MEMORY Insufficient

Games history ezine

Food and games history

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EDITORIAL

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It's generally intuited that our experience with media is additive.

That is to say, the things we read, hear, and play are taken into us and made a part of our own little growing personal ecology of information and opinion. It's why we say that we consume media. Of course, it's also why we say things like "Sorry, I can't help you move this weekend: I'm binging on Breaking Bad." So our cultural intake probably ought to be maintained with some semblance of dietary rigor.

That's what's on Jefferson Geiger's mind in this issue of *Memory Insufficient*, as he goes on the hunt for gaming's haute cuisine. Spoiler alert: he finds it. And why not? Food and games go hand-in-hand. They're typically social, they reward our investment with depth and breadth, and they sustain us. They're sustenance. So when a game portrays food, the act seems almost reflexive.

My meal of choice? Yellow Curry a la *Final Fantasy XI*. Food was a requisite part of questing in the online role-playing game. Show up to your party of adventurers without a pack lunch, and you were like to get shown the door. Pies, soups, and savory meats all granted their own unique cocktail of stat benefits, and the particulars of exactly which made the proper pairing with each the game's playable classes was the stuff of violent debate.

Popular consensus of the time held that as an archer, I was to opt for a dish that improved accuracy. But instead, I followed a rumor about the strength benefits of Yellow Curry, and found it transformative. And before long I took on a different role: that of the travelling salesman, extolling the virtues of my wonder tonic at every gaming forum and virtual border town. "+5 Strength! +2 Agility! Rangers, ask yourselves: what could you do with an extra twenty percent ranged attack power in your arrows?"

Curry stock soars. Those select Rangers who can devote the necessary playing time to afford the good stuff reap its benefits. And thus, food becomes just one more thing for gamers to use as a rubric to mete out the usual pecking orders: casual or hardcore, noob or elite. But as Lana Polansky notes, there are myriad other outcomes. Food brings its own cultural weight into the equation-- it can convey romantic notions, or the comforts of home. It can imbue a scene with energy, or settle nerves. It can be an item to be coveted: some lustrous shiny found deep in some dungeon, or populating the slot machine tumblers of *Candy Crush*. It can make you sick.

Even something as simple as a bowl of soup comes fortified with meaning, and when a developer commits precious resources to the effort of rendering it, that iconography becomes all the more significant. But what if a game does the opposite, and invokes the importance of food without committing to its illustration? Austin Howe examines one such case--and in the classic game *Chrono Trigger*, no less--within these pages. Food isn't alone in this role as a double-edged sword, but as something so common to the human experience, so instantly relatable, failure to portray it properly can mean an instant break from our state of suspended disbelief.

Perhaps it's a matter of habituation. After all, few contrivances a game makes in the name of violence ever elicit much complaint from players these days. We're so conditioned to receive guns, warfare, and powerful sorceries, that we rarely question such premises. Zoya Street's review of *Shenmue* flips that script, and in the process reveals much about the capacity of cooking to mend bonds broken by violence. That's food's latent power: a connective pull that brings people together. And as Onesimus Kain relates, when food and games combine, they draw people around coffee tables and computer monitors alike in mirthful communion.

That's a pretty special power, I think. Maybe even better than +20% Ranged Attack Damage. Certainly better than the only discernable stat change food has given me in real life: -6 Hippocampus. Too much childhood sugar, I'm told.

And lo, *Memory Insufficient*.

SOUP IS GOOD FOOD
ON THE ECONOMY OF PROPS

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Consider soup. Think about the feelings soup conjures when you imagine it. Warmth, comfort, satisfaction, remedy, safety, hominess. We have, as with all things, an ideological relationship with soup. Soup is a foodstuff but it's more than sustenance. Like bread or wine, soup occupies a specific social and ritual identity. It's a first course, or something to eat when sick, or something to warm when cold—and I declare that from a firmly westernized point-of-view.

Every region, it seems, has its take on soup and its use for soup. The stock takes on the flavours of culture and geography, from miso to chicken bouillabaisse. The collective imagination for soup

is something liquid and hot—excluding cold varieties like gazpacho.

It's domestic, even gendered. It's something mom makes. It's a staple. It has an earthiness.

Soup, like just about everything else, has been represented in games and, predictably, has been represented along certain ideological and cultural narratives. The different modes of soup in games generally range from stat booster to potion, but not in every case. The way things like soup are posed, placed, characterized and manipulated in media—specifically in games—reveals what we think about them, what place they have in our lives, and what they mean to us personally and communally.

In creative writing and literary criticism spaces we sometimes talk about word economy, which is, to put it briefly, using the fewest words possible to best communicate ideas. The logic goes that if you can't sum up what you're trying to say, you don't really know what you're talking about and you'll end up confusing or boring the reader. What it also suggests, however, is that every word you end up using has a purpose and a meaning—nothing is chaff. I'm going to violate all that in this essay, but word economy is an especially important idea in more constrained forms like poetry and short story writing. I would argue that some of that principle carries over pretty well to the use of props in games as well.

All video games can be said to possess a number of deliberately chosen objects.

These objects are inserted into a space navigable by the player (whether that's visualized with polys or imagined through hyperlinked text). Some

of these objects are manipulable, others aren't. Some objects lead to consequences, while others are just set pieces.

So far these points are moot, but I think it helps to understand our embodiment in games and our relationship to virtual props through concepts like spatiality, temporality, materiality and modality. Spatiality asks where the soup is found and how it is posed; temporality asks when the soup is found, and how time passes when using it; materiality asks what texture the soup has, or how it feels to manipulate it; modality asks what form and attributes the soup is given.

In *Odin Sphere*, cooking and crafting are important factors in obtaining sustenance and strength and sure enough, soup features prominently among the in-game recipes. The RPG allows for French onion soup, cold cheese soup and consommé among others to be crafted. But *Odin Sphere* is hardly alone. In *Minecraft*, mushroom stew can be crafted using ingredients gathered in the environment and can be consumed to lower the hunger stat. Vegetable soup can also be created in *Skyrim*, and is considered such a powerful stamina and health booster that a Gamefaqs thread is dedicated to discussing how overpowered it is.

In these games, which are largely exercises in role-playing, exploration and world-building, soup (and by extension, food) is something that suggests both a certain "comfort of home" and, in being domestically comfortable, something that is assuaging. Soup serves as support—it's an object of a special feeling of security that manifests both in its actual effects on the player's metrics and in the connotations of it being hot and homemade.

Time also factors in: gathering and cooking ingredients is time-consuming, and so making it becomes both an act of personal accomplishment and substantial consumption because it has labour value. It should recover energy (manifested in stats) because it took effort for the player to create it.

Yeto's Soup in *Twilight Princess*—which Yeto wishes to cook to help his wife, Yeta, recover from illness—gets progressively heartier as the game progresses. As Link traverses the world, foraging and trading for more complex ingredients, the soup's potion-like qualities become more powerful. Space and time lead the materiality of this particular soup to become especially strong as a result. We even see the ingredients plopping into a large, steaming cauldron. The proximity to the cauldron, the sound effects, the lighting—even witnessing Yeto stir the mixture—evokes a kind of texture much like one gets when handling actual food. (The in-game recipe even inspired a real one.)

You can almost smell the aroma steaming from the pot.

This particular soup also happens to reflect Yeto's homestead. He lives in Snowpeak Ruins, and is pretty much a friendly Yeti. In the context of *Legend of Zelda*, it seems appropriate that his favourite soup is a hearty stew: what better to warm and invigourate large, mythical snowbeasts living on an arctic mount? In the context of the real world, this mental association reveals certain cultural expectations as they relate to climate, geography and cuisine. (I think it's also significant that the stock is made from Reekfish—if we were dealing with a Western-made game, the stock might be made instead from Cuccos or cows.)

Of course, Yeto's Soup is only a reprisal of a mission found in older Zelda games, like *Oracle of Seasons*. In that iteration, you similarly gather ingredients for Lava Soup to help Biggoron get over a head cold and he's so thankful that in exchange, you get the Goron Vase as part of the game's ongoing trading quest. While there are other examples of soups-as-potions within the Zelda canon, the general theme here is that soup's mode is medicinal—it calms nerves and cures illness. It's an elixir that removes pain and restores the

self through a feeling of an aptly romantic, almost childlike, nurturing.

Archaeologist and professor of anthropology Michael Dietler, who refers to food as "embodied material culture," writes in *Culinary Encounters: Food, Identity, and Colonialism*:

> "*In effect, consumption is a process of structured improvisation that continually materializes cultural order by also dealing with alien objects and practices through either transformative appropriation and assimilation or rejection. Hence, cross-cultural consumption is a continual process of selective appropriation and creative assimilation according to local logics that is also a way of continually (re)constructing culture.*"

Sometimes, as in the cases of *Suikoden II*'s Iron Chef-like cooking contest, or the Three Stooges clam stew-eating minigame from Cinemaware, the presence of soup is there to suggest something farcical or slapsticky. It's a messy food ripe for physical comedy. But it's also connected to a form of humour that is still comforting and effervescent in this nostalgia for the home, the caretaker and all the other securities we associate with an idealized childhood.

There's an honest, humble simplicity to soup, as a cultural object which might be an almost universal human experience.

Likewise, the transplanting of specific soup modalities, like ramen in the *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* adaptation (which is heavily inspired by River City Ransom) or vichyssoise in *Harvest Moon* demonstrates the cultural cross-pollination that's occurred as a product of colonial and post-colonial globalization. (Real-world examples of this includes the existence of the Banh Mi or the California Roll.)

Screenshot from *Cloud Master* (1988, Taito)

There is one weird exception to all this, though: *Cloud Master*. In this merciless side-scrolling shoot-em-up for the Sega Master System, you face waves of all kinds of surreal and absurd enemies, including flying bowls of ramen. The ramen bowls shoot small bullets at you from some invisible arsenal, leaving you to navigate your fairly large, lumbering avatar around the bullet and enemy arcs while you shoot the bowls down. This kind of pastiche in games evokes a specific time and place for video games. *Cloud Master*, which was originally released in 1988, can be situated in a context that also saw *Super Mario Bros. 2* and *Mega Man 2*, a time when silly and over-the-top was far more the norm in games, when photorealism was still unthinkable.

Obviously, the fact that it's ramen and not, say, matzoh ball soup tells the player about as much about the cultural origination of the game as much as any other set piece. But what's interesting to me is that this is the only game out of the bunch I encountered that used soup as an explicit threat instead of as a comfort.

I think the visual style reinforced by technological limits of the era probably encouraged this inventive handling of objects.

The rigidity of pixel art and flatness (a traditional feature of naturalistic Japanese painting) of the level design presented the opportunity to compensate with the surreal, strange and inexplicable—if for no other reason than to build up a sense of unpredictability and charm. (Perhaps, also, to reinforce the fantastical nature of videogames as a form.) There's nothing particularly special about the ramen itself, but treating it as an archaeological object may reveal a tongue-in-cheek attitude that influenced its inclusion in *Cloud Master*—much like, possibly, the whimsical decision to put eyes on everything in the Mario universe.

Dietler also writes:

> *"What archaeology offers is access to the material dimension of the encounter and to the processes of daily life through which the colonial situation was experienced and worked out by ordinary people. [...] Food happens to be both one of the most important of the material dimensions and one with excellent potential for archaeological visibility."*

To talk about soup in games is to talk about more than a prop: it reveals an economic portrayal of ideology, ritual and role. The way that soup is represented in space and time, in mode and as a materially valued good, tells us a lot about the food, sure, but it tells us more about how we invest meaning in objects (and their attributes) as they are reconstructed in media.

We can easily apply this to anything (certainly, any food) as it's represented in games, and in fact I encourage everyone to do so. With games, we're interacting with signs which reify cultural, political and historical narratives. Games, therefore, are themselves cultural, political and historical objects, and part of our project in interpreting involves understanding the economy of the things in them—why they were put there, of all possible things, and what their presence is saying to us.

RESOURCES

Michael DIETLER (2007)

'Culinary Encounters: Food, Identity, and Colonialism'

in *The Archaeology of Food and Identity*

Image is of Yeto's Soup as recreated on *Gourmet Gaming*, a collection of recipes for foods from video games.

▷*Get the recipe here.*

Essay originally published on Lana's website: *sufficientlyhuman.com*

THE DRINKING GAME
TASTE AND NOURISHMENT IN GAMES CULTURE

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It all started with *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*.

I was failing my arms around in an attempt to defeat the villainous Ghirahim and Demise. My attacks always seemed to be a pixel or two off—a discrepancy between the nominal and actual accuracy benefits of the controller's Motion Plus peripheral. It was a full hour before a final thrust of the Wii Remote into wintry Colorado air brought the game to an end.

I was exhausted—my watch read 11:30 p.m. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a tantalizing bottle of Kahlua sitting on the kitchen counter. I made a White Russian, plopped on the couch and savored

a few sips as I watched the credits roll.

That night, I decided to start a tradition of drinking during ending credits. A way to pass the time and celebrate a small victory over the artificial intelligence that will soon rule us.

I paired a dark and stormy with *Assassin's Creed Revelations*, but the effervescent ginger beer couldn't stimulate an understanding of the game's convoluted plot. When the raspy voice of The Crow Father narrated the end of *Darksiders II*, I prepared an old fashioned, and the burn of the Breckenridge bourbon complemented the tinge of sadness I felt for the game's vaporware sequels. A Bud Light Platinum was the toast for successfully completing *Spec Ops: The Line*—a watery, leftover beer for an insubstantial shooter.

I popped open a brew as Kanye's earworm 'Power' played at the end of *Saints Row: The Third*. This time I was prepared with a local craft beer: Odell's Lugene Chocolate Milk Stout. The beer, named after a dairy farmer who uses spent grain to feed his cows, is a magical elixir. Brewed with milk sugar and milk chocolate, it's perfectly balanced and smells of freshly roasted beans. Hints of vanilla, caramel and cream swirl in the thick and silky concoction. I joined the game's cast and sang along to Sublime's 'What I Got' in chocoholic bliss.

But the flavors took me back to when I was a kid, cooling off after a day in the park with *Final Fantasy IX* and a tall glass of chocolate milk, and I felt sudden shame for my state of arrested development. I'm still at a sleepover playing a *Super Smash Bros.* tournament with friends as cans of ginger ale litter the floor or chugging Cokes while clicking away at a *Starcraft* LAN party. The games haven't changed either. I gather Link's trademark arsenal

in *Skyward Sword* like I did in the *Ocarina of Time*. In *Assassin's Creed* I run along walls and leap from beams, mimicking movements I first made as the titular *Prince of Persia*. I create the same carnage in *Saint's Row* that I failed to hide from my parents in *Grand Theft Auto 3* over a decade ago.

It's time to set my sights higher up on the shelves. I want crafted experiences from master mixologists and games made in homebrewers' garages. Making drinks is both a science and an art: the acidity, bitterness and sweetness need to be perfectly balanced.

The alcohol content can't be weak, but it shouldn't be so high that one drink puts me under the table.

Games require a similar level of detail and finesse. Like with Lugene, the first act of Double Fine's *Broken Age* put me into a trance until its end. The painterly art direction, quirky dialogue and crafty puzzles kept my hand on the mouse at all times. I marveled at the credits, proud that I'd helped fund this masterpiece.

Microbreweries like Odell and small developers can do wonders with modest-sized teams and simple ingredients. Die Gute Fabrik's *Johann Sebastian Joust* brings the medieval into the modern as players keep time with classical music while trying to knock the opponent's control away. It's a folk game that doesn't even have a video component.

Henry Smith's *Spaceteam* turns everyone into spaceship crewmen, surrounded by foreign controls. The goal is to press buttons and flip toggles when instructed. Whenever I'm hanging out with a group of people, I pull out the game and make them *Spaceteam* converts. I wish more mobile games were this engaging and innovative.

Like how malt, hops, yeast and water combine to form seemingly unlimited permutations of beer, the two development teams combined basic elements to create experiences unlike any other. My friends and I only stopped our long *Count of Monte Cristo* duels and frantic shouting of nonsensical commands to rest up and play again.

Besides the simple and captivating, I hunt for games that beckon for my return even though they're better in small doses. *Super Brothers* and Capybara's *Sword and Sworcery* has four acts, but after the completion of one, the pixelated narrator appeared and told me to take a break. The developers realized that too much of a good thing can be bad. Why burn yourself out so much so that you can't enjoy the game? Similarly, the episodic narrative of Telltale's *The Walking Dead* urged me to slow down and take a deep breath. Clementine's gripping tale will still be there—to be slowly savored like an exceptional ale.

I think of Avery's The Beast Grand Cru, with its rich flavors of molasses and dates, its enthralling aromas of honey and nutmeg. However pleasing the drink may be, it also weighs in at 18% ABV. This is not a session beer. I couldn't slam down four or five of those in a sitting, and I've come to find that there's no reason for me to do the same with games.

It's pointless to be glutton.

I want to stop celebrating the stagnant mediocrity that mainstream developers are offering. Let's toast to fine craftsmanship made passionate creatives.
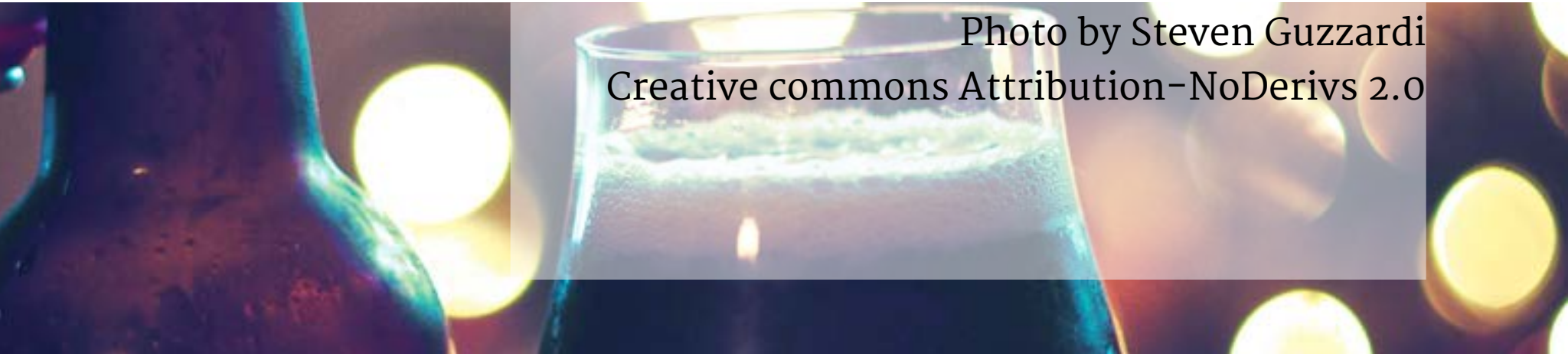
Cheers.

CULINARY RPG
AN ALTERNATE-HISTORY GAME REVIEW OF SHENMUE

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I keep having to remind people that *Shenmue* is not named after its protagonist. Reader, please don't make this mistake: the player-character is called Ine, not Shenmue. Like the protagonists of so many other RPG and adventure games, Ine is a middle-aged homemaker, responsible for preventing a young man in her care from going off the rails by making sure he is well-fed and emotionally nurtured. *Shenmue* is unique, however, in that it comes closer than any other game before to recreating the cinematic spectacle of classic culinary arts films.

The game is set in a faithful recreation of 1980s Yokosuka, packed with period details such as videogame arcades that Ine can visit at any time. The

majority of the game focuses on adventure puzzles—find the one painting in the house that has a key behind it, then use that key to open the door to the secret pantry, etc.—that allow Ine to work out why her young ward, Ryo, has been skipping school and coming home late.

There are regularly-occurring action sequences in which Ine cooks food for Ryo.

These become more important as the game goes on, and over time you're able to learn more combos and recipes from the various restaurant owners around town. This is really fun, and allows you to build a recipe book that suits your play style: get more ramen recipes if you're into fast-paced cooking, or focus on kaiseki cuisine if you prefer to see well-laid strategic plans unfold more slowly.

It is rumoured that *Shenmue* was originally conceived as an addition to the popular *Virtua Vendor* franchise that would capitalise on the growing trend towards open-world role-playing games, while taking a more action-oriented approach to cooking. Although *Shenmue* is set to become a new franchise in its own right, this influence is clearly apparent, and Yu Suzuki's experience producing fry 'em ups for the arcade shines through in the polished cooking engine. I just wish the game had given a little more attention to this aspect, as there just wasn't enough action in the first half.

As you track Ryo's movements, following a breadcrumb trail of nostalgic fetish objects such as hand-written receipts and dropped cassette tapes, you realise that he hardly eats. There are perfectly fine restaurants in town, but he's so focused on some conspiracy theory about his father that he only drops in to ask the proprietors for information, never standing still long enough to eat even a bowl of ramen. Sometimes he drinks Coca-Cola from the vending machine, but that's all.

He has no friends and no surviving family. You're the only one who will feed him.

It's a very moving story about wanting to be there for someone who is too caught up in their own anguish to even notice that you are there. Having said that, I'm not sure how Coca-Cola feels about their product placement being associated with Ryo's utter desperation and loneliness.

Later on in the game, you can also play as a person who sells bento boxes to dock workers. Ine and the bento vendor are able to share information by payphone, and by keeping these two characters in close contact you feel convinced that you can just about work out what Ryo is up to. The climactic tension of this point in the storyline is undermined by the gameplay, however. There are long stretches of time when Ryo is just driving a forklift truck, and you just have to stand around selling bento boxes until he takes his break, hoping that one of your customers will provide some useful morsel of information.

This game really shines in the way it presents the tragedy of Ine's relationship with Ryo. I won't spoil the ending, but I'll just say that I was really touched by how the storyline captured the sense of isolation that they both experience. This is expressed not just through cinematic sequences, but through the dynamics of the gameplay. Cooking for someone is about seeking a connection with them, after all, and in the same way, Ine tries to connect with Ryo by figuring out what he's going through and prevent him from hurting himself.

Each time my fingers gripped the gamepad to get a meal cooked perfectly, I could feel Ine trying to grasp for a handhold with the one member of the Hazuki family who remained to her -- slipping slowly out of reach.

Shenmue screenshot, rerendered in 1080p by Shenmue Dojo forum user Master Kyodai.

BREAKING BREAD
GAMES AS KINSHIP RITUALS

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Onesimus Kain is a Christian artist from the United States. Most of their projects are related to computer games. Their current focus is eclectic music project Ever Towards a Better Yesterday, which blends choral, march, and classical with ambient chiptune.

THE SUN HAS GONE DOWN and the house—whichever house it is today—is much quieter. Most of the louder voices are asleep now.

The rest of us—except for a couple who have elected to sit and read—are around the table. We're playing a game. And we're eating something. Chocolate or peanuts; maybe it's soup or something more substantial.

This is my family, whenever enough of us are together. We sit, we eat, we play a game.

Someone scoops up another spoonful of cranberry

salad while turning over a Scrabble tile, prompting indignant cries in protest that yet another "E" has fallen into the same hands. This new development ends the discussion over what flavor of Jell-O Grandma's recipe for the salad really calls for, and focus returns to the game. Old family recipes, a folk variant of *Scrabble…*

These are the things we gather around—maybe there's a reason for it, and maybe it's just because there isn't anything else.

We love our food. I try not to say "we love good food" though, because when I hear that from others it often makes me uncomfortable. To love food for its taste, to have standards and preferences— these things divorce food from sustenance, and we've always maintained a keen awareness of the relationship between those two.

My dad is an excellent cook. But some of his ingredients are paid for by food stamps. Some of them come out of one of the grocery store dumpsters he checks on a regular basis. We never felt especially poor, though, because we had plenty of things we didn't need at all. Many of these things were games.

We collected a fairly substantial pile of games, because we've always loved all types: the electronic kind, the card kind… everything else, and everything in between. My parents had grown up playing games with their families; they taught these games to their children, and they learned new games to play with us.

Growing up, games were a powerful way for us to connect as a family—not because they fostered pure and uncomplicated happiness, but because they helped us learn to settle disputes. If someone set off the Mouse Trap prematurely, tempers had to be managed and pieces had to be put back together, or no one would get to see which mice

were truly destined for the plastic cage. Resolution to the argument was necessary for the game to continue, and no one wanted to quit in the middle. You just didn't do that.

Now, whenever we all return home, we play games together, and we do this because it is what we have always done. It's ritual. And the other part of the ritual is the food.

These two things—playing games, eating food—have a connection in my family. I don't usually put much thought into the idea that there might be a deep reason for this. We eat because we're hungry, and because we like to. We play games because we enjoy doing that, and because we need a way to pass the time. We fill our bellies and busy our hands. Still, if this is true, it's not just true of my family; it's a common part of human experience.

Food exists because it is a need, and entertainment exists because we want something to do after our needs have been met. It makes sense that culture would grow around these things. Culture that manifests in specific tradition, in specific families like mine.

Leaving it at that sounds a bit empty, really, as if that's all there is to life. But it has nothing to do with bigger purposes, and in fact, little to do with relationships between people, either. It's just the activity the rest of real life gets to circle around.

We want to talk to each other and learn more about one another; we want to sit and learn more about ourselves. But we're silly humans who can't just do those things. We eat something, or we play a game. And, in my family, we often do both when we're together. In the meantime, I'll be congrat-

ulating my brother in between bites of gratin dauphinois on his K-D-A in the game of *Dota* we're playing.

During my lunch break, I'll put down my salad fork for a moment to text my sister about our *Fire Emblem* couples. Thousands of miles rest between us, and this is how we stay familiar. Maybe our relationships are a little bit wrong or a little bit broken if we can't just sit and talk about feelings. But I don't think they are.

We're using the same vehicles to interact with one another as we always have.

If we didn't have an excuse to interact, we probably wouldn't. That's why I feel the connection between food and games is important – because it's about exactly that: connection.

CHRONO ISN'T HUNGRY:
GASTROLOGICAL LUDONARRATIVES

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THERE'S A PRETTY FAMOUS MOMENT in *Chrono Trigger* that takes place not long after Crono and friends Marle, the princess, and Lucca, the engineer, get to the future by way of a time-travel portal.

The gang have arrived in the 21st century sometime after the apocalypse burned civilization to the ground. They find a small group of humans living in the remains of a dome who are struggling to survive. The people are hungry, and they need someone to muster the courage to go into a storage space and fight off the security systems—in particular one nasty guard robot—that have prevented any of them from reaching the food contained therein. But the agony of the dirt-faced NPCs

cloaked in fashionless brown burlap is unable to faze the perky demeanors of Lucca or Marle, or do anything to break the silence of our player-cipher protagonist, Crono.

The group hops into a machine called an Enertron that restores the party's health and magic points. "But you're still hungry . . ." it informs us.

This has become a metaphor for everything that frustrates me about *Chrono Trigger*: this classic RPG from 1995 is often proclaimed to be among the best that the genre and the medium have to offer. In particular, the game is beloved because of a "strong narrative," but when you sit down to analyze that narrative, it becomes impossible to find any real meaning or consequence to the proceedings. On top of that, it's not systematically interesting, either.

Crono isn't hungry. When *Chrono Trigger* tells me my party is "still hungry," when it sends me to find food for the "starving" future world denizens, it is achieving nothing because it refuses to depict hunger, to discuss hunger, or to make the player engage with hunger. When hunger appears as a force by which to drive the narrative and objectives of *Chrono Trigger* it appears anew: not necessarily the first time that the idea of food is mentioned, but the first time that its importance is communicated.

And when it is stated that these people are hungry, we do not see their hunger. No one kneels in starvation, no one grasps their stomach. No one is emaciated. Most tellingly, when the party returns from food storage, having found that all the food has turned to rot, this elicits no reaction. Neither does the news that they have found a seed by which they might grow plants that they could eat.

The tonal dissonance of this is only exacerbated by the fact that the leader of the hungry clan spends more time trying to convince you not to go down into food storage than convincing you he needs your help. This is a narrative context for gameplay challenges that is meant more to emphasize the party's incredible feat of strength in defeating the robot guarding the food stocks, rather than to emphasize their empathy for the struggles of others.

Compare and contrast to say, Fallout 3, wherein there are a fair amount of people scattered about the world who are dying for lack of clean water.

We can see it in the way their models are hopelessly posed on the ground, we can read it in the dialogue and (maybe this is unfair) we can hear it in the voice acting. Your choice to give them clean water is entirely a sacrifice: a decision based on your empathy, with the only systemic reward being an increase in good karma. I feel this comparison is fair, even given the tech gap (*Chrono Trigger* was released in 1995, and *Fallout 3* in 2008) since, sans voice acting, *Trigger* still misses all the aforementioned opportunities.

There are plenty of other Japanese RPGs that have decent representations of hunger as well, simply by including scenes of people eating. In *Terranigma*, the player-character Ark can, at various points, eat food lying around on tables. He gleefully gobbles it up and swallows, and there are various kitchens and dining rooms scattered across the game where he can do this.

Eating food in this manner doesn't restore health, but it is the same animation as when the player uses the restorative "bulb" items, thus it's easier to buy into the idea that eating food is what gives our hero sustenance. Here, there's a direct visual connection between eating and the game systems.

On top of that, the game has more than enough scenes of people eating and drinking food

In a narrative-driven game like *Chrono Trigger*, the story—the idea that these people need my help—should be a far stronger motivation for play than my desire to overcome the arbitrary game challenges (battles and such), that stand between narrative conflict and narrative resolution. I've discussed this with a number of friends who enjoy the game and they all agree, the battle system in *Chrono Trigger* is relatively shallow, and that's fine. These battles serve narrative purposes, but my drive to play the game is not inspired by the wondrous complexity of it's systems and a drive to master them. The battles are simply not engaging enough for that.

This is usually the case in Japanese role-playing games: that relatively simplistic challenges are used to move us through a digital world and tell its story. To repeat the old adage: I'm here for the story, and if that's the case, I need to be able to feel empathy for the characters. Even abstract "art" games and "art" films understand this: that there needs to be a human connection between the characters and the audience. Even *Chrono Trigger* understands this at various points, but here it falls flat.

The main party sprites are famously well-animated, but there is a wide gulf between the amount of work put into them and the amount put into selling players on the desperation of these hungry people.

That lack of effort in the animation sells these characters short, and the contrast with the main party is reflected in how I perceive the people's

purported problem and how the party reacts to it. My focus shifts to the party conquering the next challenge as a self-oriented display of heroics, not a self-sacrificing display of empathy. I am not experiencing the emotional content of a story; I am steeling myself to conquer this system. Not for the greater good, but to prove something to myself.

This works fine in games that are about personal triumph against adversity, but not a game like *Chrono Trigger*. Here, the apocalypse happens years after these characters will die—they need not even worry. But they do so anyway because they empathize with the people struggling to survive in the post-apocalyptic future.

But perhaps the game doesn't need the traditional narrative reinforcement that people are hungry. Maybe it systematizes hunger in an interesting way? Sadly, no.

Hunger is not something that the main characters can take for granted, since at no point do any of them eat to regain energy.

Hunger is not something that players can experience metaphorically through the mechanics, and in fact, the idea that perhaps health and magic points are a metaphor for hunger and satisfaction is denied by the text the Enertron provides. This is especially frustrating, since providing a basic link between the idea of eating and the idea of HP and MP would make it so much more clear why I don't have to worry about my party eating.

And yet, there the Enertron is, presenting its text as clever, angling for some sort of emotional chord when all that it is really doing is contradicting the very idea of empathy.

There are just so many missed opportunities, so much taken for granted. To *Chrono Trigger*, hunger is an idea that exists purely in the script, not in

the sprites or animations or systems. Hunger and starvation are shorthand for a kind of suffering that the game doesn't have the narrative prowess to depict or the design courage to systematize. There is no hunger in *Chrono Trigger*.

But you're still hungry!

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