esther*, *Don't Starve*, *Firewatch*, *Gone Home*, *Her Story*, *Inside*, *Kentucky Route Zero*, *Limbo*, *The Long Dark*, *The Novelist*, *Oxenfree*, *Return of the Obra Dinn*, *SOMA*, *The Stanley Parable*, *Tacoma*, *That Dragon Cancer*, *Undertale*, *The Walking Dead*, *The Witness*, *The Wolf Among Us*. I began to play games with friends so inexperienced they could not use the controllers on their own; unused to the mechanics, the camera on the screen would vacillate dizzyingly, wildly, exactly the way I used to shoot—read: not shoot—in *Halo 2*. So we started to play together. They told me where to go and I took them there and they told me what to click

and I did it and in that way we moved through the story together; inch by inch.

In an early draft of this essay, I focused a lot on the gendered nature of these experiences; how often I was receiving (literacy of, access to, skills for, experience with) games from men. I mentioned my anxieties about identifying as a gamer. I talked about Gamergate.

But as I keep writing I am struck far more forcefully by the intimacy of the form; the way the experience of it is specific, even erotic. What did it mean to receive someone's tutelage? To let yourself be watched? To open yourself up to new ways of understanding? To die over and over again? To experience pleasure vicariously, a kind of compersion. Knowing only what you do not know, being in awe of the form's avenues of pleasure.[4] Letting yourself want, play for days, cheat, give up. Letting yourself try again. Sharing games that aren't even really designed to be shared.

In 2018, when I was touring my first book, I mentioned during a Q&A after a reading that I'd tried to start playing *Bloodborne*—the newest entry in a famously punishing franchise made by From Software—but given up because I found the game too annoyingly, relentlessly difficult. I'd hardly been able to make any progress at all.

In my signing line, a very nervous-looking guy came up to me. After pre-apologizing—clearly aware of the optics of a man explaining how a video game works to a woman—he began to stammer out a defense of the game. Not as a way of shaming, but explaining that yes, it had a steep learning curve, but once you figure out the mechanics, it was like magic. As he talked, he got more animated; his hands swooping around describing how it becomes like a dance, like a

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4. Once, while playing some open-world game while extremely high, I sat crouched outside a bandit camp I was meant to clear out and listened to the mindless chatter of the NPCs (non-player characters) patrolling inside. *They have their own lives*, I thought, moved beyond reason. Their own absurd patterns and habits and relationships and existences. After the dialogue circled itself several times, my partner came into the room and asked me what I was doing. I tried to explain that I was basically playing *Waiting for Godot*, except I was Godot. *I was God*. Then I started crying at the beauty of it all. The patience with which she looked at me, reader! The tenderness.

perfect dance. "You will love it," he kept saying. "You will love it." He was so impassioned that I went home, redownloaded the game, and began to play. And he was right. Once I found the rhythm, I found myself able to slaughter my way through the blighted and horrifying landscape; lean into the insanity of the lore; appreciate the game's commitment to its bit.

After that, I played the next game in the franchise, *Sekiro*; now, I continue to pour much of my free time into the high fantasy horror open world of *Elden Ring*. Recently, after giving a talk at a fundraiser, I was encircled by several beautiful high femmes who gave me advice about how to access a particularly rune-lucrative level. We talked loudly, excitedly, far too long. There was such joy in the conversation; a peculiar investment in a stranger's success at some obscure shared task. I wrote their advice down on my hand. (As of the time of writing this, I cannot defeat Commander Niall to save my life and I need the left half of the Haligtree Secret Medallion; please send help.)

Here is an anthology that holds every way in which video games are dear to me: How they permit us vicarious pleasures (Ander Monson, "The Cocoon") and pains (Jamil Jan Kochai, "Cathartic Warfare"). How they reach out to us from our childhoods (Octavia Bright, "Staying with the Trouble") and connect us to other people (Stephen Sexton, "No Traces"). How they ask us—require us, beg us—to interrogate our relationship with our homes (J. Robert Lennon, "Ruined Ground"), our ideas about free will (Charlie Jane Anders, "Narnia Made of Pixels"), and how our fantasies become our myths, which in turn become our history (Vanessa Villarreal, "In the Shadow of the Wolf"). How they witness, speak to, alleviate, and bear metaphors for illness (Elissa Washuta, "I Struggled a Long Time with Surviving"), depression (Larissa Pham, "Status Effect"), gender dysphoria (nat steele, "I Was a Teenage Transgender Supersoldier") and euphoria (Max Delsohn, "Thinking Like the Knight"), grief (Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, "This Kind of Animal"), the complex landscape of our identities (Keith S. Wilson, "Mule Milk"), redemption (Hanif Abdurraqib, "We're More Ghosts Than People"). It is

an anthology that holds space for writers who are compulsive gamers (Tony Tulathimutte, "Clash Rules Everything Around Me"), former gamers (Alexander Chee, "Ninjas and Foxes"), parents of gamers (Eleanor Henderson, "The Great Indoorsmen"), and game writers (MariNaomi, "Video Game Boss"). Reluctant gamers and avid gamers and people who wouldn't call themselves gamers at all. This book—the first of its kind, as far as I and my coeditor can tell—has more room inside it than you'd expect. What a pleasure and a gift to be at its helm.

Covid haunts these pages, of course. We got stuck inside for years and remain kind of stuck, and video games are a way of filling the vessel of that stuckness. But the pandemic even haunts the reprinted essays that predate its existence—call it the dread of knowing what's coming. You are reading this book sometime after my writing its introduction, and you almost certainly have that same dread. Who knows what horrors will arise between my typing this and your taking it in? I can hardly imagine it. The levels I haven't reached. The chapters I haven't unlocked.

But joy haunts these pages, too. Play. We imprint on the medium and the medium imprints on us. Even when we get locked inside, art gives us a window. A door. An escape hatch. A crack, at the very least, to breathe.

Before the book tour for my (sad, difficult, hard-to-talk-about) memoir, I bought a Nintendo Switch. At the end of almost every event, I went back to my hotel room and played *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. One of the only ways I knew how to come back into my body—because I was always gone after those readings and Q&As, always completely dissociated and vacated and empty empty empty—was that stupid little tune that played when you cooked a meal. The crackle of fire, a grunt and then a humming, the clatter of metal striking metal, the rhythmic sizzle and bubble of ingredients. The flourish of horns at completion. Link's delighted laugh. Sometimes I didn't even do side quests or paraglide over the landscape or fight monsters; I just cooked digital food until I fell asleep. It always got me to the

next morning. And then I'd get on a plane and do it all over again. In the sky, the actual sky, on my way to the next sad place. Cooking this thing and that. That little song at the end! The ascending chime.

In that memory, I am good at something, and it is a bridge. I can hold it in my hands, move myself through space. It is real and not real. It carries me away, for a little while. It will carry me into a pandemic. (The pandemic has not happened yet, but it is coming.) The memory of the game bears me through the memory of the time. But most importantly: I play. That's the best part. In the memory, I am always playing.

Carmen Maria Machado
Brooklyn, NY
December 2022

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Clash Rules Everything Around Me

TONY TULATHIMUTTE

Something in my pocket is killing me: a suckling tick, a phone-borne horde of barbarians. Have you played *Clash of Clans*? It's a mobile strategy game in which you cultivate a base of tiny soldiers to destroy other people's bases of tiny soldiers. Released in 2012 by the company Supercell in Helsinki, which puts the Viking pillage mechanics into some kind of approximate cultural context, it's free to download and nominally free to play—yet as of 2018 had the highest revenue of any app on Apple's App Store: $6.4 billion, $9 million of which went toward a Super Bowl commercial starring Liam Neeson.

I want to talk about how this happens, but right now I'm busy playing *Clash*. Would you like to see my base? Here, flea-sized people teem around in an isometric village, in shades of nuclear green, concrete gray, mustard yellow, and turd brown. Little tunic-clad builders swing teensy hammers at scaffolded barracks, while info bubbles importune me to brew spells, research upgrades, and collect resources. Every tap of the screen brings on a new funny plip or jackpot chime or orchestra hit. My defenses are a mix of military industriousness and high fantasy: house-sized mortars, pink-haired archers in flak helmets, wizards poised atop mountains ready to send fireballs streaking from their fingers. My wealth is housed in enormous bins of gold doubloons and globes of magenta elixir. I will spend it all today and get it all back again tomorrow.

Clash isn't especially addictive (I know what *that* looks like), but

it puts me in constant low-grade anxiety. Is my shield depleting? Are my builders idle? Which upgrades do I pursue? It is a persistent itch that's pleasurable to scratch. Every fifteen minutes or so a notification informs me that my troops are ready for battle, or that my village was wiped out by someone called "dank nuggs" or "rektum." The threat of invasion from other players is constant, as is the opportunity to invade them; a "Revenge" button appears after someone attacks you. Pressing your fingertip to the battlefield makes a gush of wriggling troops surge out, absorbing bombardments from the enemy's defenses. Your troops either get wiped out or successfully raze your enemy's base; the more total the destruction, the greater the spoils of gold, elixir, trophies, and sadistic glee.

Not everyone is your enemy. You can create or join clans of players, enabling you to request reinforcements and battle other clans. Little distinguishes one clan from another besides stats and names, names like Pinoy Guns, $DA BEASTS$, BLOOD FOR WAR. In an aspirational mood, I searched for any clans called "Happiness," but they were all either empty or invite-only. Clan Prestige kicked me out immediately; Clan Friendship kicked me out for donating weak troops; Clan Love communicated mostly in Arabic. So I stayed awhile in the dead-silent Clan Maturity, left a week later for Clan Corgi Butts, and ended up where I always suspected I belonged: in the Trash Clan. Never mind—everyone is your enemy.

Clash belongs to the "resource management" subgenre of strategy games, which are descended from *SimCity*, *Starcraft*, and *XCOM*, and which the likes of *FarmVille* and *Tiny Tower* have networked and miniaturized. Resource management games have you balancing various types of currency and resources. Construction and warfare lead to more resources, which leads to more construction and warfare: *Clash*'s simplified mechanics boil the resources down to troops, gold, and elixir (read: oil—you extract it from the ground).

There is a trite-and-true political argument that's often made about such games: how they're capitalism simulators, models of military-industrial neoliberalism, ideologies encoded as entertainment—*SimCity* favors regressive taxes, while Molleindustria's *To Build a Better Mousetrap*

demonstrates how automation and incarceration are used to exploit labor. In *Clash*, everything is military, purchasable, and replaceable; the battle reports tell you how many troops you "expended." Unlike other cartoon-style games, where characters are "knocked out" or "eliminated," there's no ambiguity about death. When killed, troops turn briefly into skeletons, then gravestones, and tapping on the gravestones converts them into elixir (read again: oil).

This capitalist angle gets a lot more interesting when you consider that *Clash*'s purpose is to extract the world's most important resource from its player base (now read: money). Gameplay largely involves waiting for things to finish building. If you don't want to wait, you spend. Gems allow you to bypass the wait times for constructions and upgrades, which ordinarily take hours, days, or even weeks to complete. The bright green color of grass, greed, and envy, gems can be earned a few at a time through gameplay but can be purchased with real money to the tune of $4.99 for 500, or up to $99.99 for a 14,000-gem war chest; each gem is worth somewhere between one and twenty minutes of time.

Once you've arranged your base—and there's no end to the possible arrangements—a typical session of base maintenance and raiding lasts about five minutes, and the wait times to train new troops enforce a limit on your gameplay; without gems it'll be another fifteen to thirty minutes before your army is ready for battle, and that will suit most casual players fine. On an online forum, one user calculated that it would take about 952 days—just over two and a half years—to fully upgrade your entire base (provided you have only one builder; more builders can be purchased with gems). He also figures that it'd take 343,000 gems to rush the whole thing, which comes out to roughly $2,450. Many of the top players are wealthy, disproportionately Middle Eastern folks who've spent upwards of $16,000 on the game; game developers call these high spenders "whales," and one Saudi whale in particular was rumored to have spouted over a million dollars on the game.

Clashing on the cheap imposes a discipline on your life. I like to start upgrades right before bedtime to exploit the natural eight-hour

waiting period called sleep. One high-level player on YouTube stressed that the most important element of fully upgrading your base for free is scheduling. "Yes, you actually *do* have to do something in real life to farm a fully maxed-out base," he says, and continues:

> Can you clash at work? Can you clash at school? Do you have breaks? Are you your own boss? Do you have long periods of inactivity, just because that's what happens—can you raid there? The first thing you do when you wake up is you play *Clash*. . . . You can clash in the shower, on the toilet—not recommended, if you don't want to damage or get your phone dirty, but you can do that.

Not recommended, but also not hypothetical: the former no. 1–ranked player George Yao would bring five plastic-wrapped iPads into the shower with him to keep multiple *Clash* accounts going.

So the most interesting thing about *Clash* isn't how it's an allegory for late capitalism. (Isn't everything? Isn't that the point?) It's that *Clash* makes especially clear how interchangeable everything becomes under such a system, and how technology obscures transactions between real and virtual. *Time is life is work is play is death is money is property is time.* Like almost every game with a death mechanic, the true currency of *Clash* isn't virtual gold but actual time. Dying in a game forces you to waste your time trying again, "spending" part of your limited lifespan on a failed effort. Money can help you enjoy your time more, but there's no changing that every session brings you five minutes, a hundred thousand coins, and dozens of deaths closer to your death.

Anyone who grew up playing as many video games as I did wonders about the life they might've led if they'd learned to speak fluent Thai instead. When we call something a "waste of time," we usually mean something outside of the narrative of whatever you've called your real life, some menial and unproductive activity that doesn't amass wealth, deepen your relationships and quality of life, or im-

prove you. Something that makes time pass without changing anything else. *Clash* lends itself to being played casually in captive or idle moments—train time and toilet time—and thus positions itself as a superior waste of time.

It is some wonder how a decades-old, $21 billion industry that outperforms Hollywood could still be considered culturally marginal, but there's no games critic at the *New Yorker*, is there? One can discern in mainstream game writing a common strain of anxiety, quick to reassure us either of gaming's artistic legitimacy and utility or else its corrupting effects (recall the "hand-eye coordination" vs. "Nintendonitis" think pieces of the nineties). Most efforts to make games respectable noisily advertise their seriousness: conferences and college degrees called Serious Play and Serious Games; or the irreverent theme of *Kill Screen* magazine's inaugural issue, *No Fun*.

All this defensiveness seems awfully unnecessary. These days, video games are a thirty-something with a steady job and a *New York Times* subscription. They're used mostly to entertain, but also to train surgeons, soldiers, and pilots, to alleviate pain in hospitalized children, to fundraise for charities; I can also personally attest that I achieved peak fitness from playing an hour of *Dance Dance Revolution* every day in college. (It wasn't worth it.) Games are just too broad to generalize about.

You wouldn't know this from watching TV or movies, though. It's always instructive to hear one medium's opinion of another, but it's especially interesting how TV and movies treat video games, given that the latter were until recently the whipping boys of culture. On film, a character playing video games alone is understood to signify that he—almost always "he"—is lazy, neglectful, depressed, antisocial, unambitious, and/or emotionally stunted. (A few games have cheekily internalized these archetypes—consider *Grand Theft Auto V*'s insufferable gamebro Jimmy De Santa, or *Uncharted 4*'s Nathan Drake, who dismisses the PlayStation as a "little TV game thing.") *House of Cards* stands as an exception: Frank Underwood demonstrates range, erudition, and hipness in his fondness for both *Call of Duty* and *Monument Valley*, though he also demonstrates multiple murders.

The suggestion is that all virtual life is an immersive escape fantasy, one in which your humdrum assigned existence is exchanged for other, more interesting, powerful, or liberated ones. This is no more true of *Clash* than it is of *Tetris*. As your village's Chief, you have no backstory or identity, your troops don't speak or have relationships with one another, and there is no motive to destroy other than destruction itself; your adviser, a concerned-looking brunette, is all business, and so are most of the other human players.

But more often, video games, in the way they structure our behavior and obtrude into our lives, are less escapes from reality than they are metaphors for it. If modern life often seems like it's about making money for large corporations just to pull in enough resources to buy things, collect experiences, form good connections, have fun, and improve yourself, all against a backdrop of nonstop worldwide violent conflict and plunder (especially in the Middle East), then *Clash* is more lifelike than life itself.

In that sense, it's not just a war simulator played on your phone but a success simulator played on your life, one whose achievements can be more consistently rewarding than what our suboptimal social reality offers. Is it at all surprising that some people would decide the play's the thing, and use their lives as resources for the game? "My day job was a means to an end, paying the bills, and my real life was the game," George Yao said of his career pinnacle. The more time, money, effort, and emotion you invest in the game, the less sense it makes to separate it from life—especially if the simulation theorists are right and we're all living in a more advanced civilization's video game anyway.

Nongamers never fail to be amused by people like Yao. Why spend dozens of hours chasing a rare armor set or decorating an in-game house when you could be grinding at work or achieving orgasm? Then again, why achieve orgasm? You expend all your sexual energy today and get it back tomorrow. The stuff of *Clash* may be intangible, but so is most wealth, not to mention status, relationships, accomplishments, and the concepts of God and the nation-state. The pleasure of games like *Clash* is not joy, excitement, or catharsis, and certainly not material gain. It's the steady drip of progression, of constantly gaining

and spending currency. Like cultivating a bonsai, building your base is a means of externalizing self-improvement.

Though you lose battles quite often, in *Clash* there is no concept of loss. Destroyed buildings are rebuilt in seconds, troops can be replaced with identical ones in minutes, and stolen resources can be regained with a bit more killing. *Clash* guarantees that your property only improves; nothing ever breaks or obsolesces or depreciates. Upgrades are conspicuous, inviting you to compare your dingy stone walls with other players' purple crystal bulwarks, or your rickety wooden towers to another's iron parapets—here, luxury is not just power but military power. The only irreplaceable thing is the time you spend, the time you *kill*, playing it.

Maybe it is a waste of time. Yet many wastes of time are classified as meaningful work or enjoyable experience, despite seeming to me intuitively pointless: camping, going on walks, sitting at the beach, team sports, fishing, and having and raising children. Then again, I also think reading and writing fiction are wastes of time, and those are mostly what I do. If I were to mount a utilitarian defense, I could wax poetic about how games and novels offer vivid vicarious experiences and broaden your worldview by putting you in the minds and roles of other people, but that's disingenuous. I read and play games because I want to and nobody is making me stop.

The fact that people still *do* make utilitarian cases for art is a good example of people's need to rationalize their preferences. In a *Wired* profile, one wealthy "whale" reasoned that spending a thousand dollars a night on *Clash* actually saved him money, since he'd otherwise go out and spend six thousand dollars drinking with his buddies. I suspect this attitude has something to do with sunk cost and cognitive dissonance: you might stick to a particular activity because you don't want the hours and cash you've spent to "go to waste," which then encourages you to retroactively imbue that activity with all sorts of heavy meaning to assure yourself that your time was well spent. Compulsion gets reframed as passion, hobbies become identities, and life seems like something more than the process of becoming a beached whale.

Is calling myself a writer or gamer just a way of dignifying my habits? One reason the loser-gamer stereotype persists is precisely the notion that games are *easier* than reality—that people who play lots of them can't cope with the real world's challenges, risks, and uncertainties, and opt for the soft electric blanket of an impoverished simulation. Or they can't do human interaction and have to settle for the companionship of weak AI. Or they're addicts who lack imagination and purpose. Sounds good, except: games, especially online competitive ones, are way hard and failure-prone and full of tedious chores and complete assholes. Compulsive gaming is real enough, but there's a difference between simply preferring to spend your time gaming and being unable to stop, though not a mutually exclusive one. It's a lot easier to call gamers (or readers, or art lovers) weak-minded misfits than it is to countenance the idea that art, even bad art, is richer, deeper, more meaningful than what's available under certain shitty conditions of life: poverty, oppression, exclusion, illness, or even plain old distaste.

What I'm saying is, depending on what your life looks like, either *Clash* is as good a way to spend your time as any, or everything is equally a waste of time. At least enjoy wasting it.

The other day I had my blood drawn, and to distract from the needle I was reading Leonard Michaels's *Sylvia*. As the second vial was drawn I hit a scene just a few pages from the end where a major character dies, and the nurse started wiggling the needle in my arm, asking me to open and close my fist. "Nothing's coming out," she said. "It was coming out fast before, and now it's stopped." After a few more nauseating wiggles she withdrew the needle and told me she'd have to try the other arm.

When the needle went in again, my forehead went damp and my hearing cotton-balled; from somewhere I heard a shrill distorted remix of a Beach Boys song, then I came to with my clothes soaked, a pair of latex-gloved hands supporting my head by the mandible, and a nurse fanning me, saying, "You're waking up. You passed out. What's your name?"

My mouth replied, "Was I dead?"

They'd moved my book and glasses out of reach, and I was made to sit tight for half an hour, infantilized, sipping a cloying orange electrolyte solution and sitting in the phlebotomist's high chair with my legs elevated. I got bored immediately, annoyed that my stupid vasovagal reflex was eating into the time I could have spent at home playing video games instead of writing. I asked my nurse if there was anything I *was* allowed to do; she said I could use my phone. With ash-gray hands I took out my phone and went to war.