

***Legendary Days – a novel, and the Aspects of Geek Culture in Fiction***

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## ABSTRACT

This Creative and Critical Writing PhD thesis explores the dialogue between fiction and geek culture. It seeks to understand the definitions and uses of the terms ‘geek’, ‘nerd’ and ‘otaku’ over time. I look for points of commonality and how they have been used in texts since the seventeenth century. After this initial exploration, I move to a close reading of three novels that are representative of geek culture. These texts comment on geek culture though they do not belong to genres traditionally associated with it, such as fantasy or science fiction.

Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* makes extensive use of footnotes, intertextuality and hypertextuality. Douglas Coupland’s *Microserfs* explores the influence of technology, tries to define geeks and nerds, plays with form and language, and touches on the subject of posthumanity. Meanwhile, Nakano Hitori’s *Train Man*, which began life as a collective online message board thread, challenges common tenants of fiction, especially that of authorship and form.

The novels, in the order in which they are discussed, move from the traditional to the innovative. They pose questions about the way in which geek culture interacts with fiction, how this influence plays out in terms of theme, characterisation, format, and the reading experience. Finally, these novels also interrogate ways geek culture might help us understand the future of fiction writing. Both thesis and novel were designed with the idea of ‘play’ in mind, with particular reference to games, flexibility and contestation.

The creative element of this thesis, *Legendary Days*, is a geeky novel about saving memories. The protagonist, after losing his father, writes down his own memories in a narrative that plays with geek culture and related themes. It follows the same character in three different times and contexts, while also allowing for several intertextual intrusions throughout the text.

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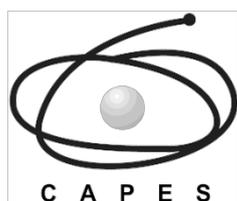
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Please accept my sincere thanks.



## INTRODUCTION

### Warning

This game autosaves at certain points. Do not turn off the power or remove the memory card when you see the icon.

### Tutorial

This thesis investigates aspects of geek culture in fiction, and is accompanied by a novel written with many of those aspects in mind. Both elements are joined to represent my final work as a student of the Creative and Critical Writing PhD programme in the Literature, Drama and Creative Writing School at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Through the discussion of three different novels plus an informative chapter that analyses key terms, my objective is to explore a new set of critical tools and creative possibilities within the culture, the concept and the literature of ‘the geek’.

Geek culture is a frequent topic in the media, and an everyday occurrence online.<sup>1</sup> Do you believe geek and nerd are interchangeable terms? Do you play Mario games on your 3DS? Do you scorn otaku, geeks who dress up as anime characters at conventions? Do you know several programming languages? Can you speak Syndarin? Do you wear a towel around your neck on 25 May? There are many types of geeks, and no standard, authoritative definition that unites them all. There are, however, certain points of which we can be sure. First, geek culture is a very real cultural and social manifestation. There are gaming conventions, role playing game events, cosplay<sup>2</sup> competitions, geek chic fashion, and even entire music genres dedicated to it.<sup>3</sup> Second, key-terms such as 'geek', 'nerd' and 'otaku' have defining characteristics in common. Third, geek culture – while it has come to

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<sup>1</sup> As I write this, You Tube has just announced the *You Tube Geek Week*, to ‘celebrate all things geek’ with a series of videos, premieres and collaborations across more than 100 channels. The themes include iconic characters, movies, sci-fi, fantasy, animation, geek culture around the world, science, education, knowledge, superheroes, supernatural, super-weird, games and fan culture. *YouTube Geek Week*. YouTube. Web. 29 July 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Cosplay (costume + play): dressing up as the characters of anime, manga or videogames.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the San Diego Comic-Con saw an attendance of 130,000 people in recent years (*About. Comic-Con International: San Diego*. Web. 20 July 2013); meanwhile, Japan’s most famous otaku event, the Comiket, recently had over 500,000 attendees (*What is the Comiket?* Comiket Official. Web. 25 July 2013). MC Frontalot is perhaps the most famous representative of Nerdcore, a nerdy subgenre of hip-hop, while Marian Call is a singer and songwriter famous for her geek culture-inspired songs.

striking prominence since the latter half of the twentieth century - is not something new: its formative characteristics have been around for centuries.

This topic was chosen based, initially, on my own interest in geek culture, as well as my personal writing experience. Before starting my PhD at UEA, I had published a short story collection called *Minimundo* which explored intertextual references in very short formats. From those initial interests, I went on to write another short story collection, this time as part of my Master's degree in Literary Theory and Creative Writing at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul in Porto Alegre, Brazil. All of the stories written at that time made reference to a different book, movie, videogame or comic. It was an experimental collection, illustrative of the issues I was dealing with on my critical examination on intertextuality and metafiction.

Over the course of planning and writing this thesis, I came across several questions. First of all, is there a relation between geek culture and fiction writing? If so, what kind of fiction references geek culture? Does geek culture influence the way fiction can be written, understood and read? Is geek culture a new movement entirely? What exactly *is* geek culture? What about similar terms, such as 'nerd', and 'otaku'? What can literature learn from geek culture? Does geek culture point towards the future of fiction?

Each of those questions comes with its own range of challenges, possible answers and potential complications. I tried to address them each time I started a new chapter, knowing that it was impossible to reach definitive answers, but increasingly seeing patterns, resonances, similarities and divergences across the range of material I read.

I was lucky that my research and writing were done under a very encouraging environment. Thanks to generous support by UEA, I was able to attend the Eurogamer Expo event in London in 2011. The next year, I also received the funding from The Sir Philip Reckitt Foundation and the Sasakawa Foundation for a research visit to Japan, where I experienced first-hand some aspects of geek culture in Tokyo and Kyoto, and attended the famous Comiket event. These two visits not only helped me to make academic connections that lead to the creation of other collaborative projects, but also allowed me to achieve a different perspective on my research.

### **Choose your own adventure**

Any thesis must address the question of its choice of texts: and that question becomes particularly vexed in a thesis such as this, where the limits of its field of study are still very much in the making. At first this is an issue of definitions. First of all, what do I mean when I say 'geek culture'? Furthermore, when I say 'aspects of geek culture in

fiction’, what kind of ‘fiction’ am I talking about?

The definitions of geek, nerd and otaku are something addressed in more detail in Chapter 1. I agree with Williams when he says that 'culture' is one of the most difficult words to define. I shall not attempt a new definition: instead, I will follow him in the sense that culture can be considered (among other things) 'a particular way of life, whether of the people, a period, a group, or humanity in general.'<sup>4</sup> In our case, 'geek culture' is the collection of meanings, practices and phenomena surrounding the 'geek', which can be expanded to include similar terms such as 'nerd' and the Japanese 'otaku', while geek culture can also include 'fandom', of which it is almost a synonym.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the first condition the novels in this thesis needed to fulfil was to reference, explicitly, geek culture.<sup>6</sup>

Here, then another distinction is implied: between novels that *deal* with geek culture, and novels that form *part* of geek culture. This thesis treats the former. This is why I am not working with 'pure' Science Fiction or Fantasy novels: they are Science Fiction and Fantasy novels first and foremost, and their impact on geek culture is a secondary characteristic (but exceptions to this rule exist). I cannot deny that my own practice as a writer leaning to the literary side influenced my choice of novels.<sup>7</sup> But I think, without making any simple value judgement, a larger claim can be made, too: the novels on which I have chosen to focus, insofar as they remain affiliated with some of the conventions and aspirations of so-called ‘literary fiction’, while borrowing also on aspects of geek literature and culture, enable, in their very hybridity, the best exploration of the literary and critical possibilities of geek culture.

The three novels I have chosen, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz, *Microserfs* by Douglas Coupland and *Train Man* by Nakano Hitori all focus on different aspects of geek culture. They are all 'literary' novels, if only because they cannot be easily fitted into a different genre. *Oscar Wao* won a Pulitzer Prize and Coupland is a writer who has received considerable scholarly as well as popular recognition, and whose coinages ('Generation X', 'McJob') have entered the common language. *Train Man* is perhaps harder to claim as ‘straight’ literary fiction; and of course – as we shall see further

<sup>4</sup> Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary Of Culture And Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 90. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Fandom seems to be mentioned often as part of geek culture. The word seems to relate to one specific element of geek culture: the obsessive interest on a subject. Geek culture, as a whole, is a bigger, more flexible category.

<sup>6</sup> Another interesting distinction hinted here is between *being* a geek and geek culture *itself*. Some definitions associate ‘being a geek’ with any kind of interest, while geek culture itself is a bigger concept.

<sup>7</sup> I say that aware that literary fiction is, in itself, a contested term: isn't all fiction literary? Can literary fiction be considered a genre in itself?

as we proceed – geek culture ‘itself’ is scarcely tolerant of literary vs genre fiction, or high/low culture distinctions. Nevertheless, the novel deserves consideration here in that it marks a genuinely new, inventive, formal departure, which draws its energies from geek culture and brings them into the book form, with effects whose consequences remain to be seen. It was a massive best seller in Japan, spawning a film, a TV series and even a series of comics based on the original. While *Microserfs* deliberately references ‘geeks’, *Oscar Wao* prefers ‘nerds’, and *Train Man* focuses on ‘otaku’ – terms to which I shall attend further in my next chapter I have organised the novels not in chronological order, but instead from the most overtly and conventionally literary to the most experimental, from the traditional to the innovative, from the structured to the fragmented.

### **Playing the Thesis**

Any piece of work that is both creative and critical is bound to allow for creative interventions in the thesis, and critical interventions in the novel. I also believe that this presents a great opportunity to challenge the common formats of writing, and allows for greater flexibility. I approached the thesis from a slightly deconstructive angle, which is reflected in my mention of some post-structuralist writers such as Derrida and Barthes. This approach also allowed me to keep in mind the idea of ‘play’ whilst writing both thesis and novel. This word has several possible interpretations: there is the association with videogames or games in general, the idea of fun, of flexibility and even contestation. A fully playable thesis with branching paragraphs would be an interesting project, although the difficulty in presenting a consistent argument in a non-linear interactive medium proved to be too high for the present time.<sup>8</sup>

Following this concept, I have added fictional tweets between the chapters, serving the double function of providing chapter summaries in 140 characters or less and upsetting the common academic structure.

### **Difficulty Level**

Writing a creative and critical project comes with its own range of advantages and disadvantages. As a writer, I find it good to be able to dedicate 80% of my word limit to original fiction. On the other hand, leaving only 20% to the critical element may not allow

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<sup>8</sup> There were a few prototypes that were fun to read, but exploring all of the ideas in a chapter would require more than one ‘playthrough.’

enough room to build a detailed argument. In my case, since my writing style tends to be economical, I finished the novel with 50,000 words and the thesis with 30,000 as a sort of compromise.

Choosing a theme that has not yet received a vast amount of critical attention means that many references are fairly new, that they are found as articles instead of full books, and that there are no authoritative texts yet. But geek culture is far from a barren land, although it frequently gathers attention coming from fields outside literary studies, such as media, film and social studies, for example. This situation has a positive side: it permits a more flexible approach and encourages an interdisciplinary approach to this particular topic. I have also found a language barrier: since many intriguing developments and references to otaku culture are in Japanese, I had to content myself with material available in English.

### **Level Design**

My methodology involved a quantitative approach to the usage of certain keywords and the use of graphs to help us understand the information found through Google Ngrams Viewer and Google Trends. In this exploratory chapter, I read the results using examples pulled from the survey. This quantitative start was followed by a descriptive/ analytical approach to specific texts. Through close reading, I linked elements of each novel to certain concepts of critical theory.

In Chapter One, I investigate the origins and uses for each of the following keywords: 'geek', 'nerd' and 'otaku'. I do so by searching for early references and examples, and also by offering graphs on how each of them has been used since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. There is a brief reference to the online trends of usage, a the comparison of my findings with dictionary definitions and an explanation of why I choose to treat these terms as interchangeable words. The purpose of this chapter is to lay the terrain that we are about to cover, defining the terms that I will use from this point on.

In Chapter 2, I discuss Junot Díaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, published in 2007. It received much critical acclaim and was the recipient of a Pulitzer Prize. It follows the story of Oscar de León, a fantasy and sci-fi nerd, and his family, as they struggle to overcome an ancient Dominican curse. Not only is Oscar a geek character, but the witness narrator, Yunior, is also a knowledgeable geek. The novel plays with genre, mixes English and Spanish, and is extremely intertextual, making use of long footnotes and references that range in topic from Dominican history to the *Fantastic Four* comics. Emphasising the novel's footnotes, I draw a parallel between hypertext and intertextuality

as some of the most important aspects of geek culture in fiction, leading to the proposal of a subgenre, or category, called *geek metafiction*.

In Chapter 3, I work with Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*, a novel published in 1995 that deals with the quest of Daniel, the protagonist and narrator, and his group of friends, as they work as coders at Microsoft. They eventually start a new software company and try to create something original on their own. The novel is full of reflections on what means to be a geek and how that notion has changed over the years. It is also a valuable look into how technology influences everyday lives, especially the lives of tech geeks living during the 1990s, a period of spectacular growth in the IT industry. I comment on Coupland's approach to textual experimentation and the idea of words as aesthetic objects on their own, before moving to an analysis of the relationship between geeks and technology. The conflict between the human condition and the machine leads us to examine the possibilities of a world where geeks act as technological gatekeepers, the limits of our humanity and the possibility of its transcendence, with a brief nod to posthumanist theory.

In Chapter 4, we take a leap of faith and investigate what happens when the common values of fiction are transgressed: Nakano Hitori's *Train Man* is a novel but not entirely a novel, published in book form but originating as an online message board thread, and the author's real identity remains concealed. *Train Man* tells the story of how a Japanese otaku meets a woman on the train, and is encouraged to develop their relationship by fellow geeks online. The concept of a geek community contrasts with the stereotype of the geek as anti-social. This Geek Chorus is the star of this novel, taking us from the traditional to the innovative, challenging form, author, narrator and narrative. To help us with disentangling this thread, I work with the database consumption model created by Azuma Hiroki and *The Death of The Author* by Roland Barthes. *Train Man* asks us the following questions: what sort of story can we tell after the impact of geek culture? Is this the kind of novel we should expect in the future?

After all this, in the Conclusion, I offer an account of the different possibilities of interpretation brought forward during the writing process, and the reasons why they were not followed. The conclusion also acknowledges possible shortcomings and the future developments proposed after this thesis.

## **Lore**

I would like to offer some comments on the accompanying novel, *Legendary Days* and its relationship with the thesis. The novel does not serve as a direct illustration of the

thesis and the thesis is not a direct explanation of the novel. Instead, they are separate projects that were developed simultaneously and stem from the same group of creative interests and critical concepts.

*Legendary Days* is the story of Max, a games journalist, who lost his father recently and is having some difficulty coping with it. He inherits his father's old journals and is inspired by them to write down his own memories. The resulting text is made of three separate points of view originating from the same narrator: Max's memories of when he was finishing school, his experiences in the present, and his commentary on his father's journals. The novel explores the idea of memories and how one can save them. It is also a family tale, a coming of age story and an investigation of self-awareness and identity, all told from a geeky viewpoint. The novel is intertextual and Max constantly references videogames, comics and fantasy novels. The main chapters also alternate with auxiliary chapters. Some of these simulate his subconscious, some present his work as a journalist writing game reviews, and there are two interactive sections written in computer code. The intention is not only to give way to the protagonist's story, but also to summon his inner world. Each section is titled and numbered, allowing the reader to follow the novel as a non-linear reading experience, should they wish to do so. *Legendary Days* takes inspiration from the novels analysed in the thesis, but also from other writers and books such as Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and Jorge Luis Borges's short stories. *Legendary Days* is organised around short chapters put together as Lego bricks or comics panels. I like to think of *Legendary Days* as a quiet and personal celebration of geek culture.

### **Final Boss**

What I hope to achieve is not a revolution, but a wider awareness of the state of literature and how fiction reacts to and deals with social manifestations of geek culture. I believe this is a rich field with many insights to offer, especially in terms of how fiction is in dialogue with other texts (and itself), and different possible future developments in the creation and reading of fiction. Much is left aside, much more work is needed. There is no time and no room for a bigger discussion, at the moment.

**[press start]**

@bernardobueno On the origins of the terms 'geek', 'nerd' and 'otaku': usage, examples, graphs. Establishing the field, agreeing on definitions.

Reply from @thebard: I was using the word 'geek' before anyone else.

Reply from @derridamachine: Aren't we all geeks? People in love with books that are too many and too few at the same time?

Reply from @samueljohnson: I'm such a word geek.

## CHAPTER 1:

### Geeking Out On Etymology: Geeks, Nerds And Otaku

In September 2011, I attended the Eurogamer Expo at Earl's Court One in London, the biggest game-related event in Europe.<sup>9</sup> Queuing in front of a life-sized statue of Link, from the *Legend of Zelda* games, I thought about the reason I had come to this place: to better understand geek culture. I was also curious, as a man wearing a Nintendo t-shirt called me forward, what kind of academic I was if I was standing in line at a gaming convention.

In order to understand geek culture, one needs to understand its key terms; in particular, one must realise that 'geek', 'nerd' and 'otaku' are somehow both equivalent and contrasting terms. I hope to explain why they can be interchangeable through an exploration of the available definitions of these terms and some literary examples of their usage. This chapter outlines the background of these terms and how they are used in fiction on a basic level. The following chapters put these notions to test, when we examine one novel at a time.

The *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition for 'geek' will be our starting point. It defines a *geek* as a 'person who is regarded as foolish, offensive, worthless'; also 'Freq. Depreciative. An overly diligent, unsociable student; any unsociable person obsessively devoted to a particular pursuit'; 'a person who is extremely devoted to and knowledgeable about computers and related technology.'<sup>10</sup> Insufficient as such a definition is (there is definitely more to geeks than computers and technology), it is nevertheless appropriate.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* is a reliable and respectable source, but it comes from a long tradition based on the opinions of a few selected authors and there is an authoritative aspect in its definition that can be contrasted with an entirely different kind of dictionary. *The Urban Dictionary* is an online dictionary with user-created content. These users also vote on the most popular definitions, accompanied by fictional examples of how each term can be used. In the *Urban Dictionary*, the term geek is defined as 'The people who you pick on in high school and wind up working for as an adult,' followed by the example '*The geeky kid now owns a million-dollar software company.*' This definition highlights the technological aspect of 'geek' as well as its association with money –

<sup>9</sup> The official website divulges an attendance of 50,000 people over four days. *Eurogamer Expo*. Web. 30 July 2013.

<sup>10</sup> 'Geek.' *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Web. 01 Jan 2012.

something that will become more evident in the chapter on Coupland's *Microserfs* further on.

Back to Eurogamer Expo: I did my best to listen to what the man in a Nintendo t-shirt was asking me, despite the noise of hundreds of TVs and thousands of people talking and playing games at the same time. He asked me how many songs there were in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*.<sup>11</sup> I had no idea. Then he asked me if I knew who the character behind him was. After I gave him the right answer, he went to a box and gave me a key-chain with Zelda's logo. I got the consolation prize.

Even so, that was not a bad outcome for a literature scholar. The links between fiction and geek culture might not be blatantly obvious from the start, but one needs only to think of authors such as Junot Díaz or Douglas Coupland to remember that their novels not only reference comics, fantasy, technology and geek culture in general, but were also recipients of respectful literary prizes - the Pulitzer award for fiction included - as well as public acclaim. There are other writers, of course, who bring references to geek culture into their works: Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem and Cory Doctorow are fine examples.<sup>12</sup>

My questions at this point are: which aspects of geek culture and its associated revolutions (like the role of technology in our everyday lives) are present in recent 'literary' novels? Can we find traces of what we call geek culture today in works that pre-date the widespread use of terms like 'geek', 'nerd' and 'otaku'? And finally, where does the knowledge of the relationship between Geek Culture and Fiction take us, creatively and critically?

Going back to the OED definition of 'geek', three central ideas stand out: obsession, intelligence and social ineptitude. These are the three characteristics that are present in virtually all related definitions, although they can be seen at different levels of intensity depending on the context. These ideas also allow us to link 'geek' to other similar nouns: 'nerd' and 'otaku'.<sup>13</sup>

Of all three characteristics, judging by the frequency it appears in definitions, the

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<sup>11</sup> *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*. Nintendo 64. 1998. Nintendo. It was, by the time of Eurogamer Expo 2011, being released again for the Nintendo 3DS handheld.

<sup>12</sup> I chose Coupland and Díaz for the reasons discussed in the Introduction. The selection is arbitrary, of course, and a longer discussion of each of these novels would be highly desirable.

<sup>13</sup> A simple online search shows 130 million hits for 'nerd' and 213 million hits for 'geek' (Google Search, 10 July 2013). I have chosen to mention the Japanese 'otaku' as an additional example because its meaning is very similar to its western counterparts and Japanese theorists such as Azuma Hiroki and Tamaki Saito have dedicated interesting studies to otaku culture; and because it can provide us with an interesting parallel that, if nothing else, points us to the transnational nature of our theme. As references, see Hiroki, Azuma. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2009. Print, and Saito, Tamaki. *Beautiful Fighting Girl*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2011. Print.

most common one is the obsessive interest in a particular subject.<sup>14</sup> The kind of obsession associated with being a geek is not the same kind of found in Ahab's relentless hunt for the white whale in Melville's *Moby-Dick*.<sup>15</sup> Rather, it would refer to Ishmael's obsessive interest in the animal: he dedicates entire sections and chapters to minute descriptions of the practice of whaling and the categories of cetaceans; he goes to great lengths, visiting museums and libraries across the world, just to get every little detail and measure right, and he openly admits that, when talking about this subject, he could go on forever. The difference may be subtle but it is important: in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael is the geek: he is obsessed with information regarding whales and he does everything he can to know everything about them.

My objective in mentioning a novel published in 1851 is to put aside the notion that there is anything entirely new about geek culture. What is interesting here is not originality, but the mutations and shifts that certain concepts have gone through to reach what we recognise as 'geek culture' today. Even so, what makes geek culture 'whole' is exactly the interaction of its elements.

Geek culture, being such a recent phenomenon, has not received much academic attention; gradually, it has been making its way from subculture to the mainstream, a trend exemplified by popular TV shows such as *The Big Bang Theory*,<sup>16</sup> the influence of geek chic in fashion,<sup>17</sup> the huge video game industry<sup>18</sup> and the ubiquitous presence of digital technology in our everyday lives.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*; also: Tocci, Jason. 'Geeks versus Nerds Revisited'. *Geek Studies*. Web. 20 July 2013.

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<sup>15</sup> Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1988. Print.

<sup>16</sup> Recent TV ratings for *The Big Bang Theory*, an American show about science geeks, shows 16.68 million viewers in the U.S. Kondoljy, Amanda. *Thursday Final Ratings*. TV by the Numbers. Web. 09 November 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Even NBA players now wear the thick-rimmed glasses typically associated with geeks. Cacciola, Scott. Cohen, Ben. 'Fashion Plates of the NBA Make Specs of Themselves: Art Finals, Hoops Stars Also Compete Over Stylish Eyeglasses; No Lenses Needed.' *The Wall Street Journal*. 14 June 2012. Web. 10 November 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Data compiled by global market research company NPD Group reveals that the video game industry generates 10.5 billion dollars in revenue. 'Videogame Industry Statistics'. *Entertainment Software Rating Board*. Web. 30 July 2013.

<sup>19</sup> See *Race, Sex and Nerds* for the idea of the geek as a gatekeeper of science and technology participation.

## Graph Geek

For an initial survey of the usages of the words ‘geek’, ‘nerd’ and ‘otaku’, I used Google’s Ngram Viewer.<sup>20</sup> Using its vast archive of scanned books (approximately five million titles and 500 billion words from across centuries), and selecting the ‘English’ corpus between 1600 (results before that were nil) and 2008 (the latest available year), I obtained the following graph showing the evolution in their usage across the centuries:<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 1 Google Ngrams Viewer 1600-2008**

Searching is case-sensitive and terms to be compared are separated by commas. I grouped all possible forms of the terms and their plurals together (there is no plural for 'otaku'). Publishing was fairly rare early on, generating the peaks and plateaus at the beginning. The first references Google finds are usually software errors when trying to read the scanned originals (e.g. ‘need’ is sometimes read as ‘nerd’), but there are also several mentions of the words ‘geek’ or ‘nerd’ that I could not find anywhere else, and were, at the time of writing, ignored by dictionaries and online discussions. It is interesting to note some uses of the words from centuries ago. I will explore a few of these.

In 1694, Thomas Hyde wrote a treaty on the game *Nerd*,<sup>22</sup> as reported by the Royal

<sup>20</sup> ‘When you enter phrases into the Google Books Ngram Viewer, it displays a graph showing how those phrases have occurred in a corpus of books (e.g., “British English”, “English Fiction”, “French”) over the selected years.’ ‘What Does the Ngram Viewer Do?’ *Google Books*. Web. 30 July 2013.

<sup>21</sup> One cannot help but to think how geeky it is to approach literature using a software solution such as this one. I do not wish to turn this into a quantitative study, but we cannot say that using such a powerful search tool is not helpful. Nevertheless, Google Ngram is sufficiently new and experimental to leave us plenty of room for interpretation (i.e. while the trends become apparent, we cannot rely on the graphs with 100% certainty. Looking through the references it found, some were nothing more than errors in the character recognition after scanning. This happened commonly with older publications, where lower print quality or archaic fonts were used.

<sup>22</sup> Hyde, Thomas. *Historia Nerdiludii*. El Teatro Sheldoniano. 1964. Google Books.

Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1852.<sup>23</sup> The game of *Nerd* is reportedly similar to chess, and the 1852 article is a comparison between the two.<sup>24</sup> Another early reference, this time in the 1801 *Gentlemen's Magazine*, refers to 'nerd' as a kind of board game supposedly invented 500 years before the birth of Christ.<sup>25</sup> The association of the word 'nerd' with a tabletop game immediately brings up the image of a group of teenagers playing Dungeons & Dragons.

There is mention of 'geek' as a 'fool' in Shakespeare's plays published in 1768:<sup>26</sup> in *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio says 'Kept in a dark house, visited by the priest/ And made the most notorious geek and gull.' A footnote by Samuel Johnson reads 'Geck – a fool,' being 'geck' an old form of 'geek.' Also, in a different collection of Shakespeare's works,<sup>27</sup> a glossary defines geek as 'a bubble easily imposed upon. To Geek, is to cheat; (also "geck").'

Another early reference to 'geek' is found in the 1783 edition of *Lemon's English Etymology*: 'Teut. *Gauch, geek, flultus, a fool.*'<sup>28</sup> It is also seen in the 1793 *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* by Robert Burns: 'Adieu, my liege! May Freedom geek/ Beneath you protection.' A glossary at the end of this edition provides us with the definition 'Geck, to tofs the head in pride or wantonels,'<sup>29</sup> although in this case the word bears a different meaning, apparently.

Otaku is, not surprisingly, scarcely mentioned at all at this early stage, apart from the occasional meaning of 'house' in Japanese. It is worthy of note that, due to the language barrier, all references in original Japanese have been excluded from this search (since I searched the 'English' corpus).

The first references to geek mean a 'fool', someone gullible, someone people cheat or make fun of. It is important to highlight how the notions of social ineptitude, awkwardness, and a foolish personality are still a part of the definition today. More recent

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<sup>23</sup> Bland, N. 'On the Persian Game of Chess'. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol 13. 1852, 1-70.

<sup>24</sup> 'A comparison between Nerd and Chess follows, frequent in works on this subject, and, after it, the philosophical arrangement observed in the places and powers of the different pieces.' *On the Persian Game of Chess*. 26.

<sup>25</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Volume 90. 1801. 826.

<sup>26</sup> Shakespeare, William. *The plays of William Shakespeare, with the corrections and illustr. of various commentators, to which are added notes by S. Johnson*. Samuel Johnson, ed. Oxford University. 1768. 446.

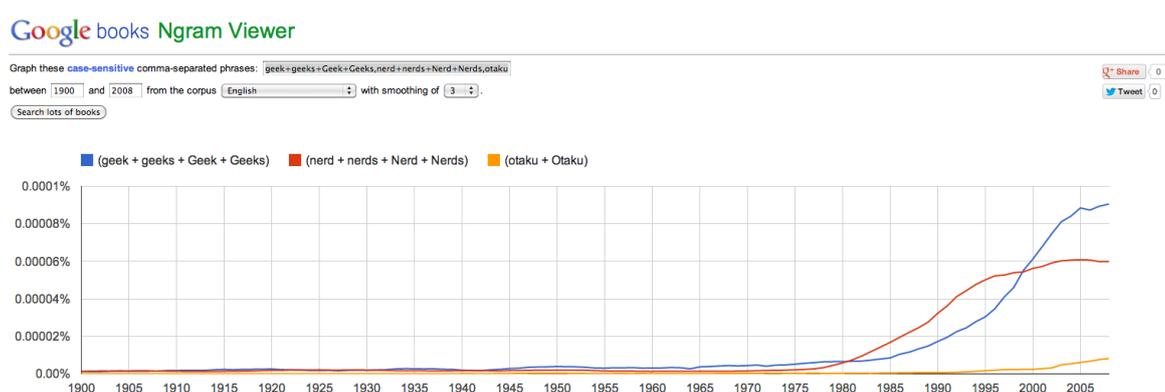
<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare, William. *The works: of Shakespear [sic]. In which the beauties observed by Pope, Warburton, and Dodd, are pointed out. Together with the author's life; a glossary; copious indexes; and a list of the various readings*. London and Edinburgh: A. Donaldson. 1771. 294.

<sup>28</sup> Lemon, George William. *English Etymology*. G. Robinson, 1783. 357.

<sup>29</sup> Burns, Robert. *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, in two volumes. London: T. Cadell. Edinburgh: William Creech. 1793. 132 and 266.

references, meanwhile, include the science fiction stories by H. Beam Piper (1904-1964), where 'geek' is a derogatory way to refer to a certain alien race, and a 1984 play by Larry Shue, titled 'The Nerd', where the word carries the same meaning found today. Once again, these findings suggest that, as far as language goes, 'geeks' and 'nerds' are anything but new. The sense carried by the actual words changes across the centuries, but it is interesting to notice how the usage of these two words follow the same pattern on the graphs above, especially after the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: their meaning is connected.

A closer look into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond generates the following graph (from 1900 to 2008):



**Figure 2 Google Ngrams Viewer 1900-2008**

If there was any doubt that geek culture was born in the 1970s and 1980s (in the sense of being referred to as such), the references in the English corpus put it to rest. The rise after 1970 is quite dramatic. Perhaps it is no surprise that this rise also coincides with the development of the personal computer and, later on, the Internet, suggesting that geek culture's popularity might be related to that. It is also worth noting the increase in the usage of 'otaku', starting in the 90s, which I attribute to the development and popularization of Japanese animation.

Apart from these direct and early uses of the terms 'geek' and 'nerd', we can always claim that certain elements of these concepts can be found in other literary works, although they are not directly referenced: the kind of social inadequacy we find in Holden Caulfield<sup>30</sup>, for instance, or the general idea of the outcast or outsider permeates fiction as a whole. But what we are looking for, specifically, is the union of those three main ideas: social ineptitude, intelligence, and an obsessive interest in a particular subject. That is something that will become more common only after the 1980s, when geek and nerd

<sup>30</sup> Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Random House. 1991.

culture becomes part of everyday vocabulary.

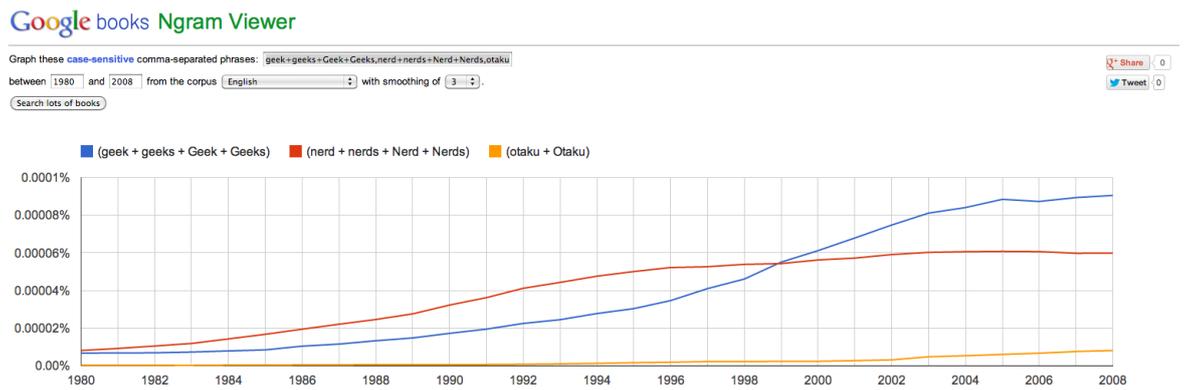


Figure 3 Google Ngrams Viewer 1980-2008

What is important to remember is that the Google Ngrams tool only reveals the amount of times the words have been used in print. It does not include its use on the Internet or orally (but that point will be addressed shortly). It also does not specify the exact meaning of each use; it only shows the general trend and directs the user to the original scanned sources. Nevertheless, it provided us with quotations that had not yet appeared elsewhere.

Another Google tool, Google Trends, analyses the online interest in particular search terms over time. It is a relatively new, however, and data is only available from 2004.



Figure 4 Google Trends 2004-2013

Searching for 'geek', 'nerd' and 'otaku' confirms the results seen from the Ngrams: that 'otaku' is much less common, 'geek' and 'nerd' follow almost the exact same pattern

as before, and ‘geek’ is more popular than ‘nerd’. However, here we see the use of the word ‘nerd’ increasing together with ‘geek.’ My hypothesis is that the two terms have increasingly been used interchangeably as we can see by the way their usage follows very similar patterns.<sup>31</sup>

### A Quest for Definitions

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘nerd’ as ‘an insignificant, foolish, or socially inept person; a person who is boringly conventional or studious. Now also: spec. a person who pursues an unfashionable or highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication.’ While frequently mentioned as the first time ‘nerd’ was used,<sup>32</sup> the OED discards the definitions associating the term with the ‘nerd’ in Dr Seuss *If I Ran the Zoo*.<sup>33</sup> It states that these hypotheses are discouraged by the spellings and meanings found. I agree: Dr Seuss’s mention was only a play on words and rhymes, and there is nothing that leads us to believe there is any kind of connection: ‘And then, just to show them, I’ll sail to Ka-troo/ and bring back an IT-KUTCH, a PREEP, and a PROO/ a NERKLE, a NERD and a SEERSUCKER, too!’<sup>34</sup>

Comparing this definition with the one provided for ‘geek’ at the beginning of this chapter makes it plain that they bear very similar meanings. Even so, the word ‘geek’ can be used as a noun or as a verb (and it has been for a long time). As a verb, the phrase ‘to geek out’ is defined as ‘to give up, to back down’, ‘to excite or stimulate a person’, ‘to behave like a geek,’ and finally, to work as a carnival or circus performer: this last notion is related to bizarre or grotesque carnival acts where the ‘geek’ bites the head off a live animal. This particular use is unrelated to the other meanings, but carries some of the depreciation linked with the word in modern uses.

In Douglas Coupland’s *Microserfs*, several attempts are made by the characters to define or explain what it is to be a nerd or a geek. Below is one extract:

We got into this discussion about the word ‘nerd’. ‘Geek’ is now, of course, a compliment, but we’re not so sure about ‘nerd’. Mom asked me, “What, exactly, *is* the difference

<sup>31</sup> ‘Geek+geek, geeks+Geeks, nerd+Nerd, nerds+Nerds,otaku+Otaku.’ *Google Trends*. Web. 15 November 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, Ben. ‘How Dr Seuss Invented the Nerd: literary origins of everyday words.’ *The Sun*. 26 may 2012. Web. 28 July 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Dr Seuss. *If I Ran the Zoo*. New York: Random House. 1977.

<sup>34</sup> *If I Ran the Zoo*, 48-49.

between a nerd and a geek?’

I replied, “It’s tougher than it seems. It’s subtle. Instinctual. I think geek implies hireability, whereas nerd doesn’t necessarily mean your skills are 100 percent sellable. Geek implies wealth.”

Susan said that geeks were usually losers in high school who didn’t have a life, and then not having a life became a status symbol. “People like them never used to be rewarded by society. Now all the stuff that made people want to kick your butt at fifteen becomes fashionable when fused with cash.”<sup>35</sup>

The story is set at the Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, Washington, and at the Silicon Valley, California, explaining the link between geeks and wealth. The context is that of IT workers in the 1990s, who became rich very quickly because of their specialised knowledge. The above distinction between geek and nerd in *Microserfs* is not definite, though, since the characters frequently use ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ as synonyms:

Caroline from the Word offices in Building Sixteen sent an e-mail regarding the word ‘nerd.’ She says the word only came into vogue around the late ‘70s when *Happy Days* was big on TV – eerily the same time that the PC was being popularized. She said prior to that, there was no everyday application for the word, “and now nerds run the world!”<sup>36</sup>

This passage brings forward an important historical period. Ron Eglash,<sup>37</sup> offering a perspective on geek culture, notes the wireless clubs in the 1920s in America, and particularly the image of the electronic hobbyist interested in model trains, stereophonic sound and model kits as early examples of geek culture. For Eglash, the image of the intellectual or ‘egghead’ fused with the electronic hobbyist to become ‘post-war nerds.’ Japan’s Akihabara District in Tokyo has a similar origin. Today considered a ‘Geek Mecca,’ its connection to geek culture and technology began when it became as the place to go for radio hobbyists looking for spare parts. Caroline is also being nerdy about the word ‘nerd’, summoning all her knowledge on the subject. Self-reflexivity, mostly in the form of intertextuality, is one of the strongest characteristics of geek culture-inspired

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<sup>35</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*. New York: Regan Books. 1995.

<sup>36</sup> *Microserfs*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> See *Microserfs* and *Race, Sex and Nerds*.

novels.

While Coupland and Eglash mention the popularisation of the ‘nerd’ image in 1970s America through the sitcom *Happy Days* and the nerd character Steve Urkel from *Family Matters*, Azuma Hiroki<sup>38</sup> points to the origin of otaku culture in Japan as early as the the 1960s. He says that films, anime, computer games and magazines coming from Japan today were a reaction to the influence of American culture after World War II. ‘The history of otaku culture,’ he says, ‘is one of adaptation – how to ‘domesticate’ American culture.’ The first generation of otaku would be of those born in the 1960s that watched the popularisation of animation series such as *Mobile Suit Gundam*,<sup>39</sup> leading to the beginning of the widespread use of the word ‘otaku’ in the late 1970s. Therefore, even though traces of a geek-like personality could be found in different contexts before this point, only from in the 1970’s did these characteristics begin to come together into a single concept.

In Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, on the other hand, the characters seem to prefer the term ‘nerd’ over the term ‘geek.’ The main character, Oscar, is an overweight nerd who dreams of becoming the Latin J.R.R. Tolkien. The important thing to notice here is the association of nerdiness with the love for genres, what Monica Hanna calls ‘Nerd Genres’, i.e. science fiction, fantasy, comics and so on.<sup>40</sup> As the novel says, ‘Oscar had always been a young nerd – the kind of kid who read Tom Swift, who loved comic books and watched Ultraman but by high school his commitment to the Genres had become absolute.’

Díaz goes on to use ‘otakuness’ as a synonym of ‘nerdiness.’ According to Azuma Hiroki, ‘otaku’ is a ‘general term referring to those who indulge in forms of subculture strongly linked to anime, video games, computers, science fiction, special-effects films, anime figurines, and so on.’ He goes on to identify this form of subculture as ‘otaku culture.’ Even though the term carried a negative connotation in the past, since the 1990s there has been a generation of fans hyper-conscious of their identity as otaku. Hiroki says that discussions about what is otaku culture, who is otaku and who is not cannot reach a conclusion, and serve merely to lead to ‘an emotional exchange over each person’s identity.’<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*.

<sup>39</sup> Animation series produced by Sunrise Studios and developed by Yoshiuki Tomino, premiered in 1979. Different iterations are still being developed to this day. According to Peter Carey, Tomino declared that *Gundam* was initially created with the objective of selling toys. Carey, Peter *Wrong About Japan*. London: Faber and Faber. 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Hanna, Monica. *Reassembling the Fragments*.

<sup>41</sup> Another useful definition for ‘otaku’: ‘Japanese, usually males and generally between the ages of 18 and 40, who fanatically consume, produce, and collect comic books (Manga), animated films (anime), and other products related to these forms of popular visual culture and who participate in the production and sales of

As Raymond Williams points out, the meaning of words changes over time because of shifting contexts or ideologies.<sup>42</sup> The discussion goes on online: the most comprehensive survey on this discussion was the one Jason Tocci published on his website *Geek Studies* in a post titled *Geeks vs. Nerds Revisited*. With links to many other websites, Jason concludes by saying that ‘there is not a difference - or at least no one, true, universally agreed-upon difference.’<sup>43</sup>

This is why I, too, choose to use the terms interchangeably. As a comparison, though, while Junot Díaz prefers to use ‘nerd,’ and practically does not mention ‘geek’ (with an occasional nod towards ‘otaku’), in *Microserfs*, the term ‘geek’ is precisely 46.5% more popular.<sup>44</sup> This is particularly interesting when we compare these facts with the Google Ngrams graphs, which show that the use of ‘geek’ in English literature began to peak in 1995, and surpassed ‘nerd’ in the first years after 2000 (Díaz’s novel was published in 2007 but most of it is set on the 80s, which validates his choice for ‘nerd’ over ‘geek’).

I hope that, through this initial survey, I have offered some insight into early references to what we now call geek culture. More than that, I hope that, by looking into contemporary definitions of ‘geek’, ‘nerd’ and ‘otaku,’ I could point to the fact that there are so many similarities, in meaning and in historical development, that I can be forgiven for choosing ‘geek’ and ‘geek culture’ as the ‘official’ terms from now on. There is one notable distinction to be made, however: even though ‘otaku’ is used in Japan with very much the same meaning that ‘geek’ is used in the English language, when ‘otaku’ is used in an English context it acts as a subdivision of ‘geek’, i.e. the geek who is a fan of Japanese culture, such as anime or Manga.

To summarise: geeks, nerds and otaku belong to the same general meaning space, and share many of their characteristics, particularly their obsessive interest in a particular subject, intelligence and social ineptitude. An interest in technology is optional but common. The words themselves are not new, but their exact meanings have changed over the centuries, even though some coincidences and intriguing parallels do occur. The real growth in usage of these terms happened after the 1970s and especially after the 1980s, coinciding with the development of personal computers and the Internet.

This leads us to the link with the following chapters, each of which discuss a different novel. Beyond exploring the aspects of geek culture found in these novels, I will

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derivative merchandise.’ Hiroki, Azuma. *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*. XV.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, Raymond. *Keywords*.

<sup>43</sup> Tocci, Jason. ‘Geeks and Nerds Revisited’. *Geek Studies*. Web. 30 July 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Data obtained after comparing the number of mentions to ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’, using the search function available on the digital versions of each novel.

also extrapolate the critical discourse that each novel offers, following the model presented in the Introduction.

The way geek culture leaks into literature is nothing particularly special: writers respond to social and cultural issues, and if there is anything we can learn from this first chapter, it is the fact that geek culture has become a relevant aspect of contemporary society, be it in the English-speaking world or as far away as Japan. The dialogue between fiction and geek culture seems to be a promising one, with many possibilities to be explored. Perhaps this is the answer to my question at the beginning of this chapter: I am the kind of academic that waits in line at gaming conventions.

@bernardobueno Junot Diaz's "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" is a family saga across generations where the central character is the classic sci-fi and fantasy super nerd.

Reply from @robcoover: Footnotes - hyperlinking before it was cool

Reply from @ggenette Captain, activate the hyper(text) drive

Reply from @JLPicard lol

## CHAPTER 2:

### Footnotes on Everything: Super Nerds and Intertextuality

#### Super nerds and secret geeks

Long before publishing *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in 2007, Junot Díaz met with critical acclaim when he published his first book in 1996, a collection of short stories titled *Drown*.<sup>45</sup> It took Díaz eleven years to publish his first novel, which then received even more attention and praise, including a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle award in 2008. Among the novel's merits are a distinctive mix of English and Spanish, an extensive use of intertextuality, and a way of establishing a dialogue between two cultural levels, referred by A.O. Scott in the *New York Times Book Review* as 'impressive high-low dexterity'.<sup>46</sup>

This 'high-low dexterity' refers to the relationship between popular and academic, mass culture and high art and literary and genre fiction, - a controversy that is just as real as it is pointless and as eternal as it is deteriorating. *Oscar Wao* manages to break the boundaries between these two realms. This is apparent even in the book's epigraphs:

Of what import are brief, nameless lives . . . to **Galactus**?<sup>47</sup>

Christ have mercy on all sleeping things!  
 From that dog rotting down Wrightson Road  
 to when I was a dog on these streets;  
 if loving these islands must be my load,  
 out of corruption my soul takes wings,  
 But they had started to poison my soul  
 with their big house, big car, big-time bohbohl,  
 coolie, nigger, Syrian, and French Creole,

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<sup>45</sup> DÍAZ, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. London: Faber and Faber. 2008. Due to its long title, this novel will be henceforth referred to as *Oscar Wao*.

<sup>46</sup> Scott, A. O. 'Dreaming in Spanglish'. *New York Times Book Review*, 30 September 2007. Web. 30 July 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Lee, Stan. Kirby, Jack. *Fantastic Four*. Comic. Vol. 1, No. 49. Marvel Comics. April 1966. in Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*. XI.

so I leave it for them and their carnival—  
 I taking a sea-bath, I gone down the road.  
 I know these islands from Monos to Nassau,  
 a rusty head sailor with sea-green eyes  
 that they nickname Shabine, the patois for  
 any red nigger, and I, Shabine, saw  
 when these slums of empire was paradise.  
 I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,  
 I had a sound colonial education,  
 I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,  
 and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.<sup>48</sup>

The quotation from the *Fantastic Four* comic is immediately followed by a quotation from Derek Walcott. Using this strategy, the author lays down the creative territory he is about to cover, while also making it clear that intertextuality will play a large role in the chapters to come. Mentioning the *Fantastic Four* comic is a bold choice when starting a literary novel, and it is the first hint of the story's alignment with geek culture. On the other hand, the quote from Walcott aligns the novel with literary tradition, and hints at the themes of the Caribbean people and issues of race also covered by Díaz. This interaction between literary tradition and popular media such as comics makes *Oscar Wao* difficult to categorise. Another example of this interaction can be found in the following extracts:

Later, when he would describe it, he would call it the Golden Mongoose, but even he knew that wasn't what it was. It was very placid, very beautiful. Gold-limned eyes that reached through you, not so much in judgment or reproach but for something far scarier. They stared at each other—it serene as a Buddhist, he in total disbelief—and then the whistle blew again and his eyes snapped open (or closed) and it was gone.<sup>49</sup>

And in case you think his life couldn't get any worse: one day he walked into the Game Room and was surprised to discover that overnight the new generation of nerds weren't buying role-playing games anymore. They were obsessed with *Magic* cards! No one had seen it coming. No more characters or campaigns, just endless battles between decks.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Walcott, Derek. *The Star-Apple Kingdom*. London: Cape. 1980 in Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*. XI.

<sup>49</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*, 190.

<sup>50</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Microserfs*, p 269.

The man with no face is a recurring image in Díaz's work and it is mentioned several times during the novel as a kind of bad omen. It is contrasted with a golden Mongoose that appears as a kind of guardian spirit. In the passages above, we can see how Díaz deals with two different styles: in the first extract, we have a high literary approach reminiscent of the magical realism of Gabriel García Márquez, where the magical and uncanny mix with reality.<sup>51</sup> He uses more adjectives, like 'golden,' 'placid' and 'beautiful', as well as the simile 'as serene as a Buddhist.' There is also a borgesian paradox in 'his eyes snapped open (or closed)' that adds to the otherworldly nature of the scene. In the second extract he mentions Oscar's interests in role-playing games and his inability to cope with the recent changes he witnesses at the local game shop: the preference for collectible card games such as *Magic: the Gathering over Dungeons & Dragons*.<sup>52</sup> His language now turns more fluid and much more colloquial, using phrases like 'the new generation of nerds' and 'no one had seen it coming.' The use of an exclamation mark keeps it down to earth, direct and simple. Díaz switches between the weight of erudition and the colloquial register throughout the novel. For instance, we have an almost academic voice in the following footnote:

There are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards “discovered” the New World—or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916—but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography?<sup>53</sup>

This kind of treatment is more than a mix of styles: it is also a demonstration of how knowledgeable the narrator and the main character are about certain subjects, be it Dominican history or the hierarchy of role-playing games/ collectible card games. What is remarkable is not only how Díaz successfully demonstrates this knowledge, without compromising one side or the other, but also the great critical and public response the book received. We see in this, at the same time, the acceptance by the less academic-inclined readers of a text that quotes Glissant and Melville and, on the other hand, the blessing from

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<sup>51</sup> Márquez, Gabriel García. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. London: Penguin. 2000.

<sup>52</sup> *Magic: the gathering* is a collectible card game where two players battle each other by using decks of cards which display spells, monsters and other effects. *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D or DnD) is a fantasy role-playing game (RPG) created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974. Reminiscent of war games, it is played using a board, miniatures and multi-faceted dice (although it can be played without the board and the miniatures as well). It was the first big game of its kind and remains widely popular today.

<sup>53</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*. 211.

the scholarly readers for a narrator who is a *Lord of the Rings* geek.

*Oscar Wao* has been the subject of several articles ranging from historiographic studies by Mahler (2010) and Hanna (2010) – who also make an effort to discuss ‘Nerd Genres’ such as science fiction and fantasy – to reflections on Caribbean and American identity and the Dominican Diaspora by Sáez (2011), Max Abrams (2009) and Kunsu (2013). There is even an exploration of masculinity and magic by Ramirez (2013). On the more literary side, are Bautista’s (2010) proposition of ‘comic book realism’ as a sub-genre, Casielles-Suarez’s (2013) investigations of the dialogue between English and Spanish, and Miller’s (2011) explanation of how *Oscar Wao* uses science fiction in its favour.<sup>54</sup> I wish to take the discussion even further by asking what the voice, the narrators and characters say about the novel’s use of geek culture, and from that, what sort of insights literary theory can give us. More specifically, I want to explore *Oscar Wao*’s intertextuality as an essential aspect of the dialogue between geek culture and fiction, and how the book’s footnotes serve as the first step in that process.

The novel’s narrator is Yunior, who tells the story of his friend Oscar de León. Oscar found being clever and overweight as obstacles to overcome to in terms of making friends and finding a girlfriend. He got off to a good start – as a child, Oscar was frequently compared to Porfirio Rubirosa, a famous Dominican playboy – but his first heartbreak permanently undermined his confidence. Oscar’s main interests are science fiction and fantasy stories, particularly books, films and television series. Yunior, on the other hand, who reveals himself as the love interest of Oscar’s sister, Lola, writes about Oscar’s maturation and how he learns to interact with people and life, contrasting his social awkwardness and his obsessive interest in geek culture with his need to experience love just like everyone else. Interwoven with Oscar’s story is that of his family: generations who seem to suffer from *Fukú* – a curse tracing back to their Dominican origins and their move to the United States.<sup>55</sup>

It is easy to focus too much on Oscar de León as the main geek in the story, but we

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<sup>54</sup> Miller’s article is particularly rich for the kind of approach I am seeking here. He writes that “Díaz, consciously writing not from within the genre but about it, does not, like some contemporary authors, actively attempt to transgress or collapse the boundaries between ‘realistic’ literary fiction and ‘fantastic’ genre fiction.” He goes on to say that ‘we should no more dub Oscar Wao a work of magic realism than we should nominate it for a Nebula.’ (Miller’s, T. S. ‘Preternatural Narration and the Lens of Genre Fiction in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*’. *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 38, No 1, 92-114. March 2011) His thoughts immediately remind me of Derrida’s *Law of Genre*: ‘There is no madness without the law, madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law.’ (Derrida, Jacques, *The Law of Genre*. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative, 55-81. Autumn, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> Lola takes the role of a first-person narrator during part of the book. Her presence, although interesting, is not enough to replace Yunior as the main narrator.

have to remember he is only a part of the narrative. His mother, his grandfather and his sister also play a large part. Even though the narrator is more witness than protagonist, we gradually learn that Yuniór is as much of a geek as Oscar, although he keeps his interests secret (even from the reader, when he can) and is more successful socially. For all his scholarly knowledge of geek culture, Yuniór tries to maintain the appearances as a ‘player,’ turning him into a street-wise secret geek.

Do you know what sign fool put up on our dorm door? *Speak, friend, and enter*. In fucking Elvish! (don’t ask me how I knew this. Please.) When I saw that I said: De León, you gotta be kidding me. Elvish?<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps if like me he’d been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, be he couldn’t.<sup>57</sup>

Yuniór kindly asks the reader not to ask how he knew what Oscar had written. The only possible answer, of course, is that he knows Elvish.<sup>58</sup> He also makes it clear that he made an effort to hide his ‘otakuness,’ a word that means the same as ‘geekyness’ or ‘nerdiness’: the characteristic of being a geek. Throughout the novel, the author shows a preference for ‘nerd’, but it is interesting to notice how he invokes otaku culture by using it as a similar term: it is an uncommon choice, and one that is not repeated after this instance. The mere mention of ‘otakuness’ is in itself a geeky choice, denoting a greater understanding of this shared vocabulary. It becomes clear that the references to geek culture in the text and footnotes are not there just because Oscar was interested in them; they are there because Yuniór believes them to be the correct way of telling this particular story. These are his words, not Oscar’s.

At no point does Díaz stop to explain these references. In the passage above, the reader would have to know that particular quotation and the fact that Elvish is a language created by J.R.R. Tolkien. Knowledge of this reference may not be too specialist, considering how popular the movie trilogy has been. However, several other references are more obscure. There are many, many instances when the implied reader needs to keep up

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<sup>56</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*. 172.

<sup>57</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*. 20-21.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Speak, friend, and enter’ is a quotation from a certain passage of *The Lord of the Rings* when the Fellowship of the Ring is trying to gain entrance to the Mines of Moria. Tolkien. J.R.R. *The Fellowship of The Ring*. London: HarperCollins. 2007.

with the references being made. There are so many references, in fact, that it is virtually impossible for one person, besides perhaps Díaz himself, to identify all the sources. ‘What do you want me to say?’ the author declared during an interview, ‘I’m book-obsessed and I wrote about a book-obsessed protagonist. The narrator too: book-obsessed.’<sup>59</sup> This tackles the novel from only one point of view. Apart from book references, there are mentions of popular Dominican personalities and the country’s history; even the language itself, Spanish slang mixed with English, is complex. Sometimes, these links to external works are embedded in the main narrative. At other times, they are displayed as footnotes.

### **On footnotes and beyond**

Anthony Grafton compares footnotes to ‘anthills swarming with constructive and combatant activity.’<sup>60</sup> There is certainly a matter of authority involved here, or at least its contestation: whose voice is that of the footnotes? Does this voice agree with or respond to the information it is linked to? Could it be that the information read in a footnote is more important, more reliable, or even more interesting than the main text?

Footnotes provide the reader with a non-linear reading experience. They are a way of jumping across sections of texts, and upset the general order of a story. Much like a thought process, a small detail leads to an idea, memory or another story that must be told somewhere else, away from the main narrative. Genette calls this sort of literary mechanism a ‘paratext.’ Footnotes, prefaces, indexes and illustrations are some examples. Everything that accompanies the main text and complements it is a ‘paratext.’<sup>61</sup>

Its name is quite clear: footnote, a note in the foot of the text, at the bottom. It is not a place readers normally look at, and some people arguably do not care about them at all. Footnotes are usually in a smaller font; sometimes the footnote is hidden, becoming an endnote, forcing the reader to juggle two (or more) bookmarks. Both footnotes or endnotes get in the way; they disrupt the reading process, much like the toddler constantly craving their parents’ attention, calling them to come and play while the grown-ups try to have an adult conversation.<sup>62</sup>

As Nicholson Baker puts it, ‘Footnotes are the finer-suckered surfaces that allow

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<sup>59</sup> Dandicat, Edwige. ‘Junot Díaz.’ *Bomb Magazine*. Issue 101, Fall 2007. Web. 28 July 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Grafton, Anthony. *The Footnote: a Curious History*. London: Faber and Faber. 1997.

<sup>61</sup> Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997.

<sup>62</sup> Here is Derrida on the matter: ‘*A propos*, is not every footnote a little Oedipal? In pure a *propos* logic, is not a footnote a symptomatic swelling, the swollen foot of a text hindered in its step-by-step advance?’ Derrida, Jacques. *Without Alibi*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2002. 91.

tentacular paragraphs to hold fast to the wider reality of the library.’<sup>63</sup> In this case, the ‘library’ should be considered the wider world of cultural knowledge and experiences that include, but is not limited to, other books and stories. Or, to quote Borges, ‘The universe (which others call the Library).’<sup>64</sup>

Footnotes are, in fact, a hint of something bigger, an explicit and visual move towards the matter of intertextuality that permeates works of authors such as Díaz.<sup>65</sup> The love of intertextuality – not only using it but the need to draw attention to its use – is one of the most important aspects of geek culture in fiction: references to books, movies, and comics become a currency and a game, where the reader who identifies the most wins.<sup>66</sup> Intertextuality itself could be understood as a series of footnotes where the actual footnotes are – sometimes – completely hidden. The references are not always explained: the reader, who is responsible for making the connections, must understand them. Or, by way of explanation, footnotes can serve an intertextual purpose, though intertextuality itself is more than just footnotes.

In the instance of Junot Díaz’s *Oscar Wao*, footnotes are not the main feature: their number is not nearly as impressive as in, for example, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (Díaz’s book has 33, Wallace’s 388), and there are, of course, plenty of other examples of novels that use them. For example, there are Borges’s fictional scholarly notes in *Ficciones*, Nicholson Baker’s attention-stealing observations in *The Mezzanine* and Nabokov’s commentaries in *Pale Fire*. Nevertheless, in *Oscar Wao*, they are the first symptom of the text’s approach to intertextuality and, by association, geek culture.

The very first footnote is a long introduction to Dominican history (‘for those of you who missed the mandatory two seconds of Dominican history...’), familiarising the reader with the minimum historical background necessary to understand the narrative.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Baker, Nicholson. *The Mezzanine*. London: Granta Books. 1998. Nicholson’s book is swarming with footnotes. Every mundane act, even the most banal, trigger memories, observations, mental notes that are, by far, much more interesting than the protagonist’s ordinary activities.

<sup>64</sup> Borges, Jorge Luis. ‘The Library of Babel.’ *Labyrinths: selected stories and other writings*. New York: New Directions. 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Genette, when discussing hypertextuality, uses ‘hypertext’ for the main text (in our case, *Oscar Wao*) and ‘hypotext’ for the texts that influenced the hypertext (the list is too long to be detailed, but it would include *The Lord of The Rings* and *Dungeons and Dragons*, for example). I have decided to use the term ‘intertextuality’ as a form of avoiding confusion, especially when I discuss the hypertext. I use the term ‘intertextuality’ in a similar way to Genette’s ‘transtextuality’, i.e. the notion that different texts are connected, and they reference and influence each other in a variety of ways.

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, for example, defends that writing must be iterative, copiable, and therefore nothing is original but also a series of repetitions of what came before. We communicate through references and intertextuality is our currency. I believe that, while this is true for all kinds of fiction, it is particularly true for, and a recurring phenomenon in, fiction in dialogue with geek culture.

<sup>67</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*. 2.

Spread over two pages, this first footnote gives us the history behind Trujillo, his tenure as dictator over the Dominican Republic and his most well known accomplishments and atrocities. This is important information – so important that it could even not be a mere footnote. Trujillo and his acts, or rather, the consequences of his acts, can be understood as the main reason Yunior writes: he is counter-attacking the history of his country with the history of a family; contrasting violence with love, hoping to break the family curse that, in his view, began Oscar’s problems.<sup>68</sup> Many of the footnotes in *Oscar Wao* serve the purpose of providing additional historical information to the reader, turning, as Grafton proposes, a monologue into a conversation.<sup>69</sup>

My shout-out to Jack Kirby aside, it’s hard as a Third Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher; he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon and we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on “la face cachée de la Terre” (Earth’s hidden face).<sup>70</sup>

In just one footnote, Díaz manages to reference Jack Kirby, a famous comic book artist, compare inhabitants of Third World countries (including himself) to the Watchers – cosmic entities in the Marvel comics universe who are only allowed to watch events and never interfere –, and quotes the Martinican writer and critic Édouard Glissant. This footnote is a reference machine, a prime example of how Díaz uses intertextuality, at once referencing popular culture, social matters and academic erudition: not conducting the narrative to a separate observation made by an authoritative figure, but opening one reference up, leading to several others.

On the other hand, even knowing that the author of both footnotes and main narrative – paratext and text – is Yunior, his voice in the footnotes is somewhat distanced, as though written as an afterthought.

In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa.

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<sup>68</sup> See Hanna, Monica. *Reassembling the fragments*.

<sup>69</sup> Grafton also highlights other uses for footnotes along its history since the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it was regarded as an art form: it could be used to prove sources and their narrative, they could convey ideology, evoke the Republic of Letters, add legitimacy to what the author is saying; they could also be a source of entertainment and abuse, when authors use humour or openly attack rivals. Ever since they started to be used, their function has not changed much, even though their popularity has decreased. Grafton, Anthony. *Footnote: a curious history*.

<sup>70</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*. 92.

Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of “GhettoNerd at the End of the World”) wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me!<sup>71</sup>

In the passage above, we see a footnote that was clearly written after the novel was drafted. It highlights the narrative voice’s authority and emphasizes the notion that Yuniór’s act of storytelling is not always reliable.<sup>72</sup> Yuniór, as a narrator, is offering a first hand account of what happened in de León family across generations. He is a distanced, authoritative narrator, but also an active character. He is different from Oscar, but at the same time belongs to the same brotherhood of geeks. Much is shared, much is undisclosed. He is clearly not the same kind of witness narrator we find in Conrad.<sup>73</sup> At certain points, Yuniór becomes the focalizing character, such as when he tells his personal story of his involvement with Lola, Oscar’s sister, or the time he shared a dorm room with Oscar. Another interesting and essential characteristic of this narrator is his unique voice and style, a mix of English and Spanish. This idea of mixing is perhaps what differentiates *Oscar Wao*’s narrator from the others: it mixes high and low, popular and scholarly, English and Spanish, text and paratext, first-hand account and editing, ‘truth’ and fiction.

The best example of intertextuality found in the novel is seen in one of the first descriptions of Oscar. It references science fiction, fantasy, television and literature, and does not stop for a second to clarify anything. If the readers are geeks (or nerds) like Oscar, they will understand, but if not, at least his range of interests is made clear:

Oscar had always been a young nerd – the kind of kid who read Tom Swift, who loved comic books and watched Ultraman but by high school his commitment to the Genres had become absolute. Back when the rest of us were learning to play wallball and pitch quarters and drive our brothers’ cars and sneak dead soldiers from under our parents’ eyes, he was

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<sup>71</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*. 132.

<sup>72</sup> Are not all footnotes geeky, as a somewhat obsessive-compulsive effort to get every detail right, to show off one’s knowledge of a topic?

<sup>73</sup> For instance, in *Heart of Darkness*, the initial nameless narrator serves only as an introduction to Marlow’s own narrative (Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of darkness*. Kindle edition. 2013). Yuniór is witness and protagonist, but he is also there to tell Abelard’s and Beli’s story, which he only learned from third parties. When Lola’s voice takes over in a first-person perspective, there is no introduction to it, or explanation. One possibility is that Lola’s chapter is actually Yuniór’s emulation of her. We certainly know – he is happy to point that out himself – that he is willing to bend the ‘truth’ if the image he is trying to evoke is more powerful.

gorging himself on a steady stream of Lovecraft, Wells, Borroughs, Howard, Alexander Herbert, Asimov, Bova, and Heinlein, and even the Old Ones who were already beginning to fade – E.E. “Doc” Smith, Stapledon, and the guy who wrote the Doc Savage books – moving hungrily from book to book, author to author, age to age. [...] You couldn’t have torn him away from any movie or TV show or cartoon where there were monsters or spaceships or mutants or doomsday devices or destinies or magic or evil villains. In these pursuits alone Oscar showed the genius his grandmother persisted was part of the family patrimony. Could write in Elvish, could speak Chakobsa, could differentiate between a Slan, a Dorsai, a Lensman in acute detail, knew more about the Marvel Universe than Stan Lee, and was a role-playing game fanatic. (If only he’d been good at videogames it would have been a slam-dunk but despite owning an Atari and an Intellivision he didn’t have the reflexes for it.) Perhaps if like me he’d been able to hide his otakuness maybe shit would have been easier for him, be he couldn’t. Dude wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore a lightsaber or a Lensman her Lens. Couldn’t have passed for Normal if he’d wanted to.<sup>74</sup>

This is, in my opinion, the single, most powerful section in the whole novel in terms of its relation to geek culture. Oscar’s description is made entirely of his interests, and the degree of his love for them. Díaz begins by providing a list of science fiction and fantasy writers: from horror master H.P Lovecraft to Conan creator Robert E. Howard, also mentioning science fiction essential Isaac Asimov, among many others. The Chakobsa language comes from the *Dune* series of books by Frank Herbert; Slan, Dorsai and Lensman are alien races portrayed in sci-fi books. Stan Lee, in his turn, is one of the most well known comic book writers and the creator of many popular characters from Marvel universe, such as *Spider Man*, *X-Men*, and the *Hulk*. There is also a mention of the otaku culture we have already discussed, and the mandatory *Star Wars* reference.<sup>75</sup>

It would be much too time-consuming to analyse this section in detail: suffice to say it becomes clear that not only Oscar knows those subjects very well, but Yuniór, too. In fact, their shared interests justify, in part, their friendship, even though they lead entirely opposite lifestyles. Even though it is unlikely, it is not entirely impossible that his interest in science fiction was not connected with a curiosity regarding real technology: unlike

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<sup>74</sup> Díaz, Junot. *Oscar Wao*, 20-21.

<sup>75</sup> The only improbable statement above, in my opinion, is that Oscar did not have the ‘reflexes’ to play videogames. Taking into account the different genres of games and the fact that not all of them required advanced skills (the Atari controller had a joystick and only one button), it seems unlikely that Oscar wouldn’t find one game he liked. Or even that he wouldn’t become interested in them later on, when the next consoles became available (for instance, *Final Fantasy* for the Nintendo Entertainment System or the *Star Wars* PC games that would certainly draw Oscar’s attention). More probably, the humble origins of Oscar’s family and the lack of funds to pay for an expensive activity like that would be a better explanation.

Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* and Nakano Hitori's *Train Man*, Díaz's book does not feature technology as an important part of geek culture. That is an important point in showing how aspects of geek culture can be approached in fiction without resorting to this common association. The idea of an 'offline' nerd is appealing: one could argue that, following the discussion in the first chapter, someone could be a geek about any subject, and that is true (book geeks, train geeks, map geeks, fitness geeks). Oscar, however, remains connected to the 'Nerd Genres' and escapes the image of the tech geek. The kind of intertextual play found in this novel is, therefore, mostly connected to other (printed) books, and does not reference computer or technology cultures like *Microserfs* and *Train Man* do.

### **Intertextuality as Hypertext and Hypertext as Intertextuality**

A hypertext is usually associated with the idea of technology and its uses in building a non-linear narrative. The works of Nelson and Lanham, for instance, and also the endorsement and study by Robert Coover, explore this side of the issue.<sup>76</sup> Hypertext is more than techno-fiction: non-linear narratives are facilitated by technology but are not dependent on it. Some examples can be found in the narratives of Borges's *Garden of Forking Paths*, Perec's *Life: a User's Manual*, or Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, to cite a few. Their fiction is not exactly linear; it invites the reader to approach it in varied ways and on many levels. They are hypertextual, but semantically so rather than technologically. This is exactly how it works in *Oscar Wao*: a series of references, explicit or hidden, through which the reader is invited to navigate. There is more than one way of reading it: the book as experienced by those fluent in Spanish is different than the one read by those who pay attention to science fiction references, or even those who understand Dominican popular culture better. Also, the question of whether or not *Oscar Wao*'s Yunior is the same Yunior that narrates the short stories in *Drown* is left unanswered; the novel (and the short story collection) reads differently depending on how the reader negotiates that inquiry.

On the other hand, among the many different approaches to intertextuality, I acknowledge Bakhtin's concepts of dialogue and carnival, as well as Kristeva's notion of

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<sup>76</sup> I cite Ted Nelson on the grounds of him being the one who coined the term 'hypertext' (see, for instance, Nelson, Theodor H. *Computer lib; dream machines*, Redmond: Tempus Books of Microsoft Press. 1987) and cite Lanham for his extensive work on the electronic word (as an example, Lanham, Richard A. 'The Electronic Word.' *New Literary History*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Technology, Models, and Literary Study (Winter, 1989, 265-290). Robert Coover is not known for writing hyperfiction; instead, his work is deeply rooted on metafiction (see Coover, Robert. *The Universal Baseball Association, inc., J. Henry Waugh, prop.* New York: Random House. 1968). He remains an important figure in the study and teaching of hypertext fiction at Brown University.

intersubjectivity, I believe Genette's terms - hyper and hypotext - to be more direct and practical. One text is the hypotext, the origin of an influence, and the other is the hypertext, the one that came later (the one which is influenced). This has nothing to do with one being more powerful than the other, but only acknowledges the relationship between texts.<sup>77</sup> It also does not limit the hypertextual relation to one hypertext and one hypotext: it happens several times with each work.<sup>78</sup> *Oscar Wao*, as the hypertext, is supercharged with hypotexts.

This notion becomes richer – if fascinatingly confusing – when we bring the idea of the Internet hyperlink into play. To a certain extent, it is the practical manifestation of a connection between texts, and also the materialization of Nelson's, Lanham's and Coover's ideas of what hypertext is. What I'd like to propose here are two things: first, that the footnote is a low-tech form of hyperlink, and second, that intertextuality in general, as a series of hypertextual relations (in Genette's terms) is an essential characteristic of fiction dealing with geek culture or, in other words, geek metafiction.

In the case of footnotes, we have the clear indication of a numerical or other character sign pointing the reader to a text at the bottom of the text – leading them from text to hypertext. Intertextuality works metaphorically as a hyperlink, although the connections are not always visible. It is often hidden in the sentences, craftily concealed among a character's words.<sup>79</sup> The intertextuality present in Díaz's book manifests partly through footnotes, but it is also a ubiquitous presence throughout the novel.

Linda Hutcheon coined the term 'historiographic metafiction' as a way of labelling texts that retell historical events through fiction.<sup>80</sup> After Hutcheon, I would like to propose that novels such as *Oscar Wao* be called 'geek metafiction' – fiction about geeks. This works as a way of differentiating such novels from what could be called geek fiction in general – fiction that geeks enjoy reading, such as 'pure' fantasy and science fiction novels.

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<sup>77</sup> For the oedipal relationship between texts, see Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1997.

<sup>78</sup> Or, subverting Genette's definition of hyper- and hypotext, we could say that the main text is the hypertext (over) and the footnote is the hypotext (under): the previous is above the latter, literally. But inverting this idea, the footnote is commenting on the main text, and therefore was written after it, making the footnote the hypertext and the main narrative the hypotext.

<sup>79</sup> This is as far as I will go with the comparison between intertextuality and hypertext. For all its identification with geek culture, *Oscar Wao* is essentially a pre-internet story and neither relies on nor uses any digital resources as inspiration or medium. The central narrative situates itself in the 80s, secondary plots before that; the term 'geek' is not used, since Díaz prefers the old-school 'nerd' and sometimes the Japanese version 'otaku.' Furthermore, Oscar is a nerd of the non-technological kind: he is not fond of videogames and computers; his passions were books, comics, television and films. Díaz's novel reminds us that geek culture does not need to be always associated with technology.

<sup>80</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and Intertextuality of History*. <[http://ieas.unideb.hu/admin/file\\_3553.pdf](http://ieas.unideb.hu/admin/file_3553.pdf)>

*Geek metafiction* is the kind of fiction that reflects on geek culture or portrays geek characters as central points in its narrative. Merely depicting a geek character or belonging to a genre like science fiction or fantasy is not enough. Boundaries may be crossed, certainly, and it is entirely possible for a science fiction or fantasy novel to deal with geek culture and to portray geek characters in central roles.<sup>81</sup> My intention in calling certain novels geek metafiction goes beyond the impulse for categorisation: it is a selfish move which helps me justify why I chose certain authors and not others. Some books are intertextual (all books are intertextual to a certain extent), other can be metafictional, and some have geek characters. What I call geek metafiction is the kind of text that looks at itself as an investigation or reflection on geek culture and the geek identity, and does so through an intense and overt intertextuality.

### **Post-apocalyptic**

In *Oscar Wao*, the main character is a geek who checks all the boxes in the definitions presented in chapter one: social inadequacy, intelligence and an obsessive interest in certain subjects (specifically fantasy, science fiction and role-playing games). He is not alone, however: the actual narrator is a geek himself, and brings all kinds of geek references into his discourse. His voice, rich, complex and passionate, bridges the gap between geek culture and literary fiction, a movement that can be observed in how the book was accepted and praised by both critics and the public.

I have also presented the basis of what I call geek metafiction, a loose category that I believe helps us better understand *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and other similar novels. The central elements of this arbitrary categorisation are that the novel deals with geek culture as a central element in its narrative, and that it is highly and overtly intertextual.

When discussing intertextuality, I have used *Oscar Wao*'s footnotes as a starting point. They may not be as abundant as in other novels, but they serve as a thread that we pull, thus exposing the underlying design of the text's fabric.

As geek culture is such an expressive international movement with very real economic, social and creative processes associated with it, it is beneficial to understand it from different angles. Díaz's literary choices and their connection to a wider field of literary theory lead us to understand how geek culture can be acknowledged and expressed

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<sup>81</sup> For example, there is Scalzi, John. *Redshirts*. London: Orion. 2012. And You, Charles. *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*. New York: Pantheon. 2010.

as a significant and rich phenomenon which started decades, perhaps even centuries, before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continues into the 21<sup>st</sup>. Geek culture adds, perhaps, a new set of critical tools that can be used to discuss contemporary concerns: it brings together a series of concepts, some present in *Oscar Wao* (social inadequacy, nerd genres, obsessive interests, intertextuality and hypertext) and some that will be investigated further in the next chapters: the path from Díaz through Coupland then Hitori can be seen as moving from the traditional to the experimental, from the book format to the electronic format. If there is a subtext here, it is the contrast between old and new, tradition and innovation. Perhaps this can be seen as the biggest advantage in using geek culture as critical concept: it assists us tackle the formal, thematic and social changes in a post-modern, database consumption-oriented society. If the elements that form geek culture today are not entirely original and pre-date the widespread use of ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ in the sense we understand now, it is their unity as a concept that makes geek culture interesting.

*Oscar Wao* also challenges the concept of genres as fixed, unchallenged, definite structures. This uncertainty, a multitude of histories, races, points of view and styles serve as a portrait of the Dominican, the immigrant and the whole of Latin American cultures as amalgams of many origins with no definitive identity. At the same time, this hint of something bigger – a new set of tools for reading and comprehension – is, at this point, not entirely defined. Giving an interview for *The Guardian*, Díaz at the same time admits this state of uncertainty and acknowledges his non-technological approach to geek culture: ‘Books are surviving in this intense, fragmented, hyper-accelerated present, and my sense and hope is that things will slow down again and people will want more time for a contemplative life. The utopian in me has my fingers crossed that we haven’t quite figured out the digital future just yet.’<sup>82</sup> On the road towards figuring out this digital future, we turn next to something a little more techno-centric.

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<sup>82</sup> Wroe, Nicholas. ‘Junot Díaz: A Life in Books’. *The Guardian*. 31 Aug 2012. Web. 01 August 2013.

@bernardobueno Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs* and the American tech geek culture in the 1990's digital boom or 'It's cool to say "geek" now, Mom.'

Reply from @georgeorwell: The inter-what?

Reply from @coupland: Ask McLuhan, he understood it before everyone else

Reply from @mchulan You know nothing of my work!

## CHAPTER 3:

### Microserfs, Technology And The Posthuman Geek

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<sup>83</sup> The original quotation was converted to binary code using an online generator. It says, 'I enjoy writing fiction. Without fiction we run the risk of losing forever the possibility of certain kinds of stories being told a certain way. And fiction allows for a time to reflect and savour speech and the gift of language.' Coupland, Douglas. 'Why Write Modern Fiction'. *The New York Times*. 14 August 2006. Web. 23 September 2011.

## readme.txt

*Microserfs* is a novel with many aspects of linguistic and formal innovation, and, compared to Junot Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, offers a more thorough exploration of the ways in which technology influences what we understand as geek characters as well as characters in general. Said innovations range from entire sections written in binary code to translating common speech into Prince song lyrics.<sup>84</sup> This experimentalism can be seen in multiple ways. For example, random words in various font sizes may be seen throughout the novel, which are assumed to come from the machine's 'subconscious' (the protagonist wonders whether or not machines have a subconscious, and considers that maybe their 'minds' need to be fed and taught, just like a child's, in order to communicate properly. To this end, he creates a desktop file and writes random entries in it). This is not to say, however, that Coupland's formal experiments are mere whimsical cleverness. They have just as much to do with Coupland's aesthetic interest in language and words as objects in themselves. The postmodernist writer David Foster Wallace proposes that North-American literature was tyrannized by irony ever since the sixties, but Coupland's innovations are not simply ironic, nor are they an end in themselves.<sup>85</sup> Instead, Coupland finds new ways of delivering his story through changes in formatting and language, while delivering a traditional, honest and emotional three-step dramatic structure that follows the protagonist as, with the help of his friends, he figures out the life he wants to lead, while working for a software company.

Just like *Oscar Wao*, *Microserfs* was not written as genre fiction, though it does comment on it. More than that, discussions between the characters regarding geek culture happen more intensely and frequently than in any of the other novels examined here, and the author achieves this through the introduction of technology as one of the main plot points.

It is clear from the first chapters that something has happened to the characters' notions of 'life.' Perhaps this is because technology is an important, almost intrinsic element of their lives. The amount of time they dedicate to their work as coders at Microsoft is enough to make them think they 'don't have a life.' The dawn of the age of computing brought with it a whole new set of doubts, forcing them to redefine their relationships and personal objectives. This conflict between the human condition and the machine is what drives the story forward: the characters are on a journey to, in a way, become free from the machine and thus fully human, and only then they take the leap to be

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<sup>84</sup> Which, remarkably, resembles 'internet talk': 'She sed th@ we, az humnz, bear the brdn uv havng 2 B evry animl in the wrld rold in2 1.' Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Burn, Stephen. *Conversations With David Foster Wallace*. University Press of Mississippi. 2012.

more than that.

I read *Microserfs* whilst keeping in mind some key concepts such as Hiroki's database consumption theory, and the artistic works of Jenny Holzer and the posthuman condition so I could bring forward the themes the novel is dealing with, explore them critically and, as a consequence, expand the way we understand geek culture in the context of *Microserfs*. Building from the last chapter, we can now add technology to the mix of geek cultural elements we have found so far, and, consequently, a new kind of geek stereotype (and thereby new ways of challenging it).

### **One-point-oh**

*Microserfs* made its first appearance as a short story in *Wired* magazine in January 1994. The full novel was published the following year, the same year as the launch of the Windows 95 operating system.<sup>86</sup> The novel is deeply connected to the 90s digital boom: technology companies such as Microsoft were associated with considerable amounts of money, and being a tech geek working in the software and hardware industry at that particular moment meant that one had a strong chance of turning into a millionaire at some point. This was achieved even outside of the upper echelon of employees because companies like Microsoft offered their employees the chance of buying stock shares. In addition, many software entrepreneurs were constantly in pursuit of the 'one-point-oh' ideal: the possibility of being the first one to do something new and influential.<sup>87</sup>

Writing in his notebook at night, Daniel, the protagonist and narrator of *Microserfs*, tries to make sense of his life, writing about his work, friends and family. More than simply a personal story, because it was written at a time when personal computers and the Internet were still making their ways into every household, *Microserfs* is uniquely able to explore the impact of technology on daily life. The majority of the novel's characters are geeks, albeit belonging to different (and sometimes overlapping) types of geek.<sup>88</sup> Their

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<sup>86</sup> When Windows 95 was released, previous versions of the software and MS-DOS ran on 80% of the world's PCs. Windows 95 also introduced new multimedia capacities, the start button, Plug-and-Play capabilities, and the first version of Internet Explorer. Microsoft. *A history of Windows: highlights from the first 25 years*. Web. 10 February 2013.

<sup>87</sup> 'One-point-oh' or just '1.0' is an IT industry term, mentioned in the novel as the ideal of pursuing something new and relevant. It is also a reference to the number assigned to the first complete version of a piece of software. Further updates would be called, therefore, 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, while major revisions would be 2.0 and so forth.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel's immediate circle of friends are coders, although some specialise in debugging and others in creating beautiful code. Todd is also an obsessive body builder, and so is his girlfriend. Daniel's father used to work in the administrative side of the IT industry before losing his job, and he is also a model train collector. Some characters are Apple geeks (even though they work for Microsoft), while others know trivia regarding the Xerox PARC computer. They are tech geeks working as software engineers, but they also have

discussions, doubts and decisions relate to their identities as geeks and their positions within geek culture. Therefore, since the characters are self-styled geeks, and there is a constant movement of reflecting on geek culture, the novel it can be considered an example of geek metafiction.<sup>89</sup>

*Microserfs* makes an effort to build a specific vocabulary in order to define what it means to be a geek or a nerd. *Generation X*, Coupland's first book, actually offered definitions on the margins of the narrative, helping to establish terms such as 'McJob', and the title itself, 'Generation X.'<sup>90</sup> In *Microserfs*, Daniel and his friends endlessly discuss what it means to be a 'geek.'

'We got into this discussion about the word "nerd". "Geek" is now, of course, a compliment, but we're not so sure about "nerd". Mom asked me, "What, exactly, *is* the difference between a nerd and a geek?"

I replied, "It's tougher than it seems. It's subtle. Instinctual. I think geek implies hireability, whereas nerd doesn't necessarily mean your skills are 100 percent sellable. Geek implies wealth."

Susan said that geeks were usually losers in high school who didn't have a life, and then not having a life became a status symbol. "People like them never used to be rewarded by society. Now all the stuff that made people want to kick your butt at fifteen becomes fashionable when fused with cash."<sup>91</sup>

Discussions such as this one happen often in *Microserfs*. It brings us back to what we talked about in Chapter 1 regarding the uses of the terms 'geek', 'nerd', and 'otaku'. Even after the discussion in Chapter 1 and my personal position on using the terms interchangeably (while remaining aware of contexts), we cannot ignore the fact that, in the passage above, the characters themselves are making a distinction. Keeping in mind what Azuma Hiroki said about the nature of 'otaku' – that after a certain point the discussions regarding specific points in definitions turn into only an 'emotional exchange between each

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a vast array of other minor obsessions that help define them.

<sup>89</sup> As was proposed in the previous chapter, I call 'geek metafiction' the 'the kind of fiction that deals with geek culture in general or portrays geek characters as central points in its narrative.'

<sup>90</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X: Tales For An Accelerated Culture*. London: Abacus. 2004. 'Generation X' refers to the kids of baby boomers, born between the 60s and the early 80s.

<sup>91</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*. 112.

person's identity',<sup>92</sup> I will not dwell on definitions here, but instead point out the new element brought into play in the passage above: that of money. According to the characters in *Microserfs*, it is the dividing line between nerds and geeks, and money's importance reflects the status of IT in the economy at that point. Jorgerson and Vu explain that 'the growth of IT investment jumped to double-digit levels after 1995 in all the G7 economies—Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United Kingdom, as well as the United States,' and this change to the rapid decline in the prices of IT hardware and software.<sup>93</sup>

This emphasises the economy as an important aspect of geek culture and sets *Microserfs* apart from other pieces of geek metafiction that do not mention it.<sup>94</sup> One possible hypothesis is that the economical growth associated with the knowledge economy, which in turn gained momentum with the development of the IT industry and the Internet, is one of the factors that allowed geek culture to become more popular over time. If this is true, then it would mean that tech geeks were the first of the geek sub-types to become fashionable and cool (a fate that Oscar de León didn't share. If only he was more tech savvy!).<sup>95</sup>

The oft-remembered biblical play on words 'the geek shall inherit the Earth' comes to mind here.<sup>96</sup> As Lev Grossman writes, 'It is as if the economic hegemony of the geek in the 1990s, when high tech and the Internet were driving the economy, has somehow been converted into a cultural hegemony.'<sup>97</sup> Also relevant is the following quotation from *Microserfs*:

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<sup>92</sup> Hiroki, Azuma. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, 6.

<sup>93</sup> Jorgerson, D. Vu, K. 'Information Technology and the World Economy'. Harvard University: *Scand. J. of Economics* 107(4), 631–650, 2005.

<sup>94</sup> Yuniar makes it clear that Oscar comes from a poor family and grew up in a poor neighbourhood, while Train Man (see Chapter 4) mentions that he spends all his money on clothes and grooming, something he is not used to doing. Apart from these, there are no other examinations of the relationship between the economy and geek culture.

<sup>95</sup> According to Peter Drucker, 'Every other dollar earned and spent in the American economy will be earned by producing and distributing ideas and information, and will be spent on procuring ideas and information.' He goes on to say that 'because the knowledge worker tends to be a good deal better paid than the manual worker, and also to have much greater job security, knowledge has already become the central cost of the American economy. The productivity of knowledge has already become the key to productivity, competitive strength, and economic achievement.' (Drucker, Peter. *The Age of Discontinuity*, Transaction Publishing. 2000. 263-264) Drucker's insights, which date as early as 1969, predict the digital boom many decades before it happened, much like the work of Marshal McLuhan predicted some of the media developments that would lead to the Internet. McLuhan, Marshal. *Understanding Media*. London: Routledge. 2001.

<sup>96</sup> 'Over the past few years, an enormous shift has taken place in American culture, a disturbance in the Force, a rip in the fabric of space-time. What was once hopelessly geeky--video games, fantasy novels, science fiction, superheroes--has now, somehow, become cool.' Grossman, Lev. 'The Geek Shall Inherit The Earth'. *Time Magazine*, 25 September 2005. Web. 22 May 2013.

<sup>97</sup> Grossman, Lev. *The Geek Shall Inherit the Earth*.

‘Caroline from the Word offices in Building Sixteen sent an e-mail regarding the word ‘nerd.’ She says the word only came into vogue around the late ‘70s when *Happy Days* was big on TV – eerily the same time that the PC was being popularized. She said prior to that, there was no everyday application for the word, “and now nerds run the world!”<sup>98</sup>

Here, the characters exchange information and opinions through e-mail, a common method of communication in *Microserfs*. They discuss geek culture using one of the tools most commonly associated with it: the computer. It is worth noting that the characters exchanging emails are co-workers, which means they can meet up and talk in person, even if they work in different buildings. Coupland’s choice to represent their communication as largely electronic serves to prove a point: it is not that the characters do not like social interaction (though they may not), but that they consider online interaction just as valid and real as communication that takes place face-to-face.

Another important aspect worth noting in the passage above is the use of popular culture as a reference. Characters define themselves and others in terms of likes and dislikes of cultural products. Mentioning *Happy Days* as the first valid use of the term ‘nerd’ in popular culture is considered just as valid, for Coupland, as referencing an academic essay.

Azuma Hiroki marks 1995 as the year when the ‘Second Period of Postmodernism’ began. That marks the end of the era of grand narratives (following Lyotard), which is then substituted with a database model of narrative consumption.<sup>99</sup> Hiroki argues that the world is no longer understood in terms of universal stories but as the interaction of and connection between disparate and individual elements. This worldview is emphasised by the growth and spread of Information Technology (IT). It is an interesting coincidence that *Microserfs* was published in that same year, and the novel shows many of the features proposed by Hiroki.

I am [danielu@microsoft.com](mailto:danielu@microsoft.com). If my life was a game of *Jeopardy!* my seven dream categories would be:

Tandy products

Trash TV of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s

The history of Apple

<sup>98</sup> Coupland, Douglas, *Microserfs*. 29.

<sup>99</sup> In Japan, 1995 was also the year of Aum Shinrikyo cult sarin gas attack on Tokyo metro, and the release date of the anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, frequently referenced by Hiroki as an example of a narrative – especially regarding its ending - aligned with his database consumption theory.

Career anxieties  
 Tabloids  
 Jell-O 1-2-3<sup>100</sup>

Daniel introduces himself not by giving an account of his beliefs or political choices, describing his physical appearance or telling a particular story about himself. Rather, the first thing he reveals is a list of interests. One important thing to notice is that he gives his e-mail address rather than his name: his identity, at this early stage of the story, is still completely attached to his work. In similar fashion, Susan, one of Daniel's friends, describes their group of co-workers as Star Trek characters:

‘**Abe:** Wise hermit cast adrift on asteroid for thousands of years; has developed odd code languages for everyday actions; lonely but not bitter; his heart is cryogenically frozen, and he must search the universe pursuing the Thawer.’<sup>101</sup>

All of the characters's personalities are always connected to external cultural references in order to achieve a sense of personal significance, similarly to the process Hiroki describes when, for example, discussing anime characters that show a certain type/colour of hair or accessories. According to Hiroki, ‘... instead of narratives creating characters, it has become a general strategy to create character settings first, followed by works and projects, *including the stories*.’<sup>102</sup> *Microserfs* is not quite at this stage, however, since it remains an author-driven work in which the story and theme still weigh heavily over the characters. The process of character building, and the endless lists associated and created by them, are an intriguing approximation of this process.

One might argue that the characters in *Microserfs* are not completely sure of their identities, and they require constant redefinition. Just as was seen in *Oscar Wao*, decoding/interpreting/reading *Microserfs* goes beyond reading the story being told: true appreciation for it must come from an understand of its intertextuality and how characters and plot are constructed like Lego bricks stacked together, little units of meaning that form into a bigger whole. This can also be seen in the way chapters are presented: the novel is composed of small blocks of text, short chapters that are entries in Daniel's PowerBook

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<sup>100</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 7.

<sup>101</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 262-63.

<sup>102</sup> Hiroki, Azuma. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, 48.

diary. Each chapter is somewhat closed in itself: the novel is not told as a continuous chain of events but rather as a collection of moments.

LEGO itself is important to the narrative.<sup>103</sup> Some editions have LEGO bricks on the cover, and the author's photo on the book's jacket was taken at LEGOLAND. The toy is mentioned as something tech geeks have in common – presumably, they all played with it as children. Furthermore, the product created by Daniel and his friends in their company *Interiority Inc.*, after they leave Microsoft, called *Oop!*, is a piece of computer software described as a 'virtual construction box – a bottomless box of 3D Lego-type bricks that runs on IBM or Mac platforms with CD-ROM drives.'<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> For a discussion on considering LEGO a form of language, see Said, Roger et al. 'LEGO Speaks.' *Working Paper*, 20, November 2001. Imagination Lab Institute, Switzerland.

<sup>104</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*. 70 and 82.



## Dream machines

The conflict between man and machine and the relation between geeks and money become more blatant when we examine a word cloud created from the novel's complete text, through the wordle.net website. This service processes the data entered, changing the size of each word proportionally to the number of times it appears in the text.<sup>105</sup>

In this image, we can see that the words 'machine' and 'money' are much bigger than the others.<sup>106</sup> There is a simple reason for that: these words are repeated for two pages each as part of the protagonist's semantic satiation experiment of repeating the same word over and over until the word loses its meaning and becomes something else. This brings up a quotation from Joyce, taken, in its turn, from Coupland's biography of Marshall McLuhan:

He found words for his treasure-house... at haphazard in the shops, on advertisements, in the mouths of the plodding public. He kept repeating them to himself till they lost all instantaneous meaning for him and became wonderful vocables.<sup>107</sup>

The above quotation could be applied to Daniel, who considers his little experiment almost a transcendental experience: the words 'dissolved and lost their meaning, the way words do when you repeat them over and over — the way *anything* loses meaning when context is removed — the way we can quickly enter the world of the immaterial using the simplest of devices, like multiplication.'<sup>108</sup>

Contrasting with this is the usage of the characters' proper names, the human element of the word cloud. Most obvious is the name Karla – the protagonist's girlfriend. Despite proposing that money has so much to do with what defines a geek, the characters are actually seeking something else: friendship and love.

<sup>105</sup> While ignoring 'stop words' such as 'the', 'and' or 'but' (common and unimportant words in English). *Wordle*. Web. 31 July 2013.

<sup>106</sup> The actual positioning of the words is randomized. Nevertheless, quite appropriately, the word 'code' is neatly placed inside the 'o' in 'money.' A fascinating coincidence.

<sup>107</sup> The original text is from Joyce, James. *Stephen Hero, episode 5*. New Directions, 1944, as found in Coupland, Douglas. *You Know Nothing of My Work*. New York: New Atlas. 2010. It is remarkable how Coupland admits that he knew almost nothing of McLuhan's work before being invited to write his biography. One can imagine how relevant McLuhan's thought would have been at the time Coupland was writing *Microserfs*. One of the most famous quotes from McLuhan is 'The next medium, whatever it is — it may be the extension of consciousness — will include television as its content, not as its environment, and will transform television into an art form. A computer as a research and communication instrument could enhance retrieval, obsolesce mass library organization, retrieve the individual's encyclopaedic function and flip it into a private line to speedily tailored data of a saleable kind.' (McLuhan, Marshall. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of the Typographical Man*. Canada: University of Toronto Press. 1962).

<sup>108</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 87.

*Microserfs* makes use of formatting experiments that go beyond the regular linear text that forms novels in general. Coupland adds sequences in binary code, reproduces file errors, and plays with font sizes. He is doing more than simply simulating a computer environment; it is also a statement on how he sees words themselves.

Coupland explicitly mentions the work of Jenny Holzer as one of his major creative inspirations: "I discovered Jenny Holzer's text work in art school in the early 1980's. After that, it now seems, a lifetime spent working with words was unavoidable."<sup>109</sup> His interest in Holzer's installations, together with Coupland's belief that 'words are sexy,'<sup>110</sup> are two key points in understanding *Microserfs*'s formal choices. During the 'machine subconscious files' sections, not every reference made is clear: brands, historical facts, random words, places, names, numbers; Coupland's chooses to depict them that way for aesthetic reasons: because they are beautiful. The same goes for other visual experiments.

My hard drive accidentally trashed today's file, so I include a snippet of the trash here as a curiosity piece. Language!

All 111 11 It the office we" live decided that instead of Friday Fll11113636111136being jeans day, we" 11111111113636373733d have Boxer Shorts Day instead. It" 11113838393940404141424243434444s way comfier, way sexier, lllland it"lllls funny watching Michael admonish the male stall members, ""1111451111114545464647474811114848Please guys, no units displayed if at all possible.""! 1114949505051&f&v&w&x&z&A&e&i&a&A&n&O' '4'O'S'['\_ 'o 'Q'U\*\*"\*{1\*}+ + + L + h + v, ,?','-9-a-}-A-6-0-©-\*'-0-»-A-0-fl-,-AOU. .?.G.O.S.T.b.l.~.N.6.e.e.i.i.u.ii.B.0// /S/b/c/d/e/A/6oOO¥Of~IT'ljnLrt^^ " " I " I A A I " ,, " ,, " ,, " " U " U " " " U " " U " U " \ ] c U A V A I vUAcH]UA]c\$]\cPR5151525253535454555556561111111111Dusty tried to get him to wear a pair of striped boxers but Dad politely refused.<sup>111</sup>

This passage illustrates a bug in the system, an error in the word processing software. Despite what Daniel says, it is not just a curiosity piece. It is language twisted

<sup>109</sup> Jenny Holzer is an American installation and conceptual artist. Her work revolves around the use of words as posters, electronic and, more recently, LED signs. The messages displayed are meant to start debate and deal with political and moral issues. Her work also questions the matter of where art should be shown. Frequently, her signs are projected on large buildings in big cities such as New York. Some examples can be seen on her website <<http://www.jennyholzer.com/>>.

<sup>110</sup> 'I've always thought that words are sexy. Words are art objects even by themselves, even without being inserted into a narrative.' Coupland, Douglas. *Why Write Modern Fiction*.

<sup>111</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 239.

and subverted, with the hint that there is some kind of computer logic behind the error, which makes it all the more fascinating. Or, as Daniel himself says, “language is such a technology.”<sup>112</sup>

To return to Daniel’s experimentation on repeating words over and over, his effort to make the words ‘machine’ and ‘money’ lose their meanings can be read as a desire to worry about something besides getting rich. By the end of the novel, having achieved success after releasing a new piece of software with his friends, Daniel says that the money is ‘simply there.’<sup>113</sup>

‘Oop!, I might add, is going to be a hit [...] it would appear that we’re all still employed, and that our risk has become solid equity, but you know what? All I care about is that we’re still together as friends, that we’re not enemies, and that we continue to do cool stuff together. I thought the money would mean something, but it doesn’t. It’s there, but it’s not emotional. It’s simply *there*.’<sup>114</sup>

By questioning their condition as serfs (slaves of the machine), the characters lead themselves into pursuing better self-awareness. First they seek freedom from a dull job that takes all their time, leaving Microsoft to create their own software company. After that, they begin taking care of their own bodies by going to the gym or enjoying shiatsu massages.<sup>115</sup> During this time, they develop better interpersonal relationships and reclaim their humanity, shattering the derogative connotations of the words ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ in doing so.

Later developments in the narrative, like the stroke that Daniel’s mother that leaves her paralysed and unable to speak, unite all the characters in an effort to use computers in the effort to help her communicate. This scene, at the very end of the novel, was part of its first version, published in *Wired* magazine. It is this scene, the actual ending, that moves the reader towards a positive understanding of the relation between human and machine. At this point, and only this point, does the novel’s subtext of transhumanity become overt.

‘*Microserfs: Transhumanity*’ was the 1994 short story’s original title. In the full novel, it became the title of the last section. Daniel’s mother’s condition after the stroke is improved when Daniel’s friends successfully find a way of allowing Mrs Underwood to

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<sup>112</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*. 112. Can this be considered ‘word porn’?

<sup>113</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*. 232.

<sup>114</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*. 358.

<sup>115</sup> At one point, Karla theorises that we have memories store in different parts of our body – that we are, as opposed to the common humanist notion that the mind and the body are separate, one single organism. When the characters’ relationships with their bodies change, their lives change as well.

communicate with them through a computer. She uses the strength left in her fingers to type short messages on a keyboard. The moment serves as a climax; it notably abandons all irony in favour of an emotional and honest family and friend-centred passage about overcoming challenges and the problematic power of technology.

When we returned to the house, my friends were gathered around Mom, in front of a monitor, their faces lit sky blue; they had forgotten to turn on the lights in the kitchen. Mom's body was upheld by Bug and Abe inside a kitchen chair, with Michael clasping her arms. On the screen, in 36 point Helvetica on the screen of a Mac Classic were written the words:

**i am here**<sup>116</sup>

This moment is also the last step on the books long process of dialogue between the human condition and machine. It instantly evokes posthumanist theory and offers closure, even though the characters are facing completely new challenge when dealing with Daniel's mother.<sup>117</sup>

It is possible to look at *Microserfs* as process that begins with the characters working as machines (not having a life, geeking out on work for days and nights, working as serfs) and moves into a period of self-discovery, when they decide to have a voice of their own, start a new company with new ideas, moving, discovering their bodies by valuing their relationships instead of only their work, and ending at a point where they are fully human, connected, and socially and physically active. Once their product succeeds and they have found their place professionally, they can deal with Mrs Underwood's condition. By applying their knowledge to improve her life, they build bridges between humanity and technology, allowing her to become something more than human, achieving a posthuman condition.

I would like to point out a connection here to the work of Japanese cultural critic

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<sup>116</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*. 236-237.

<sup>117</sup> *Microserfs* suggests the subject briefly, leaving that particular theme open-ended. As far as transhumanity/posthumanity goes, the novel leaves readers with an optimistic statement that amazing things are possible with technology, and that geeks are the people who help bring these kinds of achievements into the real world. For more references on posthuman theory, see:

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How we Became Posthuman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1999.

Haraway, Donna. 'A Cyborg Manifesto.' *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York; Routledge, 1991

Pepperell, Robert. *The Posthuman Condition*. Bristol: Intellect. 2003.

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1998.

Okada Toshio. In his pioneering book *An Introduction to Otaku Studies*, Toshio defines the otaku as a ‘new type’ of human being with a special kind of sensibility.<sup>118</sup> His claim is perhaps an exaggeration, but there is an important point to be made here, which is to acknowledge that geeks are aware and particularly responsive to a cultural shift in an extremely consumerist society. His objective in saying this, most likely, was not only to put the Japanese geeks in the centre of a cultural and economical phenomenon, but also to shift the stereotype and to challenge the derogatory notion of otaku and turn it into something positive.

At its ending, *Microserfs* offers an optimistic message regarding our situation: yes, we rely on technology and it is an enormous part of our lives now, and it has changed us, culturally and economically, but this is not a bad thing. Amazing things can be built and achieved through technology, and future possibilities are inspiring.

And as Karla and I lay there, the two of us — the *all* of us — with our flashlights and lasers, cutting the weather, extending ourselves into the sky, into the end of the universe with precision technology running so fine, I looked at Karla and said out loud, “*You know, its true.*”

And then, I thought about us ... these children who fell down life’s cartoon holes ... dreamless children, alive but not living — we emerged on the other side of the cartoon holes fully awake and discovered we were whole.<sup>119</sup>

## Save and Close

As a way of concluding, I would like to talk about why *Microserfs* is important. As a book published in 1995, its many reflections regarding technology might be seen as dated. Certainly technology and the relationship humans have with it are very different from what existed then. Computers now come in many different shapes and sizes, and even the simplest smartphone today is be more powerful than a computer running Windows 95 at the time Coupland published his book.

Despite this, there are many instances when the book is prescient regarding new

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<sup>118</sup> Toshio, Okada. ‘An Introduction to Otaku Studies.’ in Saito, Tamaki. *Beautiful Fighting Girl*. 13. The term ‘newtype’ was borrowed from the anime *Mobile Suit Gundam* where the pilots of mobile suits – a kind of space mecha, or giant robot – are frequently a new kind of human, with overdeveloped intuition and reflexes.

<sup>119</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*. 238-239.

technologies. For instance, the characters talk about the amount of social interaction they get in their lives (considering how many hours they spend at the computer), and refer to social interaction as ‘FaceTime.’ They refer to time spent face-to-face, but the term takes on a new meaning when we take into account that Apple implemented an application on their iDevices and computers called Face Time that allows users to talk to one another using the camera and microphone.<sup>120</sup> There are no references to be found confirming whether Apple developers were aware of the use of the term in Coupland’s novel or if it is only a coincidence.<sup>121</sup>

The novel’s narrator says that ‘apparently there’s some company in Texas that helps you market your reunion. [...] Beware of the corporate invasion of private life.’<sup>122</sup> Today, Facebook is one of the biggest online companies, dealing mostly with the personal lives and social interaction of its members. Coupland’s warning, issued eighteen years ago, takes on a new perspective now that we are aware of the scandal brought forward by whistleblower Edward Snowden regarding the way the United States government has access to personal e-mail accounts, social media profiles, online calls and other communications.<sup>123</sup>

On a different note, Daniel’s company, *Interiority Inc.*, is not merely creating a game, but also a graphics engine that could be used for different applications. 3D modelling is widely used today in electronic games, architecture, engineering, and in the recent 3D printing technology, for instance. The most telling resemblance, however, is between *Oop!* and a game called *Minecraft*, in which block-like objects with different textures and surfaces are used to build any desired structure, including working virtual computers.<sup>124</sup>

Such comparisons between past and present are not only fun to identify, but they also provide the reader with a kind of *potential intertextuality* – a reading that was not possible at the time the book was published, but is available now, many years later. This, simply, is why *Microserfs* is important: as a commentary on a certain aspect of society, it

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<sup>120</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 187.

<sup>121</sup> *Microserfs* is a popular book. It is not hard to imagine that at least some of people in the development team were aware of Coupland’s work. In 2011, the IMO Projects gallery in Copenhagen organised an exhibition called ‘Face Time’, acknowledging both Coupland’s and Apple’s uses of the term. It was focused on ‘the state of the face today’ and curated by Tokke Lykkeberg and Julia Rodrigues. ‘Facetime’, *IMO Projects*. Web. 20 July 2013.

<sup>122</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 177.

<sup>123</sup> Edward Snowden’s statement: ‘It was the right thing to do and I have no regrets’. *The Guardian*. 12 July 2013. Web.

<sup>124</sup> Ganapati, Priya. ‘Geeky Gamers Build Working Computers out of Virtual Blocks’. *Wired*. 10 December 2012. Web. 30 July 2013)

portrays the American knowledge economy and the development of the IT industry during the 1990s, especially the moment when the Windows operating system, multimedia software and the Internet became widely popular. As far as geek culture goes, it is one of the most comprehensive explorations of the theme in fictional form. It is also relevant formally: the whimsical experimentations are subordinated to plot and not the other way around; they also show a remarkable passion for words and language in themselves.

It is somehow ironic that, for all the importance technology has in Douglas Coupland's *Microserfs*, the novel itself is quite traditional. However intriguing, these examples do not overshadow the fact that, apart from a few tweaks and gimmicks, the narrative is very linear and straightforward. *Microserfs* remains a novel printed on paper, bearing a soft or hard cover, complete with a photograph of the author on its back, originally published when e-readers were only a possibility. Coupland still publishes new novels regularly, and still he chooses the book form. Even when delivering the Massey Lectures, he submitted the novel *Player One: what is to become of us?* instead of one lengthy essay.<sup>125</sup>

Coupland has had to respond to the constant barrage of questions about why he did not get involved with more dynamic forms of storytelling, such as movies or TV. In other words, why, since he was so fond of technology and new designs, he did not abandon the low-tech art form known as 'literature'. In truth, he has proven to be a versatile creator: apart from his books, he has worked on visual arts and design projects, and was involved with the adaptation and production of TV shows.<sup>126</sup> He believes, however, that there is something unique in conventional storytelling: the beauty of the way words are put together sequentially; the way a reader can enjoy a book at their own pace, free to stop and savour every letter, every change in formatting.<sup>127</sup>

In Daniel's words, 'a good piece of technology dreams of the day when it will be replaced by a newer piece of technology. This is one definition of progress.'<sup>128</sup> If *Microserfs* still relies on a traditional medium, Nakano Hitori's *Train Man* crosses the gap and is born as a completely electronic narrative. Whether or not this is the future of literature is a moot point; it is a rich source for discussion nevertheless.

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<sup>125</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Player One: What is to Become of Us?* London: Windmill Books. 2011.

<sup>126</sup> Some examples are the *Digital Orca*, a pixelated steel structure of a whale; *Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, an art installation exploring the 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset; *Souvenir of Canada*, a documentary which follows Coupland as he discusses the Canadian identity and decorates a house based on that idea; and the TV adaptation of *JPod*.

<sup>127</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Why Write Modern Fiction*.

<sup>128</sup> Coupland, Douglas. *Microserfs*, 115-116.



## CHAPTER 4:

### Train Man, The Otaku Chorus And The Limits Of Geek Metafiction

#### Reconnaissance Mission

*Train Man*,<sup>129</sup> by Nakano Hitori, is an unusual novel. It was originally a thread of posts on the Japanese website *2chan*<sup>130</sup> that became immensely popular after one of its users started posting his love story on it. The anonymous user, quickly nicknamed ‘Train Man’ (or just ‘Train’), asks for advice in wooing a girl he had met on a train in Tokyo. The Geeks, a collective entity comprising the other users on the thread, act as a chorus, a multitude of anonymous voices whispering advice and commenting on every one of Train Man’s posts.<sup>131</sup> This brief summary describes both the book and the original thread: they are the same thing, although the published ‘novel’ was based on an edited version of the online text.<sup>132</sup>

The first clear parallel with other literature we can see is the novel’s similarity to the genre of epistolary novels. Seminal works such as Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* or Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, for example, are pervaded with the idea of waiting, particularly relating to time it takes to receive a letter: letters are always the record of something past.<sup>133</sup> The letter format is longer than an online post, and a single letter often serves as a entire chapter in the books above. Even the e-mail, the contemporary form of letter writing, can not escape this notion. In *Train Man*, however, the online forum is reproduced, and is entirely different in nature, rules and formatting to that

<sup>129</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*. London: Robinson. 2006. Kindle version.

<sup>130</sup> 2-channel or *ni channeru* <<http://www.2ch.net>>. Allegedly the most popular online forum in Japan, where the majority of posts are anonymous. Not to be confused with *Futaba Channel* <<http://www.2chan.net>>, a separate website that was subsequently used as the model for the English language *4chan* <<http://www.4chan.org>>.

<sup>131</sup> I suppose the most obvious word play here is Geek Chorus/ Greek Chorus, though, due to translation, that cannot have been the original intention in the Japanese text.

<sup>132</sup> Both the original thread and the edited version are available for free online. The edited version compiles all of Train Man’s posts and the most important replies by the other users. Alisa Freedman (based in Andou Kenji, 2005), reports that most obscene drawings were left out of the edited version, as well as four different and less optimistic endings. Only 6.4% of the original posts are in the edited version. Freedman, Alisa. ‘Train Man and the Gender Politics of Japanese ‘Otaku’ Culture: The Rise of New Media, Nerd Heroes and Consumer Communities Intersections.’ *Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* Issue 20, April 2009.

<sup>133</sup> Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press. 2011.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

of the letter.

298 Name: Train Man ♦ SgHguKHEFY Post Date: 28/03/04 22:04

to cut to the chase, I've got a second date will get to the progress report a bit later

301 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 28/03/04 22:05

train's here train's here train's here!<sup>134</sup>

The second poster's reply, sent merely one minute after Train Man's, illustrates a sense of immediacy or, as the Geeks themselves say, 'real time.' Following Train Man's postings in real time was a major event, welcomed with enthusiasm by his fellow geeks. It was not written to *resemble* social media: it *is* social media. The publisher claims that the novel's story is true, and the novel was marketed around that statement.

*Train Man* closes a three-part examination of geek culture in fiction: while Coupland focuses on technology geeks and Díaz on the classic fantasy- and science fiction-loving geek, *Train Man* deals with the Japanese otaku. Some cultural and geographical context is necessary: we have moved away from Redmond and the Silicon Valley, the settings for *Microserfs*, have passed by *Oscar Wao*'s New Jersey, and landed in the crowded Akihabara district in Tokyo, Japan. Despite the geographical distance, the portrayal of the geek stereotype remains the same: the otaku in *Train Man* are people who are passionate about certain subjects and are socially inept. As in the previous chapters, however, there are some changes to the concept of geek/nerd/otaku here that are specific to *Train Man*. For instance, there is no indication that the main character is particularly clever. Even though he describes himself as a tech geek, he later confesses that, in fact, he does not know enough to set up a new computer himself. The social ineptitude, meanwhile, is now directed mostly towards women: Train Man is inexperienced romantically, but he does not mention how he fares socially in non-romantic situations. The target of his otaku interests is also slightly different from that seen in the novels analysed earlier: his interests include Manga, anime, videogames, voice actresses and the Internet (specifically the *2chan* message board).

The collected and edited posts of Train Man's story found their way into book form, aiming at a wider audience. Selling over a million copies, it eventually became a film, a TV series and a Manga. During the initial discussion, one of the Geeks even makes

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<sup>134</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*. Kindle edition, location 2605.

this prescient comment:

195 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 24/04/04 11:15

We're heading into film and TV drama and novel territory here.<sup>135</sup>

There are many ways in which we can link this book to some of the aspects of geek culture we have been discussing so far: geek identity, the use of geek culture as an intrinsic element (geek metafiction), and the relationship between geek culture and technology. In addition to this, *Train Man* also explores other themes. For example, it illustrates Azuma Hiroki's notion of database consumption and also shows some of Derrida's thoughts on the transformation of the book form and how the *codex* may be forsaken in favour of the electronic word.<sup>136</sup>

Above all, however, I would like to look at the new possibilities for fiction that *Train Man* presents, particularly the ways it challenges the traditional novel and narrative form in its concept and materiality, the concept of authorship, and the boundaries between media. This will lead us to focus on innovative ways fiction is created, especially those largely inspired by the contemporary, digital, uber-connected lifestyle. To do so, we will need to examine how exactly the book works, since we need to take into account the original posting formats and habits of the *2chan* discussion threads.

In this context, my study of *Train Man*<sup>137</sup> focuses on a literary approach with a two-fold purpose: first, to look for ways in which *Train Man* mentions and uses geek culture, and to what end; and secondly, to ask where *Train Man* takes us, both creatively and critically, in terms of literature?

### **Bombing Mission**

The first issue we need to take into account when reading *Train Man* is that of translation: the official English translation seems to suffer from a slight lack of understanding of geek and otaku cultures. It gives the posts voice and style when translating Internet neologisms, but certain key terms are confusing. One particular issue is the choice to use the British English 'anorak' over the Japanese, and now very much

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<sup>135</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 6882.

<sup>136</sup> Derrida, Jacques. 'The Book to Come'. *Paper Machine*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2005.

<sup>137</sup> *Train Man* is also widely referred to in academic studies as *Densha Otoko*, its original Japanese title.

international term, ‘otaku’.<sup>138</sup> There is an unofficial translation online, based on the original public domain posts. Titled *Project Densha*, which shows more familiarity with both *2chan*’s inner workings and otaku culture. It also makes use of certain formatting advantages, such as colour and font variations, as well as the inclusion of supporting images.<sup>139</sup>

Another factor worth examining is how the book’s organisation. *Train Man* is divided into six ‘missions’ or chapters (a clear nod towards video games and/or military terms, which the Geeks use playfully), with an additional ‘post-fin’ chapter. The text sits uncomfortably in book form: the formatting is cluttered, the ASCII<sup>140</sup> art is too small, and it is difficult to follow hyperlinks (unless you are reading the e-book version on a computer or tablet, a fact that in itself says much about the kind of book that *Train Man* is).<sup>141</sup> Compromises must be made. Most of the time, the style bears some resemblance to verse when mimicking the online post syntax: each sentence ends on a line break.

731 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 14/03/04 21:25

Sorry. I may end up betraying you guys.

I’m no good at writing so don’t know how well I can tell this story.

Damn. This thread’s got something going on . . .

May the force be with you . . .<sup>142</sup>

As in the vast majority of posts in the *2chan* website, the author is anonymous or, in a literal translation, ‘Mr No Name.’ The quotation above is the very first post by Train Man, preparing to tell his tale. He is worried about his storytelling skills, and whether he will be able to tell the story well (‘I may end up betraying you guys’). After his posts

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<sup>138</sup> The definition for ‘otaku’ and its relation to the terms ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ were explored in Chapter One. ‘Anorak’, however, is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘*slang (derogatory)*. A boring, studious, or socially inept young person (caricatured as typically wearing an anorak), *esp.* one who pursues an unfashionable and solitary interest with obsessive dedication.’ (‘Anorak.’ *Oxford English Dictionary*. Web. 20 May 2013). This definition is almost identical to ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’. It is interesting to notice how ‘otaku’ and ‘anorak’ *sound* similar, since they have the same vowels and the recurrence of the consonant ‘k’. But, given the context, ‘otaku’ would be preferable.

<sup>139</sup> *Project Densha*. Web. <<http://www.rinji.tv/densha/>> 15 June 2013.

<sup>140</sup> ASCII can be defined as drawings made entirely by writing characters.

<sup>141</sup> The Geeks act as advisers to Train Man, suggesting places to go, where to shop for clothes and restaurants to visit.

<sup>142</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 50. The Star Wars reference is not present in the alternative translation, which reads ‘This thread has way too much magical power. Glory to you all.’ *Project Densha*. 2006. Web. 15 June 2013. A detailed comparison between the two translations would be very interesting investigation.

became popular, though, Train Man added a diamond-shaped character followed by a unique sequence of numbers and letters – a ‘tripcode’ - to his nickname ‘Train Man’. In *2chan*’s system, this unique identification code guarantees that no one else can impersonate that particular user.<sup>143</sup> This shows that Train Man was familiar with the online message board mechanics. As he admits, spending time online took up much of his day.

No way could anybody have known that this board, commonly composed of banal postings, was about to morph into a support group and fan club for Train Man.<sup>144</sup>

There is a hint of a narrator, supposedly connecting plot points and offering a sense of context whenever editing has been done. The narrator’s interventions are few and far between. The true identity of this narrator is never fully disclosed. It is not clear whether the narrator is Nakano Hitori, the name on the cover, or if it is Train Man himself. The strongest possibility is that the narrator is the original editor of the posts, designated towards the end of the book as ‘One of Us’ or ‘Naka no Hito’.

367 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 10/04/04 21:00<sup>145</sup>

sorry to keep you waiting. I’ve renewed ‘Geek Gets Shot Down in Flames ---- Calls for Back-up’ <http://www.geocities.co.jp/Milkyway-Aquarius/7075/>

I’ve compiled both bombings into one big one. If you haven’t already been exposed, be warned. Enter at own risk. Lately, the thread has split in lots of directions but I’ve compiled the posts from two locations. If anybody knows of other places where the thread continues and thrives, please let me know. Thanks for your cooperation, all you hard-working editors out there.

Traditional narrative in mainstream literature would follow a simple structure with a clear narrator, either a protagonist, a witness or neutral narrative voice, conducting the story and the characters. In this case, *Train Man* has a much more fragmentary structure, deriving from its collective mode of text production: Train Man, Geeks and editors all contribute to what becomes the edited version of the posts. This voluntary editor even acknowledges that he worked with the help of several other people. The only certain fact is that none of those editors is Train Man. The supposed narrator and, by proxy, the supposed author of the book, is undisclosed, turning ‘Nakano Hitori’ into an alias. Once again, the

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<sup>143</sup> As explained by at *Project Densha* and the similar online board *4chan* ( 2013. Web. 15 June 2013).

<sup>144</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, Location 50.

<sup>145</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 685.

Japanese publishers claim to know Train Man's true identity, going so far as to arrange interviews with Western news outlets.<sup>146</sup> The truth is that *Train Man* is a collective work without an individual authorial voice.<sup>147</sup>

To a certain extent, *Train Man* has no Author. It is the work of many, put together by anonymous editors, made by thousands of selected anonymous posts, to which Train Man's serve only as a guiding point providing a little conventional narrative structure. All these layers of secrecy regarding the author lead us to Barthes's notion of the 'Death of the Author', but with a twist.<sup>148</sup> His original essay, which defends the supremacy of the text over its author can, and frequently has, been misunderstood as an apocalyptic declaration that the author as an entity would cease to exist, or that Barthes believes that the author should no longer exist. Says Barthes, 'Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.'<sup>149</sup> Even though this notion is commonly misread – Barthes's essay is, after all, a critique of the excessive emphasis put on the author's biography when reading, and a defence of the focus on the text itself. The status of *Train Man*'s author reflects this misreading of Barthes.

Another interesting parallel between *Train Man* and Barthes is the idea of 'thread': in the online context, it means a string of posts which form a single topic. Visually, it is very linear. Structurally, the replies to a post pile up vertically, as if tangents to the main story. For example, in the book, the main story is composed of Train Man's posts describing his interactions with the girl Hermés. But when we read it, in fact there are several replies to each of his posts, his replies to those replies, and so on. In book form (printed or electronic), the reading experience is linear, as we follow (and get lost trying to do so) each of those steps. Barthes says that 'To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognize its construction in "storeys", to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative "thread" on to an implicitly vertical

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<sup>146</sup> Lewis, Leo. 'Millions In Thrall To A Blogger's Tale Of Love On The Rails'. *The Times*. 19 March 2005. Web. 15 June 2013.

Ashcraft, Brian. 'It was fairy-tale romance. A very nerdy fairy-tale romance'. *Wired*. January 2007. Web. 15 June 2013.

<sup>147</sup> One has to wonder how the rights are managed. Who keeps the royalties of book sales, as well as television, manga and film rights? Are the Geeks bothered by the fact that the story is selling millions using their original posts? If Train Man is being paid for this, would it not be unethical to receive money if only a small part of the story was actually his words? Furthermore, is Train Man himself getting paid for it, or is Naka no Hito, the original editor of the compilations? I could find no information regarding these questions and it would require further investigation with the publishers. It all opens up the possibility that there is a ghostwriter involved, that it was a marketing stunt, or that other *2chan* users made up the story.

<sup>148</sup> Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author'. *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press. 1977.

<sup>149</sup> Barthes, Roland. *The Death of the Author*, 147.

axis.<sup>150</sup> This line of thinking asks us to consider other similar words: the thread as a path to follow, as a part of the textile quality of a story, the notion of weaving a story together, the idea of the thread as a connecting medium, and as part of a web. These ideas connect *Train Man's* structure with Barthes's ideas, the notion of Internet and the concept of intertextuality.

The main narrative, Train Man's love story, is actually quite simple – it starts with a chance encounter on a train and ends with a kiss and a declaration of love, with no plot twists along the way. The real story is how an online community was formed and the contrast between the stereotype of geeks as socially inept and their support of each other in a very real way, even if through an online forum. It reads just as well vertically as it does horizontally: the Geeks comments pile up over Train Man's reports, offering different interpretations to every unfolding tale.

792 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 14/03/04 23:27

>>789 You gave them your address, right? Then there's no need to worry coz they'll come over to your place with a thank you gift.

93 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 14/03/04 23:27

Well your address is probably one in a list of many guys! Even so, you've scored quite big for a Geek<sup>151</sup>

Train Man's account is as follows: he is a standard geek, who never had a girlfriend and still lives with his parents. One day, on the Tokyo metro, he watches as a drunken old man harasses a group of women. Mustering all his courage, he intervenes and asks the man to stop. There is a struggle and soon the other passengers and the police become involved. Since thank you gifts are such a large part of Japanese society, it is only natural that one of the women asks for his address. This story alone attracted the attention on *2chan*. When, days later, a package with two stylish tea cups arrives, Train Man struggles with his shyness, wanting to call her and offer to take her out to dinner in order to thank her for the cups.<sup>152</sup> The Geeks encourage him to do so and acknowledge his great feat, whatever the outcome.

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<sup>150</sup> Barthes, Roland. *The Death of The Author*, 87.

<sup>151</sup> *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 70.

<sup>152</sup> The teacups' brand was *Hermés*, which prompts the Geeks to nickname the girl 'Lady Hermés,' or just 'Hermés.' Also, being a high-profile brand, her choice of gift leads them to see, appropriately, a deeper meaning in them.

777 Name: 731 aka Train Man Post Date: 15/03/04 19:27

>>772 I'm your basic Akihabara roaming techie . . .

Age = how long I've been without a girlfriend

Definitely a no sexperience virgin

You know what tho, I'm gonna try. I'm gonna try to use that courage that came to me on the train

But even if something did happen with that girl that sat next to me

No way . . . No way could we walk around town together or anything<sup>153</sup>

Akihabara, also known as 'electric town', is the district associated with otaku culture in Tokyo, and has a large concentration of Manga, anime and related merchandise stores (most of them several storeys high), as well as electronics and video game shops and even Maid Cafes.<sup>154</sup> Train Man, in associating himself with Akihabara, acknowledges his interest in technology as well as his social inadequacy, especially around women. Later on, other aspects of his geek personality are divulged: he collects pornographic comics and watches anime such as Keroro<sup>155</sup> and Sailor Moon.<sup>156</sup>

910 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 16/03/04 21:39

>>904 Allow me one comment. 'There's only one of her but you've got all us here at 2-Channel.' That's all I've got to say.<sup>157</sup>

This is a key moment, an often cited quote from the book. Importantly, even though he is an otaku and has no dating experience, Train Man can count on the support of hundreds of others like him. They all believe that this should be enough to guarantee his success. When their plan works, everyone shares in his good fortune. The proposition of the geek community is a deliberate riposte on the idea of the geek as an anti-social person.

In the spirit of this camaraderie, the Geeks even begin using military terms and

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<sup>153</sup> Train man, Kindle edition. Location 285. It is important to notice that he describes himself as a 'tech geek.' Later on, towards the ending, when he is helping Hermés choose a computer, he admits that he can not assemble one himself, since he is not a 'tech geek.' The alternate online translation for the extract above reads 'I'm your average anime otaku, game otaku, Akihabara geek.' *Project Densha*.

<sup>154</sup> Type of establishment common in Akihabara where the waitresses dress themselves in French maid outfits (seen as 'kawaii' or 'cute'). They refer to patrons as 'master,' speak politely and entertain them by playing games like 'rock, paper, scissors.'

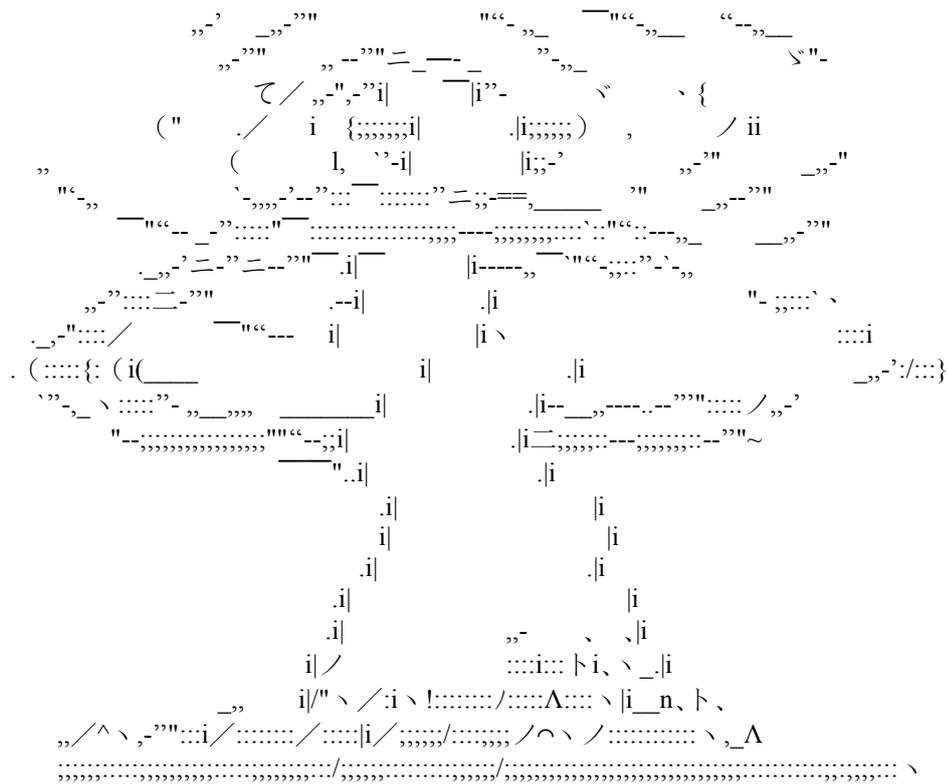
<sup>155</sup> *Keroro Gunso*. Animax. Tokyo. 2004. Animation. Television.

<sup>156</sup> *Sailor Moon*. Toei Animation. TV Asahi. Tokyo. 1993-97. Animation. Television.

<sup>157</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, Location 601.

create amusing and comical war scenes. They adopt a war metaphor<sup>158</sup>, defining themselves as soldiers on the front line, endlessly defending themselves against waves of bombs (posts) dropped by Train Man. The larger the revelation he puts forward, the stronger their metaphorical destructive power. By the end, when Train describes his first kiss and his open declaration of love for the girl Hermés, the Geeks flood the thread with ASCII art of atomic bombs, while jokingly declaring that those were their last moments, that they could now die happily, knowing they shared those moments online.

694 Name: Mr. No Name Date: 04/05/09 16:22<sup>159</sup>



The use of an atomic bomb image seems, in the book, completely devoid of references to the Second World War and Japan’s role in it. The Geeks seem to use this image, along with other war-related drawings, purely to evoke its destructive force, as part of their role-playing of a war front. The effect is supposed to be comical, humorous: Train Man and Hermés are officially together, and the online thread ‘explodes’ in cheers and congratulatory messages. They had been following Train’s account for two months.

<sup>158</sup> For a full discussion on *Train Man*’s war metaphor, see Fisch, Michael. ‘War by Metaphor in Densha Otoko.’ *Mechademia*, Vol. 4, 2009, 131-44.

<sup>159</sup> *Project Densha*.

But Train's different. He's a techie who was keen on voiceover actresses. Which meant that he was indeed a Geek. But now, with confidence and composure, he goes on the attack. This, my friends, is the stuff legends are made of. The man who became the legend of the single male board is no other than Train Man himself.<sup>160</sup>

After all the help received from the Geeks, Train Man shows signs of change. The Geeks seem to notice, perhaps even fear, that the otaku they knew has slowly developed into a self-aware, confident man.

181 Name: Train Man ♦ SgHguKHEFY Post Date: 24/04/04 11:06

I admit, a month ago, I had long scraggly hair, wore glasses, couldn't care less about my clothes and made my way to Akihabara three times a week

My life was basically all about playing games, watching anime and hanging out on 2-Channel

Lately I've got to know myself as someone who quite enjoys dressing up and going out . . .

The initial thread's main focus was not only the otaku, but also single men. Therefore, Train Man and his friends sense that the moment Train will 'graduate' from the board is coming closer. This means that, after he establishes an official relationship with Hermés, the natural thing to do is to abandon the current board and move to the 'couples' board. When the moment comes, it is treated as a ritual, with one of the thread members writing a 'graduation diploma'.

547 Name: Anonymous Post Date 09/05/04 17:45

I've prepared something

Graduation Diploma

Mr Train Man

As Chief representative

of the Geek Board, on the 4th day in

May of the 15th year of the Heisei Era,

I declare you as a graduate of the

Geek Board.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, Location 6688-91.

<sup>161</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 9834.

The fact that Train is ‘graduating’ and consequently leaving this particular board suggests that, in this context, the notion of ‘Geek’ is paired with being single. They all take as read the fact that Train will leave, now that he is somewhat successful in dating. This goes in the opposite direction of using the geek or nerd identity as a point of pride, as we have seen in the previous chapter. It would seem that, in Japan, the term ‘otaku’ carries a more negative connotation than ‘geek’ in the West.

337 Name: Train Man ♦ SgHguKHEFY Post Date: 24/04/04 20:42 for now I replied with ‘I always shop alone’ Hmm, if I end up going out with her for real, would I have to stop being a manga obsessive anorak? will I turn into? Interests: Hermes (x\_x)<sup>162</sup>

956 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 04/05/04 23:16

>>940 I am one but you’re an anorak too, no? You were really talking about Sailor Moon weren’t you? So just think about Hermes as a different kind of anorak whether it’s teas or foreign languages. I think if you redirect the energy that used to be poured into Sailor Moon to Hermes, you’ll be able to work out what needs to be done.<sup>163</sup>

When Hermés questions him about his habits, Train starts to wonder what will happen once they are in a relationship. Will he give up his otaku pursuits and interests? Will he become someone else? A fellow geek comes up with an answer, summoning the notion that geeks and otaku could pursue any kinds of interests and, therefore, Hermés can also be considered an otaku. I will come back to this point in a moment.

Finally, when the moment to end the thread once and for all arrives, with Train Man posting for the first time on the couples board, the Geeks say goodbye in an optimistic tone.

795 name: Anonymous Post date : 09/05/04 18:20

I joined the war effort about a month ago and though your bombs did send me back into the shadowy depths of my Geekhood, watching you mature over these two months made me want to offer heartfelt congratulations too. You who could barely walk in a straight line in the beginning, were raised by the netizens into a valiant soldier who bombed the hell out of us then rose through the ranks and finally graduated. I hope you and Hermes stay happy together for a long time.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 7031.

<sup>163</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 7225.

<sup>164</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition Location 10057.

Before leaving, Train Man mentions that, having visited Hermés's room for the first time, he noticed that she has otaku characteristics herself, although he does not reveal her interests in order to preserve her identity.

54 Name: Anonymous Post Date: 09/05/04 17:12 >>>40 Ah. I've got no regrets either. I had a good life. From here on in Train and Hermés will be the architects of a new world. Leaving the world in their able hands gives me much hope.<sup>165</sup>

Eventually, Train Man comes clean with Hermés, explaining about the online thread. He hands her a CD copy of it and lets her read everything. She accepts it and reads it, much to his relief, saying, 'Why are these wonderful men Geeks?'<sup>166</sup> The Geeks, considering Hermés and Train to be 'architects of a new world,' reveal their hopes that their way of life has become more mainstream. Even following the thread format and, at least initially, not planning on turning the posts into a book, the notion of closure here is quite conventional: characters are introduced, together with a main conflict; the Geeks help the protagonist overcome his problems, and he ends up with the girl. There is nothing stopping them from continuing their online exchange indefinitely – while thread can only have 1,000 posts, new threads can always be created. It feels like everyone involved, but Train Man and his fellow Geeks, sense the need for a proper ending, now that Train's grand objective has been fulfilled.

### **Engineering Mission**

I would now like to explore some of the themes that emerge in this book and how they may be illuminated by critical theory. First of all, *Train Man* has all the characteristics of what I have defined in past chapters as 'geek metafiction': its narrative revolves around geek characters, and geek culture plays a major role in its development. I believe that such a category does not eliminate the possibility for other possible interpretations and approaches. However, it helps us, as readers and critics, to place *Train Man* in wider social, creative and critical contexts. The notion of geek metafiction is expanded by the inclusion of the Japanese counterpart for the Western geek, adding a new range of interests, and certain new nuances as what being an otaku implies.

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<sup>165</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 9490.

<sup>166</sup> Hitori, Nakano. *Train Man*, Kindle edition, location 10481.

Compared to *Microserfs* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, *Train Man* might be the geekiest of all three novels. If we take away the references to geek culture, *Microserfs* becomes a journey of self-discovery and friendship; *Oscar Wao* a family saga that spans generations, and *Train Man* a love story. Nevertheless, while the first two have significant content regardless of geek culture – there are more characters and a bigger emphasis on their subjectivity, and the narrators are close to the narrative - *Train Man*'s love story is almost shallow: we know little about the characters apart from brief lists of interests and biographical data. On the other hand, geek culture holds the key to understanding *Train Man*: through rules and habits of online posting; through an understanding of Akihabara and the Japanese otaku lifestyle and through an understanding of anime and Manga references.

Of the three novels, *Train Man* is also the one that has inspired the most academic interest, likely because of the status of Japanese popular culture and its connection to anime, Manga and the otaku in academic study. Most studies focus on the otaku and their social condition in contemporary Japan, seen in Raharja (2013), Huat Kam (2013), Galbraith (2010), De La Pena (2006) and Stevens (2010). *Train Man* is often mentioned as an example of 'textbook' otaku, and therefore a useful example when dealing with this topic. Other studies focus on gender roles and masculinity, such as in the work of Freedman (2009) and Früstück and Walthall (2012). More specific examinations look at *Train Man*'s metaphorical war, in Fisch (2009), while a philosophical comparison between *Train Man* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* may be found in Thouny (2009), and there is even a study of the doll culture in Akihabara by Napier (2008). As with the books examined in previous chapters, there are few or no studies commenting on the novel's literary aspects, such as its use of characters, narrative style or format. I aim to push further and see which kinds of critical concepts we draw from this book in particular.

Azuma Hiroki, one of the most prominent theorists studying otaku culture, uses Lyotard's notion of the end of grand narratives to propose that, in a postmodern context, this shift tends towards the consumption of databases rather than the narratives themselves, or rather, that the narrative comes second, after the connections, allusions, citations, references, quotes are made throughout a larger database.<sup>167</sup>

[...] characters emerging in otaku works were not unique to individual works but were

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<sup>167</sup> 'Therefore, to consume *Di Gi Charat* is not simply to consume a work (a small narrative) or a worldview behind it (a grand narrative), nor to consume characters and settings (a grand nonnarrative). Rather, it is linked to consuming the database of otaku culture as a whole. I call this consumer behaviour *database consumption*, in contrast with Otsuka's "narrative consumption."' (Hiroki, Azuma. *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*. 54.

immediately broken into *moe*-elements and recorded by consumers, and then the elements re-emerged later as material for creating new characters. Therefore, each time a popular character appeared, the *moe*-element database changed accordingly, and as a result, in the next season there were heated battles among the new generation of characters featuring new *moe*-elements.<sup>168</sup>

He uses the term ‘moe,’ which does not have a direct and accurate translation but could, here, be defined as a form of affection or a response to certain elements of characters. That is, elements that have a certain resonance with the reader’s/viewer’s/consumer’s sensibilities. The term can be connected to the notion of ‘kawaii’ or cute, although these terms are not synonyms; a ‘moe’ element is not necessarily ‘kawaii.’<sup>169</sup> The notion of *moe*-elements can also be linked to intertextuality, which is a different approach to database consumption theory.

In *Train Man*, little time is spent developing the characters or exploring their subtext. Rather, they are described quickly as a series of interests. The Geeks are rounded up as a single entity, while Train Man is associated with certain keywords such as ‘Akihabara,’ ‘tech-geek,’ ‘pornographic manga,’ ‘Sailor Moon,’ ‘Keroro,’ ‘anime,’ ‘voice actresses,’ and ‘otaku’ (or ‘anorak’). Hermés, on the other hand, is connected to ‘tea,’ ‘trendy restaurants,’ ‘classy,’ ‘foreign languages,’ and an undisclosed otaku-like interest. The Geeks also ask Train for descriptions of the celebrities he and Hermés look like. These key terms and expressions connect the characters to a larger database of Japanese culture. These expressions are the *moe*-elements Hiroki associates with the otaku works.

This method of characterisation is not far from the realist tradition of defining characters as a collection of traits as described by Barnett and Royle.<sup>170</sup> The biggest difference here is, while Aristotle judged the character to be secondary to plot, the database model proposes that, in many postmodern narratives, the characters are formed as a collection of *moe*-elements, and the story associated with them is merely one of those elements; story is secondary to character.

Another major facet of *Train Man* is how it draws our attention to how we experience books. We are used to reading books as a *codex*, or a series of printed paper pages bound together. As Derrida points out, before the *codex* there was the *volumen* (scrolls, for example). We are now watching the moment of transition between the *codex*

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<sup>168</sup> HIROKI, Azuma. *Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals*. 52.

<sup>169</sup> *Train Man* was actually one of the biggest reasons why the term became widespread, since the main character uses the term several times. For more information, see Galbraith, Patrick. ‘Exploring Virtual Potential in Post-Millennial Japan’. *Electronic Journal of Contemporary Japanese Studies*. 31 October 2009.

<sup>170</sup> Barnett, A. Royle, N. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. Harlow: Pearson. 2004.

and something else: ‘the book to be’, a new possibility.

[...] the very form of the book’s to-come, still as the book, is *on the one hand*, beyond the closure of the book, the disruption, the dislocation, the disjunction, the dissemination with no possible gathering, the irreversible dispersion of this total codex (not its disappearance but its marginalization or secundarization, in ways we will have to come back to); but simultaneously, *on the other hand*, a constant reinvestment in the book project, in the book of the world or the world book, in the absolute book (this is why I also described the end of the book as interminable or endless), the new space of writing and reading in electronic writing, travelling at top speed from one spot on the globe to another, and linking together, beyond frontiers and copyrights, not only citizens of the world on the universal network of a potential *universitas*, but also any reader as a writer, potential or virtual or whatever. That revives a desire, the same desire. It re-creates the temptation that is figured by the World Wide Web as the ubiquitous Book finally reconstituted, the book of God, the great book of Nature, or the World Book finally achieved in its onto-theological dream, even though what it does is to repeat the end of that book as to-come.<sup>171</sup>

If the end of the *codex* is unlikely, the fact that the *Train Man*’s reading experience is uncomfortable in more traditional platforms is still significant. The story was born online, and it is in the electronic form where it shines.

Derrida’s notions sits comfortably with the status of *Train Man* as a book which is not a book, a novel which is not a novel, written by a writer who is not a writer. Therefore, I arrive at the same conclusion as Derrida: that the book-to-come is only one more chapter in history of the text/book/work/platform, albeit quite an intriguing one. *Train Man* is the book to be, a hint of a road literature might take; but at the same time it is deep-rooted in the traditional medium.

This is what leads us to other recent works that share some of the *Train Man*’s traits as books-to-come, as stories situated in the transition between the *codex* and the ‘free’ electronic word. The first example is Jennifer Egan’s *Black Box*. This science fiction story was written and published for *The New Yorker Magazine*’s Twitter account as a series of 140-character paragraphs, mimicking the social media format. It was, however, planned and drafted several times prior to publication, and then released one tweet per minute. When talking about her experience, Egan declared that her approach was to convey only the thoughts between actions, thus leaving much of the narrative for the reader to

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<sup>171</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *The Book to Come*. 15.

interpret.<sup>172</sup> Originally an electronic narrative only, *The Black Box* eventually found its way into e-books and printed formats as well.<sup>173</sup> Further examples are Cory Doctorow's books: working within a Creative Commons model,<sup>174</sup> all his books are available for free in electronic formats at his personal website. They can, however, be purchased traditionally through bookstores and other retailers, online and offline.

A third example is the movement of Alt Literature, of which Tao Lin is one of the main representatives. Deeply connected to the online world, using formats such as Gmail chats and believing in self-publishing, Tao Lin represents a new kind of presence for writers in an online world where a writer can reach much larger numbers of readers than possible in traditional publishing. However, Tao Lin's reputation spread into the mainstream, and major companies have recently published his work.<sup>175</sup>

The three examples above share the same status as *Train Man* as books in between: they are located somewhere between the prophecy of a new fiction and the roots of traditional publishing. I shall refrain from extending the subject here – we could mention online publishing, self-publishing and fan fiction, just to name a few related topics – but this would require a much larger space. Suffice it to say, this chapter on *Train Man* marks the end of my investigation into the aspects of geek culture in fiction.

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning.<sup>176</sup>

Barthes's quotation mentions the image of thread, and challenges the idea of the novel as something to be 'deciphered.' Instead, we should 'disentangle' it. *Train Man*, written at first as an online board thread, is a very rich text that lends itself to being read in many different ways. Whether or not Nakano Hitori's approach is the future of fiction writing remains to be seen. It helps us understand, create and appreciate fiction in new

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<sup>172</sup> Treisman, Debora. 'This Week in Fiction: Jennifer Egan', *The New Yorker*. 28 May 2012. Web. 01 August 2013.

<sup>173</sup> Another example of fiction inspired by Twitter is Jeff Noon's series of 140-character stories, later compiled into a website. Noon, Jeff. *Microspores*. Web. 01 August 2013.

<sup>174</sup> Creative Commons is a nonprofit organization that enables the sharing and use of creativity and knowledge through free legal tools. *Creative Commons*. Web. 01 August 2013.

<sup>175</sup> Lin, Tao. *Tai Pei*. New York: Vintage. 2013.

<sup>176</sup> Barthes, R. *The Death of The Author*. 147.

ways, rather than becoming a substitute for more conventional methods of storytelling.

At this point, I feel like standing in line at a gaming convention was the right thing to do: the relationship between geek culture and fiction writing is rich and vast, and one that we have only begun to explore. It is appropriate and encouraging that this particular perspective, when looking at literature, provides us, readers/writers/critics, with interesting tools and concepts that combine to offer us new possibilities worth pursuing creatively and critically.

1001 Name: 1001 Date: Over 1000 Thread

This thread has exceeded 1000 posts.

You can no longer post, so please start a new thread...<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> *Project Densha.*

## CONCLUSION

Many of the elements that constitute geek culture come from before 1970, but as we have seen, it was around that time that the concept of the ‘geek’ or ‘nerd’ was formed.<sup>178</sup> Even though we can think of dedicated students, unsociable people or hobby enthusiasts existing earlier than that, the amalgam of these characteristics in combination with a stereotypical interest in fantasy, science fiction, comics, role-playing games, Japanese animation, manga, computers and videogames forms the basis of geek culture.

Even when the elements listed above come together into a stereotypical geek, the image of the geek remains dynamic. For instance, as we understand it today, we can extend the quality of being a geek to practically any other interest: there are book geeks, car geeks, train geeks and so on. The debate over the differences between geeks, nerds, normal, dorks, dweebs or freaks rages on.<sup>179</sup> My position still stands: they belong to the same family and there is no reason why not to treat them as interchangeable, flexible terms. The more specific and immutable a category is, the harder it is to ‘play’ with it. The geek culture-related terms discussed throughout this thesis are not presented as binary, true or false concepts. The law of genre may be mad, but it can be helpful sometimes.

In each of the novels studied, one of the main arguments is that the stereotype of the geek is itself up for renovation, and that there is no such thing as a perfect fit for a stereotype. Oscar de León was overweight, lonely and socially awkward and he knew all about fantasy and science fiction. On the other hand, he did not care about technology and did not have the hand-eye coordination for videogames. Over the course of his troubled life, he lost weight, found relative success in his work, built a lasting friendship and eventually found love. In *Microserfs*, meanwhile, Daniel and his friends know everything about computers, and their occupation involves tinkering with the very code that makes personal computers function. They work for days on end during crunch time, exchange strong opinions on geek culture and can recite the value of pi to dozens of decimal places - but they also have a strong sense of friendship, have meaningful romantic relationships, and care about their appearance and health. One of them is even a fitness geek. *Train Man* can even be considered the story of how the protagonist fights the geek stereotype

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<sup>178</sup> The image of enthusiastic fans reading science fiction magazines such as *Amazing Stories* as early as the 1920s comes to mind.

<sup>179</sup> The online discussion board Reddit, for instance, has a thread called r/geek with over 226,000 subscribers. The top posts have to do with comparing and defining the terms above. *Reddit*. Web. 28 July 2013.

successfully: from a single man obsessed with manga, anime and voice-actresses, he grows into a confident, well-dressed gentleman in a relationship with the woman he met on the train. He serves as an example to his fellow geeks, an inspiration. He gets a graduation diploma from the geek board and moves out of it. He is called a God.

If there is one thing we can learn from the novels covered in previous chapters, it is that it is impossible to fit a stereotype perfectly, and any mention of a stereotype is an invitation to challenge it. More than this, geek metafiction has things to tell us about the formation of stereotypes and their relation to literary characterisation. While *Oscar Wao* is more traditional in that sense, both *Microserfs* and *Train Man* show us some of the impact technology and social media can have on determining how characters are created, identified, and understood.

In this conclusion, I will review the most important points made during the thesis and acknowledge the other possible interpretations that could have been followed. This investigation has been open, playful, experimental and fun. But it is far from perfect and I will try to cover these points as well.

The main challenge of exploring a new field is the lack of a comprehensive corpus of research. While there is plenty of material available, it is diffuse and its status uncertain. What I call ‘geek culture’ may be understood by others as ‘fandom studies’, ‘nerd genres’, ‘otaku culture’; sometimes it can be even a part of pop culture, intertextuality, metalanguage, transmedia or hypertext studies. Perhaps the richness found in geek studies is exactly this multiplicity. On the other hand, the reward of exploring this new area is the genuine ‘one-point-oh’ feeling: doing something original, to some extent.

In Chapter 1, I investigated the origins and different uses of the words ‘geek’, ‘nerd’ and ‘otaku’. Here, I found some interesting usages and very early references to these terms that had not been mentioned anywhere else, including the *Oxford English Dictionary*. ‘Geek,’ meaning a ‘fool’ or ‘to fool,’ was mentioned as early as Shakespeare, and that there was a board game similar to chess called ‘Nerd’ 500 years before Christ. From the extensive corpus available in English through Google Ngrams Viewer, I ventured to offer a comprehensive selection of examples from each century. There is no doubt, however, that there are many other occasions when these words are used. This point in particular could benefit from a comprehensive etymological study, categorising and detailing each of the instances. Such initiative would require more than a single chapter to cover.

In Chapter 2, I discussed *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and introduced my idea of geek metafiction as a subcategory or subgenre that helps us understand the kind of novels I explore in this thesis. I talked about the notions of hypertext and intertextuality as

central aspects of geek fiction, and I go as far as saying that geek culture itself is based on intertextuality. Another point to be made is how relevant it is that a novel as heavily reliant on geek cultural intertextuality such as this one gathered so many critical and public accolades. Geek culture, becoming more popular, did not confuse its readers excessively, serving as an enjoyable characteristic instead.

Chapter 3 explores the role technology has in defining the geek identity. More than anything, Coupland approaches texts and words as aesthetic objects in themselves, and defends the traditional reading process through the book-form formatting as a unique experience. This is in contrast with the very theme of his novel, and purposely so: Coupland is aware that humanity, technology, fiction, and words all change, and this change is part of the posthuman condition. His novel reflects on the aspects of the writing and reading experience that may change under the influence of geek culture and technology, and also considers what might remain the same.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I discuss *Train Man*, which is a change in both scenario and context, as the novel centers around the Japanese otaku. This text shatters the common concepts of fiction, medium, books, text, author, narrator, audience, and platform. It is close to a collective work with no author, even though technically there is an author; it was an online thread, and was turned into a book, movie, TV series and manga. I have tried to find ways of categorising such a book while exploring how it defines and acknowledges geek culture. *Train Man* sends us in the direction of experimental and electronic writing, as well as the online medium.

From this point on, many paths open up and lead to new questions that may start new investigations. For instance, what would happen if we looked into the aspects of geek culture within genre fiction? How are geek characters depicted and developed, and to what extent geek culture and its associated concepts influence the writing, structure, aesthetics and the medium of novels that are clearly science fiction or fantasy? Furthermore, what differences may be seen between this kind of fiction and the novels analysed in previous chapters, which belong to a more ‘literary’ or ‘realist’ tradition?

Another thread to follow would be a detailed investigation of Japanese otaku and the similarities and differences between them and Western geeks. Such an investigation would consider their history, social acceptance, points of pride, objects of interest and ways of dressing in both geek cultures. This might be broadened into an international approach to geek culture: how do different countries deal with geek culture? How do they translate or assimilate the ideas and terms mentioned earlier in this thesis? This international approach could include an analysis of how geek culture is understood online, such as on forums, websites and search engines. Is the country each person is from important? Is

English the lingua franca when it comes to geek culture or there are country-specific terms? Finally, is geek culture a lasting concept, or will it change and shift over time?

My choice of novels followed certain parameters that have been explained elsewhere, but it was also a combination of suggestions, personal readings and personal sensibilities. All the questions and approaches I have taken throughout my thesis, as well as the new questions deriving from it, as depicted above, could be applied to a whole different corpus. On the ‘literary’ fiction side, there is Michael Chabon, who wrote *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, which tells the story of two boys who become famous comic book creators, and Michael Lethem who, in *The Fortress of Solitude*, addresses music geekdom and plays with magic and superhero stories. On the genre literature side, there is *Ready Player One* by Ernest Kline, which references geek culture extensively through footnotes while delivering a science fictional account of a treasure hunt across a virtual world, while *Redshirts* by John Scalzi and *How To Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* by Charles Yu are both clever metafictional works that reference geek culture from within.

There are, of course, all of the questions raised about the platform in which stories are delivered: what happens after Chapter 4, after we learn about the way *Train Man* was written? This turns our attention to the realm of fan fiction, where writers appropriate existing universes to create original stories; cell phone novels, which sell millions of copies in Japan; and even the narrative aspect of videogames, which sometimes allows for branched narratives and dialogue trees.

I do not think fiction is abandoning the book form, or even the printed book as a format. I agree with Coupland when he says that the book and its linear delivery of stories has a unique quality that is difficult to abandon. On the other hand, books-to-be, such as *Train Man*, show that new ways of delivering and experimenting stories are accessible and relevant. ‘Comics’ are not always humorous, despite the name; perhaps a similar shift is happening with ‘book’, and what we used to call book may be transforming into something different, something that does not always look like a hard copy found on a shelf.

My personal conclusions: thirty thousand words are not nearly enough to deliver all the possible approaches and ideas that this theme requires. Three books to read and comment on in detail are not nearly enough as well. I have found out that the process of writing a novel and a thesis is not so much the process of writing a novel and a thesis, but rather the process of learning how to write a novel and a thesis; even though the result of such process is the writing of a novel and a thesis.

I hope I have contributed to the field of geek studies, and helped to open it up to examination from the standpoint of literary studies. Geek culture offers a new set of critical

tools that, though they exist elsewhere, can be put together just as the aspects of geek culture. Like the vehicles in a super sentai tokusatsu show, they assemble to become one giant robot.

A WINNER IS YOU<sup>180</sup>

Access to New Game+ (*Legendary Days*) has now been unlocked

“In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.”

- Dr Manhattan<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> On 1986, Nintendo released a game called *Pro Wrestling*. After the player wins a fight, they are congratulated by this message (Japanese games released during the 1980s often showed this sort of broken English, or ‘Engrish’).

<sup>181</sup> Moore, Alan. Gibbons, Dave. Higgins, John. *Watchmen*. New York: DC Comics. 1987.

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**Legendary Days**

a novel

Bernardo Bueno

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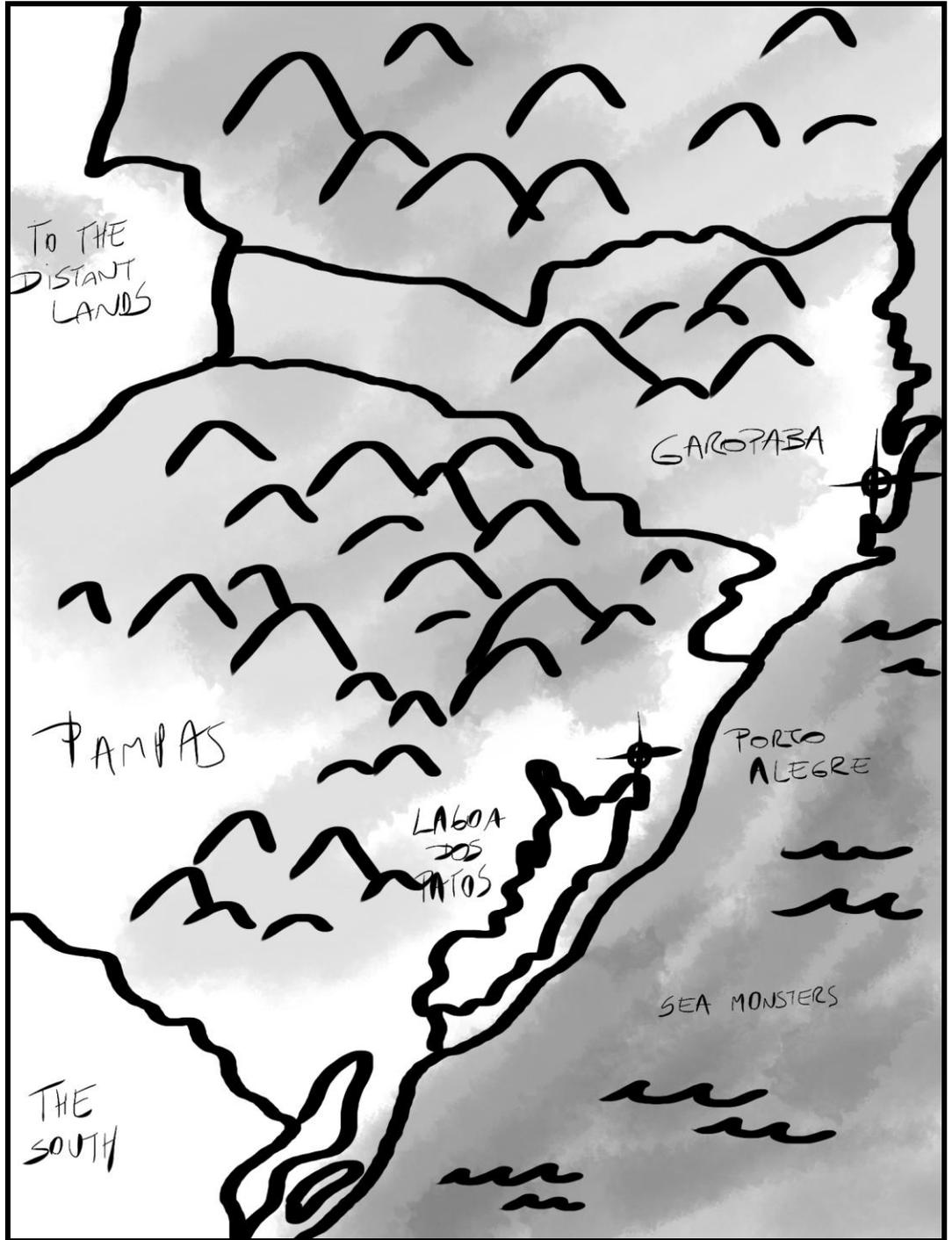
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Map



**Before anything else**

This nameless phantom feeling

- *Herman Melville, Moby Dick*

ROMULUS SLAG: Oh, the end be near. 'Tis beautiful Pete, a bright light, the end of me dark tunnel, wench as far as the eye can see, each with a pint of grog and a smile for ol' Slag; fare thee well, cruel galaxy, fare thee well.

- *Ratchet and Clank: Tools of Destruction*

I haven't lost anything that isn't lost by everyone.

- *Michael Chabon, Maps and Legends*

And he falls to his death. Nah, I'm just kidding with you.

- *Bastion*

Messages lost became messages found.

- *Douglas Coupland, Microserfs*

GIRL: I heard you were dead.

SNAKE PLISKIN: I am.

- *Escape from New York*

Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.

- *Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred years of Solitude*

Freedom hangs like heaven over everyone

- *Iron & Wine*

MORDIN SOLUS: Had to be me. Someone else might have gotten it wrong.

- *Mass Effect 3*

If I don't go will you go anyways?

John Grady sat up and put his hat on. I'm already gone, he said.

- *Cormac McCarthy, All the Beautiful Horses*

I'm in the pirate ship, being invaded by ghosts.

- *Someone playing Chrono Cross.*

She sighed and asked me, "How about you? Can you play something – maybe one song?"

"No way, I'm terrible."

"Then play it terribly."

- *Haruki Murakami, Norwegian Wood*

'What does he say?' he asked.

'He's very sad,' Úrsula answered, 'because he thinks that you're going to die.'

'Tell him,' the colonel said, smiling, 'that a person doesn't die when he should but when he can.'

- *Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred years of Solitude*

SNAKE: You can't save memories, even on that system of yours. Memories are fragile things. After you reduce them to binary numbers and send them through the air, they're not memories anymore.

MEI LING: I wouldn't be so sure of that. There's nothing that my system can't do.

SNAKE: Memories aren't just sounds and pictures. They exist somewhere between the sounds, between the pictures.

- *Metal Gear Solid*

**Choice 1**

```
var user = prompt("You are a librarian looking for a lost book at the lost books section. The lost book is about a man who got lost while looking for a lost book in the lost books section of a library. You are afraid of what might happen to you. Will you GO HOME, SEARCH for the book or WAIT to see what happens?").toUpperCase();
```

```
switch(user) {
```

```
//-----
```

```
  case 'GO HOME':
```

```
    var follow = prompt("You try to make your way out of the library, but all you can see are endless rows of bookshelves. They extend in all directions, with stairs moving to floors above and below. The most distant ones hide in darkness. You hear your steps echoing around you; but soon realise those steps are not your own. They are the steps of a lost man trying to find a lost book at the lost books section of an endless library. Are you a confident person? (YES or NO)").toUpperCase();
```

```
    var curious = prompt("Are you a curious person? (YES or NO)").toUpperCase();
```

```
    if (confident && curious === "YES") {
```

```
      console.log("You can't see why following the steps of a lost man would do you any harm. You are merely following someone else's fate, merely trying to uncover the truth. There is beauty in that. You let your fingers touch the books as you walk further and further into uncharted territory. You find what you are looking for, eventually.");
```

```
    } else {
```

```
      console.log("You are too afraid to let go of the past. You can't avoid listening to old fears: fear of the dark, fear of failing, fear of getting lost in an endless library where there is no way out. You can't settle. You can't stop thinking how lonely it is. You don't open a single book because you dread what they might whisper. You sit down and close your eyes
```

for a second. You fall asleep, or perhaps you wake up. You are not in the library anymore.

You are never able to go back there again.”);

}

break;

//-----

case ‘SEARCH’:

var forget = prompt(“You decide to search for the lost book. While you walk through the corridors, you realise you are alone. Everyone else has left. You try, but you can’t remember the name of that particular library. You can’t remember where you came from. The more you look for it, the more lost you become. The more you try to remember, the more you forget. It gets darker. Soon, the rows of books are illuminated only by a faint and gentle light coming from outside. You look outside. You see stars. You see the sky. The stars and the sky are as endless as this library. Are you afraid of being forgotten? (YES or NO)”).toUpperCase();

var mark = prompt(“Are you worried about leaving your mark in the world, of making a difference? (YES or NO)”).toUpperCase();

if (forget || mark === “YES”) {

console.log(“You remind yourself of your purpose and begin searching for the book again. You came to this library to find a lost book about a lost man, not to get lost yourself. You find the book lying on the floor next to the travel guides. The irony makes you smile.”);

} else {

console.log(“You spend a long time looking out of that window. So much time passes that you forget your name, your purpose, the book you were looking for, and the way out. But you are not afraid. It is beautiful here. You casually open a book. Any book. It is the story of a man who got lost in a library when he was looking for a lost book about a man who got lost in a library. It’s a good story.”);

```

    }

    break;

//-----

    case 'WAIT':

        var waiting = prompt("You decide to wait because you can't decide what to do next.
        You watch the day go by as you stand on the same spot. You hear footsteps. Probably, you
        think, they are the footsteps of a lost man looking for a lost book in an endless library. You
        see the night go by. You see the time go by and you realise it's not only the library that is
        endless, but also time, also space, also you. You are as big as a library and at that moment
        you realise you know the titles of each and every one of those books. You can recite them
        by heart. Knowing that, will you keep waiting? (YES or NO)");

        var patient = prompt("Are you a patient person? (YES or NO)").toUpperCase();

        if (waiting && patient === "YES") {

            console.log("You stand still until everything comes to a stop. Or maybe it is you
            who has stopped. No matter. The footsteps get closer and closer until you feel a hand
            resting on your shoulder. It is the lost man who came to the library looking for a lost book
            about a man who got lost in a library while looking for a lost book. You look at him. He
            hands you the lost book. He found it while you were waiting, and now he is giving it to
            you. You take the book in your hands.");

        } else {

            console.log("You can't keep waiting. You wander the corridors, faster and faster.
            You start crying, because the corridors are endless. You go up and down and left and right.
            You hide when you hear footsteps. You see a man looking for a lost book about a man who
            got lost. You are lost. You know that man's name.");

        }

        break;

//-----

```

default:

```
    console.log("Please choose again.");  
}
```

## Dramatis Personae

### Max

This guy is too tall and too thin; he looks funny when he dances, so he never dances. Be warned, though: there are two Maxes: a young one and an old one. One, seventeen years-old, is a constant reminder that things were better before. There he is, facing the ocean. Old Max is sitting in front of the computer, alone in a dark room late at night, wearing the same clothes as two days before, trying to find answers hidden between the memories of trips to the seaside and the diaries of a dead man.

### Gabriela

A red-haired girl in Brazil is almost implausible. Gabriela is freckled, wears thick glasses and complains about them all the time; she can draw amazingly well and therefore brings dreams to life. There are also two Gabrielas: one dreaming of becoming a comic book artist, hanging out with the boys and playing *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*; and the other managing deadlines and contracts for graphic novels, quietly observing while her husband gets lost in his own world, drifting away on a sea of reminiscence.

### Pablo

He's a mix of philosopher and rockstar, a mad scientist in a school uniform; the kind of person who escapes any kind of categorisation. He will engage in heated discussions with teachers, shed a tear when watching Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, and keep a secret poem notebook he never allows anyone to read.

**Diego**

Someone might call Diego the stereotypical nerd: the classic chubby, quiet, low self-esteemed, comics-collecting X-files fan. He dreams of becoming a game designer, so he can create virtual reality worlds and live a parallel life, at least for a while, or, maybe someday, permanently. He always says less than he thinks. Always there, taken for granted, like the money you get from granny on Christmas.

**Gus, AKA Dad**

Fathers are how the universe lets you know you are not original. He used to be passionate about teaching literature. He read poems out loud in front of his students, gesturing like a maestro conducting a symphony. But when he lands a job teaching Literary Theory at a local university he realises that maybe he isn't making any difference. That's when he starts collecting stories about the end of the world. He writes a book about it and donates a copy to the university library, from where it is never loaned. When his wife asks for a divorce, he has a hard time balancing his dreamy and optimistic self with life in a big, quiet house.

**Leticia, AKA Mum**

She works as a psychologist, in private clinics, hospitals and multidisciplinary research teams. Never once did she tell any of her colleagues that she keeps a Wiccan altar (complete with a collection of crystals) and walks around the house with an incense stick to clean up the general flow of energy. Realising she and her husband have grown apart beyond any hope, she asks for a divorce, offers him a kiss and the promise that they will be alright.

**Timeline**

- YOU** 1954: Gus is born in Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil  
Gus's diaries: 1954-2010 (selected entries until 1999 only)  
Gus's memories (told by Max)
- UNCHARTED WORLDS** 1997-1999: before the trip to Garopaba, before the graduation ceremony. Nights with friends, last day of school  
1999: Max is 17, trip to the seaside, graduation ceremony
- OLD MAX** 2010: Gabriela has a miscarriage, Gus dies (he's 56), Max starts writing down his memories  
Max goes to Garopaba alone; whale watching
- GABRIELA'S MONOLOGUE** 2010: Jotted down in her sketch book while she was at the comics conference
- GAME REVIEWS** Unspecified time: Max's writing on the games he's played

## Whales

*Am I a sea, or a whale, that thou settest a watch over me? - Job 7:12*

The blue whale is the biggest animal known to have ever existed. Measuring over 30 metres and weighing 180 tons, the monster is bigger than any dinosaur.

They know things. They've seen and heard stuff that we'll never understand. They've been to places in the ocean that we can only dream of. While we're looking at videos of astronauts playing guitar in the International Space Station, the real darkness lies at the bottom of the ocean.

There's almost nowhere in the sea where they can't be found. Whaling, however, took its toll. Branch, Matsuoka and Miyashita (2006) say that "From 1928 to 1972 (except during 1942–1944), depleting them from 239,000 (95% interval 202,000–311,000) to a low of 360 (150–840) in 1973."<sup>1</sup> Less than 0.15% of the estimated original blue whale population still lives.

In 1962, Arthur C. Clarke wrote, "we do not know the true nature of the entity we are destroying."

Captive whales sometimes try to mimic human speech. They have spindle neurons, the type of brain cell responsible for cognitive abilities.

And now directly quoting from the 'pedia:

"Some cultures associate divinity with whales, such as among Ghanaians and Vietnamese, who occasionally hold funerals for beached whales. [...] The whale is a revered creature to Vietnamese fishermen. They are respectfully addressed as "Lord". If one finds a stranded whale corpse, one is in charge of holding the funeral for the "Lord" as if it was one's own parent."

This story is not about whales.

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<sup>1</sup> Branch, Trevor. Matsuoka, Koji. Miyashita, Tomio. *Evidence for Increases in Antarctic Blue Whales Based on Bayesian Modelling*. Marine Mammal Science, 20(4):726-754. October 2004.

**Hard Drives**

100 **Megabytes** are 102400 **kilobytes**

500 **megabytes** are 512000 **kilobytes** or 512,000,000 **characters**

30 **gigabytes** are 30720 **megabytes** or 31457280 **kilobytes** or 6826 **photos** (in 10 MP)

80 **gigabytes** are 81920 **megabytes** or 83886080 **kilobytes** or approximately 24,000 **songs**

500 **gigabytes** are 512000 **megabytes** or 524288000 **kilobytes** or 104 hours of **video**

(1080p)

1 **terabyte** is a nice number and you can see where this is going

In the year 20XX you're reading this and laughing



**PART 1: Memories are time machines**

**Old Max 1**

I started playing when I was six and I got an Atari from my parents. Now I'm 28 and I'm still holding a video game controller, playing a game in which I have to slay sixteen giant monsters so I can inspire life back into my loved one. Her corpse lies on an altar inside a ruined temple. As I ride my horse across the fields - other people are hunting me down because I stole a sacred sword and came to this forbidden realm - I'm thinking how beautiful and lonely this world is.

The phone rings. It's from the hospital. They ask for my name, they apologise. They say that my father has been admitted there with chest pains. 'I'm on my way,' I say. It's not the first time it has happened, but it's not like I'm used to it either. I call my wife, Gabriela, to let her know what's happening, then get in my car and race across town, fast but still not dangerously so; I'm not trying to get myself killed. Anyway, there's nothing I can do right now.

When I get there, he's dead.

I ask what happened, and they repeat the same story: my father was admitted with severe chest pains. They tried to help, but they couldn't save him. They are sorry.

Some people think death a worse fate than boredom. I read that once and it always stuck with me. I wait and I wait for the paperwork to be done; in the meantime Gabriela arrives. She doesn't say anything because she doesn't have to. So we wait in a corridor somewhere, together. She wipes her thick-rimmed glasses with the end of her shirt. She braids her red hair like I've seen her do countless times before. There is some kind of comfort in knowing her movements so well.

I start calling our relatives. Then it's like a time warp: everything feels like it's moving in slow motion, but in fact, several hours pass. I'm suddenly aware of sorting out the funeral. Then it happens again. Next thing I know, I'm walking around the cemetery,

thinking how this place is filled with a chunky sensation of peace that is hard to swallow. My mother hugs me, wailing; someone drags her away. I'm told she took a pill or something. I don't see her again for the rest of the day. They'd been divorced for more than ten years.

He's lying there in his coffin and I feel I have to do something to say goodbye, so I touch his arm. Immediately I wish I hadn't, because it's like stone. In *Baldur's Gate*, whenever one of my characters was petrified, they were as good as dead, since I never memorised the *Stone to Flesh* spell. It's never a good thing when your father turns into stone. I watch his coffin being lowered into his grave and that's it. We go home.

Gabriela makes us some tea. She says, 'This has been the worst year ever.'

I silently nod. We both want to talk things over, we need to talk things over, but it's really not the time. Thing is, Gabriela had a miscarriage two weeks ago. Talk about bad timing. It sucks when things overlap and you don't know what to sort out first. I look at her and reciprocate her sad smile.

'Tomorrow will be a better day,' she says, then holds my hand and kisses it.

'I know.'

She gets up and I watch as she leaves the kitchen and goes to our bedroom. I listen to the sounds of her: her footsteps on the squeaky floor, brushing her teeth, opening the wardrobe, changing to her pyjamas and finally turning the lights off. She doesn't wait for me. She hasn't waited for me lately.

I keep thinking 'He's dead but I still remember him.' Eleven years ago, when I came back from a trip to the seaside in my last year of school, he said to me, 'I'm not going lie to you: things are about to change.' I was seventeen; that age when you're on the verge of something but you have no idea what it is. That was a nice talk, that day on the veranda. I make myself another tea and allow the time to pass as I remember that day.

## Uncharted Worlds 1

When I think of my father, now that he's dead, the first thing that comes to mind is the talk we had one day on the veranda of the house we shared for a while. The house where we had lived together before my parents divorced. This particular memory is what brings it back; it's what ties it all together. I'll tell you, the first sign that your father considers you an adult is the first time he hands you a beer and you have a long talk on a summer night, looking at the cars driving by, never minding the time.

Point is, school was over and I had gone on a trip with my classmates to Garopaba, a small seaside town on the coast of Santa Catarina: the only place you could go if you wanted to escape the shitty Rio Grande do Sul shore and its eternal wind and the rough, brown sea. It was our last thing as classmates. I was seventeen.

We got back the day before the graduation ceremony. The air was warm and thick like oil in our lungs. It was something past six. I'd got a nice souvenir for myself: an arm in a white cast, all covered in signatures, funny messages and the occasional penis art. My face was bruised, not that swollen any more but it still hurt; the Tylenol was wearing off. I wasn't looking forward to explaining that to Dad when I got home.

My classmates started hugging one another as we looked for our luggage. They were acting like it was the end, as if we would never see each other again. They were right, in a way: one of the great benefits and limitations of being seventeen is the feeling that the world is about to explode. A year in the future is a whole era of uncertainty.

I ignored the knot in my throat while I struggled with my bag, trying to put it over my shoulder using only my left arm. Diego, Pablo and Gabriela, my closest friends, were standing behind a group of sobbing girls. Behind the enemy lines. They were staring at me, waiting for what I was going to say, perhaps, or wondering what they could say to make everything feel better. But all that trip had left behind was a metallic taste in my mouth and

a tingly sensation telling me that from now on I should behave as an adult, whatever that meant.

I looked up. There was a profound blue sky and the summer was about to start, but I myself had had enough of the sun. I always liked the rain and never understood why everybody hated it. It felt like everything was too bright and there was no place to hide.

Then I looked to the front of our school and found its walls were already shrinking before my eyes. I said a quick 'See you tomorrow' to my friends, then turned around, heading home. Fuck it, I thought.

Soon I was alone on the street. The empty bus passed by a bit later. I could hear the TVs inside the houses, I could see their lights reflected on the walls, the grandmas watching the six o'clock soap opera, drinking instant coffee with milk, as my own granny did. I assumed, of course, they all did the same.

I was tired and confused because of everything that had happened at the seaside. It was around this time every year that the smell in the air grew different, something to do with walking on the streets of Porto Alegre under a scorching sun, buying popsicles, going to the club's swimming pool, the easy life of a middle-class boy who went to a private school and didn't have a worry in the world, except growing up.

I lived just down the road from the school. As I approached my dad's house I noticed his TV wasn't on. Instead, he was listening to music, though I couldn't recognise it from where I was. That was unusual for two reasons: my father wasn't supposed to be home at that time of day, since he taught at the university in the evenings. There was also something different about the garden: the grass was actually alive; it was new.

I went through the gate and opened the front door. Everything looked different – new furniture, new paint on the walls. The house smelled like a newly-opened hotel. I could hear the music quite well now – his old Bob Dylan *Blood on the Tracks* LP record. My father was slouching on the sofa, wearing only his underpants and a kitchen apron, his feet on a new tea table, a beer in his hand.

‘Hey, I didn’t hear you coming,’ he said, smiling. Then he had a better look at me and sat up straight. ‘What happened to you?’

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘I’m fine.’

I passed by him, climbed the stairs and went into my room. It was different than when I had left. Tidy. Clean. On a chair, protected by a plastic bag, was the suit I was going to wear to my graduation ceremony, one of my father’s, a tad big for me.

I turned my computer on to check for e-mails, but there was nothing; my friends were with me on that trip, after all. I checked mIRC and ICQ but no one was online. I launched *Full Throttle* but gave up playing after it crashed - my PC was rubbish. I looked at the corkboard on the wall, where I had pinned posters from *X-men*, *Spawn*, *Oh My Goddess!* and *Akira*, together with some pictures of Gabriela, Diego, Pablo and me at school and from the last time we had pizza together. I took it all down, tossed the photos on the desk, crumpled the posters together and threw them in the bin.

Dad put on Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon*. Soon after the first vocals on the beginning of ‘Breathe’ he called me to dinner. In the kitchen we sat together and ate chips and hot dogs.

‘Have you talked to Mum?’ I asked.

‘She said she’ll be there, you don’t have to worry.’ He removed his glasses and placed them next to his plate. ‘What happened to you? Did you pick a *fight*?’

The emphasis on ‘fight’ carried all the absurdity of that possibility in his mind. I wouldn’t have believed, a week ago, that I’d go around picking fights. However, that was exactly what happened and I was well proud of it, even though I didn’t feel like telling him anything. I wanted to keep it all inside me, afraid that if I let one of those memories go, they would all flee, leaving me empty and flat. Good or bad, they were mine, and of all the powers I had when I was seventeen, which weren’t many, at least I could choose to withhold information as I pleased.

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ I said.

He sighed. 'Are you nervous? About tomorrow?'

'What? I don't know,' I said. 'Maybe.'

He poured me more Coke. I took a long sip.

'What the hell happened to the house?' I asked.

'Oh, that,' he said. 'I thought it was time for a change.'

I looked at him: he was still wearing only his underpants and the kitchen apron. His face was red. I had never seen my father drunk.

'Dad, seriously, what happened?'

Was *he* withholding information from me? It was weird to get home and see everything different. Dad was a bit of a mess lately – ever since the divorce and ever since I moved back to his place six months *after* they divorced – so it was hard to predict his actions.

'I don't want to talk about it,' he said, barely hiding his grin.

I didn't find it funny.

'So, how was the trip?' he asked.

'Great.'

We spent the rest of the meal in silence. My father was distant, looking at the blank wall by my side, distracted. After we finished, he took the dishes and put them in the sink, over a big pile of dirty pans. He opened the fridge, got two beer cans, handed me one and said, 'Let's go outside for a minute.'

I watched him walk past me and after a moment of doubt I followed. Pink Floyd was still playing. Now it was 'Us and Them'. Outside, on the veranda, Dad was looking at the empty street and the TV lights reflected on the neighbours' walls.

'I can't stand these fucking soap operas,' he said, 'any of them.' Then he turned to me: 'Why don't we talk, Max? You're graduating tomorrow. We have time. Let's talk.'

**Old Max 2**

I get home from the supermarket and find Gabriela sitting on the couch, next to a big cardboard box. She has her legs and arms crossed, as if that box were some sort of menace.

‘What’s that?’ I ask.

‘Your mum dropped by earlier. She said she was going through your dad’s stuff and she found it.’

‘What’s inside?’

‘Don’t know. She said he wanted you to have it.’

I put the groceries on the kitchen table and came back to the living room. ‘What the hell is it?’ I say, opening the box. Inside, I find a collection of old diaries that my father had been keeping for a number of years. They are of all shapes and sizes, some fancy and others just plain, old notebooks.

Solid Snake would say that a cardboard box can save your life, and he would be right. My dad is gone but wait - here’s his life inside a cardboard box. A real-life save file.

‘What am I supposed to do with these?’

‘I don’t know,’ Gabriela says. ‘Read them?’

I shake my head. ‘Not yet.’

I take the box to the office. This is a big old apartment, the first one we bought, and the first to have a spare room. We had started to clean it up, get things ready for the baby, but now everything is back, random stuff like a cabinet we aren’t using, empty suitcases, piles of books along the wall and a table with the computer, where I spend a lot of time.

I place the box on the floor. As I do so, I realise Dad was on to something. I should do the same: write stuff down so it won’t get lost after I die. You can’t trust people’s memories, because memory is like smoke and fades away too easily.

I look at the box but I don’t find the courage to open it right away. I shove it to the side, next to some light-yellow paint cans we’ve never opened.

## Uncharted Worlds 2

I carried our beers outside, sat on the steps and watched as a mosquito sucked the blood out of my leg. I didn't move even though it was itching, and let it fly away.

He sat next to me and said, 'I took the week off.'

He'd never done that before.

'Are you alright?' I asked.

He smiled, dismissing my question with a wave of his hand.

'It's fine,' he said. 'My students are probably celebrating right now. We had an exam scheduled for tonight.'

I noticed some bruises on his hands, probably from moving the furniture around.

'So how was your year?' he asked. 'Since, you know, the *divorce*.'

That last word came out hard, slow.

'I'm fine,' I said.

He waited until a noisy motorcycle passed by before going on.

'I know it's been hard. I should've been around more.'

We didn't see each other much. I had classes in the mornings and some afternoons; he worked from mid-afternoon until late at night. Maybe I had no idea what he'd been through lately. And vice versa.

When exactly do fathers and sons start to grow apart? I'm not sure there is a particular moment, or if it is an inevitable process. That's human nature, maybe: people share homes, office desks, school rooms; they have breakfast together; they play volleyball during the break, go to the cinema, and celebrate birthdays, toasting with cheap wine at pizza places; and yet, like galaxies, they slowly drift away from each other.

'It's OK,' I said.

'I see. Have you thought about after graduation?'

‘No. Depends on which university I get into.’

What he really wanted to know was whether I’d decided if I was moving back with my mother or staying with him. I was taking the university entry exams in Porto Alegre and São Paulo, to where my mother had moved six months ago. I was either studying Journalism or Philosophy.

‘Don’t worry so much,’ he said. ‘You can always change your mind later, whatever you decide.’

He put his beer in a lower step and leaned back.

I asked him if he was happy. It was a fair question. You know, since the *divorce*.

‘Of course I am,’ he said.

He grinned and patted me on the back, a bit too hard. It felt a bit patronising, as if he was letting me know I shouldn’t worry about grown-up stuff.

Memories cannot be tamed. Memories are time machines.

I’m still there on that veranda, looking at him and wondering how much truth there was behind that grin and that ‘Of course I am.’

He said, ‘Everybody has a dark side, though.’

I looked at my broken arm.

‘I guess so.’

‘Who’s the girl?’ he asked.

Something ignited and spread inside my chest, like a breaking bottle of Greek fire. I took the rest of my beer in one shot, smashed the can the best I could with my left hand and threw it on the lawn. Then I told him about the trip, the girl, the fight and everything else.

### **Old Max 3**

I’m trying to find a box of old pictures. I used to have a sort of memory box too. No

diaries, but I collected some mementos as time went by. When it got full, though, just after college, I abandoned the idea. I'm sure it's somewhere in my wardrobe.

I have to take all the blankets out before I see the cardboard box with a green cover. As I pull it out, a blue file falls to my feet. It's full of my first pieces of published writing: from magazine articles to the first game review I published.

I had been working at the newspaper for a couple of years when the guy from Culture asked me if I liked games. He said he'd noticed I kept a blog about it and asked if I was interested in filling for Wellington, the Games section guy, during his vacation. I tried hard not to look as excited as I really was: being a game journalist had been my dream for such a long time. So I said, acting cool, 'Yeah, I could do that.'

One month later, when Wellington came back from his vacation, he declared that writing a hundred and fifty words every week was not really journalism and he would be moving on to Fashion. If I wanted, I could keep the job. In truth, I tended to write a lot more for my blog than for the actual newspaper, but I was getting more money to do it (versus no money from the blog), and got to play new games for free.

I entered the Chief Editor's office for the first time in my new capacity as Games editor. I said hi while he was checking his e-mails and I explained I was very excited about this new job, and that I had a lot of ideas. He nodded without looking at me. I stared at the sweat on his forehead. His air conditioner was broken, so there was one of those portable fans in the corner of the room. The fan blew from one side to the other, but when it reached the far right side, something inside it got stuck and it had to struggle to turn around, so for a while it just kept in place, clicking like mad.

'We publish one page dedicated to games per week, as a part of the Computing section,' he said. 'Just send me the text before the deadline. Write about what the kids are playing these days, don't swear and don't use violent pictures. That's all.'

He dismissed me like we do mosquitoes, waving his hand in the air, still not looking at me. I had dreamt of this moment for such a long time and in the end no one gave a shit

about it. They didn't even need me to be at the newsroom much. I tried once to take my Xbox there, but they told me it was disruptive for the other journalists. Well, of course it was, considering they kept bugging me to play FIFA instead of doing their jobs.

### **You 1**

Let's do this, shall we, Dad? Here I am, with a box full of your old diaries. Ultimate combo. Well played, sir, well played. I will now proceed to open and analyse them with proper respect and attention. I tried not to, of course, but it's the next best thing, with you being dead and all. I shall try to avoid the fake academic voice whilst doing so.

The days are long, the art is non-existent. Where's that Phoenix Down when we need one, eh?

I know you. Of course I do. I knew you well. I've lived with you for many years. But let's pretend I didn't. Were you the kind of man who had secrets?

### **Uncharted Worlds 3**

Okay. If I'm doing this, I need to get things right. I'll go back a little bit. Before the trip, the graduation, and even before my parents split up. Back then we all lived together in that old house by the school.

My senior year had just started. The prospect of the end was close enough to make me wonder about the future sometimes, but still far enough away for me to allow myself several hours a day playing videogames. I guess I can say things were pretty easy. My classmates weren't so different from me: no one was rich, but no one was poor either; everyone had different shades of the same dysfunctional family, all of us raised in a safe bubble made of Catholic lies, new videogame systems and gossip about who was going out with whom. I'd like to tell you I was a geek: fat, smelly, socially awkward, incapable of

holding a proper conversation, never had a girlfriend, a full-on nerd. That would make my story fit right in, wouldn't it? I would be part of a long tradition of suffering people, tormented by bullies, cultivating secret thoughts of perpetrating a school massacre, perhaps.

That's not the case. I could say I nerded-up as time went by. I allowed myself to love things more intensively, love them freely; but back then I was little more than a pile of nerves, too worried about everyone else's opinion. So yeah, I had my friends, we played Advanced Dungeons & Dragons and owned videogames, but we also went out for pizza, attended parties, got wasted like everyone else. I'd say we were secret geeks, straddling the verge; life was too short and the time to grow apart was near, and we all knew it, but no one dared bring it up.

Pablo, Diego, Gabriela and me: we were role-playing game players, occasional band-mates, all-around geeks. None of us could sing, but that never stopped us from performing really bad Pink Floyd tributes in the safety of our homes, with Diego playing an acoustic guitar and the rest of us singing terribly out of key. We stayed over at each others houses so we could play RPG all night long, always letting Gabriela sleep in the bedroom while the boys slept in the living room. We played AD&D Second Edition, set in Forgotten Realms.

My memory fails. I know I stashed some of the character sheets from that time somewhere in a box, but I can't bother to look for it now. So the following descriptions are inaccurate and perhaps exaggerated. Built from memory, kept in my heart ever since. I was there, man; we killed motherfucking dragons, looted their treasures; we died, attacked the undead in a long-forgotten haunted tower; braved cursed keeps, wielded magic instruments to bring justice and peace. We sang the old songs around the fire. It was hard to open our eyes and find ourselves around a common wooden table, in a common city apartment, in God knows where in Brazil, which was far enough from everything we've ever seen or heard on TV, movies, books and songs.

Me: warrior level 10, two-handed sword master: a killing machine. Equipment: two-handed sword +3, +5 against the undead; full plate armour +1, torches, rope, 876152 gold pieces. How did the character carry so much gold? No idea. He didn't have a *Bag of Holding* or anything.

Diego: Dungeon Master. He didn't care a lot about rules *per se*: he frequently used ideas from books, movies or anime in his stories. Equipment: Dungeon Master's Guide, Player's Handbook (cracked spine held together by sellotape), Monster Manual (post-it galore). No Dungeon Master screens, because hidden dice rolling was for cowards.

Pablo: Thief level 12, trickster, pick-pocket extraordinaire, backstabber. Equipment: cloak of invisibility (1 use per day), ring of stealth +20%, and a pet ferret called Midnight.

Gabriela: mage level 9, conjurer, fireball and magic missiles specialist. Equipment: magic wolf familiar ('Balmung'), Grimoire, staff of fire (fireball 3x day), collection of healing magic scrolls, since no one else thought of playing a priest to heal the party.

'Fuck the priests!' Pablo used to say.

One of those weekends we were staying over at Diego's house.

'Do we have crisps?' Pablo asked. 'Anything to eat?'

'You just had four hot dogs,' Diego replied. 'How can you possibly be hungry?'

'Maybe he doesn't have food in his house,' I said. 'So he needs to stock up when he comes here.'

We laughed. Gabriela came back from the toilet and joined us at the table.

'Let's play already.'

Pablo replied, 'Oh, she's angry!'

She punched his arm. 'Shut up.'

'Ok, so last time...' Diego glanced over his notes. 'You defeated the necromancer who was hiding in Baldur's Gate.'

I glanced over my character sheet and my notes. 'And we were heading towards

Waterdeep.’

I looked at my watch. It was almost 10 pm. Pablo got up and went to the kitchen, where he opened cabinets and searched for food.

‘Pablo!’ Diego called. ‘What the hell!’

Gabriela was sitting next to me. I could see her legs from the corner of my eye. I immediately started drumming my fingers on the table. *Come on*, I thought, *she’s your friend*. But at that age I didn’t care much about the politics of friendship over sex.

Pablo came back with a two-litre bottle of Pepsi and a bag of Doritos. Diego called me. ‘Max, come closer. I need to talk to you about your character.’

Reluctantly, I moved closer to him. Have no recollection at all of what he said. I kept thinking about Gabriela’s legs and what she would do if I woke her up at night to tell her the things I had been thinking about her legs (and the rest of her body). *Only sex*, I would say. *We can go on being friends in the morning*. To which she would reply, *Sure thing*.

‘Can we start already?’ she said, looking at me.

‘What?’

Pablo got up again. ‘Wait, I need to take a shit.’

Diego closed his *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, admitting defeat. I shrugged and turned the TV on.

## **Game Review 1**

### *Wolf Hunt*

*Wolf Hunt* is deceptive. You might think it is a psychological thriller. You might think it's an RPG. You might think it's a survival game. You'd be both right and wrong, since it is a little bit of all those above.

It is no secret that I'm a big fan of games that take it up a notch and venture beyond the typical ultra-violence we're used to. A lot (and I really mean a *lot*) of video games today

feature violence as a way of solving conflicts. *Wolf Hunt*, despite its title, does not underestimate our intelligence. It requires the player to deal with issues of solitude, madness, love, regret, and, why not, the supernatural. But you don't do that shooting monsters. You do that exploring, surviving and finding clues hidden in the details.

Here's the main plot: Jack is a regular guy, a high school teacher in his mid-thirties. He plans a getaway trip with his wife for two weeks to an isolated place in the mountains. On their way there, however, they have a huge fight and she decides to go back home. He decides to continue the trip alone. There are not enough supplies, but he thinks he can get them from a store. Big mistake. An unexpected blizzard, the worst in a hundred years, traps him in the mountains with no electricity, little food and no mobile signal. While he fights to stay alive, Jack uncovers mysteries regarding the cabin and the surrounding mountain region. The whole situation challenges his sanity. There might be more to it than an untimely snowstorm.

Strong-willed but not used to living in such a harsh environment, Jack is educated and intelligent, but not particularly fit or strong. As the story progresses, he has to deal with his fears while his body and mind are tested. His girlfriend appears in the introduction and at the end, and sometimes during dream sequences or reminiscences. At a certain point, Jack believes there's a pack of wolves hunting him. The alpha wolf talks to Jack in his dreams. Minor secondary characters show up - such as a police officer, and a rescue team looking for Jack - but they are not as developed as the main character. Jack talks to himself as a way of brushing off the silence. Whether he offers useful comments on his situation, or merely curses because bad things happen, you'll grow accustomed to his voice and thoughts. Which is good. I've never liked silent protagonists.

The environment is made of rocky / snowy forest areas in a valley between mountains. The place is not specified but think an isolated spot somewhere in Canada. Lots of snow, trees and mountain peaks. The weather is dynamic, with sun, light snow, wind and blizzard, and a day and night cycle. There are no levels *per se*, but different things happen

depending on the time and weather, such as creature encounters or memory sequence triggers. There are lots of places to explore: animal dens and secret spots, as well as hidden treasures and traces of other explorers who came to the same place many years before. The main storyline spans two weeks, not counting occasional flashbacks.

This is a survival game. The player needs to make decisions based on time: they'll need to find food and water, fix problems in their cabin and fend off aggressive creatures. They'll have a limited supply of ammunition, food and water to start with. The cold is also dangerous. The main goal is to survive long enough for rescue to come, if someone comes at all. The cabin has a few books that can be read. One of them is a survival manual, which serves as a sort of tutorial. Other books may be found, but not read. However, there is an interesting achievement trophy that asks you to find books hidden throughout the game world. I've managed to find Melville's *Moby Dick*, Stoker's *Dracula*, Bueno's *Legendary Days*, Wilson's *Ballistics*, Burgess's *Ficciones* and Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Surely they're there to give hints to the game writers' influences. By the way, the writing is fantastic. Easily one of my top five games this year.

As times goes by, the player starts to believe there is a pack of wolves hunting him. First he sees them from afar, and then they try to ambush him. Jack dreams that the alpha male speaks to him, exposing his past mistakes and undermining his confidence and exposing his past mistakes; Jack's mind may be in peril here. He starts to believe that the wolves and the mountain are evil. Possible choices include but are not limited to: keeping his distance or confronting the wild animals? Staying and waiting for someone to come or trying to brave the paths alone and trying to find a way out himself? Does Jack have what it takes to survive on his own?

This is a first-person game. The player can interact with objects in the game world (take, drop, knock, open, close, etc.), which is usually context-directed and bound to an action button or key. The player can also carry weapons, tools and traps. He can harvest plants and hunt for animals. The key to his game is to administer time strategically. The

character needs to eat, drink and stay warm, as well as fight aggressive creatures.

There is a lot of exploration involved, during which the player might encounter clues that he is not the first to explore these areas. There are traces of other people in caves and an abandoned cabin, for instance. Objects, notes and diaries leave clues that maybe the mountain has a will of its own. The thing is: is that true or is the character losing his mind?

There are no multiplayer or co-op modes. However, it is possible to write in a diary and, should the character die, the notes become available on the next playthrough, as if someone else left a diary behind, a long time ago. There is more than one possible ending.

By the way, *Wolf Hunt* is compatible with the recently released virtual reality devices. I would love to explore the mountain that way but I have no access to a VR kit. It's so beautiful...

Sound and music are minimal. There's not a lot of soundtrack apart from action scenes and pre-rendered movies. There is a stereo in the cabin that can be turned on. Outside, however, listening to nature's sounds becomes a survival tactic. The sound is used only as a way of creating atmosphere.

The user interface disappears when not in use, which is welcome considering how beautiful the environment is. There is a button to bring it up. Players can access an inventory. Being close to interactive objects brings up the option to touch, switch, sit, grab, etc. There is a health bar and a temperature bar. Jack stays healthy by eating, drinking and resting. If the temperature drops below a certain threshold, the player starts to lose health.

But these are only the gameplay elements. The main thing here is braving the solitude. A man, alone, cut out from society, thinking about his life and fighting to go on, even when, after a life of mistakes and an ugly break-up, it might seem that he has nothing to live for. It's about finding meaning, being strong on your own. And that's way harder than scoring a headshot.

**Old Max 4**

I leave the file containing my early publications behind and take the cardboard box to the office. It's full of crap I don't remember anything about. Things and moments that once seemed important but that were obliterated from memory. A twig, a dried leaf, a bracelet. The only thing I want from there is an envelope of old photographs, taken during my last year of school. More specifically, during the graduation trip we took to Garopaba, a small seaside town a few hours north from Porto Alegre, on the way to Florianopolis. I rummage through the stuff in the box until I manage to find it.

And here we are, my friends and me, in all our seventeen-year-old glory. God, how have we improved. This thing sure takes me back. I remember I hid these pictures away soon after I had them printed. At that time things were a bit confusing so I ended up forgetting about it. I think it's the second time in my life I've looked at them.

I wait until dinner to show them to Gabriela. We're having pasta in the kitchen when I hand her the envelope. Poor girl almost has a heart attack when she sees it. She looks at the photos and I realise this is the first time we've laughed together in a while. I feel almost guilty but don't mention it.

"Jesus fucking Christ, what was I thinking?" she goes. "God we look hideous in these school uniforms."

"That's not all," I say. "There's a couple from our trip to Garopaba."

"Oh, like it wasn't enough, now I have to look at myself wearing a bikini, ten years ago."

"Eleven, actually."

"Fuck you."

I stand behind her so I can see everything again. She leans her head against my arm.

"Simpler times," she says.

"Yeah."

She puts the photos inside the envelope and hands it to me. “So what’s going on?”

What’s the plan?’

I sit back in my chair. ‘What plan?’

‘You. How are you holding up?’

‘I don’t know. It’s weird. I think about him and then I remember he’s dead.’

She breathes deeply. ‘It’ll take some time to get used to it.’

We eat our pasta.

I look at her. ‘It would be nice to have a diary, like he did.’

‘It’s kind of cute, actually.’

‘We’ll, you know my father, always the dreamer.’

She nods.

‘*Knew*,’ I say. ‘*Knew* my father. Shit.’

I ask how she’s doing. We know what it means. It’s not a routine question; I want to know if she’s recovering from the miscarriage. The recovery process, so I’ve learned, was long and painful. She still has to deal with it, even today.

‘Better.’

There is a moment of silence. When did silence become something that hovered around us? We never had any trouble talking before. But ever since she lost the baby, we’ve been spending more and more time doing our own things, more time apart, even at home, even when we’re together.

I clear my throat and ask about her day. She sighs and tells me she dropped the ink over a page she was working on and had to start all over again, and how Joana found a new bakery that sold *mille feulle*; we finish dinner and I do the dishes. While I do so, she goes to the living room and turns the telly on. This flat is too big for us. I miss the time we lived in a studio, with nothing but an old telly, a sofa we bought in a sale and an underpowered PC where I could only play Genesis and SNES emulators.

**You 2**

You woke up alone. You had a double bed and a nice bedroom, enough money to pay your bills, no girlfriend, one ex-wife you still had feelings for, and a son who was about to finish school. You were forty-five years old.

You played solo.

I find myself reading your diaries and writing about you. I was just going to have a read and that's it, but suddenly I feel as though pictures and memories are not enough: I need to make your presence felt, a scar on paper, each press of a key on my computer like the hit of a hammer. I'm angry with you because you died suddenly. I'm angry with you because I love you and I miss you. Let's cut the crap. I'm fucking pissed off, that's what.

You welcomed me into your life, your notes, your ramblings, your mistakes, your shopping lists, your sketches. You were, my dear sir, a most refined man, one I looked up to, one I could never live up to, with all your books and talks about great themes and heroes' journeys and literary theories. Who knows what went on in your head.

You died but didn't respawn. I went there and collected the loot.

So I'm there, watching you as you lived, but not in a creepy way, I hope. I'm there when you wake up one day feeling like shit, missing your son and your wife and not looking forward to spending hours in a meeting at the university where you work.

Will I find out about lost brothers and sisters, witness protection programme data, some trauma you never told anyone about, or maybe a secret formula or the missing algorithm from the blueprints of a government supercomputer? Will someone come after me now that I hold all your secrets?

I'm looking at the screen of an entirely new game.

**Uncharted Worlds 4**

One day, during an afternoon chemistry lab class break, there were some younger kids playing volleyball. Someone hit the ball too hard and it rolled across the schoolyard. Pablo was around and chased the ball to toss it back to the kids; before he could do that, though, it ended up at Schnitzler's feet. Not the most kind of human beings. He did what was then expected of a jerk like him: kicked the ball as hard as he could.

Pablo had zero patience for shit like that. If someone made fun of him he always talked back smart, or with what I like to call *Ye Olde Kick in Da Face*. Also, a great *Magic: the Gathering* player. He was a versatile motherfucker.

So Pablo, who was bending over to get the ball when Schnitzler kicked it, stood up and said, 'What the fuck did you do that for, you clown?'

It took Schnitzler by surprise. He just laughed awkwardly, and Pablo walked away.

The actual retaliation came the next day, when we were leaving school, walking to the nearest mall to have lunch together. No one saw or heard Schnitzler. He kicked Pablo on the back so hard he fell to the ground. I swear to God I can still hear his skin tearing on the concrete. Schnitzler simply turned around and left. I helped Pablo get up – he had wounds on his knees and elbows, but the tears in his eyes were the worst part.

And that was it. Gabriela yelled 'Coward!', but I didn't do anything. We tried to calm Pablo down and went to McDonald's.

That made me think of when I was five or six, walking to the beach with my mother, in Capão da Canoa. We had an apartment there, where we spent the summer, even though the beach is crowded, the water cold and the sea copper-coloured and dangerous. I liked it, though; there were some good arcades and ice cream shops. It was a three-block walk from the apartment to the beach; we did it every day. My dad usually stayed home, reading the newspapers. 'I'll meet you later,' he would say.

One of the houses on the way had a sprinkler spinning around, watering the lawn. I ran there and played in the water a little bit, when a kid about my age came out of the house, running and growling, like a guard dog. His fists closed, in what looked like a pretty

good boxing stance for a six-year old. I was dancing and laughing, but when I saw that kid I ran back to my mother and hid behind her. She smiled and put her hand on my head, pushing me gently towards the sea.

I suppose the right thing to do was growl and scream back at him, hold my ground and show him my fists, until his mother or my mother intervened. React. What would my father have done? Would he have pushed me gently towards the sea or towards the boy, telling me not to come back until there was blood?

I suppose that eleven years later, when Pablo fell to the ground with that sound of tearing flesh, the right thing for me to do would have been to shout at Schnitzler, tell him to pick a fight face-to-face. Push him hard; ask what was wrong with him. Yell something about his mother. Wait until he turned his back then fly-kicked him, too.

But I didn't do any of that. I didn't do anything.

Pablo confronted him shortly after all that happened. I wasn't there or I would have stopped him. I don't know what he said to the guy, but I know Schnitzler promised to kill him. I found Pablo at the end of that day, nervous. He put his hands on my shoulders and said, 'They're out there, man.'

Outside the school was a group of more or less twenty guys, waiting.

We did what every gentleman would have done in our place: we ran away, as fast as we could, across the school yard; we reached the limits of the school, where a high wall marked the frontier of a neighbouring sports club. We climbed a tree and jumped over it – just like so many students skipping school had done before us - and arrived at the dark, deserted athletics tracks. The sun was gone and we laughed and walked home while the adrenaline wore off.

We never ran into those guys again. Eventually Schnitzler was banned from school, for some other random reason (Drugs? Who knows). No one ever talked about it again.

Something haunted me after that, though. A part of me wished I had crossed the school doors that day, in slow motion, dropped my backpack on the ground and, under the

sunset, looked at those twenty guys and said, quite calmly:

‘Come on, motherfuckers. Bring it on.’

### **Old Max 5**

I join Gabriela in the living room. She’s watching some home makeover show so I lay my head on her lap and look out of the window. I can’t think of anything else to do. I think of my father, his funeral and the people shaking my hand, hugging me, saying ‘I’m sorry,’ ‘My condolences.’ Yeah, whatever. Life is just a permadeath run.

My mind races back; I think of angels, demons and how the last years of the twentieth century were all about that. Lame movies starring Schwarzenegger fighting Lucifer. Deep down, we were more than a little afraid of the end of the world, like kids playing with an Ouija board, half laughing, half believing.

People hugging me, telling me to hang on, that it would all pass. I thought about the after-life. I sincerely wished for things not to be so easy there, wherever he was. Not that I wanted him to suffer, but because it would be much cooler if he were fighting demons in the underworld. Mano a mano. My father holding a minigun, tossing grenades, fighting hordes of demons. Explosions and bullets louder than the church’s bells on the seventh-day mass service, much louder than the silence in his house when I went there to tidy up his things, louder than my mum’s crying when she showed up a week later and held me saying ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m sorry’ like it was her fault. It wasn’t, it really wasn’t, it just happened.

Man, I need to stop thinking about death, but it lurks around me. Truth is, I miss the old guy. This thought, calling him ‘old guy,’ brings a smile to my face. He hated that. I put on my pyjamas and lie down. One more day has passed.

**You 3**

On your last day at the farm where you were raised, you walked through the fields and got your shoes wet in the damp grass. There was a fig tree far away, alone in the middle of the hills. There were no other trees for over a half a mile around it. You looked down and saw your long shadow stretching in the direction of the tree. The silence and the loneliness were overwhelming. In a field like that, hearing the cry of the southern lapwing, it was easy to feel small. You were seventeen and had a book in your hands.

You hoped to find a place to read, a quiet place to disappear. Instead, you found yourself wandering, aimless. It was all so big, so quiet, so damn lonely that you felt like you were at the end of the world, the final bit of land before it all ended up in a gigantic chasm. Ahead of you, if your sense of direction was right, was Argentina, and way up north lay all the rest of Brazil. It can be hard to believe the world is bigger than what you see; most of the time, however, what you see is what you get.

You felt close to the grass, to the hills, to the horses in the stables, to the cold and misty morning, to the stray dogs wandering everywhere. ‘This is where I belong,’ you thought.

You walked to the fig tree and found a place between the roots. Facing the direction you came from, you could now see the house. Your father was inside, sipping chimarrão, our traditional yerba mate tea, served in a dried calabash with a metal straw.

You watched as uncle Adriano’s old Chevrolet approached on the road and stopped in front of the house. It had been almost a year since he had come to the farm. He got out of the car and looked around. Despite the distance, his eyes met yours and you waved at each other. Soon Uncle Adriano and your father were loading the truck with the last pieces of furniture.

It was your final day in the farm. When your mum had died one year before, your dad had decided to move to a tiny apartment in Porto Alegre's City Centre. Leave the farm

behind. Leave the silence behind.

‘I can’t take this any more,’ your father said one night. You were doing your homework at the kitchen table. Your father was staring at the family pictures hanging on the living room wall. The crickets were singing outside.

You watched him through the kitchen door as he paced back and forth, then went into his bedroom and came back with a cardboard box. He took all the pictures from the wall – all his wife’s pictures – and put them in the box.

‘I’ll sell the farm,’ he said. ‘I’ll sell everything.’

Then he went to bed. You were alone in the kitchen. You got up, went to the living room and looked into the box. You carefully closed the flaps and went back to finish your homework.

### **Uncharted Worlds 5**

My parents divorce was almost a secret business, subtly conducted behind my back. I couldn’t see the signs, but then I wasn’t watching their relationship closely. I just took it for granted, because, well, what else should I have done? They just dropped the news one day. Called me in the kitchen and blah blah blah. I didn’t have a say in it, it was done, but of course they still loved me and it wasn’t my fault. I was sixteen and not stupid, so I guess I was bummed for a while, but eventually, I adapted.

I moved in with my mom in a new apartment. She didn’t want to stay at the old house. ‘Time for something new,’ she said. ‘I’ve had enough of the past. Plus, that old house smells like mould.’

My dad was a great guy, always had been. Just not very organised, not keen on cleaning up, following a schedule, cooking and all that everyday business. It’s not like he was old-school; it’s more like he was always thinking too much. Maybe it was because of his job as a Literature teacher. When the divorce came, no one even considered the

possibility of me staying with him. So those were the first six or seven months of that year. I lived with mom at a cosy small apartment on Cristóvão Colombo Avenue, went to school, played games, saw my friends and studied for the college entry exams. I went to Dad's house at weekends, and we went out for a movie now and then during the week. It was weird, but I didn't have a say in it. No power at all.

Eventually, things changed.

It was the first week after the July winter break. My mum received this incredible job offer in São Paulo, six hundred miles away. She was moving, with the promise that I could live with her after I graduated, if I wished to go to a university there. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do after school. My true priorities were to reach the next level with my character, beat Final Fantasy VIII and, at some point soon, to have sex. Not in that order, of course.

She had to move fairly quickly. In the first week after the July winter break, my mum dropped me at my dad's.

I got out of the car and got my luggage from the trunk. I dropped it on the sidewalk, looked at my father's house and sighed. My mum got out of the car and looked at me. She was wearing big sunglasses and round golden hoop earrings. Looked younger than she was too, some kind of magical transformation she went through after the divorce. I wasn't angry, really, just tired of being tossed around. She pointed the car keys at me.

'Will you be alright?'

I looked at my father's house again. There weren't many houses left in town. At least that was my impression. All my friends lived in flats. This house was clutched between newer buildings. The garden was dead, the grass uneven. He'd let the place go. There was rust all over the iron fence.

'Yeah,' I said. 'I'll be alright.'

'I'm really sorry, honey,' she said. 'I have to go.'

'Have a nice trip, Mum,' I said. 'Call me when you arrive.'

‘You can visit me,’ she said. ‘As soon as I settle in the new place.’

I kicked the tyre lightly. ‘I know.’

She was ready to go to the airport, her bags already in the car. Everything else would go in a moving company’s truck next week. Mum held my chin up and looked me in the eye. I could see her glance through the dark brown lenses. I know she was trying to look sad, but when she had got the phone call about the job, she’d danced around the living room.

Dad appeared at the window and waved to us.

‘There he is,’ I said, waving back. ‘Hey, Dad.’

‘What, where?’ she said, straightening her hair.

‘Over there, by the window. He’s waving.’

‘Ok, listen,’ she said, pointing the car’s keys at me again. ‘If you can’t take it any more, if it is really unbearable, you can come and meet me, ok?’

‘Ok,’ I said. ‘We’ll be fine.’

‘I’m scared too. It’s all very new.’

My father opened the door and stood there. It was Saturday morning, but he was wearing a suit anyway.

‘Okay, this is it,’ she said, and hugged me tight. ‘Be patient. It’ll be alright.’

I didn’t want her to get on the plane feeling guilty. I could do it – every son knows how to make his parents feel guilty.

‘Just, go, Mum,’ I said. ‘Be happy, all that shit.’

‘Fuck,’ she said, wiping a tear from under the sunglasses. She held me again, and then crossed her arms while I walked towards the house, carrying my stuff. My father opened the gate; I walked through without a word, but he was looking at her. He opened his mouth to say something then changed his mind; raised his hand in a silent motionless wave of goodbye, while she started the engine. He was still there when I got to my room on the second floor; still looking at the car while it went up the street.

**Old Max 6**

Days go by. I'm a bit quieter, a bit grumpier; that cardboard box in the office, its ominous presence like a statue of a weeping angel. I'm trying the demo version of a new game coming out soon when I get an e-mail from Gabriela.

From: Gabriela O. Martinelli [gabitoons4life@gm...]

To: Max Martinelli [maximuspwrAAA@gm...]

Hey, Max. I was having coffee today at the studio and I was thinking about you. I tried to talk to you at home but you seemed so distracted, you barely replied to what I was saying. So I thought about sending you this e-mail. I'm starting to get a bit worried. You've been inside the apartment for days now. I think it's time you start to cheer up a bit. I just want you to be happy.

Love you,

G.

From: Max Martinelli [maximuspwrAAA@gm...]

To: Gabriela O. Martinelli [gabitoons4life@gm...]

Hey Gabi,

Sorry. I know things are a bit tough. I've been thinking about you all the time. About us and everything... but I feel so drained, weak, a bit angry. After everything that happened, I don't know how to do it, really. How are you, anyway?

She's online at her studio's computer, so our e-mail exchange turns into a chat log.

**Gabriela says:** Hey.

**Gabriela says:** I'm... OK, I guess. I've seen better days. I wish we could talk more.

**Max says:** I know... sorry, I'm a bit distracted lately.

**Gabriela says:** Maybe it's time for you to seek some help.

**Max says:** Like professional help?

**Gabriela says:** You aren't happy, are you?

**Max says:** Well...

**Gabriela says:** Are you going to be alright this weekend, all by yourself? I *have* to go to that convention. But I can stay, if you want me to.

**Max says:** Stop. I'm not crazy, I'm fine. I don't need any help.

**Max says:** First you lost the baby, then my father dies. It's not very easy, you know.

**Gabriela says:** The way you say it makes it sound like I'm the one to blame. I'm just trying to help.

I don't reply to the last one. I let it hang in the air until she gets home later. She doesn't even say hello; she applies a bit more strength than necessary to close the door then takes a shower. I make a sandwich and eat it by myself in the kitchen, while Gabriela packs her things for the comics convention she's going to. I walk into the bedroom.

'Hey,' I say.

'Hey.'

'Listen...,' I start. But she shakes her head.

'I don't want to talk, Max,' she says. 'I really don't want to fight today. Let's leave it like this. I'll go to my Con, you'll play your games, stay up all night, whatever you want to do. Then we'll see.'

'We'll see? What the hell is that supposed to mean?'

‘It means what it means,’ she says, as she closes her bag. ‘I’m going. Joana is picking me up in ten minutes. She’ll give me a ride to the bus station.’

‘But your bus only leaves at ten.’

She breathes deeply and looks away. She hugs me and kisses me. She avoids looking me in the eye. She leaves.

#### **You 4**

You loved epic stories. You were very fond of books and never quite got over the fact that I didn’t love them as much as you and Mum did. I’ve got nothing against them, really; it’s just that I always liked a specific kind of book: the ones with tables and charts and rules for designing fantasy characters. After that, I moved to complex technological systems, also known as video games.

In any case, you wrote about *The Odyssey*. You mentioned that when his father went to Troy, Telemachus was only a child. After years had passed, Athena came to him in the guise of Mentos, king of the Taphians, and told him he should go look for his father. In Odysseus’s absence, Telemachus had grown to be a man. Yes, yes, all those adventures and monsters were great. But you focused on how people seemed to forget the real point: Telemachus grew without a father.

You used to write when everyone else was asleep. You were a little embarrassed to keep diaries as a grown man, even though there were plenty of examples of famous writers and artists who did the same. And no one was able to read those notebooks, not even Mum, for many, many years.

She was really depressed, and so was I, but reading your diaries has kept me going. You called me “my Telemachus,” and you promised you would not abandon me to fight a distant war. You wrote that you didn’t want to get lost on the way back. You had a way with melodramatic prose, but I can forgive you for that. What the hell, man. If you're not

going to be sincere and cheesy in your own journals, then where can you be? I'm with you on that one.

## **Uncharted Worlds 6**

Activate memory sequence #456

Once upon a time, Pedro, Diego and I decided to have a party. Why? Because. Diego lived in a nice apartment building and there was a function room you could use. So we booked the place, printed out some invitations and gave them to our classmates. This was way before senior year. We must've been thirteen or so, and we desperately needed to be cool, or accepted, or something. You know when you need to be something but can't define what? What happened was this: we had some snacks and a big sound system. We dressed up nice and waited for everyone... but no one came. But wait! That's not (entirely) sad. I'll explain why.

While we waited, we practiced some killer dance moves. It was epic. I'm talking about jumping on the wall and back down. And we listened to a lot of songs. But I was also very nervous. Entertaining did seem a bit of a chore. Time went by, and we kept dancing, up until the moment we realised no one was coming. We convinced ourselves that was because (maybe) the address was hard to find, there was no doorman and so on and so forth. We gave our classmates the benefit of the doubt.

'I don't think anyone is coming,' said Pedro.

'Yeah,' I agreed.

I'm trying to remember what was playing. Some 90s dance song? Haddaway's 'What is love (baby don't hurt me)' is my best guess... but then again, that song seems to invade all my memories of the nineties, like a flashback in a crime-scene television show: the colour scheme changes and some old music starts to play. Except it's always the same.

Diego looked kind of bummed. I was relieved.

'They probably didn't find the address,' I said.

'Yeah,' Diego agreed.

'Let's do something else,' Pablo suggested.

'Yeah,' I agreed.

So we went back to Diego's apartment and played some videogames. What of it? We had a great time. Danced, had snacks, listened to music. No one came to talk to us later, explaining why they couldn't come. In fact, no one mentioned it again.

Funny things, memories. They suddenly wake up in you. Only now I was thinking about it and realised no one came because they didn't want to. Because they didn't think we were cool enough. I'm actually glad no one was there. They wouldn't be able to handle my dance moves.

End memory sequence #456

## **Old Max 7**

I go out for a walk. It's 9pm, but the streets in Porto Alegre are always raging; it won't be until midnight that the noise will go down and the lights will cast an orange glow on faint winter mist. I'm not sure where I want to go. I keep walking.

I pass the restaurants by the avenue. It's Friday so they are full; I walk by a homeless guy pulling a cart full of recyclable rubbish. I follow the flow of cars; I keep walking to where they are leading. There is some sort of comfort in doing what everyone else is doing. There's a shopping mall thirty minutes away from home. This is where they are going. I follow them there.

Every shopping mall looks the same. Which is why it's the first place I visit whenever I get somewhere I don't know. The odd familiarity, the similar designs, even the smell coming from the mixture of all the scents coming out of the stores; everything makes me feel at home. I look at the windows and the clothes and the sale signs. Finally, I stop by

the computer shop. It's one of those selling everything from hardware to software, computer and game accessories. I watch the multitude of screens displaying a loop of game previews; cables and mice and keyboards and flat screens of different sizes, game disc boxes, fancy desktop computer cabinets, customized with neon and decals. The culture of interface is the place where nothing is what it seems, and where everyone wants to be someone else, where movement becomes light, light becomes sound, sound becomes word. There we are, mingled with all those cables, trying to figure out which goes where, where to connect them, which button to press, which screen to look at. I sit on the bench in front of that window for a long, long time.

After I get home, I try to play a game, have a snack or simply sleep, but none of these things seems to work. That fight with Gabriela has left a sour taste in my mouth. I can't stand staying in our bedroom. I keep thinking that her bag was too big for a two-day trip; that she left too early to catch her bus; that she said 'We'll see' like a threat. I keep thinking about what she'll be doing during the convention: if she'll meet a nice-looking guy who will tell her he likes her comics and says all the things she wants to hear. Maybe this guy will be the right combination of cute and sexy for her to conclude that it's okay to have an affair; after all, she's away from home and from the jerk who does nothing but play videogames all day.

Our bed is now uncomfortable. I fall asleep on the couch, with the TV and the lights on.



## Uncharted Worlds 7

December in Porto Alegre was already too hot to bear. On that particular morning, the biology teacher was scribbling something about photosynthesis on the blackboard, when the pedagogical advisor paid us a surprise visit to lecture about the future or something. We had just arrived from gym class, having spent the last hour and a half playing football, which was all we did in P.E.

‘Here’s the ball,’ the P.E. teacher would say, ‘knock yourselves out.’

‘This is a sham,’ Pablo used to say, pointing loosely at the ball, gym, the school and the world.

Some of us were listening – some actually cared about the college entry exams. They would define who was going to the Federal University and who would have to go to a private one (and who wouldn’t go to either of those). Federal universities were free, but it’s not like money was an issue: our parents paid for our private school anyway, and the Federal University, so big and difficult to get in, was falling to pieces, quite literally, despite the prestige of getting a place there.

‘Less than two percent of the entire Brazilian population will go to a university,’ said the pedagogical advisor. ‘Keep that in mind and study hard.’

As he talked, I stared at the crucified Christ over the blackboard. It was a Catholic school, after all, the kind where we would read a line from the Bible and say a quick prayer before discussing biology. Such a strong image: a crucified man, bleeding and half-dead, used as a reminder of the universal love of God.

In front of me, Gabriela was drawing Wolverine on her notebook. She could draw anything better than anyone I knew – apart from her older sister, who was a professional illustrator and lived in Rio. I was feeling kind of dizzy from the heat; like the sun itself had evaporated and turned into a golden mist which we breathed. Strange images floated around me – Wolverine and his claws (*SNIKT!*); the advisor and his sweaty shirt; the

biology teacher sitting on her desk, bored, and suddenly – how come I hadn't noticed before? – Giselle's arse two rows in front of me, a real vision in her gym shorts.

During the break, I sat with Pablo, Diego and Gabriela on the benches by the football field. Diego was reading a Spawn comic book and Gabriela was still drawing. She was always sketching something. I'd bought a sandwich from the cafeteria and watched the movements across the field, people and their complex social relations, boyfriends and girlfriends, people we shared days with for years, ex-best friends, now almost strangers, belonging to different groups. I sighed.

'Can you believe this is almost over?' I asked them.

'Thank God,' Pablo said.

Diego laughed, without taking his eyes from his comic book.

There was a pause.

'McFarlane's style's so good,' Diego said, flipping through the pages.

'I don't like it much,' Gabriela said. She closed her sketchbook and stretched her arms. 'Too much detail.'

'Yeah, maybe, but the colours are nice,' Diego replied. 'Everything from Image is so great.'

She said, 'I like old comics. They have fewer colours and less blood. Life was simpler.'

I looked at her.

'Yes, it was.'

Pablo slapped Diego's comic book from below, then ran across the football field, laughing; Diego got up to chase him. They invaded the game played by first-years; the ball was close to Pablo so, while running, he kicked it and scored. Some of our classmates applauded and screamed. Pablo stopped to celebrate the goal, raised his hands up high; Diego jumped over his back and they fell down.

'I was only getting started,' I said to Gabriela.

‘It’s not over yet,’ she said. ‘We still have the trip.’

‘The trip?’

‘It’s an idea.’

Diego and Pablo walked back to us, talking. The first bell rang. We had two minutes to get to our classroom.

‘My favourite character? Angela, no doubt,’ said Diego. ‘Do you think angels are actually hot like her?’

‘Hope so.’

‘Hey,’ I said. ‘Are you going on the trip next week?’

‘Oh, man.’ Diego said.

I had mixed feelings. I couldn’t take those classes any more. My legs barely fitted under the table. Also, it’s weird to be in school after you start to shave regularly. However, there were many things I’d never done, and school was all I knew. Gabriela was right. It wasn’t over yet. If something has to end, we have to make it such an end that it is worthy of remembrance, right?

They got up; everyone had already gone back to the classrooms. I was still thinking, a stupid grin on my face.

Pablo looked at me. ‘Are you high?’

‘Yeah, I’m high, man,’ I said. ‘I’m high with the possibilities the future holds.’

‘OK, you’re high,’ Pablo replied. ‘Now, let’s go, we have one more week before they set us free.’

‘Whatever freedom means,’ said Diego, shrugging. He walked toward the staircases.

‘Wait,’ I said. ‘Just... wait.’

They turned. We were the last ones outside.

‘We’re going on that trip,’ I said.

Gabriela smiled.

‘We’re going,’ I said, ‘and it’s going to be awesome.’

At first they just stared at me.

‘Shut up,’ Pablo said.

‘I have my *Magic: the Gathering* deck in my backpack. If you go, it’s yours.’

He looked at the others and pointed at me.

‘Can you believe this guy? I don’t need your cards. I always beat you. But alright, I’ll take it. I’ll go with you.’

‘You have my sword,’ said Diego.

‘Gay,’ I replied.

We looked at Gabriela. She rolled her eyes.

‘It was my idea in the first place,’ she said.

We climbed the stairs together. We’d soon be free.

Whatever freedom meant.

## **You 5**

Your diaries have lot of quotes from the books you loved. Nowadays all I need is to highlight stuff on my e-reader and everything will be saved into a text file I can print or read or e-mail or whatever. You transcribed your favourite passages into your notebooks. I mean, it's full of them. You were in love with your books, so much so it's like you were trying to rewrite them longhand, savouring every single fucking word. Ctrl+C, Ctrl+V, dude. Seriously.

I shouldn't be writing 'seriously' any more. I'm well past that, no?

Well, I shouldn't be talking to my computer either. But here we are.

You described how you met Mum: you were classmates in college. Both of you went to the same Psychology module: she was training to be a counsellor, you wanted to get ideas for your stories. You two were the nerdiest, cleverest and most annoying students. You went to fucking protests during the dictatorship! You've fled from the mounted police!

Some of the people you met at college disappeared around that time. Forever. So, here you go: secret number one. You were *this* close from getting caught by the military and not being my father at all.

You dreamt of being a bestselling writer. Not any writer, mind you. You wanted to write psychological thrillers that would sell millions. Of course, you forgot you lived in Brazil, where the average person reads less than two books per year. Talk about dreams that die.

You went out with Mum a few times, took her to restaurants and to the cinema. You were delighted by her intelligence and energy, despite her bad temper: qualities and traits she would have all her life.

You sang 'And I Love Her' to her in front of her bedroom window one night and her father chased you for two blocks. When he finally caught up with you, he smashed your guitar on the ground. Needless to say, he didn't like you at first: the man who would become my grandfather thought you were a spoilt middle-class boy who had no idea what real life was.

He was right, but you did your best to change his mind. You ended up best buds, telling each other jokes after Sunday lunch at Grandma's house. You even, quite ironically, performed Christmas songs together, with you playing the guitar and him doing the singing. Classic.

This explains why you listened to The Beatles so many times after the divorce. I'd always thought that the lyrics for 'And I Love Her' were self-explanatory, but I didn't know it was your song. Your song! It feels weird getting access to this kind of information. I sure hope I don't find any naughty details in here somewhere. I'd never forgive you, old man.

Every time you listened to that album, always five or six times in a row, you mumbled 'Bitch' and carefully put the record back onto the shelf. Burning bridges, as they say. Rancour is thy name, but a breakup is a breakup. Tough.

## Gabriela's Monologue

I meant to turn this into some comics. Instead, it turned out to be a letter. I don't know.

My name is Gabriela. I'm a comic book author. Everyone thinks that's cool. But I'm busy all the time! With the studio, commissions, side projects and graphic novels. I like it, though. Could use more spare time to watch some good ol' X-files, though.

Sorry. I don't know your name. I don't know you. I'm not sending this to anyone. Just need a way to blow off some steam. Put it out... this is crazy.

Things I like: desserts, coffee, comics, cats, books (not just reading – the actual books; I'm the kind of girl who smells the books in book stores), the colour blue. Also chocolate, sleeping... Ideal vacation: eating and sleeping, all the time, non-stop.

I have a group of friends and we have a studio together. We don't always work as a team, but the rent is cheap, and we always share our snacks and our coffee machine is rad. So yay for that!

Max is kind of depressed lately. I'm kind of depressed lately too. I can't stand to see him like that. I love him but there's nothing I can do. Dude needs time.

I wanted to talk to him about this, but I can't. A while ago I got pregnant. Except things didn't work out and I lost the baby. And it was the worst day of my life. So we gave each other some space.

I'm just afraid that space has become bigger and bigger. I don't like us being apart. I did my best to take care of him, but I was still in a weird kind of mood. I would let the world burn because I was so sad.

This is so lame. I never wrote a letter to anyone. Seeing Max suffering somehow evened out the pain I was feeling. I'm a horrible person, I know, I know, I know, I KNOW. If you'll excuse me, I'm just going to the kitchen to eat everything in there so I can feel

guilty for the rest of my life.

## Uncharted Worlds 8

On Saturday we went to Garopaba, the bus left the school early in the morning. It would be a six-hour drive, more or less, to get there. Gabriela arrived late and we almost had to leave her behind.

The change in everyone's looks – from the lifeless black and grey uniform to the colourful shorts and t-shirts and sunglasses – was kind of shocking. My classmates were all strangers to me. I talked briefly with Diego and Pablo – we were frightened by all those 'what are you doing here?' looks.

We were first to get in. I really wanted to sleep because I was up until three in the morning surfing the web. I would be lying if I said I didn't access one or two porn sites, but most of the time I was just downloading old ROMS for my Sega Genesis and SNES emulators. Downloading them was almost more fun than actually playing: the thrill of finding one working ROM of *Michael Jackson's Moonwalker* was something that only hunters chasing the last mammoths would understand. Anything more powerful than a Game Boy or ATARI emulator demanded I play it without sound to avoid slowdowns. My PC had 16 MB of RAM.

As soon as the driver started the engine, everyone went crazy, *Woohooing* and whatnot. I had this feeling I'd crashed someone's party.

Soon the landscape changed: the familiar buildings and streets gave way to industrial plants and favelas at the city's borders, and after that, the endless rice fields; and then, as we reached the highway and went further north, the first cattle, eucalyptus trees and sometimes a dark-water lake. I fell asleep.

I woke up two hours later, mouth open, drooling. Everything was quiet. Too quiet. As I sat up straight, I heard whispers followed by a camera flash in my face. Laughter. I looked around, now fully awake.

‘What?’ I asked. ‘WHAT?’

They laughed even harder. Someone handed me a little mirror. They had painted a cat nose and whiskers on my face.

We still had four hours to go.

Eventually we arrived in Garopaba, with just one major incident: someone sat on the fire extinguisher and we had to pull over for fifteen minutes until the white cloud settled.

Garopaba is little more than a fisherman’s town, but Santa Catarina shores are so beautiful that any part of it is like a tiny paradise, hills covered in patches of rain forest trees ending right on the shore. There were dozens of little beaches, each one with its own name and personality. Garopaba was something in between, a touristic city with lots of B&Bs and small shops. The houses were old colonial style. You could see the men working on their boats, getting the fishing gear ready, the seagulls flying around them.

The coach stopped at the station, a ten-minute walk to the inn. We got our bags and formed small groups, scattering here and there.

‘Your face is already worth the trip,’ said Pablo. Diego and Gabriela laughed.

The inn itself was two stories high, quite close to the beach. All the rooms were accessible through a big balcony that surrounded the whole thing. Almost every window looked at the sea or the town. The rooms were simple: old beds and closets, nothing else. The bathroom had an electric shower that gave you a shock every time you touched the tap. Gabriela was in a single room; so was Diego. I was on a twin room with Pablo. They were randomly allocated by whoever organised the trip.

‘If you try anything,’ Pablo said, ‘I’ll pluck your eyes out. I know I’m irresistible and all, but show some restraint, for fuck’s sake.’

After leaving our bags I went to the balcony and stared at the sea. One thing I always

liked: the smell of salty water and endless horizons. When you travel, you can't help but feel that whatever you left behind, good or bad, has become almost mythical, something that barely exists any more. Perhaps it has to do with the human ability to adapt. All I know is that within an hour of our arrival, I wasn't thinking about universities and parents and houses or anything else.

### **Old Max 8**

I've got some friends online. It's weird how these things work. When I got my first computer and, subsequently, my first dial-up modem, the Internet was some kind of witchcraft very few people knew about. Most of my classmates didn't even have a computer at home, so it really was just Pablo and me talking about it, exchanging e-mails and meeting up in chatrooms. Nowadays everyone has an online presence, an online life, or lives. Each website invites me to create a new persona. I can be anyone, in theory. I say in theory because this kind of fantasy – that the Internet can give you some kind of anonymity – is fading away at an alarming pace, as we learn about how many trails we leave behind. There's no place to hide online, unless you really know your stuff.

All that is to say that, even though I'm spending a long time at home, working and writing and reading by myself, I'm not alone. There are other people, people I connect to on several assorted levels: some are real life friends, some are online buddies I only know by alias. It's the way it is.

I was commenting on a journalism thread when someone asked what would be my dream interview. Most people would pick some politician. The president, or even a terrorist; a well-known or controversial public figure. I chose Duke Nukem. Since I was inspired, I kept writing how that would be possible. In fact, it is possible – I believe so – just give it a couple of years. It would go like this:

Let's say there was a scientist, a genius, really, who for some reason lives in the same city as me, and he's developing cutting-edge virtual reality/ artificial intelligence simulations. Something deep, black-ops, private initiative, nothing to do with universities. Let's say this scientist approached me and said that he likes my blog and my opinions about the way games should work as opposed to the way games actually work and he wants to talk to me about something. An experiment. Let's say I accept the invitation.

We talk over coffee in a part of the city I've never been to before. The kind of shadowy place where only senior citizens go, guys with tweed jackets and wool berets. A coffee shop close to an old-school barber, where, while you wait to get a haircut, you can read the latest Playboy magazine. I think about getting a haircut there after the coffee, but then I taste it and it's the best damn espresso I ever had. I stare the scientist in front of me. A bald guy with a sweater sprinkled with cat hair.

He tells me he hacked into the Defence Department of an Eastern European country where advanced research concerning virtual reality and artificial intelligence was being developed, sponsored by a forgotten Soviet Union war fund.

I ask how he did that, and he says that they were counting on the fact that no one would take the research seriously because it was in such a distant country. That the country's name was too difficult to pronounce.

Let's say this scientist's name is Johann, and that he claims to have a microfilm with the actual code to build the ultimate Simulator, and that, being an old-time gamer ('I played Pong on a black & white TV,' he says), he crossed the Simulator data with the codes from games to create probable artificial intelligences. Simulations built on simulations.

The result was a virtual environment where you could talk to game characters.

Let's say that this is all theoretically possible and that he has run the diagnostics, but that he needs someone to get inside while he controls the computers. He needs a guinea pig.

Let's say I say 'Yes.'

He replies, 'Who the fuck are you, asshole?'

This is the first thing Duke Nukem says to me.

I think he is going to kill me, but that isn't possible. At least I think it isn't. The Simulator works well, but there is no environment. Man, let me tell you, shit is REAL.

'You better start talking,' he goes, 'Or my fists will do the talking.'

'Erm, I'm a journalist.'

'Who do you work for?'

'The New York Times,' I lie.

He scratches his balls. 'The world is totally my bitch. Go on.'

'Where were you born?'

'My first memory is kicking some alien ass.'

'Makes sense. What is your favourite thing in the world?'

'Shooting things. Drinking beer. Having sex with twins. All three at the same time.

You know what I mean?'

'Yeah, I do.'

'This interview sucks. I would leave, if I knew how.'

'Have you ever been in love?'

'Yes.'

The straight answer and the apparent honesty blow me away.

'What happened?'

'I fucked love in the ass and it never came back, afraid of my almighty dick.'

'Beautiful.'

I hear Johann's voice coming from above, saying I have a minute before he disconnects me.

'Last question, Duke: are you ever afraid of anything?'

'I'm not afraid, kid. I'm never afraid. There's no use for fear if you're holding a Big Fucking Gun, even if you're looking Death in the eye.'

‘What if you didn’t have a Big Fucking Gun?’

‘I’d punch Death in the face. I want to punch you in the face now, you fucking pussy.’

‘That’s an interesting approach on everything, Duke, but I’m leaving. It was a pleasure talking to you.’

‘Fuck you.’

[DISCONNECT]

The thread goes in flames, other journalists offer similar fictional accounts of dream interviews and we all have a blast. And there goes the best part of my weekend. And you want to tell me this isn't real? That having a great time with virtual people is not worthy? Well, piss off. You know nothing. Nothing!

## **You 6**

I quote:

*Eighteenth century philosophy, research methodologies; meeting deadlines and filling timetables: we're lost, buried in a mountain of paperwork when we should be staring at the sky in a daily ritual of humbling before the infinite.*

Damn you for being ever such an optimistic bastard. But this was from a time when you were a bit down. Everything should be alright: you were married, you had a newborn baby, had just landed a job as a high school literature teacher.

The key term in the paragraph above is ‘newborn baby’. If your writings are to be trusted, there is nothing more rock 'n' roll than having a baby. Try not sleeping for a year and see how that makes you feel. So sorry. Maybe one day karma will get me, and I'll be the one not sleeping, holding a baby in my arms and wondering why everything looks so hopelessly bleak. I've been having some trouble sleeping lately, and let me tell you, it's not

easy keeping on track. It used to be easier, you know. Back in high school I went to bed at two in the morning, because I was caught up in an online chat, or setting up emulators, or just playing on my Playstation. Sleep was hardly a necessity. So yeah, I'll give you some credit.

You were downright afraid of me. I was a month old, but you were afraid of me. You wrote that you were sure I had some sort of sleep detection plugin: I waited for you and Mum to fall asleep and then started crying. If (sleep) {console.log("Waaaaaaaaaaaahhh");

Fathers and sons have always had a turbulent relationship, ever since Saturn ate his children and Oedipus killed his father. You wondered if the stories we learn are simply concerted, continual attempts to understand our parents, or just a way of vicariously enacting revenge on them.

## Uncharted Worlds 9

I put my bag on the bed while Pablo opened the windows. The room smelled faintly of the sea, grains of sand tickled my bare feet when I took off my shoes. I didn't bring a lot of things with me, apart from my worn out copy of *The Lord of The Rings*, which, by that time, had already turned into a lucky charm. A few clothes, a small notebook and a pencil case, but that was it. I felt strangely nostalgic for my collections back home. I ran through a mental list of my stuff:

**1) 174 comic books**, divided between *X-men*, *Spiderman* and *Wolverine*; I also had a couple of imported Manga (since no Manga was officially released in Brazil back then), and some *Conan* issues which I bought at a discount bookstore in Capão da Canoa. The most valuable editions were in plastic file bags.

**2) Books:** not many actual novels, I'm afraid, apart from *TLotR*. I also had all my RPG books in a cabinet next to my bed. *AD&D*, *GURPS* and supplements – *Forgotten*

*Realms, The Complete Book of Humanoids, GURPS Fantasy, GURPS Superheroes, Mystara, Battletech* and the original red *Dungeons & Dragons* box.

**3) Dice:** I had the most ridiculous multifaceted dice collection, for use in role-playing games: dice with four, six, eight, ten, twelve and twenty sides; coloured, marble, pearl and gem finish. There was no need for that many (50? 60?), but I liked them anyway. I kept them in a black velvet bag.

**4) Lego:** I was too old to play with Lego, but I kept them in a box inside my closet. Maybe someday I would give them to my children and they could carry on the collection from there, I thought. Other people came up with the most amazing ideas, but I always built cars, robots or spaceships. Or cars that were also robots and spaceships.

I remember feeling half-naked without my things. I'd always thought of my bedroom as some sort of personal fort, a safe haven from all the anxieties outside. Not that I had any phobias or social issues – I wasn't a *hikikomori*, those guys in Japan who locked themselves in their rooms for years - not by a long shot. But I felt protected there. If I was into my stuff, my fantasy worlds and dreams of monsters and knights, and my games and computer files, I could forget about all the rest for a while.

I came round from that daydream when I saw Gabriela on my doorstep. Pablo was taking a shower.

'Hey,' she said. 'You okay?'

I pretended to be organising my things, even though there was nothing to organise. I just moved stuff around on the bed.

'Sure,' I said. 'I'm unpacking.'

'How about we go to the beach?' she shrugged. 'There's nothing else to do, anyway.'

I looked at my clothes.

‘I just need to... could you, uh...’

She said she’d wait outside, and closed the door. I changed to proper beachwear and went out with her. She said Diego was unpacking too, but he’d brought all his RPG books, so that would take a while. We laughed as we went down the stairs. It was then I realised she was wearing a bikini and shorts. I wasn’t ready for it. When did she become, well, that *hot*?

‘What?’ she turned around. ‘Why did you stop?’

I looked at her, trying to absorb the thought-process U-turn in my mind.

‘It’s nothing,’ I said, as I followed her.

## **Old Max 9**

Mum calls and asks if I want to have lunch. I meet her in a fancy restaurant at the mall. She’s all dressed up, as usual. Hugs me tight and says she’s missed me.

‘Me too, Mum.’

She takes a long look at the menu before ordering a glass of white wine.

‘So, what’s new?’ she asks.

‘Dad died, have you heard?’ I smile, but she doesn’t think it’s funny. She never gets my jokes anyway.

‘Not cool, Max.’

‘You’re right, I’m sorry.’

‘So what have you been doing?’

‘I don’t know, the same,’ I reply. ‘Writing some stuff. Playing games. Watching TV. Can’t really complain.’

‘How’s Gabriela?’

‘She’s away at a convention somewhere. She’s fine.’

She gives me one of her looks. She knows something's up, but she just takes a sip from her glass of wine and leaves me be.

She says, 'Have you thought about the house?'

'No. What do you have in mind?'

'He left the house for you, honey.'

'But you have the right to –'

'I don't want it,' she says. 'Listen, we sorted everything when we divorced. He got the house, I got other stuff. And anyway, I would want you to have it as well. You're our only son, so it's yours.'

'Did I ever tell you about the refurbishment he did in my last year of school?'

'No. He did that?'

'When I got home from Garopaba everything was different. He'd cleaned everything, really, the garage, the living room, bought new furniture, painted the walls, got a big new TV. I don't know why I never mentioned it before. He didn't tell you?'

'Not a word.'

'When I got home he was in his underpants, wearing a kitchen apron and drinking beer, saying things like, "I needed a change."'

'Huh.'

'You know, I think he never got over you, Mum.'

'Well, do we ever?'

'What?'

'I mean, just because things changed, it doesn't mean everything that came before didn't count, Max.' Her tone is that of a mum explaining to her child how planes fly. 'You can't help it. You miss some things.'

Don't know why that look on her face makes me want to cry. It's like that lately. I'm alright and suddenly for no reason something completely unrelated to anything makes me want to cry.

She holds my hand. 'Hey, hey – it's alright, honey.'

I hide my face between my hands. That's the only way I can cry – hiding my face.  
Good thing it's early. Not many people around the restaurant to stare at us.

'It's alright,' she says. 'It's alright.'

## You 7

A quote from Beowulf I found in one of your notebooks:

*"I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea,  
As I sat in the boat with my band of men,  
I meant to perform to the uttermost  
what your people wanted or perish in the attempt,  
in the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfil that purpose,  
prove myself with a proud deed  
or meet my death here in the mead-hall."  
- (Beowulf, 632-638)*

You were amazed the first time you read *Beowulf*. You did that later than you'd expect a literature teacher to. But if it's any consolation, *Beowulf* was never a central subject in Brazilian literature, which explains in part your amazement of how epic it was. Battles and monsters and love: you don't find that stuff easily around here. You cautiously battled the required national readings, teaching them while recommending Shakespeare and Tolkien on the sly. You felt such a rebel.

But most of all, you took pleasure from the fact that a narrative that follows a warrior and his deeds did not shy away from the occasional reflection on death and family and necessary goodbyes. Warriors also die and they also get old; warriors fail, and they see the

next generation overtaking their own; warriors see the end coming but they fight the dragon anyway.

Note to literature teachers in Brazil: folks, we need more warriors and dragons and shit. The realism is killing those kids' love of stories. Who cares about frakking reality? Give me some magic.

### **Uncharted Worlds 10**

On the second day at Garopaba, we slept until noon then walked up and down the beach a few times, then had steak and fries at the sea front and walked around the crafts and clothes shops. And that was it. I mean, what was there left to do? It was a fishing village with some restaurants and shops, and that's it! Boredom!

I got Diego's comics and sat on the beach for a while. Then we dived in and the water was goood. I mean paradisiacal good. Clean and warm, just like the ones in toothpaste ads. Gabriela kept reading the latest Cosmo (since when did she buy Cosmo?), while the guys and I just sat there for hours looking at the girls passing by. There's science behind these kind of observational activities.

Diego, Pablo and I would exchange occasional remarks about the *derrière* in question. Whenever we did that, Gabriela would roll her eyes and sigh. I guess she was sitting there all afternoon trying not to lay a smack on us, or just afraid to walk to the beach and have us talk about her as well. She didn't take any chances.

That night, Pablo bought a bottle of cachaça, some limes and sugar. We ended up in Gabriela's room, which was bigger and nicer than ours, drinking caipirinha and playing *Truth or Dare*.

Results: Diego admitted he cheated once on a math test (the horror!). Pablo revealed he made out with a girl inside the church in Gramado (should adolescent passion be

excused or considered a deadly sin?); I admitted having stolen some comics from a bookstore, but only because they forgot to charge me for it (I'm a boring bastard, what can I do?). Gabriela said she saw her sister having sex with her boyfriend once (silent stares).

As the night went on, Pablo dared Gabriela and Diego to kiss, which they did, and we all had a laugh. Pablo went out for a smoke (Diego: 'Since when do you smoke?' Pablo: 'Did I have to ask you for permission?'). Later, Diego fell asleep on the floor and Gabriela's face was so red I thought there was something wrong with her.

'You knocked him out cold,' I said.

'True.'

'You're too much for him.'

'Shut up.'

'Poor bastard.'

She threw a pillow at me. I fell back and stared at the ceiling. There was a cobweb there and some moths flying around the light bulb. I closed my eyes for a second and I could hear the ocean. Gabriela said something – I didn't get what but I said 'okay,' then fell asleep.

## **Old Max 10**

Whenever I feel like taking a trip, the first thing I do is get some information about distances and roads, so I can estimate how many hours I'll be travelling. When I was a boy, whenever someone asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always replied, 'An astronaut'.

It's been a long time since I gave up that dream, for random reasons I can't remember. But I'm still fond of all things space, with the exception of *Star Trek*. So I decide to spend a few hours losing myself on the NASA website and other related websites, and come out with a list of distances:

Distance from Porto Alegre to Garopaba: 338.39 km or roughly 5 hours driving

Distance from Porto Alegre to Rio de Janeiro: 1,125.12 km or 24 hours by bus, counting the stops every 4 hours

Distance from Porto Alegre to London: 10,359.46 km, or 30.61 trips from Porto Alegre to Garopaba

Distance from Porto Alegre to Tokyo: 18,838.68 km, also referred to as 'all your money'

Distance from Earth to Moon: 384,400 km or 20.4 trips from Porto Alegre to Tokyo, hopefully with better seats

Distance from Earth to Sun: 149,600,000 km or 2,210,467.21 hours driving, considering the conditions are the same as in the BR-101 highway (quick note: 2210467.21 hours are equivalent to 92,102.80 days or 252.33 years, not stopping to have a wee or barbecue at a suspicious roadside restaurant)

Solar System Diameter: 9,000,000,000 km or 23413.11 trips to the Moon

How many Earths fit inside Jupiter: 1321.3

How many Jupiters fit inside the Sun: 926 Jupiters, approximately

Distance from the Sun to Alpha Centauri (closest star system): 4.37 lightyears, or 43.7 trillion km, or 3,429,602,888.08 Earths side-by-side

Size of the Universe: you must be fucking kidding me, unless you mean Mr. Universe, of which there were several; in that case, the most famous one was The Governator, who stands 1.88m tall and that's a considerably more manageable number.

## **You 8**

You were at the mall. It was supposed to be a nice day out. You thought, 'Why not spend the Saturday afternoon with my kid?' So you took me there on the busiest day of the week. I was two and a half, so flexibility was not my strongest suit. There were so many people that just walking around was a chore. There was nowhere to sit in the food court

and the play area was so crowded that I became scared, tired and angry. You didn't know what to do at times like these. But then again, who does?

I cried as loud as I could, closed my eyes and screamed, and struggled when you tried to calm me down. People were staring. All you could do was carry me away and take me home. I cried all the way there, too.

You took me for a walk in the street, to watch the cars driving by, to see if I'd settle. I would call your attention whenever I saw something interesting: trucks, stray dogs, aeroplanes. I'd grab your chin and direct your gaze to whatever I was looking at, and you would calmly explain what it was.

In general, you were afraid ("To be a father is to be afraid"). You wanted me to know that the world was more than walking from point A to point B and dreaming impossible dreams. You wanted me to be hopeful, even when what you wanted was to get just fifteen more minutes of sleep.

One morning I chased our cat with a wooden spoon. Mum was still asleep and you were making breakfast. It was before seven. Before I could hit poor Luna, you came and took the spoon away from me. Immediately I started wailing, scared of you, such a big man, taking everything from me. How could you make me understand that you were only teaching me right from wrong? You were so big and scary. You didn't want to scare me; you wanted to be a cool dad, that's all, and teach me stuff about *Star Trek* (the classic series), and all the books you loved. You were even up for some football! You didn't play or care for it but couldn't help fantasising about playing with your kid in the park. For a moment there, time stopped. It was really hard to make me understand all the whys and hows. And it was so bloody early in the morning.

So you did the only thing that you could. You took me in your arms, brought me closer in a tight hug and said,

'It's okay.

Your

father  
is  
here.'

### **Old Max 11**

This is a lonesome morning. I roam around the house uncertain of what to do. I walk into the office and clean the place up for no reason at all. I come across the box with my dad's diaries. I take a long look at it. I think of that trip to Garopaba again.

I look for the car keys. I take my wallet and a jacket. I don't worry about anything else. I close the windows and leave with that heavy box on my arms. I take the car and drive north, heading for what is probably, at this time of year, a phantom town.

As I make my way through Porto Alegre streets before I get to the motorway, I think about this piece of news I read recently. A girl from America spent the last year crossing the country on foot, from Maine to California. She did it because she spent a lot of time playing Guild Wars and started wondering how it would be like to live a real adventure, to go on a journey like those she was used to going online.

The best part is that, after the trip was finished, she visited Arenanet's studios, the guys who created Guild Wars. They welcomed her and rewarded her effort with a character inspired by her story. So now, and forever more until they decide to pull the plug on this particular game, a character named after this girl will be travelling the world of Tyria.

I respect that. I just don't think I could do it myself. Personally, I believe I'd be robbed, raped and killed on the way. When we were in school, Diego was mugged three times in one year while he walked home. The last time, they took his shorts and shoes; left the guy in his underpants. Someone once said to me that the world is not as dangerous as we think. I'm not willing to bet my life on it. Not in Brazil, dude.

I reach the city's exit. The surroundings haven't changed. The small factories, the rice fields, they're still there. The billboards change the ads from time to time, but that's all. I've made this trip many times. It became a sort of tradition of ours, Gabriela and me, to go north from time to time. In part because the seaside around here is rubbish, in part because that's where it all started. We have never been there during winter, though.

I turn on the heater, put some music on just to serve as white noise. The road is not that busy. It's still early in the morning and no one is making the journey to the seaside. Spring hasn't officially started yet. 'Tis the season of red wine and fondue, of soup and hearth fire, just the sort of homely cosiness I'm trying to get away from. I look at my side. The cardboard box is on the passenger seat, wrapped in a seatbelt.

## **You 9**

My decision to choose Santa Catarina every time I wanted to go to the beach probably stemmed from my childhood. My grandparents had an apartment in Capão da Canoa but you and Mum never bought one. Instead, we'd go somewhere different every year. I was jealous of my friends and their summer friendships - the people they only met during holidays because they always went to the same place. We, however, drove north, arriving at Figueira, Florianópolis, Praia do Sonho, Ibiraquera, Perequê – sometimes even further north to Angra dos Reis or Rio.

When it was my turn to decide where to spend my holidays with my wife I found myself doing the same as you did. It is an almost symbolic choice for adventure instead of stability. Almost symbolic, I say, because there are hardly any dragons on our maps.

What I remember of those early days in Santa Catarina was staying in all kinds of rented houses, just us; running around with you playing tag; a short walk to the beach every morning, not long after sunrise. You'd take me on your shoulders and we'd sing some silly song you made up.

## Uncharted Worlds 11

I woke up a bit hungover. I couldn't sleep any more so I got dressed and sat on the steps outside the inn. It was early, something like seven or so. Everything was so crisp and sharp outside, like a high definition image on a brand new TV. I rubbed my eyes and stared at the road. There was a small grocery shop, where a man in his sixties went in and bought a bag of freshly baked bread and a newspaper. He was bald, had thin legs and a friendly smile. He said 'good morning' when he passed by. I nodded and smiled. I thought, 'That's nice.' The scent of warm bread lingered around.

I thought that life away from home wasn't that bad. That, if you really think about it, home is not a word with fixed meaning. I thought about turtles and their shells, always on their backs. I thought about little animals that were born and then learned to walk in a matter of minutes. I noticed again the sound of the ocean, particularly clear now, its endless blast coming and going among the old houses. Arriving and leaving. To be home is to be always on the verge of saying goodbye.

Then Gabriela showed up from behind and sat next to me. She said 'Good morning' and I said the same, as if I was expecting her.

She kept quiet for a while, then asked, 'Did you sleep well?'

'The best I could.'

'I know,' she said. 'Last night was a bit too much, huh.'

I remembered her kissing Diego. Or was it a dream? I grabbed and let go of little faint memories. It was like playing with the smoke from a burning incense stick. It went around my fingers.

'It's a bit hard to remember,' I said.

She didn't answer for a while. Then she murmured, 'I see.'

Something was off. I wondered if I'd said something I shouldn't have the night

before. Did I make a comment on her legs, or the way she looked in a bikini? Could I have done that? I was terrified at the thought, so I kept quiet.

‘I think I’ll get some more sleep,’ she said.

‘Yeah, good idea.’

She got up and left.

I stayed there for a long time, trying to remember, but all I got was an image of moths flying around an old light bulb.

### **Old Max 12**

I have passed Torres and am officially out of Rio Grande do Sul. I look to my side – I have been checking on the box from time to time – and I realise there is a tiny dark gecko sitting on one of the box’s flaps. It must have crawled inside the box in my house or back at my father’s. It is standing there; I’m not sure it’s watching me or just enjoying the ride.

‘Why, hello there,’ I say.

It doesn’t move. I don’t think it is too afraid of me.

‘It’s nice to have some company.’

It quickly crawls back inside.

‘You don’t have to be afraid. I’ve nothing against geckos. Maybe you should have a name. I’ll call you Lola.’

Lola is so tiny, it must be really young. Last time I tried to catch a gecko it left its tail wiggling behind and ran away.

Random thought: There are 365 days in one year. If you are lucky enough to live 80 years, that gives you 29,200 days. May seem a lot, but let’s consider that you probably won’t remember anything that happened to you before you were five (memories of rain drying in the summer sun; the smell of the ice cream shop my grandmother used to take

me; to be scared of thunder in pre-school, and something about fruit vending trucks at the seaside). Then you'll have 27,375 days. Still a lot, though.

You may think it's unlikely that your life would be defined by certain of those days in particular. But if you think about the universe - if you are the kind of person who thinks about the universe - you'll notice that given its size (really fucking big), it is unlikely that there isn't life somewhere else other than Earth. The failure to find life in other places in the universe until now does not mean it won't be found. It's the same with you and me: the huge number of days we live (nothing compared to the 13 billion years of the universe, but still) does not mean the importance of those days is diluted, shared between them equally. So it's only logical to declare that some of them may indeed be more significant than others, and some may even be so greatly important they'll define everything that happens afterwards.

Not that I'm a fan of logic (or math); it just makes sense. So if you have a child to look after or people that matter around you, it's a huge responsibility to influence those people's days; you may be responsible for one of those life-defining moments, good or bad. So if you think about all that – and you probably will, since I brought it up – you should be fucking scared by now.

## **You 10**

If I had to choose one memory of us, just one, I think it would be the lightsaber battle. It's not like it's the most important plot-wise. I mean, it didn't change anything, not like weddings and births and deaths do.

You got me a lightsaber for my birthday. Not a fancy one; it didn't light up or make any sound; it was just one of those plastic ones that are very tough to break. It was the perfect one for use in a lightsaber battle. Which is why you got one for yourself as well.

'Why two?' Mum asked. 'He's going to need someone to fight with,' you replied. I was five or so.

Then we spent the morning forging scenarios where I beat you every time. You were a space pirate, an evil alien, a robot. You taught me how to use the Force, even though I'd never watched *Star Wars*. We made a mess around the house before you grew tired and asked to have a few minutes.

I can't remember the birthday party or any of the other gifts, but I remember us, clashing swords, duelling for the fate of the universe.

## **Uncharted Worlds 12**

Someone mentioned there was going to be a meet-up at a local bar. It was someone's birthday so everyone was going out for drinks. It was supposed to be just a night out. Supposed to.

We walked all together searching for the bar in question, a place called "The Monkey." It was an unusual chilly night, enough for me to wear my hoodie. We arrived at big wooden house built in a U shape, with a lawn in the middle, lit by torches. The place was crowded, with lots of people chatting on the balcony. Inside, there were a pool table, a classic 50s American-style jukebox, and a little stage where a band was playing bad reggae.

We sat at the counter and I ordered four beers. I raised mine in a toast.

'To our legendary days,' I said.

They raised their bottles too. Never had a beer tasted so bittersweet in all my life.

I thought someone was staring at me, but when I turned, no one was there. Diego said I was just being paranoid. We turned around to have a better look at the bar.

'This place kind of looks like *Zelda's* Dark World.'

'I know what you mean,' I said.

‘Yeah,’ Pablo and Gabriela agreed, in unison.

I picked up random drinks from the menu, laughed a lot; I remember Gabriela and Diego holding hands sitting next to me. Then I said ‘What the fuck is that?’ and they replied it was what it was, before making out in the most shameless way, Diego fumbling her ass and everything, while Pablo put some coins in the jukebox and danced with himself to the sound of Vanilla Ice.

So yeah, it got a bit out of control.

As the night went on, things got weirder. There was more Vanilla Ice and bad reggae. Or was it a bad reggae version of Vanilla Ice?

Suddenly I was having this super-serious talk with Pablo.

I asked him, ‘Are we supposed to wait for something to happen?’

He said, ‘What?’

I had all that was left of my beer, stared at him and said, ‘Are we supposed to wait for something to happen?’

He looked at me and said, ‘I’m so drunk right now.’

I looked Pablo in the eye and said, ‘Yes.’

He pointed to two girls playing pool and said, ‘All your base are belong to us.’<sup>2</sup>

No wonder we didn’t have more friends. Engrish quotes from early videogames remain very funny, examples of a more innocent time, when such mistakes were made. Today, in this billion-dollar market of triple-A games, more lucrative than some Hollywood movies, there’s no place for silly mistakes. God bless you, children of the 8-bit and 16-bit generation – your glory shall never fade away.

‘Not yet, bitch,’ I said. ‘But you wait and see.’ And then he was gone and I was alone, alone and gone and gone and alone trying to find my way to the toilet. When I tripped someone pushed me back and I reached the toilet zigzagging and screaming, ‘I’m

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2

Sega’s Mega Drive 1989 game *Zero Wing*, if you’re wondering.

Pong! I'm Pong!'

I headed to the pool table. Everybody was sexy and, in my mind, everything would be OK, peachy, lovely, brilliant.

I asked the girls, 'You want some company?'

They looked at me and LAUGHED. I smiled.

'It's be alright,' I said. 'Lemme teach you how to play,' I said, taking one of the sticks from them.

They asked if I knew what I was doing.

I told them the truth. 'Oh, no, no, I really suck. But it'll be alright, you'll see.'

Weird visions: I saw a man in a dark suit ordering a drink. He had a funny coconut hat. He took it off, ran his hand through his hair and there were two little horns on his forehead. He raised his glass and whispered, 'Welcome.' Then a gorgeous blonde woman with the biggest lips ever and wearing a red dress came closer to him and they kissed. She looked like a negative version of Angelina Jolie. No one else saw that.

Also, angels. Little angels flying around the light bulbs outside. A guy playing an acoustic guitar and singing on the little stage. I had a dream of being a rock star. Of smashing my guitar in front of thousands of people; then jumping into the crowd and being carried away, away, to a better place, to rock star heaven, a place with ten million white towels, hazelnuts, and fifteen million bottles of pure, pure mineral water.

## **Game Review 2**

### *Revenge : Kill : Machine*

Much has been said on the use of violence in video games. Sometimes, it is so ubiquitous it's hard to take notice it any more, as if guns and lasers and headshots have become our main currency. More realistic blood! More realistic gore! Immersive worlds of brutal violence!

Now, I'm not against it. I think video games, as a form of cultural expression, should engage with the full spectrum of human interest and behaviour, and benefit from this variety. It's just that sometimes the focus on blood, and the recourse to violent solutions for every problem, gains so much more attention than the storytelling or the experiences one can go through. That's not what I'm looking for.

Most of the time.

Let me just finish my introductory rant by saying that I'm an adult. As a child, I enjoyed games for children. Colourful characters jumping around and all that. I feel more than glad that the games industry didn't stand still and kind of grew up with me. So nowadays I can witness characters talking like adults, dropping f-bombs, engaging in sexual intercourse or committing acts of bloody revenge. But we should never sign off the fact that that's not everything on offer.

All this is said to justify, somehow, how much fun I'm having with *Revenge : Kill : Machine*. The title says it all. Think of all the revenge films you've watched, then multiply them by every martial arts and cop film and you'll have it. It's bloody and violent, there are car chases, explosions, martial arts, samurai swords and fucking ninjas, man. Everything you can dream of, it's there.

The thing is, everything is so well tied together. It's not gratuitous. You play as a private detective who was raised by a secret and ancient samurai clan in Tokyo. The setting is the near future after a brief but devastating World War III. It's almost cyberpunk; technology plays a large role, but the world is in a state of in shambles and everyone is just trying to get by. Tokyo is not even Tokyo any more: it was rebuilt and re-populated, cannibalised, internationalised, destroyed and rebuilt again.

You do odd jobs of information stealing, person-finding, framing corporations and finding out people's secrets. But one day you discover the wrong secrets, belonging to the wrong person, and they come for you. More specifically, for your clan. The people who raised and taught you the old ways are killed; the places you grew up in have been burned

to the ground. So you have no other choice than to enact revenge, destroying anything and anyone in your way. A simple job turns into bloody war.

It's hard to say why I love this game so much. I even forgive the obligatory driving sessions between missions. I dislike open world games something fierce, but the storyline and the action in *Revenge : Kill : Machine* sequences make it worth it. Or maybe it's just that, anyone, including JRPG geeks such as myself, need to blow off some steam now and then. And by blowing off some steam, I mean fighting an army of ninjas in a dystopian, futuristic Tokyo.

### **You 11**

One day I said, 'When I grow up, I'll buy you a gift, because I like you.' You made a note saying that you couldn't ask for anything else.

Now I wish I gave you better gifts. Sorry to disappoint you there. Not sure what you were expecting. Certainly not the playable piano tie, or the glow-in-the-dark socks.

### **Old Max 13**

I've been driving for four hours now. The road is nothing like the last time I came to these parts: everything is under construction, new bridges and new asphalt here and there. It would be hell if it wasn't winter. I've been sharing the road mostly with trucks and crazy coach drivers.

I end up stopping at a petrol station somewhere between towns. I get a Coke and some crackers and lean on the car's hood to eat, watching the road. The petrol station is dirty and windy; the sky is overcast. It's boring like life in the first town you get to in an RPG game.

Let's see if you remember this.

Link is dreaming. He hears a girl's voice. She says she's Princess Zelda and asks for

help: she's a prisoner in the dungeons of Hyrule's Castle. Link wakes up and finds his uncle standing next to him.

'I'm going out for a while,' his uncle says. 'I'll be back in the morning. Don't go out of the house.'

Link notices his uncle is holding a sword and a shield. Something's wrong. He leaves. Link is now alone.

He couldn't just wait. The thought that he is just a boy doesn't cross his mind. He has no doubts: he goes outside, in the rain, and makes his way to the castle, carefully avoiding the guards. He finds a secret passage under a bush, leading to the dungeons.

He walks in the dark corridors, guided only by the faint light of a few torches hanging on the walls. After a while, he finds a dying man on the floor, his breathing failing. It's Link's uncle, sword and shield on his lap, no strength to hold them anymore.

'I didn't want to drag you into this,' his uncle says. 'Take my sword and my shield. Save the Princess.'

Link didn't think he wasn't ready. In fact, as far as we know, Link didn't think at all. He was one of those silent protagonists. The player is supposed to identify with them. Link should've said, 'To hell with the Princess, I'm not getting involved with politics. I'm not bursting into the castle, fully armed. They'll call me a traitor!'

Today, we would call him a terrorist. By the way, Final Fantasy VII started with a bombing mission, where the main character and a group of terrorists explode a power generator. It is implied later on that lots of people die because of it, innocent people, no less. That game would've never been such a hit after 9/11.

Link, however, took the shield and the sword from his dead uncle. He raised the blade and looked at it, and then he went on to save the Princess.

The ocean reminded you of your mother. The generation before yours had spent many summers on the Rio Grande do Sul coast. They had owned land there, built houses, never thought of anywhere else. Like frakking Sid Meyer's Civilization, man. What were you guys doing there? Trying to build an empire? Seriously: cold, brown water; crowded beaches; unrelenting winds. What's to decide? Take your shit and *move*. Find one of those white-sand tropical beaches. We're Brazilians, we're known for that.

Nah, too much of a hassle. You stayed with your mum for three months, while your father worked in Porto Alegre. By the time you got back home after the summer, it almost didn't feel like home at all.

The ocean in these parts is rough and dangerous. You can't go out too far or it'll drag you down. Your relationship with your mum wasn't the smoothest, and you always attributed it to your opposite personalities. She was outgoing and sociable and you were quiet and shy, fond of books instead of people. To me, she has always been lovely, willing to shower me with gifts and sweets; with you, she had always been demanding, critical, and hard to please. Kind of like the ocean.

### **Uncharted Worlds 13**

After that night at the Monkey Bar, I woke up lying down in the sand, wearing only my underpants, my clothes neatly folded next to me. I couldn't remember how I got there. I felt like a zombie, a vampire in the sun, decomposing and melting, with a headache so strong I couldn't even sit up straight. I remembered billiard balls; colourful, spreading around on the table, so funny and beautiful, and then nothing. I'd never felt so bad in my life. I ran to the ocean before being sick; washed my mouth and my face with the salty water. Promised right there never to drink again.

I got dressed, walked by the ocean and let the slow waves reach my feet. The weather was cloudy and on the misty horizon I could see a cruise ship. Everything else was quiet,

and the feeling I got was like when you fall asleep listening to music in your earphones and suddenly you wake because it has stopped. Once again I was alone early in the morning. By then, I wasn't so sure why I went on that trip or what the hell was going on. For a second I was worried that this was the prospect of my entire life: indecisiveness, uneasiness, dumbness, misgiving, lethargy.

Maybe it was because of this brief moment of desperation that she looked like the answer. I said a prayer and there she was, further along, sitting on a beach towel, wearing jeans shorts, a big grey jumper and red Converse shoes. She had dark, shabby hair. She was reading.

I watched her for several minutes before she noticed me.

She seemed intrigued by the sight of me. I looked like rubbish that had just washed ashore. Nevertheless, there I was, and there she was, and some reaction was required. I thought, 'Why not?' walked up to her, hands in my pockets, and said, 'Hey.'

She said, 'Hey.'

'What are you reading?'

She said, '*One Hundred Years of Solitude.*'

'Cool. Cool.'

(Never heard of it).

I said, 'You're up early.'

She said, 'Who the fuck are you?'

I looked at her without knowing whether to laugh or run away. She was intimidating. She seemed to appreciate my confusion. Without waiting for my answer, she said, with the same accent as me, 'I like to read in the morning, before the crowd comes.'

'I don't like the crowd either,' I said.

'You look like shit, mate,' she said.

'I'm just hungover.'

'I see.'

‘But it’s not like that, you know... I don’t drink, really.’

‘Ok.’

I took a deep breath while a long minute of awkwardness went by. Finally, I sat next to her on the sand, not because I was being bold, but because I was dizzy.

‘Sorry. I’m Max.’

She shook my hand.

‘Aline.’

I stared at her. She looked both cute and dangerous.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I’ll leave you in a moment. I just need a second.’

‘You’re weird, Max.’

I smiled. ‘Not really. It’s just a weird morning.’

‘All mornings are weird.’

I turned to her. ‘Are you real?’

She shrugged. ‘Not sure, myself.’

Then she continued to read her book.

‘I don’t do this,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Hit on girls.’

‘You mean you’re not into girls, then?’

‘No, no, I mean... I don’t...’

‘It’s alright. The book tends to scare boys away.’

‘Huh.’

‘You look like a lost dog.’

‘Do I?’

‘Yeah... not a stray dog – a lost dog. There’s a difference.’

‘I see.’

‘Ok, Max, I’ll give you a chance. I’ll hit on you.’

‘Will you, now?’

‘Sure. What do you like to read?’

‘*The Lord of the Rings*. You know it?’

She reached for something in a backpack behind her. It was a copy of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I walk around carrying my books. I’m weird.’

‘I think it’s hot that you like *The Lord of the Rings*.’

‘I like the first one better,’ she said, ‘I have a problem with endings.’

I stared at her. I had a vision of her wearing a white gown. Of a little girl spreading rose petals as she walked down the aisle.

‘Do you have a problem with beginnings?’ I asked.

‘Not at all,’ she said.

**PART 2: Everything I Know About Whales**

**You 13**

You finally gave in and decided to hire a nanny. With mum working more and more you had no choice. So you hired Clara. She was my aunt's nanny back in the day and knew our family well. She was a simple lady who used to say she was black, even though her skin tone was the same as ours. You were reluctant at first, because you didn't know her very well, but she found her way around our house quickly. You wished you could pay her more.

One morning Clara showed up with a rose branch under her arm, and told us she was going to plant it in our garden. You didn't think it was going to work: it was nothing more than a branch, with no flowers. She took care of the garden whenever she could spare some time, and she took care of me. She cooked, kept our house clean. I remember her; she'd let me watch telly, knowing I was only allowed a certain amount of time each day. She took me to the shops to buy ice lollies and helped me get ready for school.

A couple of months after she started working for us, you looked out of the window and what do you know – there was a huge rose bush there, blooming.

**Old Max 14**

As I drive alone, I let my mind flow free, and think of my of my dead father and my mum, living in a distant city. We were all grown-ups now. But I can't stop thinking of how my mum and I have grown apart in recent years. This thought comes back to me from time to time, but I think that's how it's supposed to be. Every man is an island, they say. I say that every man is a galaxy, and that what happens is that when we're born it's like the Big Bang and there's this massive amount of energy going everywhere. As time goes by, we discipline those molecules into taking shape. Planets. Stars. Comets. Asteroids. We group together, forming systems. But time keeps going forever and all that energy from the first

explosion is still inside us somewhere. It takes us places; it shines; it burns. So we keep moving and, very slowly, because it is almost imperceptible, we drift apart. We expand, we grow, we move apart. Bam! Metaphor.

I tap my fingers on the steering wheel and hum a song I remember my mother used to sing to me before I fell asleep. I feel like my father is sitting here with me. The feeling is so strong I'm afraid to look and see a cardboard box tied to a seatbelt. He took me camping once.

I carry on driving.

## **You 14**

You believed that the end of the world was a fascinating idea. In stories, it had interesting consequences for the characters, who had to face the most basic questions: did they value friendship and love more than staying alive? Did they focus on their memories as the end drew near or did they forget everything and go on a murderous, vengeful rampage?

The other side of the coin is the post-apocalyptic story: the world has already ended and just a few of us remain. Much like the end-of-the-world scenarios, it leaves the characters alone with only their most vital needs met: food and water. Survival. Do they try to rebuild or just go on for as long as they can? Do they group up and protect each another or trust no one but themselves?

I had it too easy: no wars, no dictatorship, no immediate enemies. My life is not epic material. You were aware of real life problems: a crap transport system, poverty, political corruption. All very real, and very boring, problems. You couldn't help resenting the fact that gods didn't walk among us.. Deep down, you confided to your diaries, you wanted to be a hero.

I'm just gonna say it. You *were* a hero. A big damn hero. Blargh. I know, right? It

sounds corny, but since you suffered because of the lack of heroics in your life, it's fair to lay it out for you. There, I said it. You were my hero. Happy now?

#### **Uncharted Worlds 14**

‘So what’s your story?’ I asked Aline.

‘Don’t you think it’s important to keep a little mystery going on?’

‘Well, my uncle Adriano used to say his marriage was over once he started having a wee with the door open. Is that what you mean?’

She laughed. ‘They divorced because of that?’

‘No, they’re still together. I said the marriage was over, not that they got a divorce.’

She looked at me, her face halfway to a smile, uncertain.

‘It’s alright,’ I said. ‘It’s supposed to be funny.’

‘Yeah, I guess.’

I don’t know how I had the guts to talk with her in the first place. But I figured since I woke up at the beach with only my pants on, it was time to take a leap of faith.

She told me she came to Garopaba with her sister. Since they rented a one-bedroom house, she was sleeping in the living room and there was no way to sleep late with a one-year-old – her sister’s kid - who woke up at six. So she packed her books and went off to the beach, looking for some quiet.

I said, ‘What are you doing now?’

‘Going back home.’

‘I’ll walk with you, if that’s alright.’

We walked along the main road, dodging the long lines of people carrying beach chairs in one hand and children in the other, or pushchairs full of buckets, spades, balls and other toys. She told me her house didn’t have much furniture but it was quite new. I walked next to her while we climbed a dirt road up a hill, leading to a few houses overlooking the

sea.

It was not a matter of love at first sight – the thought didn't even cross my mind. She was just the cutest girl I had ever seen, with a backpack full of books, and for some inexplicable reason she was talking to me.

'I remember visiting Garopaba a few years ago with some friends,' I told her. 'We were ten or eleven, I'm not sure. These streets around here didn't have any tarmac. It was so funny.'

'What was funny?'

'You know, we had no clue. We were that age when you want something really bad but don't know what it is.'

'I feel like that all the time.'

'Well, yeah, but get this: we were coming back from the city centre one night, in the back seat of my friend's dad's car. So we saw this group of girls, walking, they must've been fifteen. We started poking each other and saying, "Look at them, look!" and suddenly my friend leans over the window and screams 'What's up, BABES!'

'What happened then?'

'They laughed, but so did we. We got home and then decided to walk back to see if we could meet them. Of course we didn't. It was too dark, there was no lighting on these roads, and we didn't have a clue how to talk to them anyway, so we came back home and watched TV.'

'How cute is that!'

'Pathetic, you mean.'

'Yes, that too. But mostly cute. A group of eleven years-old boys chasing girls.'

There was a nice breeze. We stopped in front of a new house, surrounded by a new lawn, too green to be true. There was a swimming pool but it was empty. From up there we could see the beach down below.

'How long will you stay?' I asked.

‘A couple more days,’ she replied.

‘Ok.’

‘Nice meeting you, Max.’

I took a step forward and kissed her cheek in a clumsy, awkward move, approaching too quickly so her reflex was to dodge. By the time she realised what I was trying to do, I wasn't sure any more if I should go back, or which side of her face to kiss; when I finally did it, the corner of our lips touched. Awkward.

‘Erm, bye,’ I said.

‘See ya.’

She turned around and walked toward the house, climbed the steps to the balcony, waved and went in. I backtracked the way we came, now smiling to people as I passed by them, saying ‘Good morning’ to ice-cream vendors, hippie jewellery guys and stray dogs. It was all noisy now: a song of waves, children and seagulls. The ocean has a powerful attractive force: it brings people together for cryptic reasons.

## **You 15**

I managed to find, almost by chance, the account of our family history, written by you, who had this idea of writing it down as a form of backup. You started by taking notes, chatting with your mother, drawing a family tree. The project went on for a while, though not for long. So all that was left were sketches of chapters and scribbles next to their names: 'Augusto – drowned'; 'Maria – came from Poland with her mother and father, look for the copy of the Bible in Yiddish'; 'Leliana – was an artist of some kind, but everyone thought she was a prostitute.'

Besides those, there are several notes on two particular tales: 'Jose Antonio – died in a bar fight,' and 'Jaime Pisco – bookkeeper and slave.' You obviously worked on those for longer. Maybe you even added some bits, fictionalised them. It took me a while to edit it in

the right order. I find myself connected to those men. Something about their stories resonates in me. They are a part of my family, of my name, of my – gasp! – fate.

When my grandfather Jose Antonio was twenty he worked on the farm from sunrise to sunset. He used to handle the horses; he would ride them while he watched the cattle. His mother prepared breakfast every morning. Strong black coffee, no sugar, with corn bread and colonial cheese.

When he went outside, during the winter, all the grass was covered with frost, a real problem for the ones who depended on the harvest. But not their family. They relied on the animals. They used to breed and sell cattle and horses.

When the day was over, Jose Antonio would go to the nearest bolicho, the wooden bar on a crossroad somewhere near Vacaria. All the working men used to go there. They sat at old wooden tables and kept the cold away by drinking and telling stories.

Jose Antonio died in that same place, after he and another man started an argument regarding a girl; and I'm not talking about Jose Antonio's wife. Even so, honour is a very serious thing. The other man accused Jose Antonio's grandfather of owing money to him and being a cheating bastard. Jose Antonio's grandfather pulled his knife – every proper gaucho in those parts carried a knife – and said, 'I love my wife, I fuck whoever I want to, and I owe you no money, you son of a bitch.'

The other man didn't bother to reach for his knife. He stood up, took the wooden chair he was seating on, and struck Jose Antonio on the head. He fell dead on the spot.

'May I never back down from a fight,' you wrote as a sidenote. Many years later, I'm contemplating your handwriting and wondering about José Antonio's story. I'm drinking a tall glass of Coke. I raise it in a toast and repeat the words.

'May I never back down from a fight.'

## Old Max 15

I should be getting there in one more hour. I get a text message on my mobile. It's from Gabriela. *Hey*, it says.

I stop the car at one of the road refuges. Beyond the road there's a lake I don't know the name of. It's cold and windy and lonely as shit. I get out of the car feeling very stiff from the ride. I stretch, yawn, look at my mobile. I look at her message and wonder what I'm going to write next.

**Max:** *Hey. How's the convention?*

**Gabriela:** *Full of nerds.*

**Max:** *As usual.*

**Max:** *I'm not at home.*

**Gabriela:** *Where are you?*

**Max:** *Heading to Garopaba.*

**Gabriela:** *What? Why?*

**Max:** *Fresh air.*

**Gabriela:** *Are you staying there?*

**Max:** *Maybe a couple of nights. Is that ok?*

**Gabriela:** *don't know.*

**Max:** *About the other day...*

**Gabriela:** *Have to go. Talk later.*

**Max:** *I'll let you know where I'm staying when I know.*

Now it's her turn not to reply. She's probably too busy to call instead of texting. I squeeze my phone hard with both my hands, look at it and scream. More like a growl,

really. A hulk-like growl, but there is no one there to hear it. I was hoping I could crush the thing with my hands, but obviously I can't. I get back in the car and fasten my seat belt. I beat the crap out of the steering wheel.

Lola is still inside the box. I can barely see her, but there she is, looking at me from the dark, as if she is guarding my dad's diaries, making sure I am going to do the right thing. Is she a guardian spirit? I spend a few minutes staring at the lake, looking at the tiny white waves formed by the wind. A lorry passes by and shakes my car entirely. I wake up from this daydream and turn the engine on. Head north.

I keep waiting for another reply, but the phone is silent for the rest of the way. I arrive at Garopaba early in the afternoon. The town is quiet and looks the same as fifteen years ago; some dirt roads are now paved, but that's it. I see the fishermen working, talking to each other on the beach. They look at my car and at me with distrust, as if I just wandered into the wrong neighbourhood. Surely a guy like me shouldn't be here at this time of year. I stop by the first decent inn I find, close to the beach. I have no intention of staying at the same one from my school trip and I don't even know if it still exists, for that matter.

The receptionist is a middle-aged woman who is knitting and watching TV when I come in. She says hello and, after I fill the forms and pay for my room, she informs me that the only other guests are a young couple that came to do some whale watching.

'Are there whales around this time of year?' I ask.

'Yes,' she says. 'They stay until late October. But the sea is a bit rough this week.'

I thank her and leave the lobby, but after I climb the first step up the stairs, I turn around and ask her who will be taking that couple to see the whales. She hands me a card from a travel agency that does that kind of tour.

I call the number on the card. I speak to a guy who says the agency itself won't be open for at least another couple of weeks, but that he is a marine biologist conducting some sort of research and that a local fisherman will take him tomorrow morning to see the

whales up close; and that indeed there is a couple that will be going with him.

‘Would you mind taking one more person?’ I ask.

He thinks for a moment, then says, ‘Fine. You don’t have to pay me; just bring fifty reals and give it to the fisherman. We’ll be leaving from the beach eight o’clock tomorrow morning.’

## **You 16**

How could you possibly express in words how fucking hard it was to bring up a child? You stared at your journal trying to work it out, express it, exorcise it, even though what you really wanted to do was to light the notebook on fire. You loved me, but I drove you crazy, I drove Mum crazy, and you drove each other crazy.

(Sorry. Didn't mean to.)

Before that, the problem was the sleepless nights. All the nights were sleepless nights. But then as I grew up, I dared to think my opinion mattered, that you two had to do absolutely everything I wanted, when I wanted, the way I wanted. That included choosing my own clothes, eating / not eating a certain kind of food, turning on / turning off the telly. Everything was reason enough to start a war, and war it was. Peace negotiations abounded, every minute presented proposals and counter proposals; denials, coup attempts, betrayals, turns of events, ambushes.

How could I not see what was right and what was wrong? How could I not see that that jacket was too nice to be worn in school? That too much telly was bad for me? That I should eat my breakfast, wake up later, not scream to get your attention; ask please and say thank you, talk to people when they talked to me, wait for my turn to speak, wait for my turn to use the bathroom, leave you and Mum alone for a few minutes to let you take a breather before the next fight?

Sometimes you took me to school without saying a word then spent the rest of the

day feeling guilty. I drove you nuts, nuts, nuts, but tomorrow was always a different day that might or might not start at five in the morning.

Maybe drinking could solve your problems, you thought, ironically. You were certain you'd never be able to sleep again. Then those days passed, only to be substituted by endless fights and negotiations. That would pass, too.

And then adolescence would come.

I feel sorry for you, man! But it could be worse. Lack of sleep is a temporary problem, and children always make up for it in cuteness. But that cuteness is thrown out of the window when they hit thirteen, isn't it? It could be worse, though. I might have been in a bad mood from time to time (that's an understatement), but it's not like I got someone pregnant, had drug problems, or tried to run away (though I wanted to!). I don't know. Those things we hear about. You had it easy! Stop complaining! Exclamation marks!

## **Uncharted Worlds 15**

I went back to the beach and found Diego, Gabriela and Pablo sitting there.

'Were have you been?' Gabriela asked.

'Went for a walk,' I said.

I was about to tell them about Aline, but I wanted to savour the secret.

'I heard you made quite a scene yesterday.'

'Me?' I asked. 'What'd I do?'

They shared a look.

'Ha-ha, very funny, man,' Pablo said.

I stared at them.

'Really man, it's not funny any more,' he said.

'I swear I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Jesus Christ.'

‘Fuck you, man. Why don’t you just tell me?’

‘Where’s the fun in that?’ Pablo pulled my arm, taking me towards the inn and waving at the others. ‘We’ll be back later! Have fun!’

He took me to room 13. I could smell incense and hear some kind of Japanese flute music coming from the inside. Pablo turned to me.

‘Do you remember Fred?’

‘Sure. Crazy guy. Wrote his ex’s name on his forearm with a hot knife after they broke up. It’s wicked.’

‘He invited me over. I thought you might like to join us.’

‘Join you in what?’

We knocked. ‘Come in!’ someone said. As we opened the door we could see the room was different from all the others. Firstly, no one wanted to share a room with Fred. Not after his suicide attempt. The lamp was covered with a piece of red fabric and the curtains were shut. Took a while to distinguish Fred’s shape against the mess of clothes and sheets. He was sitting next to the bed, on the floor, like a Buddha, his eyes closed; his long, greasy hair partly covering his face.

‘What’s up?’ Pablo said.

Fred opened his eyes and smiled.

‘Glad you could come. Come in. Close the door.’

‘I don’t like this,’ I said.

‘Shut up and close the door.’

## **You 17**

We were playing a racing game on my Playstation. You casually mentioned that back in the day you bought two 5½ inch floppy disks, one with a chess game and other with the first Prince of Persia, all playable on a PC with a greenish monochrome monitor. Somehow

one of them had a virus that fucked up the machine. I wondered how computer viruses worked without the Internet. You said that the guy who sold you the bootlegged floppy disks was probably a jerk.

The first time I tried to teach you how to use a Playstation controller, you said, 'This has too many buttons.'

I replied, 'Some people prefer the keyboard and mouse, so stop complaining and play.'

You said you could see their point. Installing programs and games used to be hard. Maybe mastering the PC proved a point. With consoles, all you had to do was to insert the game disk and start playing.

'But then again,' you said, 'humans built machines in the first place. What does it say about us when we admit to being afraid of them?'

'It means we're fucked,' I replied.

You laughed and we kept playing that racing game. I was in first place and you were last. Each time you took a turn, you banked along with your car.

## **Old Max 16**

My room at the inn has two single beds and a small telly, a bathroom with a barely-working electric shower and a window that doesn't do a very good job keeping the cold wind outside. I put the box on one bed and sit on the other. I close my eyes for a moment.

Some time ago, I was reorganising my comics collection. Gabriela and I had just moved in together. I ended up spending the whole afternoon going through them. I only bought Marvel Comics, because I had this crazy idea that one was not allowed to like DC and Marvel at the same time, just like you couldn't cheer for Gremio and Internacional, or play with Playmobil and Lego.

That time, I concluded that most of those stories were just plain bad. Granted, there

are some interesting story arcs, but everything gets rebooted every five years or so. Comic book universes are forever trapped in a time loop, a space-time dimension with a constant countdown to oblivion and rebirth. Jean Grey dies, Jean Grey resurrects. Mary Jane dies, Mary Jane resurrects. Professor X is paraplegic, then he walks, or suddenly Cyclops is sleeping with Emma Frost. Wolverine has so many origin stories that it's hard to believe in any one of them. That is why Japanese stuff carries a bit more punch, since it almost always (the good Japanese stuff, anyway) runs for a fixed number of issues.

My point is: every good story needs a proper ending.

On the other hand, there's also something powerful about never-ending superhero stories: they slowly become myths. The finer details get lost in favour of the common points between the different reboots. A thousand years from now historians will be saying that we worshipped flying gods in spandex.

I open the box. It smells like a used books shop. I start by looking at the notebooks, taking one in my hands, feeling its weight and texture. Some are beautiful hardback notebooks, others soft-cover, hand-made works of art; some are cheap, convenience store ones. They're all filled from start to finish with notes and doodles; pages are torn from them at the end. It looks like he didn't want any of his diaries to have blank pages left behind whenever he started a new one.

It takes me a while but I organise them in chronological order. The most beautiful ones are the oldest. As time passed, my father cared less and less about the looks, but whenever he wrote an entry on the more recent ones, they were longer and had fewer drawings and grocery lists. He started them when he was twenty-five, but he didn't keep the diaries continuously; sometimes there were long, two - or three - year gaps.

I start from the beginning, reading about the time my father had just left college and was thinking of getting married to a girl he had met at university. It gets dark outside while I read. He had a carefree style of writing; he thought about being a writer but it wasn't a real goal in his life. It was more like a fantasy, like being a rockstar or an astronaut, the

kind of thing that would be really cool to do but that you don't give chase to. Therefore, he sounded relaxed, even when upset about something going on in his life. He didn't care, at that time, if someone would come to read his diaries someday (the idea that maybe one of his children would inherit them came much later). His writing agreed very much with the slow and windy quietness of a seaside town during winter. He was a peaceful, cheerful, kind man. The dreamy type. Optimistic. The kind of guy who asks you questions and listens to the answers; and he wasn't just being polite.

I get hungry and think about dinner, and wonder if there are any restaurants open. I close the diaries, put the ones I have read back in the box, and head out. The same woman from before is at the reception downstairs – still knitting, this time watching the eight o'clock news before the novela starts. The couple she mentioned before are sitting there too, on a tiny sofa in front of the reception desk. They are chatting, cuddled together. They must be a few years younger than me, maybe twenty two or so. They both look charming, good-looking and happy; he's some sort of athlete; I decide he's into running and is taking a physical education degree. She looks nerdy, wearing a delicate pair of glasses, her hair held in a ponytail. She's wearing an olive-green military winter jacket that's too big for her and it must be his; he's wearing jeans and an old grey hoodie. They say hello when I get there.

'Hi,' I reply.

A motorbike passes by on the road. The guy gets up and takes a peek outside. Maybe they're waiting for someone.

'You're that couple looking for whales, right?' I ask.

'Yeah, that's us,' she says. 'How do you know?'

'She told me,' I reply, nodding towards the knitting lady.

'Ah.'

'I hope you don't mind, but I phoned the guy who's taking you and asked to join.'

'Cool,' the guy says. 'You like whales too?'

‘Not really, but I thought, “What the hell, I’ve never done this before.” Should be interesting, right?’

They laugh.

‘Maybe...’ he shrugs.

She explains: ‘He’s not into the ocean. But I always wanted to come, so he sprung me a surprise.’

‘Right,’ I say.

‘I can’t wait!’ she says, hugging him. ‘I’m studying biology. I’ve always loved all kinds of whales. But I’ve never actually seen one, you know, in person.’

‘Me neither,’ I reply.

The guy says, ‘As long as they don’t get too close...’

I approach the receptionist.

‘Hey, are there any restaurants around?’

Before she answers my question, the guy says that there are only two takeaways in town at this time of year, and that one is closed tonight.

‘We ordered a pizza, but that was almost an hour ago,’ the girl says.

‘You can eat with us,’ the guy says. ‘We don’t mind.’

‘You sure?’

‘It’s fine, don’t worry.’

‘Thanks. I’m Max.’ We shake hands.

‘I’m Oliver, this is Olivia.’

I smile at the coincidence. They laugh too, in that tired way people act when they’re sick of hearing the same joke over and over.

## **You 18**

You wondered if you were doing the right thing. It seemed there was no alternative.

Mum and I would leave the house by the end of the month. You didn't know how this was going to work. Or if it was going to work. God. You felt like such a grown up. At least she wasn't suing you and you weren't fighting for custody. Divorce was something that happened to other people. You didn't want everything you'd been through thrown in the bin. But it sure felt like it. Like being thrown out of your own life.

You decided not to tell me until everything was set up. You knew that it would shock me, especially considering that you two didn't have the habit of arguing or anything like that, so there were no hints of what was about to happen. I was busy with my own teenage dramas anyway. People change, you wrote, and they sometimes change a lot. You kept me in the dark for as long as you could. Ignorance is bliss, ignorance is bliss, ignorance is bliss. Say that three times for good luck and finish up by tapping on your teenage son's shoulder and leaving him alone in the kitchen to absorb the news.



**Uncharted Worlds 16**

Fred changed the cassette on the stereo next to him. Now it played some song by *The Doors*.

‘You came from far away,’ he said, closing his eyes. ‘To seek enlightenment.’

‘What the fuck,’ said Pablo.

Fred pulled a small wooden carved box from under his bed. Really beautiful crafting. Whales and dolphins and wooden waves. He took out some dried leaves and rolling paper. I realised he was preparing the biggest joint I had ever seen.

I had no idea how to do it. I tried mimicking whatever they did, and Fred kept repeating in a low voice, ‘Hold it, hold it,’ so I did. I held it inside for as long as I could. We shared the weed and my thoughts escaped from my mind as if they were smoke slowly coming out of my ears; my face was itching and life was slow; music, love past and present mixed together. I was sure I was there and somewhere else at the same time.

Then it was night; I have no idea how long we’d been there. I told them I wanted to see the stars. To which Fred replied, ‘It’s alright, man, go.’

I was leaving when I thought maybe it would be better to pay him. So I reached for my wallet but Fred told me it was alright, he enjoyed our company.

‘Go follow you hearts or whatever.’

Pablo and I walked to the seafront and sat on a bench overlooking the sea.

‘How old is the universe?’ I asked.

‘Almost fourteen billion years.’

‘How old is the Earth?’

‘Four and a half billion years.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Seventeen.’

Pablo laughed and I laughed so we laughed for a while until I barely remembered

why we were laughing.

‘Today was my favourite day,’ I told him.

‘I love hot girls,’ he said, covering his eyes with his arm, as if the stars were shining too bright.

I covered my eyes as well. ‘I don’t want to go back home.’

He hugged me. ‘*Shh*. It’s alright.’

## **You 19**

Here's the second family tale recovered from your notes. You told me once I looked like my great grandfather Jaime Pisco. He was a bit of a nerd. But I never knew he had been a slave! Is it one of those stories we don't tell children? Maybe you were just waiting for the right moment to let me know. But here it is. I'm looking at it right now. It's another one I want registered here, because I think it shows where I came from.

Great grandfather Jaime wasn't a slave like, from Africa, since he was Portuguese. But he was forced to work on a coffee farm when his daughter – my grandmother - was five or so. They were held there against their will.

He came to Brazil from Portugal on a boat in the beginning of the twentieth century, like so many before him. He was looking for a different, better life, and no one living knows anything about his life before getting on that ship. Apparently, he wasn't fond of talking about it either. Whenever someone asked, he said, ‘It doesn't matter any more,’ and carried on reading his newspaper.

A wise man, a book lover, you couldn't talk to him whenever he was reading something. You would talk to him and he'd answer but wouldn't remember a thing after that. He also liked hats. One of the only photos left of him is one of him on the beach at Capão da Canoa, wearing a suit and hat and holding his cane, barefoot on the sand.

He was a bookkeeper in Portugal before coming to Brazil. A bookkeeper is pretty

much an accountant, but when I was little I used to think that meant he was the guardian of some ancient medieval library in a tower. That would've been much cooler.

He came to Brazil seeking work, a fresh start, opportunity, even though I hardly believe Brazil back then was a land of opportunity like America. He arrived at Santos, in São Paulo, and made his way to Porto Alegre, where eventually he found a wife and started a family. It wasn't until his first daughter was five that he was presented with the opportunity of buying a piece of land in São Paulo's countryside, owning his own coffee farm. He didn't have to think much – he packed his things and off they went, man, wife and child. They didn't know they would become slaves.

His daughter, Joana, would be my grandmother. She told me they had a small house, and there were plenty of other families working there too. Thing is, they weren't allowed to leave. Simple as that. And the money they earned had to be spent in the local grocery store, which was so expensive they were always owing money. They were trapped.

They stayed there for a few years, but soon the rumours of an escape plan started to happen. Sure there were armed men around. The owner of the market helped them hide for a while, and they and the other families escaped during the night, walking in the dark, leading for the nearest city. Jaime's wife was pregnant then. Joana was almost eight.

Jaime soon found some work in a nearby farm. My grandmother had the chance to have some education; Jaime got work as a proper bookkeeper for the land owner. Distant relatives from Porto Alegre managed to pay for their trip back, and they had to start over.

You could say many things about this guy, but one thing you cannot say is that he didn't make things happen. As usual, reading his newspaper in the morning, if someone asked him about those times, he would reply 'It doesn't matter any more,' and would keep on reading.



**Uncharted Worlds 17**

I was taking a shower that night when it came back. I'd always had good ideas in the shower, but that time I remembered everything. It looked like a fast-forward movie. I'm just glad there wasn't YouTube or mobiles with cameras at that time. I could have gone viral. I could be famous. Well, sort of.

First, we all got to the Monkey Bar. Lots of beer, getting drunk, low resistance to alcohol (saving throw against poison: critical miss). Then there was all that talking and walking around; hitting on girls next to the pool table (Test against Charisma with a -3 modifier due to intoxication: fail). They left. Waiting for something to happen.

I bought a token for the jukebox. Chose *Blur*'s 'Song no. 2' and danced alone. Someone started a cachaça shots competition, go go go go go, drumming on the counter one more uno más uno más one more. Where the fuck am I? Where is this place? Is this real liiife? Got to the veranda, threw up.

Pablo walked past me, his arms around the girls I was talking to before. He looked back and said, 'I can't believe this is happening!' I gave him the thumbs up and turned around, only to see Diego and Gabriela together. I guess that really happened, then. They also left, holding hands.

As it turned out, my rockstar fantasy wasn't too far from the truth. There was a guy playing an acoustic guitar on the stage. Lots of girls drooling over him. Why, by the holy fire, would someone want to listen to this guy? Apparently, I said that out loud.

He stopped playing and said, 'What?'

I said, 'I see through you, man.'

He decided to ignore me and went back to playing. It was terrible. I mean, he was a decent enough musician, but he kept winking at the girls, the smooth bastard. So I waited for him to finish his song and just after he struck the last chord, I took his guitar and smashed it on the ground.

There was a big commotion then, but somehow people managed to keep him from hitting me. The manager and a couple of bouncers grabbed me and tossed me on the street. But not before the singer approached me and whispered ‘You’re a dead man. I’ll destroy you, motherfucker.’

‘Ok, thanks,’ I said.

So I was alone outside.

Things got a bit clearer; I was in the toilet of my room, using the mouthwash. Then walking aimless across the sand. Bonfires, waves, the moon. Howling at the moon. I always thought wolves were great. I wished I was a werewolf.

I climbed one of the rocks at the end of the beach, where a hill started.

‘What are you doing there?’ said a familiar voice. I looked down to see Gabriela and Diego.

‘I want to see the stars,’ I replied.

‘Get down from there!’ she said.

‘I want to get closer to the stars!’ I stretched my arms up, got dizzy and fell down on the sand.

‘Let’s get him to the inn,’ Diego tried to get me up, but I struggled. I was ashamed of everything that had happened. I didn’t want anyone around me.

‘Leave me alone!’ I took my clothes off, kept only my pants. I was hot.

‘What are you doing, man? Let’s go!’

He tried again but this time I took a swing at him and hit the side of his head.

‘Fine,’ he said, and walked away.

Gabriela took my clothes from the ground, folded them and left them next to me.

‘Idiot,’ she said.

I lay on my back. She walked a few steps, but then came back.

‘I’ve made a mistake,’ she said. ‘I was selfish.’

‘Yeah,’ I agreed. ‘Me too.’

‘Things just happened like this,’ she said.

‘I know,’ I replied. ‘It’s complicated.’

‘Yeah.’

She walked away and I fell asleep.

## **You 21**

In one of your diaries, there was a sealed letter that hadn't been sent.

*Dear Leticia,*

*So you are chasing your dream. Finding yourself. Big deal. Aren't we all chasing our dreams? What the hell does that mean anyway?*

*I guess it's different for everyone. I used to think my dream was to have a family, a good job and some friends. Clearly I was wrong about something, as you made clear yesterday. That's not enough, apparently.*

*I don't expect you to understand why I'm mad, and I don't expect you to love me. It doesn't matter any more.*

*Anyway, what I wanted to say is this: good luck. Good luck trying to find your dream, to find yourself and the meaning of life. Good luck, because this is all bullshit and you learn it fast enough.*

*Best wishes,*

*Gus*

*PS: I hope you die.*

*PPS: I still love you.*

## **Game Review 3**

*LifeDeck*

I've wanted to write about this game for a long time but I couldn't, because of embargo issues. But I can talk about it today. Now, I'm not a huge card game fan. I used to play a bit of *Magic: the Gathering* back in the day, but even then I was rubbish. But *LifeDeck* is different. You play life events. So no monsters, no elves and no magic.

The players are regular people trying to get on with their lives. They are each assigned a set of cards dealt at random, and they can play them in any order. However, there is also a set of public cards that everyone can see and play when it's their turn. The objective of the game is to achieve self-awareness, or, in other words, to come to terms with life and be sufficiently happy.

The game can be competitive or collaborative, depending on who is playing. It's not simply a metaphor for life, it *is* life – an interface that provides players with the opportunity to share feelings and anxieties, offer help to their friends or simply experiment with different life scenarios. It's a little vague, but it is meant to be. The story itself is not set and changes depending on who is playing. The story is life, and players deal with things that happen using the cards they are dealt.

Best of all: there's no need to buy booster packs, no DLC, and no in-app purchases.

There are no characters – the players are free to imagine someone, if they wish, or just play as themselves. They can input a name, age, job and a brief character description. It might be interesting to add a checkbox attesting if the player is role-playing or not.

The game has no levels. The play area simulates a table, and it shows the players' basic info. It also shows a set of available public cards. It also shows the player's hand, which is visible to the other player. During each player's turn, they place cards on the table. They can be joined together like dominoes, generating different effects. The end result is a virtually infinite timeline that can be scrolled as the player wishes (the game is designed for mobiles and tablets).

There are three kinds of cards: events, personas and modifiers. Events are placed

horizontally, while personas and modifiers are placed vertically. Examples of each kind of card are provided below:

- 1) Events are the storyline: death, birth, break-up, fight, chase, hide, meeting, date, travel, discovery, epiphany, love, friendship, etc.
- 2) Personas are characters: friend, lover, date, stranger, woman, man, child, father, mother, relative, enemy, teacher, boss, etc.
- 3) Modifiers affect personas and events: angry, sad, happy, fast, epic fail, success, late, beautiful, shy, surprise, paralysed, etc.

During a turn, the first player puts down one of each card. They have to play at least one but are not obliged to play all three. One additional action is to play a card from the public deck. The public deck refreshes randomly with every turn. After that, the other player is free to play their cards, either adding another event or modifying the previous event. Each event can receive one comment from each player. The turn ends when both players agree that they've reached the end of the current story.

One of the best features is that each player can choose any song or playlist from their own music library to listen to while playing. The art style is expressive and significant without adding too many details, allowing the player to create associations without taking the place or their imagination. It reminds me of Monet and Van Gogh – or at least I think it does. My knowledge of art history is incomplete. It is beautiful, though.

Single player is possible in this game but not fun. Local and online multiplayer (with an option to randomly search for a partner) is the main gameplay method. The idea is to share experiences and solutions, allowing the themes to move from the game into real life. It's possible to exchange messages with the other players.

I'm geeking out here. But let me just say this: the game is fun. The level of fun depends largely on your partner, though. If you play with a jerk, it can be tough going. But if you find a like-minded, sensitive person, you can both exchange experiences and advice, or just create a unique story that will probably never repeat itself.

**Old Max 18**

Stories inside of stories inside of stories inside of stories

**You 22**

You hated being single. You had to do everything by yourself. You had no one to help you decide which film to watch, which suit looked better or what to do next weekend. If you don't have to build an argument to defend your point of view, where's the fun? You just do it. You think and you do it and no one tells you if you made the right choice. No one cares.

Not that you were a lazy bastard before the divorce. You did stuff around the house. You helped. Cooked sometimes. You were one of those modern fathers, sharing the load and all. Even though you used to think that it was a waste of time, technically speaking - what use is tidying up the house if everything is going to be upside down again tomorrow? - you did it anyway. You were part of a team - a pack - whose comfort was your top priority. But suddenly it didn't matter. The only person who benefited from a neat house was you. And you were getting tired of you.

Not to mention the prospect of dating. You were out of the game for a very, very long time. And let's face it: you were never good at it. You had some good moments - the memory of a serenade and a broken guitar comes to mind - but that was it. You had no intention of starting dating again. You were a lone wolf. Yeah. You liked that idea. It was a bit - a lot - clichéd, but you weren't going to talk to anyone about this. Gus, the lone wolf. You liked that. The mysterious divorced guy.

Point is: you hated being single, and drinking those glasses of wine before writing gave your prose too much freedom, perhaps. The divorce changed you. You just weren't

sure how it had, yet.

### **Uncharted Worlds 18**

‘We always knew that deep down you were crazy,’ Pablo said. We were having lunch together at an ‘all you can eat’ buffet.

‘The difference now is that everyone knows,’ Gabriela said.

I stared at her. Didn’t know what to say. Did she really like me? I mean, did I miss any signs? That was weird. I had no idea how I felt. I had just met a girl, and she was great. Talk about bad timing.

‘Now, if you excuse me,’ Pablo got up. ‘The girls from the other night invited me to play cards. See you on the other side.’

It was starting to get awkward with just the three of us staring at each other. It became another kind of awkward when Aline came out of nowhere, approached our table and said ‘Hello.’

I made the introductions.

‘I was having lunch with my sister and her family, over there,’ Aline pointed to a table by the window, where a woman with a child and her husband were staring at me. As soon as I looked at them they pretended to be eating and talking about something else. ‘Wanna go for a walk or something?’

‘Sure, I’ll just pay the bill.’

When I got back, Aline and Gabriela were talking. Gabriela was complimenting her glasses and said she was tired of hers; that she was thinking of using contact lenses.

‘I tried that once,’ Aline said. ‘Would rather stick a fork into my eye, thank you very much. But you look good wearing glasses, Gabriela.’

‘Thanks,’ she blushed. ‘I don’t hear that very often.’

They laughed and exchanged pleasantries and harmless questions, like how long they would stay, which other beaches they knew around Garopaba. I avoided my friends' looks when I said I was ready and we left the restaurant.

My mind was back on the memories of my wild night, and everything I'd said, what Gabriela had said, and that poor guy's broken guitar. I should find him and pay for a new one, I thought.

'You're quiet today, Max.'

I looked at the boats far out at sea, dragging their nets through the ocean's floor, always hoping to find something. Fishermen must dream of finding lost treasures when they are looking for fish. I said that to her.

'I like boats,' she said. 'Once I went to Santa Marta's Lighthouse. Do you know that town? I like lighthouses, too. It's like they're watching over us, even though I know they're only meant to keep the boats away from the rocks.'

'I wish there was a lighthouse here,' I said.

'Me too.'

I couldn't think of anything else to say, anything smart or charming so I just kissed her. Oh, soundtrack! Why doesn't life have soundtrack? We could walk around with earphones all the time, but that would be weird, wouldn't it? I had to make do with bad music coming from the cars passing by. It's never the tune you want to hear.

So we walked together, and talked about random things. It's funny the way the sand squeaks a bit when it's moist and you step on it. Kind of like snow. We climbed the slope to her place; there was no one there. She took me to her bedroom, we lay on her bed, curtains shut, door locked, no boat lights, no lighthouse, nothing.

At some point I realised it was about to happen.

I didn't want to go too fast. I wanted it but didn't at the same; it felt wrong because I didn't know her well and that's not how I imagined it would be. So I didn't put up any pressure, and it was good and sweet in any case. She was hot, her hair was a mess, she

wasn't afraid to touch me, she took my hands and guided them over her skin; she told me what she wanted me to do.

Not bad, not bad, I said to myself. It's really happening, I thought, while I fumbled with her bra. I'm getting there.

Then, someone honked outside.

She froze and said, 'My sister.'

'Shit.'

Short of breath, we ran around the room collecting our clothes. I heard the car pulling over outside, doors being slammed, a child yelling and laughing. Aline leaned over the window and yelled she'd be right there.

Then she reached for a backpack by the door.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Time to go. Back home.'

'You're leaving? Now?'

'Yes.'

'What? Why didn't you tell me?'

'I didn't want to go.'

She kissed me one more time and had a good look at me. I'd like to say that she did that on purpose, that she was evil, that she wanted to leave me hanging on. But that's hardly the case. I just couldn't believe my bad luck. I mean, come on, I got so close.

'I have a problem with endings,' she said.

I smiled. 'Me too.'

'Close the gate when you leave.'

## **You 23**

Sometimes you took a little break from work and walked to the toilet just to knock

your head against the wall. You went to the bathroom so often, they must have thought you had a prostate problem. It's just that you remembered something stupid you had said and convinced yourself it was all your fault. You wished to be twenty-two again and forever, writing bad poems and buying her a single rose because you couldn't afford a whole bunch.

Despite all of that happening, though, you managed to keep writing. You wanted to let me know, one way or the other, that you were doing your best. One day, you thought, I would be old enough to understand; I would inherit your diaries and, by reading them, I would learn more about you. I would learn from you.

You should probably have avoided writing shopping lists in your notebooks, though. Kinda breaks the mood.

### **Old Max 19**

There is a small dining area at the Inn's reception. The place is only partially lit. We have our pizza at one of the tables. It's more than 10 pm now; the receptionist locks the doors and lets us know she's going to her room. It feels very odd being here; it smells salty and humid; wind seeps below the doors. I look through the window but can't see a thing; the public lighting is very faint. It feels as if we are the only three people in that town. No, in the world. I shiver.

'Cold?' Oliver asks.

'A little. This place really is deserted, huh.'

'I like it,' Olivia says. 'It's nice to get away from everything for a while.'

'All that noise, nowhere to park, I know,' I say.

'So, Max, what do you do for a living?'

I wipe my mouth. This pizza tastes like the frozen stuff. But a pizza is a pizza, always better than sandwich.

'I'm a journalist. Videogames, mostly.'

'No way,' he says.

'Yeah, pretty much.'

They ask the basic questions: if I get to play games all day long, if I see stuff that's not out yet, that sort of thing. Then he says how much he likes *Call of Duty* and other first-person shooters that he plays on his X-box. I say that it's fun, and choose to leave out the fact that I'm more a JRPG kind of guy. I usually leave that part out when I'm talking to regular people - civilians. The fact that I like the Japanese kind of RPG is usually misunderstood by most: they immediately think of *Naruto*, *Dragonball*, magical girls and tentacle porn, not necessarily in that order, depending on the person. Or they just think I'm a freak. Which is OK, but after a while one gets tired of explaining the intricacies of videogame genres to someone oblivious its intricacies.

We talk about games for a while. Olivia was very fond of Mario but that was all her experience: playing at her cousin's house on Sundays a few years ago.

Then things start to get bizarre.

'Do you always travel alone, Max?' Olivia asks me.

I feel her feet rubbing against mine under the table.

You've got to be shitting me, I think. So people actually do this sort of thing?

I stammer but finally manage a 'No,' before pulling my foot back. What. The. Fuck. She keeps eating, eyes on her plate, as if nothing happened. Was it an accident? She's blushing, so I don't think so. Things start to get awkward; Oliver is looking at me, expecting me to reply with something more than a monosyllable. So I say that I needed some time away from home; that my father passed away recently.

They stop eating and say they are sorry, etc.

'That's OK,' I say. 'Don't worry.'

We finish eating more or less in silence. I feel really cold, but my heart is racing. The whole thing feels wrong – but the strangely good kind of wrong, you know? I put my foot

forward just to see what happens. I touch her feet. It's not that sexy – we're both wearing trainers, but what the hell – and she doesn't take it back. We talk amenities, the weather, the whales, the sea and whatnot. I feel my heartbeat in my head, like blood is going to burst through my ears. This is all wicked and weird.

'We should go to our room,' Oliver says.

'We could have some wine,' she says.

'Oh yeah,' he goes. 'We brought a bottle of wine. You could have some with us if you want.'

I look at them. 'I... sure, I just have to check something in my room first.'

They get up. He puts her arm around her.

'We'll be waiting,' Olivia says, and giggles.

They walk away and I'm left alone in that dining room. Did I just get invited to a threesome? I slowly bend over and bang my head on the table.

## **You 24**

This is some of your own writing. A usual, obsessed with the idea of the end of the world. Why do I need this here? Because I like your stories, and it's been difficult to find one that you completed. Because I think they fit in the grand scheme of things. Because it feels right. Also, because I think *you were* Professor Rodriguez.

*Professor Rodriguez was a methodical man. He taught with a passion, a passion slowly heated over the years, a passion that could last forever. The students loved him for his wisdom and kindness, his ability to combine the tones of his clothes. He was also very polite and refined. Always left the University at the same time every day. He was attached to his routine.*

*It was late afternoon, a day when Professor Rodriguez stayed late, talking to a*

*student in need of guidance. The university was silent. Silent, thought the Professor. Strange, he thought.*

*Strange, the orange colour in the air, the strong, diffuse sun beating on the columns, spreading over the woods by the building. The Professor felt lonely. After all, we're all alone, he thought. As in the stories about the end of the world, he thought. And laughed. The trees in front of the Department of Ancient Languages made an echoed sound, like the soft touch of a dream.*

*Of a dream, Professor Rodriguez repeated aloud, as if he heard the voice of the narrator. Little did he know it was the end of Time and soon he would indeed be the last man on Earth.*

*Little did he know, repeated Professor Rodriguez, intrigued, looking for the car keys in his dark leather briefcase.*

## **Uncharted Worlds 19**

To continue with unpredictable things, on the last day before we set off home we were having ice cream when someone grabbed me by the shoulders and twisted me around. At least he had the guts to punch me in the face; but a warning would've been nice. I was sent back, ice cream and everything, and hit the floor before I realised the guy was that singer from the bar. Karma is a bitch.

I got up. 'What the fuck, man!' I was shaking and my nose was bleeding.

He didn't care to explain or talk. I meant to say I was sorry and that I would pay for the damage I'd caused. I'm *lawful good*, dammit. Ever was, always will be. But then the guy sprung over me for more and I thought 'fuck it.' I tried a few punches myself, but didn't hit the target. In the commotion we turned a few plastic tables and chairs. There was a crowd forming around us. Someone held us from behind, anonymous hands splitting a fight.

‘How old are you?’ I asked. ‘Shouldn’t you be working on a bank or something? You know, being boring?’

I thought: all these years playing Mortal Kombat and Street Fighter must be worth something. I seriously doubted I could pull off a Hadouken, though. But, oh, man, I wanted to believe I could, so badly.

He wasn’t happy with my comments, so he easily broke out and hit me a couple of times in the stomach, and then again in the face. His fist was so big that probably he could have hit my mouth and my eye at the same time; felt like he did. All I could see were blue and red spots and the air seemed too cease to exist. He kicked me again while I was down.

I looked up through the tears, sand and blood that covered my face. Damn, why was I crying? I watched him walk away.

‘Too easy,’ he said.

But at that moment a voice came from nowhere; echoing, reverberating:

‘War machine!’

Pablo jumped over me. No one saw it coming. Pablo hit him with his two feet in the chest. It was epic. The guy flew back just like in an old kung fu movie.

And that was it. Two cops were nearby; they came running when they saw the tumult.

People say they arrested the singer, not because I pressed charges, which I should have but didn’t, but because, as it turns out, he was a drug dealer. And he was charged with preying on teenagers or something. The cops took me and Pedro to the hospital, gave us a lecture and asked if we wanted to call someone; we said we were fine.

As they left, I heard one of them saying ‘Every fucking year.’

My left eye had swollen to the point where I couldn’t see anything.

‘You alright there, man?’ Pablo asked.

‘Yeah. You?’

‘I think you’re worse than me.’

‘True.’

‘Check this out.’ He opened his mouth and showed me there was a missing tooth, laughing.

‘Crap! Does it hurt?’

‘Not yet,’ he said.

‘How did you even...?’

‘I kicked the guy then fell face-first on the ground. I didn’t think it through.’

The doctor had a look at my injuries and said, ‘Interesting day, I see.’ After the nurse had cleaned my wounds, the doctor told me to apply ice to my eye and that I should know this but he was going to say it anyway, I shouldn’t get in any fights. He said I was lucky, that I had no idea how bad things can get. He said he’d seen some pretty bad stuff. He gave me a prescription for strong painkillers.

The nurse took us for an x-rays. My left arm was swollen and hurting a lot. They said I had a small fracture, but that it could have been a lot worse. ‘Cool,’ I thought. I had never broken anything before. Diego and Gabriela were waiting for us. They asked a lot of questions and we repeated everything the doctor had said: nothing serious, we’d live.

‘Quite the finale for our trip, huh?’ Diego said.

Then it really started to hurt.

## **You 25**

My mum called you at noon to let you know about her job offer in São Paulo. She explained everything and said that I should probably stay with you. You said, ‘Yes, of course,’ but in fact it took you a long time to grasp what had just happened. So, she was moving indefinitely? And you had to take care of me... alone?

You kept reminding yourself that breathing was key. Breathing was important. You could do it. But the worst part was seeing her go. For all that had happened, you knew

knew that you loved her. It was impossible to stop loving her – your history was too complex and long and there were a lot of dreams and conversations and moving and decisions involved. And there was me. You had sworn to keep by her side until death; you remembered that part well. You weren't very keen on religion, but you were keen on oaths. You kept your word.

But loving her wasn't just a matter of honour. It was just... there, that's it. You never talked to anyone about this. You were unsure if you wanted to get back together. It felt like a lifetime since we had left. You stopped writing when you heard the car outside. I was returning home, on my last year of high school.

### **Old Max 20**

The ways I have died, in approximate values, not at all scientific:

Shot at: 30,998

Drowned: 1,799

Electrocuted: 266

Attacked by a wild animal/ monster: 109,991

Touched by a ghost: 7,655

Poisoned (out of potions, out of antidotes): 12

Hit myself with a boomerang when low on Health: 1

Eaten by a zombie: 8,956

Explosion: 3,673

Starved: 9

Melee weapon attack (sword, knife, mace, lance, club, etc): 77,001

Dark magic spell (Fireball, Magic Missiles, Lightning, etc): 9,979

Beaten by thugs (in general): 479

Obliterated by a meteor: 1

Erased from existence (corrupt save file): 8

Uncertain fate after having failed my objective: 6,009

Fallen from a high place (parkour gone wrong, miscalculated jumps): 2,377

Fallen into poisoned water (and/ or acid): 1,233

Uncertain fate after my time is up: 699

Drifting in space due to lack of fuel: 8

Traffic accident/ hit and run: 68

Outer space perils (asteroid belt, de-pressurization, black holes, solar flares): 28

Atomic bomb: 2

Skating accident: 4,687

Melted in a pool of lava: 456

Eaten by dinosaurs: 2 or 3

Eaten by aliens (any kind): 23,455

Ultimate sacrifice for dramatic reasons: more often than I'd like

Heart attack: 0

## **You 26**

It was one of those few days you didn't have to teach at night. You got home early only to find no one around. Of course, you thought, I'm a divorced man! You opened your arms to embrace all the emptiness of your house. You tossed your briefcase over the sofa and took off your jacket. You went to the kitchen to get something to eat or drink, only to find an empty fridge. Who's the idiot who forgot to go grocery shopping? That's right, it was you again!

The divorce wasn't doing you any good and most of the time you just tried to keep living, and avoided even thinking about it. Was this was a temporary arrangement or would / should you find someone else to spend the rest of your life with? You brushed those

thoughts aside because no one was interested anyway. You changed your clothes and decided to walk to the supermarket. It was early, it was warm, and it was a nice evening. So yeah, you left the car behind and walked alone. You said hello to our neighbours, those people you've said hello to for years now without a clue what their names were. You didn't think of those things. You just kept on living.

Today, one of your students asked you why they had to read the *Poetics* by Aristotle. You tried to argue that it was the most basic of all the basic literary theory books, the one that started it all, but he didn't seem to care that much. In fact, how much time, you wisely considered in silence during that particular class, should you dedicate to explaining the purpose of poetics to a boy who took issue with reading such a tiny book? It's hard not to fear for the end of all books, you thought as you walked. No one reads, you thought on your way to the newsstand. Not like real books anyway, you thought, buying the latest issue of *Playboy*.

You kept it in a bag so no one else could see it. Not that you were particularly embarrassed by it. After forty you definitely didn't think that much about what everyone else was thinking. Maybe you should have a makeover, you thought. Pluck your eyebrows, have a haircut, buy new clothes. So you do that: you have a haircut, buy new clothes, new shoes: why not, because after all, what is a supermarket-slash-shopping mall for if not to cater for all your makeover needs. Then you buy groceries, go home, have a nice shower, pluck your eyebrows and listen to some good old Pink Floyd while you read a very interesting article on cigars in your new *Playboy*. That's it. That's life, you thought. You didn't think any of those other things you weren't supposed to think. So that was a good night. Definitely a good night.

## **Uncharted Worlds 20**

I was packing when Gabriela suddenly turned up and came into my room.

‘So, who’s this Aline girl?’

‘She’s gone.’

‘You’re such a man, aren’t you?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Getting drunk, picking fights, sleeping with girls you’ve never met. It’s not like you.’

‘I haven’t slept with her,’ I said.

‘Yeah, right.’

‘What’s wrong with you? What did I do?’

‘Well, since you’re asking,’ she crossed her arms. ‘This trip changed you.’

She was crying, but not in a sad way. It was more like she wanted to murder me.

‘You don’t remember, do you?’ she said. ‘What I said to you that night.’

‘No.’

She left. The guys came back shortly after that, asked where she went, said she crossed them in the hallway and didn’t even say hello.

‘She said she had a headache,’ I lied.

‘Hey, wanna climb the hill?’ Pablo asked. ‘Diego hasn’t been there yet.’

‘No, thanks. I’ll just stay here and pack.’

‘Ok,’ they said. ‘See you later.’

## **You 27**

You couldn't stop thinking of her, and what she was doing in São Paulo. Was she happier? Had she met someone? Was she ever going to come back? Sometimes she called to talk to me and ask how everything was going. You had awkward conversations about the weather, compared crime rates, talked about pollution, smog, the underground.

You almost quit your job. At the time, and I remember this, you were always angry. It

was the endless Beatles record listening phase. It was way before the home makeover and beer-drinking. You got mad at the syllabus of your modules at the university, how they were always the same, and made an effort to remind yourself that high-school literature classes were way worse. But at least then you'd had the chance to change some lives, to make someone love books and stories, while college kids' minds had already formed. Either they loved or hated reading, and there was little you could do to influence them.

You fantasized about having an affair with a student. You wondered why this was such a popular myth: no student ever came on to you. You thought you got more ugly over time. A bit plumper, perhaps. Your hair was turning grey. You didn't recognize yourself in the mirror. Where did all of those wrinkles come from? Were you ever going to feel your age or did it really work like this, a twenty-something trapped in a middle-aged body, wondering if it would be too crazy to go bungee-jumping or clubbing?

We watched the remastered *Star Wars* trilogy together around that time. You explained that you were never a big *Star Wars* geek, but since we lived in a (kind of) western civilization ('The dark side of western civilisation,' you said), it was important to know it well. It was canonical. You explained the hero's journey and Campbell's work. You got more and more excited talking about this while we had McDonald's for dinner. People stared at us, you were talking so loud; I got cross at you for it at the time, but I don't mind it now.

### **Old Max 21**

I go into my room and have a look around. There's just that box on the bed and my wallet and car keys over the table. I sit down, I get up. Of course I think of Gabriela; then I think of her at that convention and all the guys hitting on her. That's why I never go with her. Come on! A hot, red-haired comic book artist? Everyone notices her, always; among the comics circle, she's quite well known. Was she angry enough to cheat on me? Is she

cheating on me right now?

I want to do something that will keep my mind off things; I want to get back at her for being always right, I want to hurt her somehow. I pace my room; finally, I leave and head to Oliver and Olivia's room across the hall. I stop in front of it. Lights are on, they're laughing. Then I hear the bed squeak, and a soft moan.

I take a step forward to knock. Maybe this is all in mind, and I'm losing it. What's a glass of wine, after all? I should make friends. I'm not good at making friends, so I get confused with this sort of thing. Then again, who needs new friends? I'm 28, I'm past that. Crap crap crap crap. I rest my head on the wall and stare at my feet.

This would change everything. I might be able to keep it a secret in case something happens, but for how long? I'm not one for keeping secrets. I suck at it, like I suck at, say, football, finding lost things or buying clothes. No, no I shouldn't be that stupid. She deserves better. Deserves better. We may have a shot at working things out. I should stop doing everything at the same time. I came here to take my mind off things, and whatever this is, it's not what I've planned.

I head back to my room and close the door behind me. Lock it.

This is what I'll do: I'll read those damn diaries, punch the wall because I can't seem to make my wife happy, maybe jerk off in the shower and, tomorrow morning, I'll go out and hunt some fucking whales.

## **You 28**

Maybe this madness has gone on for too long, you thought. Maybe it's time to put an end to all these diaries. Come on. You were not a brilliant writer, you would never publish a novel everyone was going to read. Most of the things you had been writing for – how long now? More than twenty years? – were, let's face it, embarrassing. I disagree, but you were mad back then. No one had read them before. Mum knew about them but you never

allowed her to read them. So much rubbish! So, what use was it? Was it worth keeping them as your legacy?

Maybe some editing was in order. You thought about all those famous writers and thinkers who instructed their heirs to burn their stuff after they were gone. You could understand the feeling. But maybe you weren't the best judge. Maybe time would tell. Maybe they would serve, hundred of years from now, as a curiosity in a museum, a record of how life was. How people fell in love and had kids and broke their hearts. How they expressed themselves so badly. How literature professors had such simple and cheesy prose. How [the list goes on.]

You looked at me and wondered when I had become such a big guy, a man in every way. Inexperienced, yes, still young, but a man, taller than you, even stronger than you. You used to hold me in your arms and laugh when I pointed at trucks and aeroplanes. Now I was locked in my room all the time, playing video games and planning trips with my friends.

If I may, dear Dad from the past, I'd like to offer you some advice. Life is all about levelling up. You can't just go on forever. You need to grind a bit sometimes. Boss battles can be tough, but they shouldn't be too tough – so step back a while and level up. Learn some new skills, some special techniques. Limit breaks! You probably think I'm talking nonsense, but there is beauty in these things, I tell you. Philosophy, even. Truth can be found anywhere, man. So, stop whining and level up.

## **Uncharted Worlds 21**

I finished packing, read random passages from *The Lord of the Rings* and took a long shower, trying to figure things out. When I was done, Pablo and Diego were playing *Magic: the Gathering*.

‘Your deck is actually pretty good,’ Diego said to me.

Pablo explained, 'He's got some great cards, just doesn't know how to play them.'

I sat on my bed. 'Yeah... I think you're right.'

Then it came back. I remembered it, like a whisper in a dream, that night when we played Truth or Dare and had some drinks in Gabriela's room.

As the night went on, Pablo dared Gabriela and Diego to kiss, which they did, and we all had a laugh. Pablo went out for a smoke (Diego: 'Since when do you smoke?' Pablo: 'Did I have to ask you for permission?'). Later, Diego fell asleep on the floor and Gabriela's face was so red I thought there was something wrong with her.

'You knocked him out cold,' I said.

'True.'

'You're too much for him.'

'Shut up.'

'Poor bastard.'

She threw a pillow at me. I fell back and stared at the ceiling. There was a cobweb there and some moths flying around the light bulb.

Gabriela said, 'Max, there's something I've been meaning to say to you for a while.'

I said, 'Go ahead, I dare you.'

'I think... I'm falling for you.'

I closed my eyes for a second and I could hear the ocean, far, far away.

'Okay,' I said, then fell asleep.

'You look pale,' Pablo said.

'I'm good.' I replied, looking for my clothes. 'I'll go for a walk.'

'Alright,' they said.

That's it, I thought, as I closed the door behind me. That's *it*.

I headed to Gabriela's room. I knocked on her door.

She opened it just a bit.

‘What do you want?’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘You’re right. I’m a jerk.’

She opened the door a little more. I went on: ‘And I remember what you said.’

She kept staring at me.

‘I’m boring,’ I shrugged. ‘I’m a boring nerd with no particular talent. You can draw, Diego is clever and Pablo is crazy. I don’t have any dreams to follow.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I just came to say I’m sorry. I think you’re amazing and I always think about you. I feel guilty. I didn’t want to make you cry.’

‘Not enough,’ she said. ‘What else you got?’

That took me by surprise. I tried to remember romantic movies, love stories, books, songs, anything I could use, but I’d got nothing.

‘I don’t know! Do I need anything else? I think I’m falling for you too and that freaks me out, ok? I’ve been falling for you for a long time.’

She stepped forward and kissed me.

She kissed me.

It was so... *forbidden* to kiss her, it made it all the more exciting. I knew the taste of her lips before we kissed; it felt like we’d done it before. When I felt her breath on my lips, any trace of rational thought just vanished. I’d wondered about doing it. Several times.

There she was, right in front of me: taboo. I was looking at her freckles and the little wonderful imperfections of her skin. She grabbed my arms and pulled me towards her. It was wrong; she was my friend, but that tenuous thought only made me want her even more. She pulled me inside her room and locked the door – it was all too surreal and too close to resist.

We lay on her bed and as we did, the friendzone was gone, definitely gone. I didn’t know who I was, shit I didn’t remember my name, but it was very clear that I wanted to

lick her neck, touch all her body, all at the same time. I had rehearsed this in my mind more than a thousand times, so I tried to remember the films, the good ones and the nasty ones, the classy and the dirty but nothing I thought could translate into the right moves so it was awkward, especially with my arm in a cast; but boy, I was sure I could do it better and I did, at least I think I did, but we would have time, wouldn't we, time to get things right, to figure it out together and boy, that moment, that, right there, just the two of us, and in a locked room, boy that was awesome.

## **You 29**

I had just left for the trip to Garopaba. That Saturday morning you thought it was good having me live with you again. Immediately after that you remembered I was graduating as soon as I came back. You didn't know whether or not I was staying. You knew I could move with Mum to São Paulo. You didn't want me to.

Yes, you had a couple of beers. You were not a beer drinker, you were more of a wine taster, Mr Fancy Pants. You looked around and decided to clean the place. Really clean it. There were too many things that reminded you of what you had lost. It was time to make that house yours.

You couldn't sleep. No teenage boy roamed the corridors at 3 am or played RPG with friends all night long. Just silence. You got up. Turned on all the lights in the house.

You walked through the hall and looked at the family pictures we'd hung there. Santa Catarina, special dates, birthdays, trips. The family and relatives together at Christmas.

The photos were in chronological order. The first ones were of you and Leticia before I was born. Then there was me sleeping in my mother's arms. Her look was something new. Our life was there, hanging on the wall.

You sat in the middle of the corridor. When you have a child, you become a parent. But there is no word for what you were before they were born. You're just there, living, waiting.

**Old Max 22**

We're walking towards the beach, Oliver, Olivia and I. No one mentions last night and it's better this way. She's talking non-stop about all the kinds of whales: blues and orcas, humpback, belugas, fin, grey and sperm whales. She mentions that Moby Dick was an albino sperm whale, but the ones we're about to see are right whales, which are still pretty big.

'They used to hunt whales around here, too,' she says. 'Their fat was used for lighting. A single whale could give something like thousands of litres of oil, you know. But it was cruel. They killed the calves first, to draw their mothers closer. It was horrible. By the time whaling was forbidden in Brazil, there were practically none left. But they're coming back now.'

'You sure know a lot about whales,' I say.

'Tell me about it,' Oliver says, smiling. 'I had to bring her on this trip only to see if she would stop bugging me about it.'

'Shut up,' Olivia says.

We get to the beach and meet the marine biologist there, Carlos, standing next to a fisherman and a tiny wooden boat. We introduce ourselves, shake hands and pay the fisherman.

'I was hoping the weather would be nicer today,' Carlos says.

We help push the boat into the sea and get in. There are no life jackets. I wonder what we would do if something went wrong. Just us in that tiny boat.

We move further into the sea as a fine drizzle starts to fall. I've brought no waterproof clothes. The boat moves faster after we breach the surf. It's cold. Very cold. With the wind and the water splashing on our faces, I start to feel miserable two minutes after we leave the shore. Carlos points to an area in front of us where the water stirs more

than elsewhere.

‘A ship sank over there,’ he says. ‘That’s why the waves are bigger over it.’

We go through that part. I shudder when I think there’s a sunken ship right below us. The waves are not what make me uneasy about the ocean. It’s the immensity below, and everything we can’t see or predict.

The trip on this infernal boat is endless. It’s been more than an hour and we keep moving south because that’s where the whales are today. The drizzle is freezing my bones. And we are moving against the wind and against the waves, which makes our journey considerably slower, colder and wetter.

What was I thinking?

If I die at sea because I took a trip on a whim it would suck. I’ll never write my own diaries to leave to my children, I’ll never get things right with Gabriela, and on top of that people will forever wonder whether or not I was trying to commit suicide by offering myself as whale food.

For hours the only thing we see is water and the shore, farther away than I’m comfortable with. I keep considering whether or not I could swim to safety from where we are now but I know – I know – I couldn’t. Everyone is quiet because it is impossible to talk, because of the noise of the boat’s engine and the splashing waves.

I need to survive this.

I’m curled up inside the boat, trying to get warm, when Carlos yells, ‘Over there!’

I get up. The fisherman turns the engine off. We drift over the water. I try to balance myself as I stand up only to find that my legs are funny, wibbly wobbly half-numb. I hold onto the edge of the boat and look to where Carlos is pointing: far away from us, I can see a tiny fin. It goes out of my sight for a moment, then a second later, an albino right whale calf jumps over the water and splashes down again.

‘It’s white!’ Olivia screams. ‘It’s an albino whale!’

Holy fuck.

The significance of that is not entirely lost on me. I never read *Moby Dick* and the extent of my knowledge is that there was a big mean whale called Moby Dick, who happened to be white, and a certain Captain Ahab was obsessed with getting it killed; I also know that that whale also appeared in a Woody Woodpecker's episode, where it reveals, at the end, that it was only that angry because she had a really bad headache or something. I might be getting the reference wrong here, though.

Point is, I'm not that stupid. A white whale, sperm or right or whatever, is not something you see everyday. That vision seems ominous, for some reason. An omen of what, I do not know.

For a couple of hours we stay in this bay, approaching the whales at times. There are five or six of them, all with calves. They stare at us and go back underwater. Apart from that white calf's jump, they do no more acrobatics. We can only see their eyes and the top of their heads, which is like 10% of their bodies. Swimming with whales must feel like giving in; uttering Take Me, Whale, Take Me to the Endless Sea. It must feel liberating, empowering. What is the coolest thing you can do on Earth? Maybe you can climb Everest, but I don't know. Swimming with whales must be top of the list.

I sit down and watch as Olivia yells every time she sees one whale, and Oliver tries to get the whole thing on camera. She talks non-stop about the whale's habits, asks Carlos questions; he tells her about these whales in particular, and how one of them got tangled on a fishing net a week ago. All the technical stuff I won't remember afterwards. I sit there and watch these people doing what they love and thinking when did I expect to be swimming with whales. So to speak.

We're getting ready to leave. Carlos and Olivia are discussing whether or not they should stay for just a bit longer when we suddenly realise one of the whales is close to us, so close we could reach our hands and touch it. The fisherman is not used to this; he turns the engine at full speed and manoeuvres away from it as fast as he can.

'Did you SEE that?' Olivia screams. 'Did you see how CLOSE it was?'

Carlos smiles. He and Olivia stare back at the bay as we leave. I share a look with Oliver, a 'thank God it's over' look, but we say nothing.

Moving upwind and along the waves, the journey back is much faster. I'm soaked, shivering and still praying to reach the shore alive.

We say goodbye to the fisherman and Carlos at the beach. Oliver and Olivia ask me if I'm heading back to the inn, but I tell them I'm staying for a few minutes.

I'm now alone. I sit on the sand. The drizzle turns into light rain. I watch the fisherman take the boat into the garage in the distance. Eleven years ago I was here, on this same spot. I close my eyes. I feel I've cheated death. The whole time I was waiting for a whale to come from below the boat, open its mouth wide, swallow us and take us into oblivion.

### **You 31**

It was like a window popping up on your screen: [click here to update your software](#). A new version of your current firmware is available.

The first thing you did was to ask for a few days off work. Then you cleared some space in the living room and worked your abs, did some stretching. Sweat that old age off, burn some years off you.

[Click here to update](#).

You cleaned up the garage. There were piles of old stuff lying around, so you called some charity to collect everything. You added the living room furniture and the kitchen table. Whatever was left, like the sound system, was in the middle of the living room, covered by an old sheet.

You went out to the mall, bought a new TV and new furniture. You paid extra because you wanted them delivered that same day. Then you got some paint and accessories, went home and gave the walls new colours. You took the photos off the walls.

It was so hot the paint didn't take long to dry. Still speckled with paint, you went to the supermarket and bought two bags of earth and some flowers. At a gardening shop, you managed to find some new patches of lawn. Back home, you used a big kitchen spoon (since you had no proper garden equipment) to take out the weeds; you planted the flowers and replaced the lawn patches, sat at the balcony and waited. You had instant ramen for lunch. Then you waited some more.

The new stuff arrived in the evening, when the paint had already dried. The delivery guys helped you put the furniture in place. 'Big change, huh,' they said. You tipped them, cleaned the floor, threw away the paint and brushes you had used. You proceeded to buy groceries then reorganise the kitchen cabinets. You cleaned the bathroom and the bedrooms. Everything was perfect and new. You finished it at three in the morning, had a beer, looked at the garden and its new soil. You watered it and waited.

## **Uncharted Worlds 22**

I once read an article on a website about some people in Japan who like to wear girly bodysuits of anime-like characters, complete with plastic mask, a wig, big eyes. The result was that they looked like life-sized anime dolls. Most of the time, people doing that were men. You know, those crazy bastards in Japan, obsessed with anime and manga. There are all kinds and levels of otaku, nerds and geeks, but some people win the prize, don't they? In English, they call these people *dollers*. In Japanese, it's *kirigumi*, although *kirigumi* is a broader term and it serves for people dressing up as plush toys; something you find in theme parks, for example.

But, BUT... in this article I read about a girl that used to dress like that. She had many kinds of outfits, different characters, and would pose for photographs at events and in public places. She said what got her into it was that she liked the feeling of living between worlds – the 2D and the 3D; fiction and reality.

Why am I talking about this? Because when I remember that night, when I knocked on Gabriela's door and we completely shattered whatever was left of our friendship, that's how I felt: between worlds.

After we did it we were lying naked on her bed and we stayed there in silence, afraid of what was going to happen next. She fell asleep. I heard thunder and it started to rain. I could hear the raindrops falling heavily over the inn's roof. Between what was before and what would be after we got out of that bed. There we were, as if someone had pressed *pause*.

**[paused]**

[start] resume  
[x] skip  
[o] retry



**You 32**

On a Sunday I checked in to say everything was going alright in Garopaba and I was still alive. You tried to squeeze some info out of me but I just said that we were going to the beach and stuff. Whatever.

That night she knocked on your door.

She didn't let you know she was coming and of course neither of you ever mentioned it to me. I'll be forever thankful to you for not writing down the details.

You ordered pizza and had some wine. She told you everything that was going on, that it was hard, that the job was stressful and the city sucked but was great for shopping, at least. That she had some friends. That she never thought living alone would be so hard. That she felt lonely. That she missed you.

She spent the night at your place and you had no idea what it meant, until the next morning, when you were making breakfast and she said she wasn't hungry. She left in a hurry, leaving her scarf behind. By the door, without looking back, she mentioned she liked what you had done with the place.

'It suits you,' she said.

Now, I did not know that! So you almost got back together? You dog. Oh God, I really shouldn't be reading this kind of stuff about my parents. But then, I'm a grown man. Time to stop freaking out over the little things. I just... there's no way for me to quite understand you two. It's like you always loved each other but didn't get back together because. *Because*. You see, this is why I don't like sandbox, open world games. It's too easy to get distracted and leave the main quest for later until you don't remember what you were supposed to be doing in the first place.

**Old Max 23**

I don't know what I was thinking when I came on this trip.

Hell, I wasn't thinking. Whales are not normally dangerous, but you never know. Specially if you've got no life jackets with you.

Death, in the form of the largest mammal on Earth, looked me in the eye and let me go. That's what I'm saying if anyone asks. Not only that, but the sea was the worst part. I don't have a lot of experience off-shore, and even though we were relatively close the whole time, it was still pretty damn scary.

I won't mind if I never see Oliver and Olivia again.

It's now almost 6 pm. I rush to my room and have the best shower I've ever had. As soon as I'm finished, I hang my clothes in front of the heater the Innkeeper left in my room while I was out. I get under the covers and sleep.

In my dreams I relive the whale watching trip. I see me shaking on the boat; I see the whale's eyes staring at me but other things get mixed up and I see Gabriela waving from the shore. She is waving goodbye. I shout 'I'll be back soon!' but she keeps on waving. Then I'm still on the boat but I have this feeling I'm forgetting something but don't quite know what it is; I remember it's my father's funeral and I turn the boat around, but I know I'll never make it in time.

I wake up disoriented. It's dark. I switch on the lamp by the bed and check my watch only to see that it is half past nine: I've slept for more than three hours. I feel rested and hungry, so I get dressed – clothes still a bit damp. I look at my dad's box and there is that gecko, Lola. She's looking at me the same way that whale looked at me before; like it knows something.

She crawls back inside the box. The night is beautiful now; clouds are gone and the moon is out. I remember one time when I was little, my father and I went to the beach with torches so we could look for crabs digging holes in the sand. We walked around for a long time, laughing whenever we found one and it ran away into one of its tiny burrows.

On my way out, I stop by the reception and borrow a torch. It's too late to find any shops open around the town; the only place I find open is a bar where I'm able to get a beer

and a pastel. I head to the beach. I can see faint lights in the distance: fishing boats in the night. I walk around aimless, spotting the crabs here and there. They flee from me. I stay there until I'm hit with the most genuine 'what am I doing here?' feeling, and whatever certainty and resolve I had when I came on this trip vanishes. I should be home with my wife, I should be talking to her, getting my shit together, as they say. I walk a bit faster, almost running now, with the feeling I may have made a mistake and that it's not going to be easy to fix it. I run to the inn, having decided to leave right now, but when I get there, Gabriela is waiting at the door, and boy, she looks mad.

### **You 33**

You were having a beer and waiting for me to arrive from my trip. You were feeling quite well, just hanging out, listening to some old records, having a drink. You thought, maybe I can get used to beer. All these years of wine tasting had made you soft, you thought. That kind of thought echoes in your mind lately. Soft. Maybe you've grown soft. Maybe it was time to let it go and just accept you were like everyone else.

Then I came in. You didn't hear me opening the door because of the music. You were happy to see me, until the moment you realised I was hurt: a broken arm and a swollen face. What was it? A car accident? No. Arm and eye, it looked like a fight. But me? I would never do that. And what kind of irresponsible wimp organised that trip? Why hadn't anyone called?

You talked to me, asked what happened; I didn't want to talk. You thought fast: if it had been something more serious, someone, the police even, would have called. So it must have been a fight, you thought. Your boy in a fight?

I went upstairs and kept my silence. You cooked dinner, changed the record, called me. Again, silence. You were lost in thought during the meal. My graduation would be the next day. You thought yes, that was the moment I was leaving. Leaving, as in growing up.

As in growing apart. As in living my own life. As in becoming responsible for my own acts. As in you should leave me be.

You took me outside and we had beer together in the veranda. Might as well accept it, you thought. There you were, middle aged and divorced, with a kid about to graduate from school. God knows what would happen next.

With all our differences, there was one thing you could be sure of: I was not a bad person. I had my heart in the right place. And for me to pick up fight there must have been good reason. Like acting stupid because you are in love with someone. Like being a jerk because you feel lost. Like getting punched in the face because sometimes that's what life means. Figuratively. And literally.

You couldn't teach me all the things you knew. I wouldn't listen. But maybe you could offer me something else. Like a nice evening out, a cold beer, and time to listen to my story.

'Tell me about the girl,' you said.

### **Uncharted Worlds 23**

'Farewell party downstairs!'

I woke up with the shouting. They were knocking on each door to make sure everyone was invited. Gabriela was still half-asleep.

'Hey,' I said.

'Hey,' she smiled.

'Wanna go downstairs?'

'No,' she said.

'Come on, it's our last night here.'

Turns out the neighbours were complaining about the noise so everyone went to the beach as soon as the rain stopped. They built a bonfire and brought guitars; they sang the

same old songs, but I was on a different level, vibrating on a different frequency altogether.

I held Gabriela's hand and refused to let go.

'Isn't the wood wet?' I asked.

'We found it at that half-built house on the way here,' Pablo said. 'It's quite dry.'

We sat around the fire.

'Telling stories around the fire,' Diego said. 'Just like old times.'

I replied, 'What old times?'

'Old times. When people gathered around the fire to tell stories.'

'I know a joke,' Pablo said.

Diego tossed a twig in the flame. 'Not what I meant.'

Gabriela said 'This is nice, isn't it?'

We agreed and stared at the flames and heard the wood crackling.

'Who's starting?' Diego said. 'Who has something interesting to tell?'

You should've seen the look on his face. He knew. I thought that what went on between him and Gabriela was a drinking night thing, but now I could see it wasn't like that at all. He resented that we were holding hands.

'You don't care. None of you,' he said.

Before any of us could reply, he went on.

'How's your room, Diego? Are you having fun? Or are you just happy to tag along with us all the time?' He turned to us. 'Do I look like a fucking child?'

He was all red. Tossed a handful of sand into the fire.

'Couldn't you two have waited? Did you have to do it here? Now? No, you couldn't wait. What the fuck! Show some fucking respect.'

'Sorry,' she said.

He stormed out. I looked at her.

'Diego likes you?' I asked. 'I thought that you guys were drunk that night!'

'Come on, dude,' Pablo said. 'It was written on all over his face.'

‘I thought they were just messing around!’

‘I talked to him,’ she said. ‘I told him that we should forget about the other night... he was pretty bummed.’

Pablo slapped the back of my head.

‘Go talk to him,’ he said.

I went after him. I yelled I didn’t know, said I was sorry, but the guy ignored me. After a while I was just walking behind him. He went all the way to his room and came back with a pile of role-playing game rulebooks. I tried to ask what he was doing, but I heard nothing from him. Gabriela and Pablo joined me in a barrage of questions and apologies.

He lifted the RPG books over his head and stared at the sea.

‘This shit ruined my life!’

Then he threw his books in the water. They floated there, coming and going with the waves.

No words left. In fact, words were drowning right in front of us.

An abnormal distance grew between the four of us. This moment was taking away all the sweetness of what had happened before. The surf brought the books back to the sand. It threw them up. Diego looked at the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* at his feet and sat down, defeated.

I got in the water and carefully collected the books again. He would regret doing that someday. I still have them, bent and rugged, in my office.

‘I don’t know my father,’ Diego said, all of a sudden. ‘Never met him.’

I thought his parents were divorced. But I wasn’t sure why he said that.

‘Since we’re here,’ he shrugged, ‘we might as well share some stories.’

‘Better to have no one than an asshole for a dad, right?’ said Pablo.

I remembered my father and me fighting with lightsabers in the living room when I was five.

‘We never know, do we?’ said Gabriela. ‘The details of other people’s lives. We think we know, but we don’t. You probably have no idea that my mum is crazy, for example.’

‘What?’ I asked.

‘I think she hates me. She hates that I like to draw. She says, “Look what drawing did to your sister! She could be a lot better and blah blah bah”. My sister is fine and happy. It was a smart move to get as far away as she could from that house. I caught my mum once, talking to my dad, saying she was afraid I was a lesbian.’

Hate is such a strong word.

Gabriela said, ‘I think she wanted a doll, not a daughter.’

Pablo got up and kissed the top of Gabriela’s head. I didn’t know what to say. None of us deserved her.

Pablo poked me and asked, ‘Can I talk to you for a moment?’ He pulled me to the side and asked, ‘Do you like her? For real?’

‘Pretty much, yes.’

He looked at Diego and Gabriela. They were talking to each other.

‘I just want to keep us together, man,’ Pablo said.

‘Nothing is going to happen,’ I said.

‘Something has already happened.’

He took a deep breath.

‘Graduation is upon us.’

I said, ‘I know.’

‘And then it’s each man for himself.’

‘I know.’

Pablo and I stayed there looking at the sea. Gabriela and Diego were quiet, sitting next to each other in the rain. Behind us all, the sound of music and people laughing came as if from a distant world.

### **You 34**

You had no idea what went on during that trip. I was pretty bummed. You made me breakfast and brought it to my room, asked what my plans were. I said, 'I'll just sit here and play some games for a while.'

You tried to talk about the college entry exams.

'Sshhh,' I said.

You watched me play. On the screen, there was a terrain full of cute little soldiers, tiny wizards and monsters.

'Who are you in there?' you asked.

I pressed a button. The battle stopped and the whole scenario divided between blue and red squares under the characters.

'I'm the blue ones,' I said.

I explained I had to kill all of the monsters. You weren't impressed.

That wasn't the whole game, I told you.

'I've got to level up,' I said, 'so I can get new abilities and magic and loot, then I can buy better equipment as well. I can also change the job of each character, so if one of them masters all the Black Magic spells I can still turn them into a White Mage if I want to.'

'It looks like chess.'

'Yeah, chess with magic spells.'

You took a sip from the hot chocolate you'd brought and watched me play.

## Game Review 4

### *Crash Site*

If you thought love and spaceships didn't go well together, think again.

In fact, think hard, since there are a lot of great love stories that involve spaceships.

Even though the main character in *Crash Site* has just crash-landed on a hostile planet in a distant galaxy, he's not there to wage war, explore, or fight evil aliens. He's not even the heroic type. The Astronaut (we're not given his real name) is the Princess: he's in trouble and must wait for his love to come and rescue him. His gender and the gender of his lover are undisclosed - I'm just assuming, or choosing, because I was the one playing and I'm therefore biased.

It all starts with an action sequence: an astronaut falling from the sky. The spaceship has exploded and there's debris falling everywhere. The sky turns from dark blue, full of stars, to the light orange and red of dawn. There's no voice-over (remember: this is an indie title). The text reads:

'It all happened so quickly...'

At the last minute, the Astronaut lights up his jetpack, just enough to prevent him from dying, before it stops working properly and he lands on a desert-like planet. He gets up.

'I had no idea what was going on.'

The player gains control of the character. At this point, it is possible to walk left and right and activate the jetpack for a short burst to reach higher places. The Astronaut makes his way through a cave and climbs over a mountain.

'I've sent a distress signal.'

And then, as he reaches the summit:

'My last message before crashing down was short.'

'I love you. I'm crashing. Save me.'

The interface is minimal and the music is little more than a single acoustic guitar at key moments in the narrative. It's hard to explain how the minimalist graphics and music combined get to me. Everything is simple and honest. It's a bit cheesy at times, sure, but you can see the whole game comes from the heart. I won't spend much time talking about mechanics. You have to experience it for yourself. It's a lonely journey of waiting, but you'll come out of it changed.

There's a countdown to the moment you'll run out of air. Your spacesuit's systems are slowly failing. You have no idea if anyone is coming. There's little more to do than wait and walk around the planet. You'll find some surprises along the way, but nothing I can tell you about without spoiling the whole experience. Some things you have to experience yourself.

#### **Old Max 24**

'Hey,' I say, unable to think of anything else.

'Hey.'

Gabriela and I stare at each other. She, blocking the entrance to the Inn; me, standing at an empty road in a deserted seaside town.

I can't say a thing.

She says, 'I came to find you, of course.'

She steps down and walks towards me, arms crossed, the wind messing her hair and tossing it over her face. She tucks in behind her ear.

'What did you think? That I'd wait for you to come home, considering the way you've been lately? I was afraid, Max.'

I smile. She came to find me.

I hold her. She doesn't hold me back – she's as stiff as a petrified tree.

'It's okay,' I say. 'Really. I was about to leave and head back home.'

‘No you weren’t,’ she says, keeping her head down. I know she’s crying. She’s always cried silently but I know the difference in her voice; I get it when she’s crying. I don’t even need to look at her.

‘Yes, I was,’ I say.

‘I don’t care.’

‘What about the convention?’

‘It was boring.’

I laugh.

‘Good. That’s what I wanted to hear.’

‘Why?’

‘Never mind.’

‘Are you okay now, Max?’

‘I just realised I am,’ I say. ‘You know what I want to do? I want to take you home and have some pizza. Watch TV together. Maybe talk things over.’

I’m feeling invigorated. Like I can take this on. Like, I’ve survived. He’s gone, but I’ve survived. And he left behind a collection of nice memories. Maybe I should write my own, I think. My own memories and my point of view on those he wrote, too. It’s ok, I think. It’s gonna be ok.

She says, ‘Let’s go home.’

‘I just need to know one thing,’ I ask.

‘What?’

‘Did you meet any cute fans? The kind who offer you wine after the book signing, stuff like that.’

She smiles. ‘Not this time.’

‘Good.’ I pass my arm around her and hold her closer. ‘You won’t believe what I did today.’

We get my stuff, I pay the bill and get into the car. On the way home, I tell her

everything I know about whales.

**PART 3: Setting Sail, Coming Home**

**Uncharted Worlds 24**

That last day was crap. We each stayed in our rooms. I was afraid to talk to Gabriela because I didn't want her to say we'd made a mistake. She didn't come to see me, either. Pablo didn't want to take sides so he went off somewhere else with some people I didn't know. I stayed in my bedroom, alternating between sleeping/ reading *The Fellowship of the Ring* for the umpteenth time/ looking out the window/ taking more painkillers.

Around noon, everyone was stowing their luggage on the bus parked on the street beside the sea. It was time to return to Porto Alegre.

Next to me, a group of guys was singing a samba, clapping and playing a drum. Two girls were dancing. I held onto the strap of my backpack. It was a beautiful day, as days of leaving often are.

Somebody said: 'Pity we can't enjoy a day like this.'

It was hot.

I said: 'Yes, it's a real shame.'

I put my backpack on the ground and kicked off my flip-flops. I ran across the sand, jumped through the surf, and dived in, leaving only my left arm above the water.

**Old Max 25**

When we arrive late at night, we hear the neighbour's autistic son yelling. The light in one of the rooms in the ground floor flat is on and we can see him. He's a teenager, but bigger than me. We look at him. He yells again, pacing back and forth in his bedroom. He's very distressed, but then his mother walks in and hugs him. She tells him something, she looks at him and tells him he's alright, she's there, he's not alone. He calms down.

The following night, I'm writing at the computer and Gabriela is next to me, looking out of the window.

She says, 'Have you ever wondered what's out there?'

'You mean in the stars? All the time.'

'No, I mean on this planet. The other places.'

I shrug. 'It's just fairy tales.'

She turns to me. 'What?'

'America, Europe, Asia. They're too far away. They're like fairy tales. No more real to us than the game I was playing the other day.'

She laughs. 'Yeah, but there's no way for you to go to Hyrule, you know. And all you need to do to go to New York is to buy a plane ticket.'

'A very expensive one.'

'I don't know,' she says. 'I'd hate to feel we can't see other things if we want to. I'm tired of seeing the same people every day. The same places....'

'You wanna move?' I ask.

'That's not what I meant. It's just, sometimes, when I'm looking at the stars, I think how big the universe is.'

I nod. 'Really fucking big.'

'Yeah, so it feels like a waste of an opportunity not to travel the world and try to know everything there is to know. You and me, we won't be able to fly to other planets and see other galaxies. It's all fairy tales.'

'Yeah.'

'But we can buy a flight ticket.'

I nod again.

'Yeah, we can.'

**You 35**

During graduation, you sat next to Mum and despite everything you held hands when they called my name and she rested her head on your shoulder while I climbed the steps.

You copied a section from Beowulf into your entry that day.

*'and so the good and grey-haired Dane,  
that high-born king, kissed Beowulf  
and embraced his neck, then broke down  
in sudden tears. Two forebodings  
disturbed him in his wisdom, but one was stronger:  
nevermore would they meet each other  
face to face. And such was his affection  
that he could not help being overcome:  
his fondness for the man was too deep-founded,  
it warmed his heart and wound the heartstrings  
tight in his breast.  
the embrace ended  
and Beowulf, glorious in gold regalia,  
stepped the green earth. Straining his anchor  
and ready for boarding, his boat awaited him.  
So they went on their journey [...]'*

We had lunch together that day before the ceremony. Mum wouldn't leave me alone, asking questions about what happened during the trip, so I had to give her an abridged edition of my adventurous tale. You smiled and nodded while I talked.

**Uncharted Worlds 25**

The rest is legend, memory, past, all those things we leave on a shelf in the basement. The trip back was, as trips back home always are, shorter. Everyone wanted to talk to me, to ask how the fight was and why did it happen, but since I didn't reply much they gave up. Pablo tried to convince people he'd had a threesome, but no one believed him.

I still remember those days. Perhaps I'm still there.

People grew quieter as we went south. Passing Torres, all the views were too familiar. I couldn't get myself to say a word. Pablo turned to me:

'You ok?'

I just nodded, sensing that there was nothing else I could do but cry. He reached for his backpack, took the *Magic: The Gathering* deck of cards I gave him as a payment for coming on the trip and put it in my hands.

'You've got the right cards. You just need to learn how to play them.'

I held the deck, certain that I would never play a match again in my life, and nodded. He punched my arm lightly and like that we arrived home.

**Old Max 26**

I drive to the newspaper. I tell them I want to work at the office more often, that I'm tired of working at home. I tell them I don't care much about what kind of story I'll write; I will even work for Fashion. They say okay. They also say that the Games section is looking great and maybe they could expand it a little bit. Times are a-changing. I'll get a column online that I can update as much as I want. I even get a table!

A few days go by. I take a break, someone calls me to the kitchen. They bought a cake.

'How did you know it was my birthday?' I ask.

They reply they are freaking journalists, plus my online profile let them know. But of course.

I revamp my blog entirely and in the heat of the moment propose to the newspaper that they should send me to the next Tokyo Game Show. They say it's alright and direct me to Accounting to sort out my expenses. A couple of other online outlets buy my ideas for other stories I can cover while in Japan (one is interested in hardware, the other in a personal account of the experience, a third one wants me to visit Akihabara). So all I had to do was ask?

I explain everything to Gabriela. There are still at least three months before I go, but that doesn't stop me from blabbing non-stop about it. We have wine and pizza; she tells me about her convention and the new graphic novel she is working on. I listen. I listen, like I haven't listened in a long time. I'm not thinking of games or Star Wars or work. Then at the weekend, we paint all the walls and buy new furniture. The same days, I beat two different games I'd been playing for months.

### **You 36**

I want to say one more thing. I know you liked Homer's *Odyssey* (and Joyce's *Ulysses*), and also *Beowulf* (which I have just finished reading), so it's a shame that you never got to play *Dragon Quest* or *Final Fantasy*. The early ones, at least. And *Tactics*. God, you'd love *Tactics*. You watched me play it once, remember?

In *Dragon Quest V* the protagonist loses his father at the very beginning of the game. After that, he spends his whole life trying to find the legendary hero who will save the world from all evil. Time passes, and the protagonist falls in love, gets married, has kids. Life, right? He ends up finding out that the legendary hero he was trying to find is his own son.

I'm no legendary hero. I'm a peasant. We were never slaves, we never travelled the world or vanquished Demon Gods. But we had a great time, right? What I want to say is: I got it from here, Dad. Your journals are safe with me. I'll keep them, back them up. And this – all this I've been writing – is nothing else but me giving it a go. This story thing. I got your back, old man.

## **Uncharted Worlds 26**

Graduation ceremonies in Brazil are in December, when the academic year ends. So we have summer vacations from December to the end of February. The bad thing is, it's so damn hot and you have to wear a suit in a room with no air conditioning. It's unbearable. Our ceremony lasted four hours.

My dad took me there. We talked about the weather on the way. He said Mum was already in the hall, waiting for us. I asked if the classrooms at universities were any different from school.

'They *look* about the same,' he said. 'But it's different.'

'I wonder.'

We got there early, because the school was only a short walk from home. The yard was now a parking lot, a weird thing to see, like an empty church or an empty restaurant, or clowns in the kitchen eating cake after playing with the kids. Simple as that, the magic ended and that place wasn't home any more. The presence of parents and siblings in the halls we'd walked in for so many years burst the protective bubble around that place. It felt like a rave in a cathedral.

Wearing a suit was unusual. I was a five year-old wearing his father's shoes.

I thought: what about tomorrow?

Maybe the headmaster would say, 'It was all a joke guys, really. Chill. You're not really graduating, there's still a year ahead, a secret year. Surprise!'

‘Are you ready?’ Dad asked.

‘Let’s do this,’ I said. We climbed the stairs leading to the big hall. My dad put his hand on my back and gently pushed me forward. We walked in together.

### **Old Max 27**

I heard about this new service online. You pay them some money, and then you upload your son or daughter’s pictures and create posts for them. You can do videos, too. It’s like a blog, but they’ll save everything for you and arrange it in a nice timeline and such. You pay them to collect and keep your memories safe. And then you can choose a date when they’ll let you son or daughter know about all this. They’ll send them a letter with the login information and they can access the website and go through their timeline.

This idea is very poetic and appealing: guardians looking after your memories. Catchers in the rye, like in the book, preventing people from falling off the cliff. Here you go, your job is to guarantee that my memories will get to my children when the time comes. It is a very special mission, methinks. It should be a public job or something, commanding an enormous pay check. Memory Guardians. Savers.

### **You 37**

This is something I found in one of your diaries.

*I’ve been here before.*

*Endless end of the world scenarios, with zombies or not.*

*I’m usually alone, but sometimes I hear sounds, whispers, hints of a tune hummed somewhere in the rubble, inside an abandoned house, beyond a broken wall.*

*These sounds I listen to at sunset, which is the hour of memory. It’s that moment when you remember there was something you needed to do and time is running out, before*

*night comes and you have to crawl back in your hole and wait for the wandering zombies to go away.*

*I'm amazed how people resist the simple logic of love.*

*Perhaps the lack of it is the reason for the world to end over and over and over again. We are fascinated by the barren landscape that shows us nothing but the lack of something to care for.*

*I've been here before.*

*Most of the time, I am alone. I've watched it end, over and over again. The dreams of others bring me these images. Sometimes it ends in an explosion. Sometimes there is a boy and a girl holding hands. Sometimes it's just a quiet acceptance when the silence comes and in a whisper we're all memories.*

*I'm standing on an empty road. Nature is claiming this place back day by day, weeds perforating the tarmac, flowers blossoming in cracks on the concrete. The rusty cars, turned over the curb, the ravaged stores, the broken windows. The monsters, hiding; the humans, dying. Check, check, check. It's always the same because we are always the same.*

*It's sunset.*

*I hear someone playing an old acoustic guitar. They play it well, but it is slightly out of tune. Whoever is playing doesn't care. I like the way it sounds. I follow it until I reach a house with a broken window. It's coming from there, but I don't go in. Instead, I sit outside. I listen to the tune with my eyes closed.*

## **Old Max 28**

It's just like fighting a giant colossus. You defeat one, but there's always the next one to find. Sometimes, between them, you have to spend some time wandering.

**Old Max 29**

I am looking at the computer screen. I take off my reading glasses and rub my eyes, tired. I massage my shoulders.

Then it hits me.

My father is dead.

I feel alone, like I'm still living in the house we shared, only he's not around. Like I'm walking in that house, opening the kitchen cabinets, full of groceries we're not going to eat; the dirty dishes he always left for later, the laundry basket full of clothes. Everything stopped in between.

A while ago I finished reading his diaries. On the night I read the last one, I saw Lola, the gecko, on the wall next to the computer. She stared at me for a while and then left through the open window. Just like that. I've never seen her again.

I turn off the lamp and the monitor and sit in the dark. I bend forward, put my elbows on the table, and cry. I cry silently, because no one else needs to hear it. I cry in the dark. I don't know how much time I stay like this, but there's no rush. Eventually I turn the monitor on again, save the file I was working on, and turn the computer off.

I walk around the house. Have a glass of water. It's done. Nothing else to say. Done. I go back to the room, and she's there, sleeping. It's late in the morning, two, three, four AM, I don't know. The anti-mosquitoes thingy is on, I see its red light on the jack. The fan in the ceiling is at maximum speed.

This whole thing took a lot longer than anticipated.

I lie next to her.

She's awake. She reaches out her hand and I hold it.

'I was waiting for you,' she says. 'I need to ask you something.'

'Ok.'

'Are we trying again?'

‘To have a baby?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes, we are.’

She breathes deeply. ‘But not right now.’

‘No, not right now.’

So I hold her, and we lie together in the darkness, and we slowly fall asleep together.

### **Uncharted Worlds 27**

I heard my name coming from the speakers, and then the music started. We were all in suits and formal dresses, sweating like hell. The old fans on the walls could barely blow any wind. The families gathered in that hot room waiting for the end of that torture.

I thought I would go up there alone. I was ready to go up there alone.

But among the clapping and the people and the smiley faces someone took my arm and pulled me closer. I hugged them by instinct - then I recognised Gabriela’s perfume and opened my eyes and I was among her red hair. She kissed me and said she loved me. Then Pablo came pushing people around and hugged me too and when I was about to climb the steps Diego was there too. I climbed the steps, this time fully aware of the clapping, the song, the teachers, the classmates, and I looked at them, I mean, I really looked at them. So much light, so much music, so many people and so little time.

**Choice 2**

```
var user = prompt("After all you have been through, a man wearing a mushroom hat, or perhaps a mushroom-man creature – you're not sure – stares at you and tells you the Princess is in another castle. You wonder how many castles there are in this world, and how many dragons you need to defeat before you find her. You sit on a large rock by the road – the mushroom creature is still staring at you – and take a deep breath. Why is the Princess so damn helpless? You're not getting any younger, and frankly, you're tired. You want to go home. Will you GO ON and find the next castle, will you REST for a while, or will you GO HOME and let the princess handle herself?").toUpperCase();
```

```
switch(user) {
```

```
//-----
```

```
  case 'GO ON':
```

```
    var weapon = prompt("You leave what is left of the last castle and hit the road again. It's a hot summer day, but then again, all days in this kingdom are hot summer days. Everything is so bright and there's no place to hide. You miss the rainy days, you miss staring at the fire and letting time pass. You miss playing with your toys and dreaming of magical lands. But you're not a kid anymore. Those were the days, you think. You hum a song from your childhood – you can't remember the lyrics but the melody is still fresh. You've lost count of how many hours you've been walking. You reach a bridge over a river, where a half-man, half-turtle monster is waiting for you, holding a hammer. 'They have sent me to kill you,' it says, smirking. Are you carrying a weapon of any kind? (YES or NO)").toUpperCase();
```

```
    var fight = prompt("Do you know how to fight? (YES or NO)").toUpperCase();
```

```
    if (weapon && fight === "YES") {
```

```
      console.log("You take your weapon in your hands and engage the turtle monster in
```

combat. It is a fierce battle – its skin is tough and it rams you with its shell once, almost rendering you unconscious. You manage to dodge an incoming attack and use your weapon to deliver a killing blow. You’re now alone again, covered in the beast’s blood. It’s not the only time this happens. They keep coming for you. They are trying to kill you. You go on and reach the next castle. It’s the biggest you’ve ever seen. You approach the entrance, only to find the gates blown up and corpses everywhere: turtle monsters, little dragons and other aberrations. There’s a letter stuck on the wooden doors by a bloodied knife. It reads: ‘You took too long. I had to take care of everything myself. I’ll meet you back home. Yours, The Princess.’”);

```
    } else {
```

```
        console.log(“You have a willing heart and the disposition of travelling the world in search of your Princess, but relying on luck alone is unwise. You need to defend yourself – this monster facing you now is not the first and won’t be the last. But you’re defenceless – you try to escape but it chases you, until, with a swift strike of its hammer, you fall to the ground. Quests such as this one require heart, clear objectives and the right tools. You are dead.”);
```

```
    }
```

```
    break;
```

```
//-----
```

```
case ‘REST’:
```

```
    var map = prompt(“You close you eyes for a second and take a deep breath. How many years have you been doing this? Thirty? Yes, something like that. Wasn’t it about time to stop saving princesses? Does she really need your help? Have you been wrong all this time? Maybe you should forget about the princess and look at yourself. You are tired and alone, sitting next to an empty castle, being stared at by a weird mushroom creature. And you’re broke. Mushroom guy takes pity on you. ‘Hey, pal,’ he says, ‘you look like you’ve been through hell. I may be able to help you. Do you have a map?’ (YES or
```

```

NO)?").toUpperCase());

    var drive = prompt("Can you drive? (YES or NO)").toUpperCase();

    if (map && drive === "YES") {

        console.log("The mushroom guy shows you, on the map, the secret location of the
castle where the Princess is. He gives you the keys to his car and wishes you good luck.
‘Come back after you get her,’ he says. ‘Let’s have a beer. By the way, thanks for clearing
the place of those pesky beasts.’ You just nod, suddenly taken by his generosity and trust.
You get in his car and take a moment before starting the engine. Maybe this is what you
need: a road trip to find yourself. When you find the Princess in the next castle, you’ll have
gotten your act together.");

    } else {

        console.log("With no map and no driving skills, there’s not much you can do next.
‘I was going to lend you my car and show you where to find the Princess on the map,’ says
the guy with the mushroom hat – or the mushroom with legs, you’re still not sure. ‘But if
you want, we can get inside and have a beer,’ he says. You feel really exhausted. You
accept his offer. You go in and he shows you the place. It’s actually nice without all those
monsters. You and the mushroom guy have a great afternoon playing videogames. You
forget about the Princess, if only for a while.");

    }

    break;

//-----

    case 'GO HOME':

        var fire = prompt("Screw this. You're going home. The mushroom man – seriously,
who is this guy? – watches you as you turn around and head back home. You feel guilty for
a while, but as you walk, it wears off, like a temporary evil spell. You watch the landscape
changing and smile. You camp next to a lake, a beautiful place you’ve passed by before but
haven’t had the time to stop and enjoy. Do you know how to make a fire? (YES or NO)");

```

```

var tent = prompt("Do you have a tent? (YES or NO)").toUpperCase();

if (fire && tent === "YES") {

    console.log("You can feel your wounds heal. You know you've made the right
choice. It is about time the Princess start looking after herself. You were never appointed
her bodyguard anyway, and she left because she wanted to. Maybe she even doesn't want
to see you again. You have nearly fallen asleep when you hear a voice outside calling your
name. You recognize her voice, but for a moment it all feels like a hallucination. You get
out of your tent and see her there, right in front of you. She explains she's been looking for
you for days, ever since she managed to escape the castle. You fall on your knees, more
tired than you've ever been. It's a good thing she found you. You were starting to lose
hope, even though you would never admit that, even to yourself.");

    } else {

        console.log("You decide to bathe in the lake's waters. It's such a hot night. You
take off your clothes and dive in. It's been a long time since you last allowed yourself to
relax. You hear her calling your name. You turn around and there she is, looking at you. 'It
must be luck,' she says, 'finding you here. I've been looking for you for days. I thought
you might be in trouble.' You smile and call her. She joins you in the lake. You hold her
close and kiss her. She's real. Not an hallucination. She's there, with you, in the water.");

        }

    break;

//-----

default:

    console.log("Please choose again.");

}

```