* DRAWING IS THE BEST VIDEOGAME *

I was 5 years old when I got my Gameboy. It was my first computer and I took it everywhere. I used to sit on the toilet long after I was finished doing my business, immersing myself in its green dot matrix display and enjoying my privacy. Not only was the Gameboy a portable deviceâ€”it was also a personal device, with one screen per user. If you wanted to play with a friend, they needed one, too. Just like with todayâ€™s iPhone, you couldnâ€™t write programs on the device itself. Even worse, the tools to do so werenâ€™t even available for consumers. That never bothered me or my friends though, because we didnâ€™t even know what programming was.

[Photo of me at age five, playing Gameboy.]

At that age, the notion of hardware-software dualism was an alien concept, too. In order to play a game you had to put a physical cartridge into the back of the machine and the Gameboy was an incomplete object without it. If you turned it on with no game inside, a black aberration would animate downwards in place of Nintendoâ€™s logo. On a few occasions I experimented by putting tree bark and leaves in the back slot, thinking any object that fit would complete the circuit and render a playable world. This was my first attempt at designing and programming my own systems.

[Illustration of bark and leaves in the back of a Gameboy.]

Speaking of playable worlds, Iâ€™d like to tell you about my initial playthrough of The Legend of Zelda: Linkâ€™s Awakening. Thatâ€™s the version where the player character Link wakes up at the end and realizes his entire adventure was a dream. I borrowed the cartridge from a friend at school and it didnâ€™t come with any instructions or box, so I had no preamble to the experience. Link begins the game in a sea town after washing ashore from a lightning storm and being taken in by a girl. I spent the next month of my life frolicking around this early zone. Link could talk with citizens to experience their conversational loops, toy with chickens, and enter the library to read books about foreign places. The pictures were good, and the music was calm. This is all I thought there was, and I loved it! A small and pleasant place to go and play, not unlike my own neighborhood.

[Illustration of what I thought Zelda was versus what Zelda really was.]

My friend asked me one day at school if I had found Linkâ€™s sword yet. I didnâ€™t understand what he was talking about, so I went home and started searching. I eventually found the sword by the beach near the shipwreck. I tore through the rest of the cartridge in a week, all the while having the mind-blowing realization that the little area I had been playing in for so long was only a tiny fraction of what the game had to offer.

As I continued to grow up, my knowledge of computational media grew up too. Every game I played was a bit less mysterious; a bit less magical. I kept playing new games over the years, captivated by a false sense of endlessness that was never really there. Eventually I turned away from single-player games to online multiplayer games, and in my teenage years, I got into eSports by way of PC first-person shooters. By the time I turned 18 I had basically given up on gaming and turned to drawing instead, something I had been doing all along in the margins of my life.

[Photo of me winning a World Cyber Games qualifier in my eSport days.]

I came to enjoy drawing in my early days as a temporary replacement for whatever device I had at the time. In elementary and middle school we had a free study period, and since we werenâ€™t allowed to have our Gameboys or Tamagotchis or any other electronics at my school, I chose to make drawings on blank, letter-sized sheets. I would often abstract the characters from games I was playing and come up with new worlds that were symbolically similar. I would lean into the page the same way I leaned into the screen. I once had a whole taxonomy of characters loosely based on Bomberman. I almost always drew in pencil. Both my drawings and my Gameboy games were rendered in grayscale. I would also draw things just in order to erase them or draw over them, using the space to process a playful narrative of a system that was unfolding in my imagination. With pencil & paper as the Gameboy, I was the cartridge. Every completed drawing was a saved game. This was my second method of programming, and one in which I was simultaneously the user and programmer. Itâ€™s still my favorite one.

[Illustration of characters I used to draw based on Bomberman.]

If you owned a screen that had just one pixel and that pixel could only be black or white, then there would only be two possible images. In the same sense there can only be so many combinations of pixels on the 160x144 bitmap display of the original Gameboy, and only so many combinations of marks given a graphite pencil and a letter-sized page. It is a vast, but still limited space of possibility. Systems place limits on space in order to make space browsable. The Zelda cartridge I played contains 500 kilobytes of information. The game is how you are forced to browse that information. For several years I invested quite a bit of time into writing my own drawing and painting software to explore this concept. Writing source code was my third learned method of programming.

[Illustration: The more information you paint with, the more possibilities you have.]

These days, whenever I put pencil to paper or plot pixels on a screen I first consider the system Iâ€™m using to limit and browse that space. Sometimes the boundaries are presented in the form of a graphical interface

right in front of me, as they are in Photoshop or my own software inventions. Other times they are inside me, like my choice to represent a certain subject, to draw only with straight lines, or for a given duration.

What I love about drawing is its programmability, tight feedback loop, and resourceful use of energy. The history of drawing is one of people using and developing manual instruments and controls to alter their field of view in real-time, and videogames are a brief subset of that.

[Photo of a Playstation 4 controller with a paintbrush. Videogame controllers evolved out of paintbrushes.]

I was captivated by Gameboy games because I thought they were endless. As I grew up I beat them and realized their boundaries. Then, I became interested in drawing as a way to find the endlessness I sought all along. Iâ€™ve tried my best to explore that from many different angles, and now that I have, I see boundaries once again. Drawing is just a Gameboy game, with a bigger cartridge. The endlessness is in us.

Still, drawing is the best videogame.

Happy new year â˜º

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Monologue background track sourced from Dalin Waldo & BjÃ¸rn Svin.