**SANDBOX**

ISSUE 01

Image Accessed viaRodrigo Rojo de la Torre ↓

Level 12: Cross Word Answers

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GLOB   HAZE   STOMP
LEVI   TREY   PAPER
OVEN   MILE   LLAMA
OER  GLAD  VALLEY
METRE    ALAS
    PLOD  UNHAPPY
ADAM  RIDGE   NILE
GEM  CASE  SETOUT
ANIMALCROSSING
SYRUP     YAPS
   SEWERS   ROMP
URGE  OMIT  ECOLI
LIEU  ROVE  SIREN
NORM  STAR  SATAN
ATM   EELS  OLAS
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THE **Sims**
ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK

THE COZY EDITION

# SANDB□X

ISSUE 01

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| | A24 |
| | MY YARD CHANGEMAKERS |

*Hey Reader*
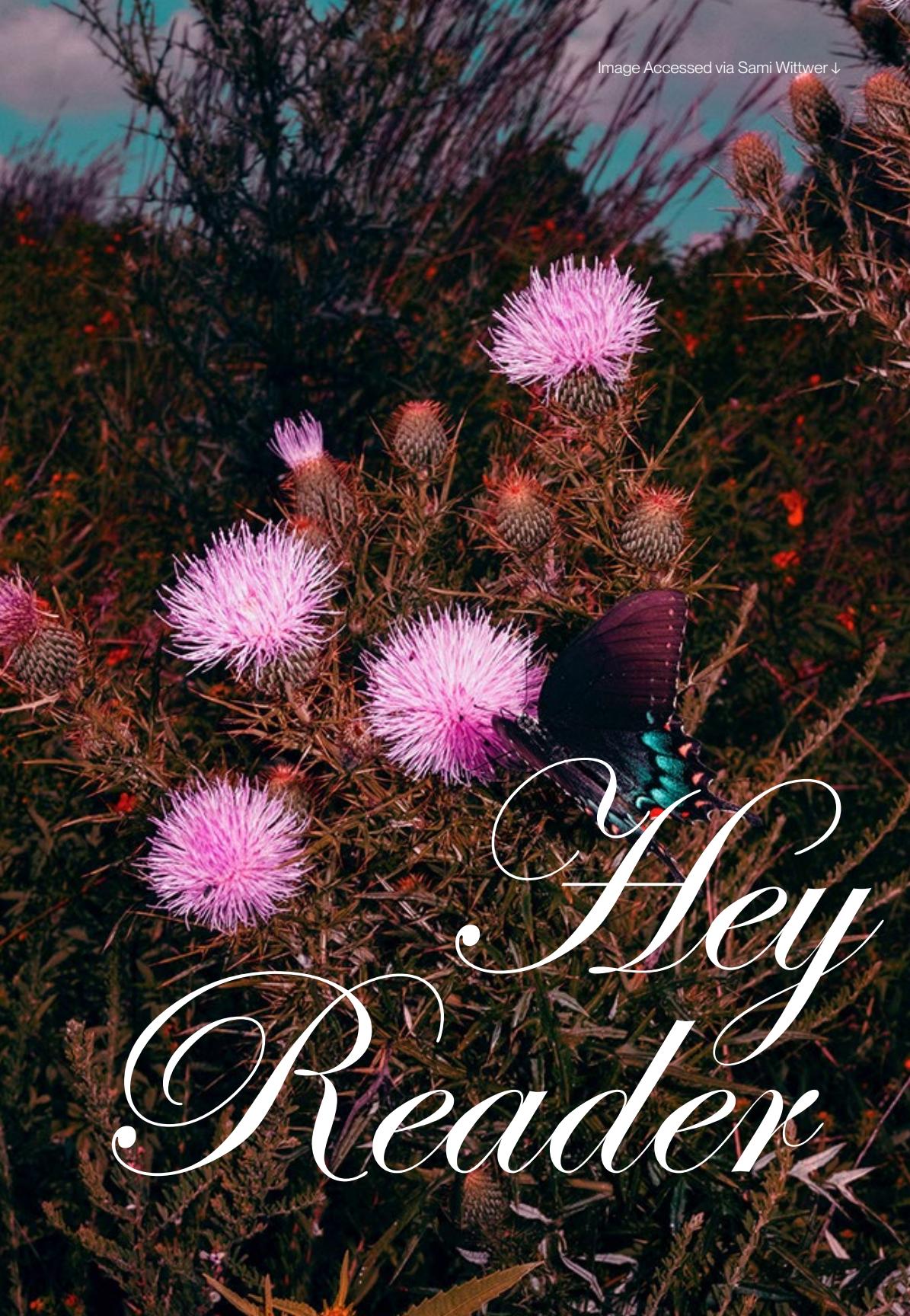
Why do we crave comfort in gaming? Maybe it's the predictability, the adorable characters, or how these digital worlds feel like a second home. Whatever the reason, cozy gaming has carved out a space in this chaotic world. When life gets overwhelming, or I need to escape the crushing responsibilities of adulthood, I retreat to a world where my biggest problem is whether my crops will grow in time or if my sims will set the kitchen on fire again. No high stakes, no pressure — just an immersive experience where I can unwind, decorate a house I could never afford in reality, and pretend I have my life together. That's the charm of cozy gaming. Whether it's completing tasks for the capitalist landlord raccoon with a sweater vest or the satisfaction of placing the last puzzle piece, these games offer something unique: relaxation, creativity, and community.

This month, we explore the world of cozy gaming. We take a peek behind the curtain at what goes into creating some of your favorite experiences, from interviewing the simmers behind *The Sims 4* Creator Kits to choosing the daily word of *Wordle*. We also explore why cozy gaming can be a powerful form of meditation — helping players decompress. Whether you've achieved perfection in *Stardew Valley*, are still in debt to Tom Nook, or are just dipping your toes into the world of cozy games, we've got something to improve your gaming experience. So grab your favorite blanket and a snack, and let's get started.

DIGITALLY YOURS,

# KEPLER

If there's one thing that seems to seep into all corners of gaming development, it's the dedication to world building. Creating a whole new universe for your players to get lost in, finding beauty and fulfilment in all of its finer details. But this world building was also something the team at Kepler Interactive, the global video game publisher, noticed when they saw the fashion designer Robyn Lynch's FW23 collection show. So, the team broached a collaboration – a collection designed by Robyn, inspired by visuals and graphics of Kepler's brand and many games.

The thing is, for the team at Kepler Interactive, the creative mediums and disciplines we often put in their own separate boxes, work much better in conjunction. "We believe games are an art form in the same way music, art, architecture and fashion are," says head of creative Simon Sweeney. "We're the first generation of people who have grown up with games, that they are part of creative culture seems obvious to us. The games we love look outward and take influence from other forms of art and culture, so the next logical step is engaging with that culture ourselves☐"

*Words by Olivia Hingley*

*slay and decay*

*meow meow ^_^*

*supermarket simulator*

# *Take*

## *Me*

## *Home*

**Bose QuietComfort Headphones →**
Block out the world and immerse yourself in your game with Bose's noise-canceling headphones. Featuring high-fidelity audio and a classic, comfy design, these headphones provide 24 hours of battery life, ensuring your cozy gaming sessions go uninterrupted.

**↑ Robyn x Kepler Collab Tee**
Robyn Lynch and Kepler Interactive have teamed up and are giving away the only set of their clothing line. To participate you'll need to explore their website, an interactive experience with visuals from the collection and secret achievements to unlock.

**↑ Freezer Bunny Plush**
This lil' legend has been lurking in fridges, freezers, and odd places throughout *The Sims* series since day one. But now, he's here to keep you company! Keep him in your freezer for authenticity or cuddle up with him while plotting your next Sim's pool-ladder disappearance.

*words by cate mcphee*
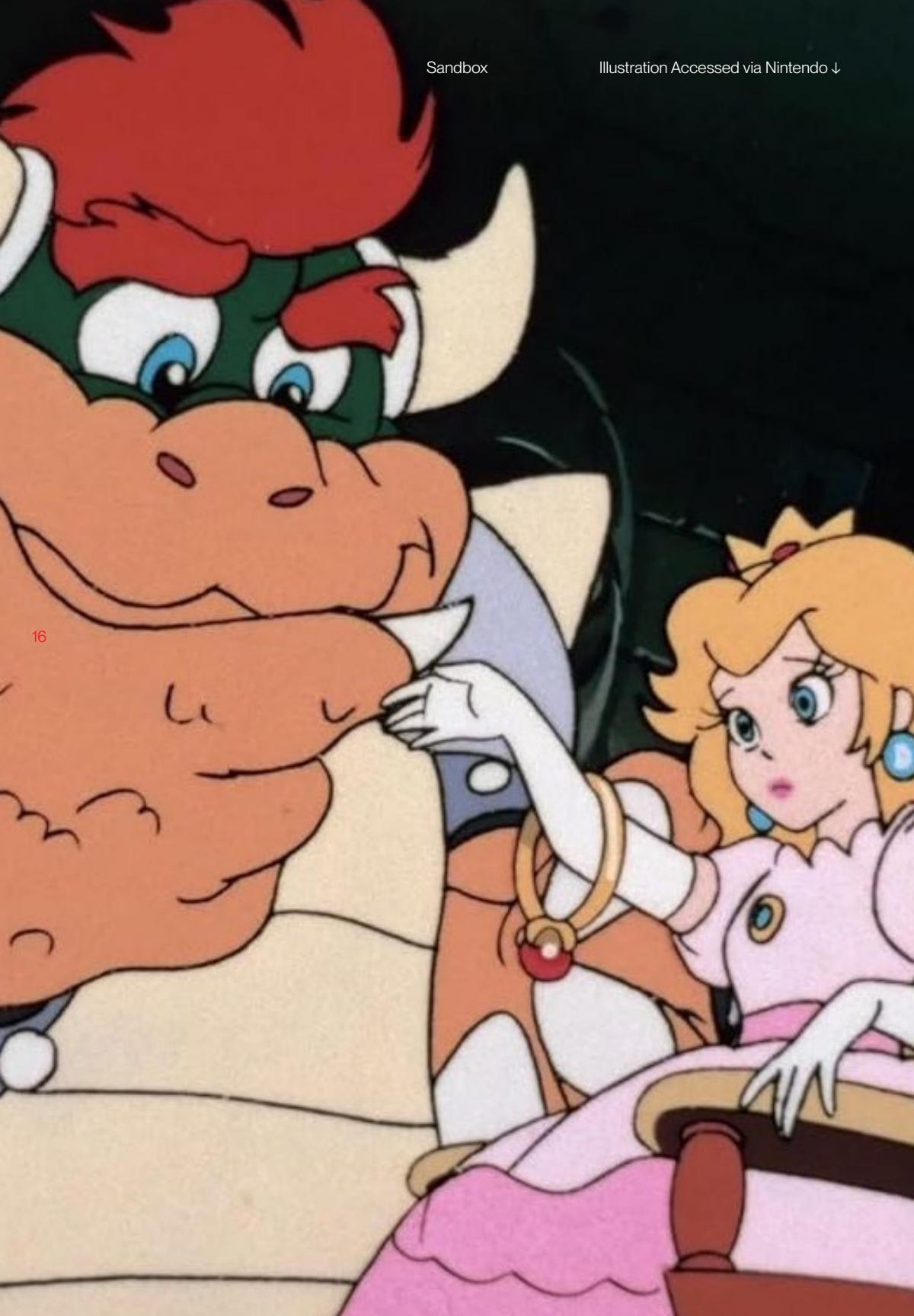
Instead of navigating the choppy waters of "So, what do you do for fun?" — why not let a game do the heavy lifting? There's no better way to break the ice than with a little competition. Games can spark meaningful conversations, reveal hidden traits, and showcase your sense of humor. Skip the awkward silences and get to know your potential match's quirks, qualities, and questionable strategies with these two gems.

# FIRST DATES ARE
# WEIRD

Words by Cate McPhee

## WE'RE NOT REALLY STRANGERS

*We're Not Really Strangers* will have you, reveal embarrassing childhood stories, reflect on past relationships and probably question your existence. This card game is designed to build deep connections fast. With three levels of increasingly personal questions, it'll quickly expose whether your date is a trauma dumper or a locked vault. Will Wthey embrace the emotional rollercoaster or break into a cold sweat when asked, "What's a lesson love has taught you?" Either way, you'll know exactly what you're getting into.

## WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS?

Test if you and your date can sync up with *Why are you like this?* One player draws a word card and must get their partner to guess it. But there's a twist: a challenge card determines how you'll give clues — whether you're talking, drawing, or wildly flailing your arms. Challenge cards also have an additional restriction, like having to balance on one leg while giving hints. You win or lose together, so it's the perfect way to test if you and your date are truly on the same wavelength — or if you're destined for a lifetime of miscommunication■

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# The Making of
# The Sims 4
# *Creator* Kits

Interview by *The Sims 4*

*The Sims 4* recently announced Creator Kits, and we're excited to share how these kits went from an idea to reality, along with an exclusive look at the first two Creator Kits, Myshunosun's *Cozy Kitsch* and Trillyke's *Sweet Slumber Party*.

Image from Marilyn Jean

Myshunosun has been playing *The Sims* since 2007. The possibilities for playing with life inspired them to create their own custom content. "I'm grateful for the opportunity to channel my passion for art, visual design, and 3D modeling in such a unique way—seeing the items I create come to life in the world of *The Sims* is truly rewarding."

Trillyke grew up with *The Sims,* and started making custom content in 2016. "I saw what incredible things other creators made, and found it fascinating that these assets were available for everyone to play with, so I decided to create my own." For her own work, she mostly draws inspiration from modern, alternative, street and k-fashion.

**What's the difference between Creator Kits and the kits you've collaborated on with creators in the past?**

The Sims Team    *The Sims 4* Creator Kits mark the first time that a full collection of in-game assets have been crafted by a creator and officially published by *The Sims* development team. This new type of official kit partners with creators from the custom content community to lead the creation and design of new content.

Creators have the freedom to pitch kit themes and make items that speak to what they want to see in-game. This content will be distributed via official channels and available to all players. This approach will allow all players to add even more variety to their game, and console players to enjoy new content from creators previously limited to PC and Mac players. We know there may be some confusion between previous kits featuring community collaborations and this new process.

Previous kits start with outreach to the potential collaborator, who then pitches their idea for their kit, and works with the *The Sims* team to finalize the design and theme. *The Sims* team then creates the items in-game to bring the vision to life. We understand that not everyone may be familiar with–or interested in–creating in-game items, so collaborative opportunities will continue to exist as an avenue to work with Simmers who may have exciting ideas that reflect communal interests, but may not have the technical ability to see these ideas realized on their own.

**Each Kit begins with a pitch, which comes in the form of a mood board from our creators to illustrate the overall vision. What inspired your Creator Kit pitches?**

Trillyke    Movies! I was always fascinated by how sleepover parties were portrayed in movies. Endless hours of gossiping, dozens of teen magazines and skin care products scattered around the room, cute PJs and fluffy socks! I went to sleepovers in my teen years, but never on the scale these movies presented them. So I wanted to create a kit revolving around one of the main (and my favorite) focuses of teen slumber parties–the cozy and cute attire!

Myshunosun    I love creating items with vibrant color palettes. When *The Sims* team reached out to me, I immediately envisioned a specific palette of vivid reds, mustardy yellows, and amethyst greens. I associate these vibrant shades with mid-century design, which I consider a timeless style in interior design. As both a player and creator, I aim to craft items that blend seamlessly with the rest of *The Sims 4* catalog. This project felt like an excellent opportunity to share my personal passion for color and mid-century design with other players.

**What went into making these Creator Kits?**

The Sims Team        Each item that is created for a Creator Kit has a unique set of parts depending on whether it lives in the Create a Sim (CAS) or Build/Buy (BB) game mode. The inspiration for each item comes from the initial pitch, where our creators introduce their vision in the form of a mood board that tells the story, tone, and vision for a cohesive kit. This helps the *The Sims* team understand what the creator is trying to achieve, and what it would take to successfully support the creators vision.

After the pitch, creators submit a comprehensive list of all the items they want in this kit, and *The Sims* team then evaluates if each item can be supported within our current toolset. A template is then created from the *The Sims* team's catalog of assets that serves as the foundation for the creator to build upon. The creators are then able to use this template to create a 3D model, colors, textures, and swatches for their item, with the help of documentation and guidelines provided by *The Sims* team. These guidelines are more about performance functionality and less about artistic style, so players can use the items in the ways they would expect to in-game. For example, if there is a bookcase, Sims can pick a book from it and read, and that CAS clothing will support a variety of body types.

Once a creator submits all of these parts for each item, *The Sims* team carries out a series of tasks and tests with Quality Verification that helps us catch any issues before release. This also allows *The Sims* team to maintain compatibility with all other content releases. For BB assets, creators have to additionally write a description for each asset, which is eventually added to the game catalog and translated by EA into the 18 different languages TS4 supports.

The final step is prepping for publishing. The creators name their kit, write the descriptions for store pages, and create renders of objects that will end up on the front of the kit art (packaging). *The Sims* team works with the creator to ensure everything is approved, then polishes, localizes, and delivers the final artwork–fully bringing the creator's vision to *The Sims* community. We're continuously improving and refining our process based on feedback from our creators and collaborators to ensure a seamless and enjoyable experience. The process may look different in the future.

**Did you learn anything new throughout this process?**

Myshunonsun        Getting to know *The Sims* team was thrilling! As a self-taught creator, understanding how the team develops content for *The Sims* was an invaluable learning experience. This project helped me improve various aspects of

my content creation process. For instance, I'm now much more confident in creating 3D models.

Trillyke        A lot! From small technical details to bigger, more in-depth factors of what goes into creating a kit was very fascinating to see. I was introduced to many different methods, platforms and tools, it was very interesting to see how many different things and even teams are involved to publish a kit!

**How much creative freedom does the creator have?**

The Sims Team        Creator Kits are a partnership between the community creator and *The Sims* team. The idea and decision-making behind what to create, how it will look, and how to go about authoring it comes from the creators themselves. Creators propose and refine the idea for their kit, select the clothing and objects they want to create and what they'll look like, and come up with the names and descriptions that you'll read in-game. That creative freedom even extends to areas you might not expect, such as capturing the screenshots for their kit, arranging the cover art, and writing the description of the kit that appears in the marketplace.

Because we see Creator Kits as part of our overall kits lineup, *The Sims* team does help set certain standards and expectations with the intent of preserving creative freedom. For example, we do ask creators to regulate the volume of content they include, and we share performance criteria their items must meet to maintain the game's stability for all players.

We're learning and growing from our experience with creators to refine the process for greater accessibility.  Our goal is to empower more creators to unleash their creativity and bring new ideas and styles to , including things that we at *The Sims* may have never chosen to create ourselves. Embracing those creative differences creates a clear path to more choice and new experiences for everyone who plays !

**What surprised you about the process?**

Trillyke        How much freedom I got from *The Sims* team! From brainstorming ideas till creating the final touches I was given a free hand, but the team was always ready to help me, whenever I needed assistance! Being able to express my creativity has been absolutely amazing.

Myshunosun        While it wasn't surprising to learn that there are many factors to consider when creating new items, the sheer amount of documentation was impressive! It was extremely useful and helpful, of course.

**How do you pick creators to work with, and how are they payed?**

The Sims Team    *The Sims* community and our custom content creators are exceptionally talented – choosing who to work with was a difficult decision! As integrating assets that are made outside of *The Sims* team is such a new process for us, we treated this first wave of Creator Kits as a pilot. We've been working with a pool of custom content creators who are known in *The Sims* community for their high quality creations, responsiveness to community re-ported issues, and who are in good standing with official current Mods and Game Updates Policy.

This group has been instrumental throughout the pilot to inform a creator-first strategy and allow our team to adapt to their feedback and continue to refine the experience. We wanted to understand their typical process of creation, while also ensuring that this experi-ence would be valuable and rewarding for them to take part in.

Throughout this process, all creators have been fairly financially compensated at every stage for their time, input, and expertise. This has been integral to this pilot program and reflects our values of ensuring equita-ble compensation as part of *The Sims* Creator Program.

**What's next for Creator Kits?**

The Sims Team    We're just getting started! We're really excited to hear what the community thinks, and we have more Creator Kits coming in 2025. Our whole team loves work-ing with creators and we're planning to expand this pro-gram in the future.  Two Sims sit at a round table talking about music. The room they are in is styled with mid-cen-tury furniture.

**Is there any advice you have for other creators, or anyone who is looking to learn more or level up their craft?**

Myshunosun    If you're an aspiring creator, I encourage you to engage with the community of fellow creators. *The Sims* community is a treasure trove of knowledge and passion. The best way to learn something new is to try it yourself and openly share with others. For example, Tumblr is an excellent space to build that type of connection.

Trillyke    Just start it! I know it sounds overwhelming, and it is not something you can master overnight, but why should you anyway? Learning is the fun part! Through the small steps you can learn so many new things and gain so much experience! Even after creating for over 8 years, I still find myself learning new things! Especially now, when there are so many materials available for ev-eryone, there really is nothing that could stop you trying something new! So yeah, just start it■
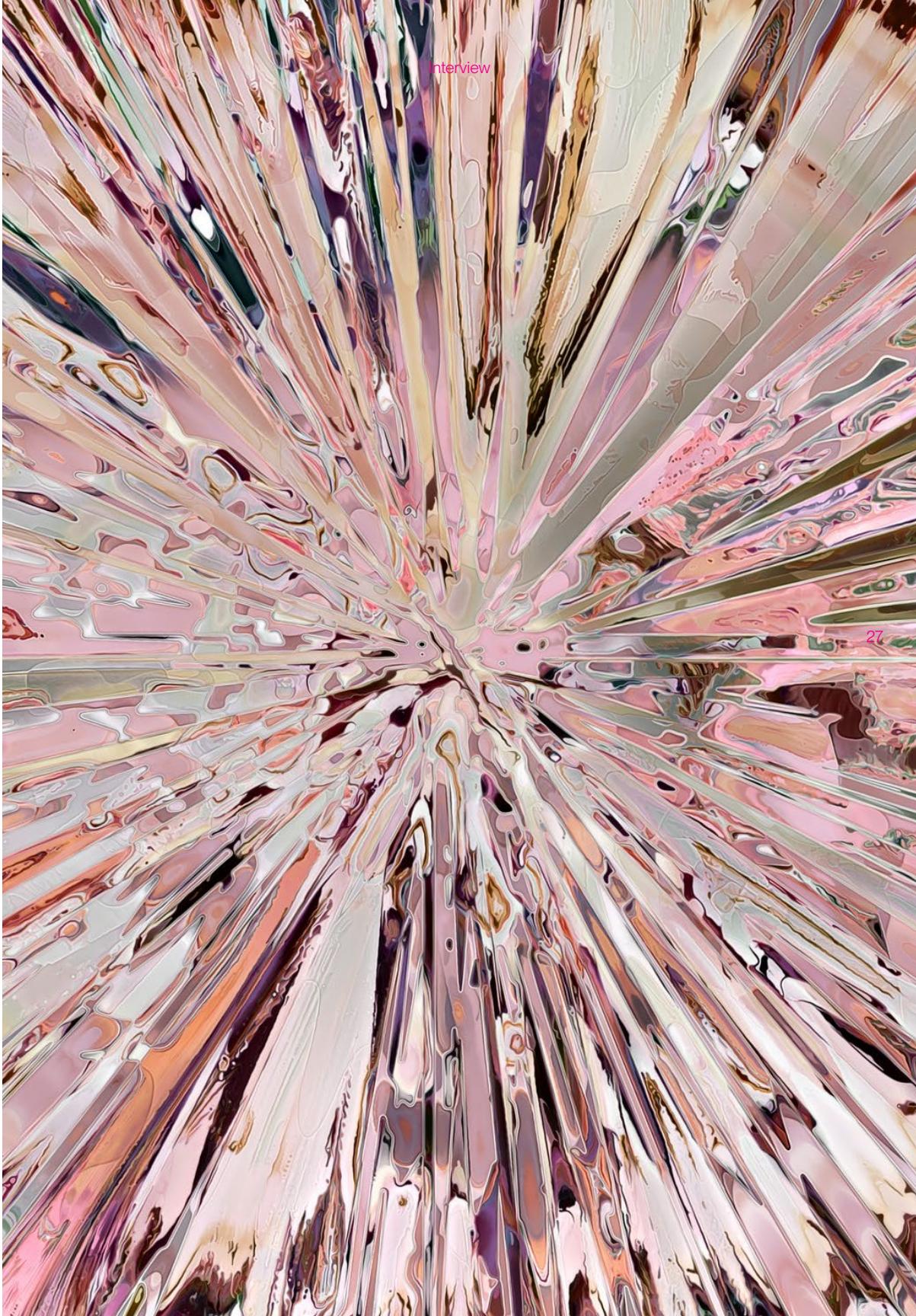
# Inside the World of Wordle at New York Times

by Saira Mueller

**T**he premise is simple (guess the word) and yet can be highly competitive. How many tries did it take you? Have you optimized your starting word for maximum impact? Do you play in Hard Mode, where you need to use the letters you've already found in each subsequent guess? *Wordle's* balance of simple, fun competition quickly resonated with players. Within two months of its public release in October 2021, the number of daily users shot from 90 to around 300,000. After the New York Times acquired *Wordle* from its creator, software engineer Josh Wardle, in January 2022, its player base grew to tens of millions. There's a lot of strategy behind the puzzle, as well. From the words the Times picks to *Wordle's* place in the publication's business model, everything has its purpose.

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For players, the *Wordle* experience is fairly simple. You navigate to the web page or open the NYT Games app, and plug in your starter word. On the back end, it's far more complicated. Initially, the game's creator Josh Wardle curated a list of words that would run in order. While the Times still uses that list for the most part, it has since been adjusted to ensure each word meets the Times' standards and is in North American spelling — something that won't be changing anytime soon, according to Everdeen

Mason, the editorial director for NYT Games. "I know some of our international audience hates that," she admitted to CNN. Even having a set list of words isn't enough. The New York Times assigned a dedicated editor for *Wordle*, Tracy Bennett, in November 2022. "Wardle's original word list forms the bulk of the database of words we're accessing, though we're not running them in the order he had originally arranged them," Bennett told CNN. "I've removed a handful of words that felt too obscure or vulgar, or that had derogatory secondary meanings, but those have been few and far between." Then, the strategy comes in. Bennett works in week-long batches, about a month in advance. She spends around two hours a week setting up the seven words that will run. To start, Bennett randomly selects words from the database using "a variety of methods." She then researches each word for its current and historical meanings before mentally running through each word's letter combinations "to identify any that are 'lucky guess' words that defy strategy." These lucky guess words include things like _OUND, where there are more than six letters that could occupy the first slot, Bennett said. Once she has the words for that week, Bennett checks them again to make sure that the order of the puzzles makes sense. This includes ensuring that there aren't too many hard words or similar words in a row. "That's how we think

One word.
Five letters.
Six tries.

about it," said Mason. "As a solver playing every single day for a week period, how does that feel? Is it fun? Is it challenging enough?" *Wordle*'s 1000th puzzle was one of the words switched out from Wardle's original lineup, but more because the original was "a little boring," Mason said. The Times didn't theme the new word either, after Bennett experimented with a themed *Wordle* related to Thanksgiving — FEAST — in her first month on the job. "We got a resounding response from the audience that they did not like that at all," said Mason. "I think it just made it too easy." Bennett said that some solvers enjoyed the thematic nod, but others felt it broke the rules of *Wordle* because it added an element of guessing what the editor might pick. While the Times sometimes has a nod to current events in its other games, such as the crossword, there's more context overall. "With *Wordle*, it's just one word," Mason said. "We were actually surprised that people were so mad about it." Feedback is an integral part of the Times' process for *Wordle*. The team collects this information from its community forums, social media, and direct emails. They go through this feedback roughly every week to see if things are being mentioned repeatedly — Bennett said she got a lot of comments about the words GUANO and SNAFU, for example.

■■■■■

Last Spring, the Times also implemented an external testing process for *Wordle* so the team can get feedback from a small group of people before the puzzles go public — there are around 35 testers for all NYT Games. The testers get the puzzles about three to four weeks in advance. This helps with the calibration process, making sure there aren't too many hard words in a row. "Data is very important in what we do," said Mason, explaining that they look at solve rates and other analytics alongside the feedback. "But I really want them [the editors] to have a lot of creative freedom and passion, because I think it does make the puzzles better." For her part, Bennett aims to "provide variety in solving difficulty, parts of speech and letter combinations while keeping things mostly random." The game's core experience — six

tries to guess a five letter word — is something that users don't want the Times to mess with, Jonathan Knight, the business head for NYT Games, told CNN. "The most requested feature for *Wordle* is don't do anything," he said. The second most requested feature is an archive, so players can go back and try puzzles that they missed or didn't solve the first time around. This is in the works, Knight said. While the Times doesn't have a date for the rollout, it plans to release the *Wordle* archive this year. "You're even going to be able to play *Wordle*s that predate the New York Times acquisition, which is really fun," Knight told CNN.

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Aside from the editorial strategy, *Wordle* fits perfectly into the Times' business plans. "Our lifestyle products are really a key part of that strategy," said Knight. For online games like *Wordle*, which is available for free — on purpose — it's an opportunity to funnel players to a paid subscription, either to access more of the Times' games or convert them to news readers. "Subscribers who engage with both news and games together on any given week have the strongest long-term subscriber retention profile of any at the Times," Knight told CNN. "We're really excited about that combination of games and news, and I think that's pretty unique to what we're doing." Every game in the Times' portfolio has its role to play. *Wordle* was a massive accelerator and turning point for the strategy overall, said Knight. Last week, in a continued effort to "protect our rights around *Wordle*," the Times issued DMCA notices to many of the variants that have popped up over the years. "We always knew we wanted to be the premier subscription destination for digital puzzles," Knight told CNN. "We wanted a collection of human-made puzzles that were for everyone — *Wordle* was sort of the perfect game."

Sometimes, a word is more than just a word. It can evoke connection, vulnerability or challenge. People connect over *Wordle*, from commiserating over how hard the day's word was to sharing how many tries it took to solve it. "I have learned that, for a lot of people, it's given them something to do with their families every day," Mason said. "I find it really heartwarming that people are able to use this as a kickstarter for their relationships and their day. There's a comfort to being like 'we did this together." The most common time to play *Wordle* in the US is 9am, according to the Times. For Donna Cona, who has played it since before the Times acquisition, *Wordle* has become her go-to thing each morning. Although she admits that it "drives me crazy when I'm stumped … and it's usually because I'm always suspect of using the same letter twice in a word." "I've rarely missed a day," said Cona, who still looks forward to her "every morning *Wordle* ritual," and whose friends and family share photos of their completed *Wordle*s as a way to stay connected.

■■■■■

For some families, *Wordle* is a blend of connection and competition.In Malia Griggs' case, it's a way to stay in touch with her father, even though they're physically apart — she lives in New York City, he in Columbia, South Carolina. Her father, Jerrold Griggs — who has a PhD in applied mathematics — takes *Wordle* seriously. He created a spreadsheet in January 2023 to track each of their stats. "He tracks both of our scores (so, the amount of tries it took for each of us to solve the *Wordle*)," Malia told CNN via email. The sheet also includes data like how many vowels the day's word had. "And he keeps notes, such as when our streaks end, when we solve in two guesses, or when we have a streak of solving in three tries or less." The Griggs' started playing *Wordle* together around December 2022, and for Malia it's been a nice way to share interest. "We don't talk every day, but playing the game together is how we show that we're thinking of each other." "I like how this very simple game has become this mental exercise for people to not just guess the word of the day

Wordle 1,370 6/6
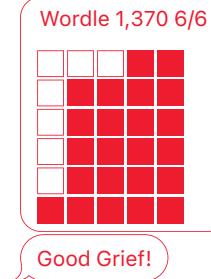
Good Grief!

same thing happened to me!

but put a lot of meaning into it," said Mason. This shows the imagination, creativity and collaboration of the NYT Games audience, Mason said. "There's lots of people like me who sort of change their starting word all the time based on how they're feeling," Mason said. "It just feels more fun that way." Others have superstitions or statistics-based approaches that they abide by, such as using the word ADIEU as their starter because it includes the majority of the vowels — although the Times said in December that ADIEU is the least efficient of the top 30 starting words. SLATE, CRANE and TRACE are the best, according to *Wordle*Bot, the Times' tool that analyzes players' completed *Wordle*s. While breaking a long streak can be disheartening and frustrating — the current longest streak is 968 days, held by multiple people in Hoquiam, Washington and Willowbrook, Illinois — it's an inevitability. This is part of the game, too, said Mason. "It wakes you up." Recently, Malia Griggs broke her 283-day streak because her first guesses didn't reveal any letters, and the remaining ones had multiple options. Although, she said she played "before I was fully awake," which she noted was a rookie mistake. "I'm still bitter about losing," Malia said. "It's more disappointing than I'd like to admit." Breaking a streak hasn't really impacted people's desire to continue playing *Wordle*, according to Mason. Instead, it spurs them on further. *Wordle* "has to be a little spicy," Mason told CNN. "It has to be a little bit challenging — because if it wasn't, it would be less satisfying to win■"
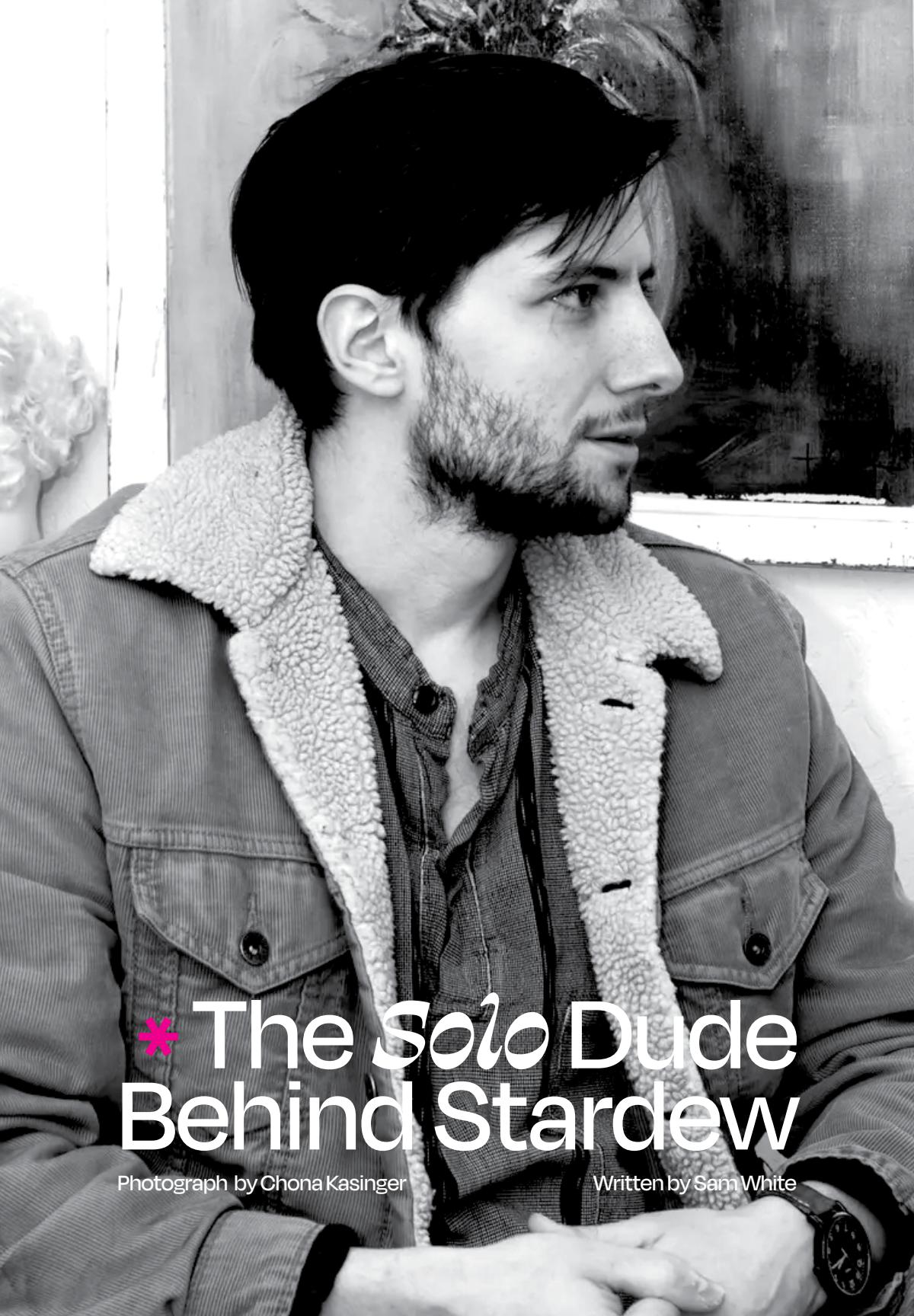
**The *Solo* Dude Behind Stardew**

Photograph by Chona Kasinger      Written by Sam White

It's just after lunch and Eric Barone, a 30-year-old developer, is at his computer in his Seattle apartment. It's a place he rarely leaves: only to go get groceries, for walks to clear his head, or to drive his long-term girlfriend, Amber, to college. Even his three-times-weekly workout takes place downstairs in his basement — alone, away from other people. Most of his days are spent much like today: an indeterminate spiral of reading articles and perusing the comments below, eventually starting work at some unspecified point in the afternoon.

After seven years, the pressure is off. Eric can afford laziness today. We're speaking a few days before the second anniversary of the release of *Stardew Valley*, the video game Eric spent nearly half a decade making. It all started with a modest idea: a renaissance for *Harvest Moon*, the long-running Japanese farming simulation series that, in Eric's eyes, had lost its way. He kept wishing a better version existed. So he made it himself — all by himself, having never made a game before.

"I think it makes sense that I worked entirely alone," Eric says. "I wanted to do all the music, the art." Quiet and contemplative, Eric might not be recognized by the Seattleites who see him walking to the store. He's no Hollywood bigshot. But he's the prodigy behind the unlikeliest independent video game triumph since *Minecraft*.

To appreciate his work, you first have to understand the scale of the task he undertook. Modern video game development is an absurd thing, an enormous creative endeavor that requires millions of dollars. Publishers employ hundreds of developers, producers, artists, animators, designers, writers, and actors to work punishingly long days for several years at a time, some working on the most minuscule of details to create immersive worlds. There are game artists who draw rocks all day, separate audio designers who record the many different sounds made when you throw those rocks, and gameplay designers who determine how much damage those rocks will do when they strike an enemy in the head.

Blockbusters of this scope take a few familiar shapes. *Grand Theft Auto, Madden, Call of Duty* — guns, sports, more guns. Then there's *Stardew Valley* — a humble, intimate farming adventure about the monotony of domestic life, in which you spend dozens of hours parenting cabbages. Eric was a team of one. It took him four and a half years to design, program, animate, draw, compose, record, and write everything in the game, working 12-hour days, seven days a week. His budget was the part-time wage he made as an evening usher at the local stage theater.

Games like *Minecraft* may have paved the way for the democratization of indie-game development, yet despite the tectonic shift in the scene, entirely solo projects like *Stardew Valley* — financially unviable and creatively overwhelming — are still very rare. And of course they are. Even putting money aside, the demands of making intimate art of this scale are enough to break a person.

But as just one man, Eric Barone tested the limits of video game ambition and unintentionally created something that resonated with an audience of millions.

*Stardew Valley* begins with loss. Your grandpa, old and frail, lying on his deathbed, hands you an envelope. Your immediate instinct is to open it. "Have patience," he says, "there will come a day when you feel crushed by the burden of modern life." Years later, Grandpa, long since passed, you are beavering away soullessly at his desk in a faceless corporation called Joja. "Life's better with Joja" adorns the office wall above you. A flashing light blinks under the word "Work." The light next to it, under "Play," never shines. You reach into your drawer and retrieve the envelope:

Dear grandson, If you're reading this, you must be in dire need of a change. The same thing happened to me, long ago. I'd lost sight of what mattered most in life...real connections with other people and nature. So I dropped everything and moved to the place I truly belong. I've enclosed the deed to that place...my pride and joy. It's located in *Stardew Valley*, on the southern coast. It's the perfect place to start your new life. This was my most precious gift of all, and now it's yours. I know you'll honor the family home, my boy. Good luck. Love, Grandpa.

The somber beginning acts as a perfect transfer of responsibilities. This is your farm — yours to grow and develop through hundreds of hours of play. You wake up, sow seeds, water crops, and nurture your livestock. You gather, cutting down trees for lumber and mining veins for ore. You also explore

the nearby town and speak to its locals. Everything you do drains your character's energy. Whether you're growing rows of cabbages to sell at the local market or expanding your stables and coops for livestock, an ever-depleting bar counts down the time left before you have to go to bed. The next day, you wake up and repeat the same tasks. *Stardew Valley* is a perfect loop, one that turns repetitive monotony into therapeutic compulsion.

The game's main charms are its marriage of workmanlike play and sentimental atmosphere, but the themes get pretty dark. Barone explains:

People struggle with personal issues, and I wanted to portray that in the game. I think it makes the characters a lot more relatable...not just these ideal abstractions of people that are sometimes found in games." For Eric, it was another way of ensuring the world of *Stardew Valley* felt truly alive.

The funny thing is that Eric never wanted to make video games, at least not professionally. He liked computers and dabbled in basic programming, but it was never a career ambition. "As a kid, I remember I made this little Choose Your Own Adventure," he says. "Then I was in a band when I was 18 or 19. It was this experimental electronic-pop duo called 17 Colorful Feathers. One of the ideas I had was when we released our album online, I would include a video game with it. I crafted this dumb little game like The Curse of Monkey Island. It was called The 17CF Game, or something like that." "It's pretty embarrassing now," he says, laughing. "I'll send you a link."

Born in Los Angeles, young Eric was whisked away to Washington before he could form memories of the Californian haze. He spent his childhood a little way out of Seattle, on the outskirts of the city limits near the woods, in a semi-rural area called Auburn. Much like Eric, it's an unassuming but pleasant place. It has a Wikipedia-worthy array of parks — 28 of them — and Eric has never strayed far. School, college, his immediate family, and all of his friends. It's here that he also met Amber, while they worked together at a local Auntie Anne's pretzel shop.

Eric's relationship to games is familiar to anyone who grew up in the late '80s or early '90s. His older half-brother introduced him to the Super Nintendo — *Final Fantasy, Chrono Trigger, Earthbound* — and Eric checked out copies of *Nintendo Power* from the library. But it was *Harvest Moon* that

stuck with him as he got older. "I liked that you could have relationships with the townsfolk, and even get married and start a family. That was something you couldn't do in most games I played as a kid, and it made the experience much more personal. That you were living in a world that felt alive, time moved forward with or without your input," Eric says. "It was easy to imagine that the world was very much alive."

As he moved through school, Eric read more about the video game industry — with its underpaid, overworked culture — and he took a swerve. He chose instead to study computer science at the University of Washington Tacoma, graduating in 2011. He tried several times to get what he perceived as a "normal" job, the kind of job that would've allowed him and Amber the everyday life he expected to build. Maybe get a bigger apartment, get married, and have a few kids. But he was repeatedly unsuccessful, failing to get the jobs he was applying for, and with no clear direction for how to correct his trajectory.

Eric was practical. For a better shot at a job, he needed to improve his skill set. Learning to code made the most sense, and he started teaching himself to program video games. It was supposed to be just practice, the most creative way he could teach himself. He and Amber never even had a conversation about abandoning his job search. This was never supposed to be the thing. And it was at his desk, the same one he's sitting at, speaking to me now, that he began making *Stardew Valley.*

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The first moments of the game's life were plain and uneventful. A single avatar — you, the player — floating in an empty void. "I didn't really have any sort of deliberate plan or anything," says Eric. "I just had my intuition as to what was the next important thing I should work on." He started small (Eric's focus is always on the player) and expanded from there, creating a basic navigable area (the place that would become your personal farm).

He then built on the fundamental farming mechanics (crops, livestock, minerals), all of which he researched extensively to authentically re-create their behaviors and scarcities. He'd do all of this again and again: build a slice of the game and develop it until it was "around 80 percent done" before adding depth, reworking bits, or fully redesigning them if he became unhappy with them.

The peripheral features — the townsfolk, social aspects, mining and cave exploration, as well as combat — would be added later in the development, but the creative ethos stuck with Eric throughout the entire process. Create. Move on to something else. Go back and re-create. Create. Move on. Re-create.

The game's character portraits — small avatars that appear when you talk to any of the game's 30 or so townsfolk — were redesigned at least ten times throughout development. First, they were more traditional line drawings. Then Eric tried basic pixel art. The portraits got more detail — better-looking hair, a different shade of hair, and a headband added to the hair. He kept making and remaking, the changes becoming smaller and more intricate with every new redesign until, to most people, the differences were so subtle you'd think they weren't important. He'd lose whole days just fiddling with things he'd made days, weeks, or months ago.

I put in thousands of hours on pixel art just to get better at it and better at it," he says. "I just persevered and forced myself to learn. You realize the thing that you thought was good actually isn't. You realize why, and you improve on it. And that's just an endless cycle." Every part of the game was made with this kind of maddening meticulousness.

Eric needed hundreds of lines of dialogue for the three dozen or so townsfolk you can interact with. He wrote and rewrote those lines for several months straight, over and over, every single day. He also created over a hundred individual cut-scene

moments for them — all of which needed to be tested. Each tweak, of which there were thousands, required him to reboot the game to refresh the game's code. "It was definitely a struggle to keep my sanity," he says. Eric never considered easier alternatives, even if sticking to his vision meant months of painstakingly boring and sometimes infuriating work. "Ultimately, I wanted the game world to feel like a living place. I wanted you to forget that it was a video game and to feel like these people had a life of their own."

This avid perfectionism permeates *Stardew Valley*. Eric is addicted to it — in his video-game life, at least. "He's certainly not neat and orderly, his desk is always messy," Amber says, laughing. "He would be working all day till 11:30 P.M. and I would be like, 'Hey, you have to get off the computer. You have to do something with me. We have to eat dinner. We have to watch an episode of Star Trek.' I needed more interaction with him." Eric's duties as partner had slipped drastically behind his personal ambition to perfect the game. He guiltily recognizes Amber felt lonelier and lonelier as he pushed on, but he did little to address it — he still worked 12 hours a day on the game, often going straight from his desk to the theater for an evening shift. He was all-encompassingly committed to *Stardew Valley*: "When I'm deep into a project that's consuming my entire life," he says, "that's what makes me feel the best."

There were obstacles — some that he didn't know if he could get around. Often a tweak Eric made would break something in the game, or he wouldn't know how to translate ideas into code. But throughout the four and a half years, he never once reached out online by asking questions or speaking to another developer for advice. He hates asking for help. He prefers not having the subconscious feeling of owing a debt for a favor, so instead, he does things all himself. Everything — literally everything — he learned about making games came from poring over pre-existing comment threads on forums and blogs until he found the solutions he needed to move forward.

The only work that never felt tedious was composing the game's soundtrack — an escape from staring at his computer monitor and a chance to let loose on his instruments. He composed dozens of individual pieces of music; at least eight tracks for the game's Winter Festival alone, all but one of which went unused. In the months leading up to
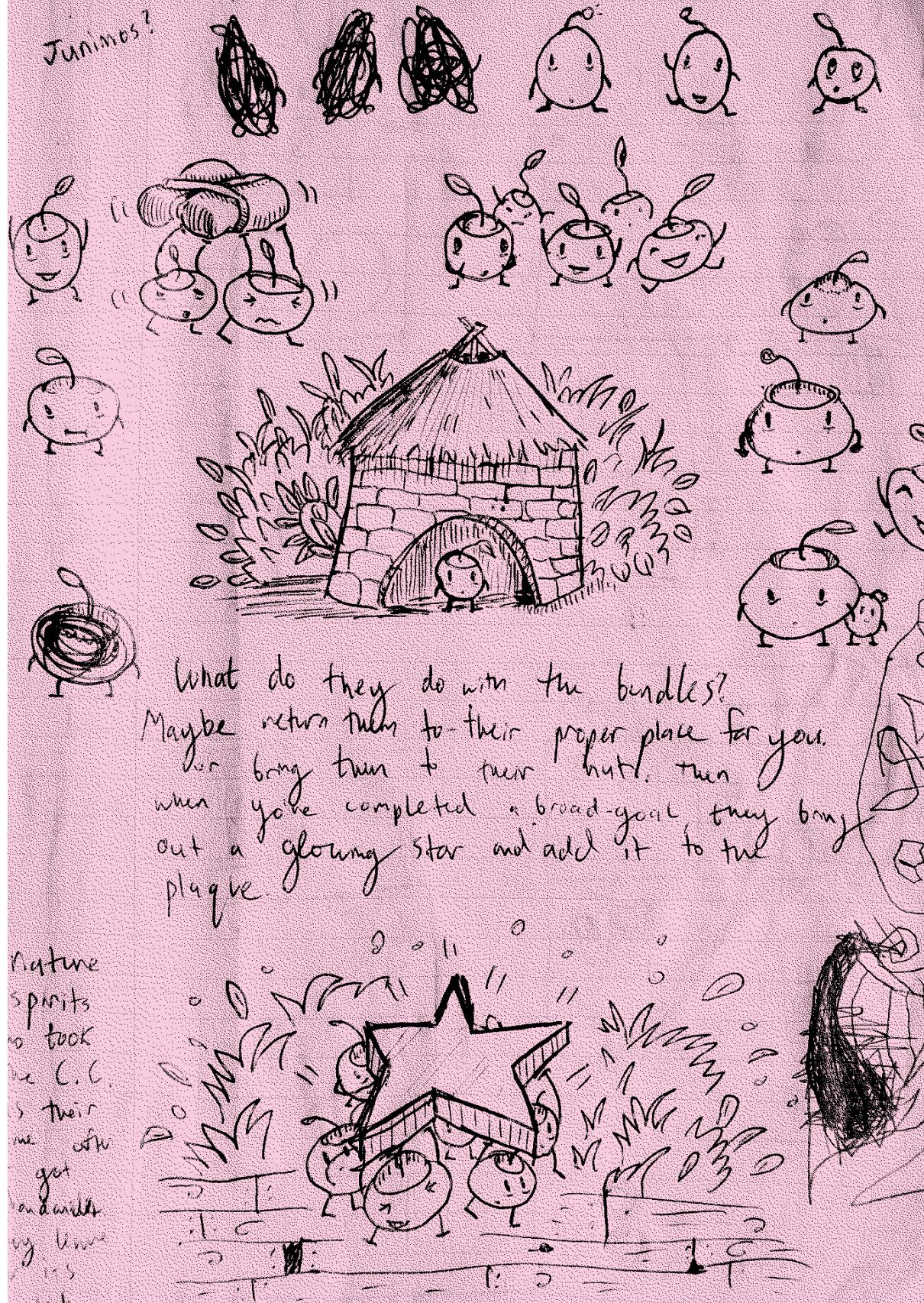
*Stardew Valley*'s release, Eric struggled. He talked often with Amber and his friends about giving up on the game. His confidence had slipped. "Imagine playing the same game, every day, for four and a half years. All day. I was just absolutely sick of it, I was bored," he says. "I didn't even have an objective sense of if the game was good or not. In fact, I thought it was bad." Traditionally, video games are playtested extensively — dozens, if not hundreds, of people kicking the tires, looking for bugs and issues. But even more than that, games are a form of art built on complex systems and code. Playtesters are often asked, Is this game even fun to play? Remarkably, Eric was the only person to play *Stardew Valley* until the very last stages. Not even Chucklefish, the game's publisher, had played it when they signed Eric. Amber had played a few hours here and there — Eric would ask if she thought new parts were any good, but it wasn't nearly enough to gauge objective quality. "She'd give me a vague answer," he says with a laugh. "She thought it was fun, but she didn't know enough about games at the time to really give me a detailed answer."

He couldn't escape from the pressure and even dreaded seeing Amber's parents because of the inevitable questions he'd get about his progress: "How's the game coming along?" "When are you going to be done with that?" Did they look down on him? He couldn't be sure. But the pressure ratcheted up several notches in the final weeks. "I had to prove that I wasn't just crazy, that this wasn't just a pipe dream, and that I was actually gonna follow through on it. That was really getting to me, psychologically, thinking about whether I was wasting my life, wasting my time. So part of my strategy was to convince the people around me that they should believe in me," he says. "But that was difficult. I was definitely embarrassed." Amber urged Eric to finish more quickly, arguing that a slight compromise in quality would be better than never releasing the game at all. But she regrets putting that on Eric. "I think she realized that my level of pickiness was actually important. Maybe the individual pixels on one portrait don't matter, but the general approach of being meticulous and caring about details — that approach overall led to it being a good game."

But it would be when Eric relinquished the privacy of his game that his confidence in it would return. Having been introduced to three Twitch streamers — called Bexy, Siri, and Prens — by a mutual

contact at Chucklefish, he enlisted them to play *Stardew Valley* privately. Siri in particular had been following the game's progress for quite a while: "I went out of my way to make it abundantly clear I was interested. Thankfully, [Eric] hadn't forgotten, and I was one of the first he reached out to when the time finally came." They'd help Eric catch and log bugs for him to fix, as well as offer feedback. "It became almost a game seeing if we could keep up with how quickly he was fixing things," Siri explains. It didn't always help Eric's compulsion for perfection, though, having this dedicated trio of players giving him their opinions. It pushed him to tweak the game right up until release.

A day within *Stardew Valley* lasts around 17 minutes, but Eric kept tweaking it until the end. (It's probably no surprise that he'd lost all sense of time.) But the careful adjustments were crucial to the game working. "The psychology of it and how, by keeping the days short, it always felt like you had time for 'one more day,' no matter how long you had been playing. Before you realized it, hours had passed." Before the game was even released, Bexy, Siri, and Prens had each played *Stardew Valley* for more than 500 hours.

On the evening of February 25, 2016, a few hours before *Stardew Valley* released to the public, Eric encountered a game-breaking bug, the kind of major technical problem that would severely damage people's ability to play. He doesn't even remember what it was, exactly — just that it sent him into crisis mode. Usually, an entire team of developers would be on hand to fix problems like this. As always, though, here it's just Eric. "I stayed up very late in a panic to fix it," he says. "I was in a sort of daze the whole time. It was very stressful but also exhilarating." He spent the following days working nonstop, releasing patch after patch. He felt a huge weight of responsibility to everyone who'd bought it and had issues, so he put yet more time into perfecting them, fixing save files that had corrupted or become unplayable, and continuing to ensure the best quality-of-life improvements for the game in its first few days and weeks.

It sold 500,000 copies in a fortnight. More than Eric, Amber, her parents — or anyone — could ever have imagined. Eric remained the sole fixer of all of the bugs and blips that cropped up, even as the audience ballooned exponentially in front of his eyes. By April, the sales numbers had risen to over

a million and showed no signs of slowing down.

Critics loved it. And on Steam, the largest game-distribution platform, fans had rated it a 10/10. Siri and Bexy both continue to play the game to this day, streaming it live for their audiences. "The game has brought me and so many people joy," Siri says. "It has gotten me through some of the toughest of times these last two years, just by being a relaxing, charming game. Truly, it has touched countless lives and will always be close to my heart."

Eric's enthusiasm was rekindled by the game's critical and commercial success. He created a free update for the game, released about six months after launch. He added new crops for players to cultivate, the ability to marry other characters, a new quest, several new farm buildings, and five different farm layouts (the original game only had one) to expand *Stardew Valley*.

It was only now that Eric was completely, burned out. In August of 2017, he took a vacation. He went on a road trip with Amber and his housemates, completing a cross-country loop down from Washington State into Oregon to see the solar eclipse. They traveled through Idaho and Utah, stopping off to explore the national parks, before making the trip to see the Grand Canyon. In California, Eric reveled in the beach lifestyle he'd been wrenched from as a child and visited Disneyland. After the trip he told himself he would never touch *Stardew Valley* again.

Multiplayer is the last thing you expect from a self-affirmed recluse like Eric. He can't remember exactly when he half-announced it as a feature — he mentioned it in a blog post, however, many years ago, while he was still in the midst of development. ("Do I regret [promising] that? Yes. I think I do regret it.") It's the next and potentially final stage of *Stardew Valley*'s life. Out in the next few weeks, it allows up to four players to combine their efforts and play together in one farm. It's the first part of the game that Eric hasn't been that involved in. All the multiplayer coding sounded "really unpleasant" to him, so Chucklefish, who up until this point had handled only the admin and marketing, subcontracted the development of multiplayer to another party.

Eric has now moved on to his next so-far-unannounced game. He wants you to know that it isn't a direct sequel to *Stardew Valley*. He also wants

you to know it's nowhere near ready; it'll be another three years, he reckons. It's more focused but still a deep, immersive experience. Optimistically, Amber thinks his newfound development expertise means he might get it right first try this time around, without the need to obsessively redesign and change every little bit of the game: "We'll see," she says. "No promises." Eric is excited, buzzing about his project, even if he's deliberately vague. "It's a relief to finally be working on something new after six and a half years," he says. "I'm definitely going to go more extreme [this time]."

You've gotta do something outrageous to justify your existence in the video game world. I want every moment of the game to delight the player with things that they would not expect, things that go above and beyond what normal games do. With the graphics, the sound, the music, the characters, with how interactive the world is, or how alive it feels."*Stardew Valley* may be the game he comes back to for the rest of his life, but he recognizes it's time to at least try to move on. He says, "I feel less connected to it than I used to. Because the game has kind of left the nest and taken on a character of its own that's more than just me. I would imagine it's like if you have a kid, and they leave the house and they start a life of their own. You still feel like this parental connection."

Working on the new game, he has spurts of motivation, all while he bums about, reading articles and comments on days like today. He hates the dilly-dallying trap that he's fallen into, but he's not indulging in the high life he could very easily afford, either. He loved his life before he got rich — "So why would I change that?" Eric says what he means. He knows *Stardew Valley*'s success was, in part, due to a lack of "PR bullshit." With game number two, it's no different. "I'm just making the game I want to make, in the style that I want, without worrying whether it's going to be successful or not." He doubts the new game will come even close to his debut in that regard, but now there are far fewer restrictions and absolutely no financial worries to hold him back.

"In *Stardew Valley*, I felt kind of constrained because I was basing it off of [*Harvest Moon*]. For my new game, there's no specific game that I'm emulating or building upon. I have a lot more creative freedom to do it however I feel like." He's not finished — not nearly. He's doing it all again, the only way that he knows how: alone∎

# The Fantasy* of Cozy Tech

From the "cozy gaming" trend to a new generation of A.I. companions, our devices are trying to swathe us in a digital and physical cocoon.
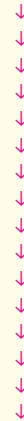
At a wide desk in a bedroom somewhere sits a figure, her back facing the camera, supported by an ergonomic white office chair. Her head is bracketed by puffy, white noise-canceling headphones. Her wrists rest on a foam cloud as she plays a pixelated farm-simulation video game called *Stardew Valley* on a handheld Nintendo Switch. She is surrounded by screens. An expansive computer monitor in front of her displays footage of another game. A monitor to the side projects an animation of some friendly forest landscape, with animals flitting among gently swaying trees. On the wall, lights the shape of geometric tiles cast a soft glow in changing colors according to whatever is onscreen. On floating shelves above her rest small potted plants, signs of organic life amid a tranquil technological ecosystem. Her keyboard has keys in pastel colors that clack like a typewriter's; next to it rests a glass mug of grass-green matcha latte. You can find versions of this figure across *TikTok* and Instagram, under the hashtag #cozygaming. She is completely ensconced in a serene environment, a self-contained digital and physical cocoon. Her accessories, the room's décor, and even her soft clothes and fuzzy blankets extend the world of her games. As one cozy-gaming content creator put it,

"Like someone having a bubble bath and candles and a glass of wine, you're turning a typical normal activity into something more relaxing."

↳ Cozy gaming has become not just a social-media genre but a life style. The trend can be traced back to the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nintendo released the latest iteration of its *Animal Crossing* series, in March of 2020, just in time for quarantined players to hide away as they built cutesy, cartoonish islands populated by anthropomorphized creatures and shared them with one another. The game, which has sold nearly fifty million copies to date, became emblematic of pandemic escapism, offering a kind of parallel virtual society in which interaction was still possible. Around the same time, a law student named Kennedy started posting videos of herself playing *Animal Crossing* and other, similarly soothing games, under the name @cozy.games, eventually accumulating six hundred thousand followers on *TikTok* and countless imitators.

↳ Kennedy has the requisite office chair and wide wooden desk, but she also plays games, and reads, in a lounge chair complete with s pillow and a chunky knit blanket that her cat lays atop.

Words by Kyle Chayka

Illustration by Ariel Davis

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# DESIGNED NOT JUST TO BE HELD IN OUR HANDS BUT ATTACHED TO OUR PERSON

↳ The cozy style is made up of "warm lighting, natural materials, soft textures, and, most importantly, knickknacks that make you happy," Kennedy (who goes by her first name only, or by the nickname Cozy K) told me recently. "Coziness is that warm glow of peace and safety." Even as the threat of COVID-19 receded, the popularity of cozy content has continued to grow, helping to preserve some of the housebound, self-cosseted mood of quarantine for a world now buffeted by economic instability, international conflict, and political upheaval. Cozy gaming is "reassuring during turbulent times," Kennedy said. A few days after Trump's victory in the 2024 Presidential election, she posted a video of herself throwing down a newspaper, screaming, and retreating to her desk to play the Sims. The caption read, "my daily routine until further notice."

↳ Meditative video games such as the Sims or *Minecraft* have long offered players a form of immersive escapism into worlds of their own making. *Stardew Valley*, with its now famous pixelated barns and crops, was first released in the twenty-tens, a decade that also saw the rise of hygge, a Scandinavian stylized coziness to combat the darker seasons. Luxury candles and weighted blankets became millennial status symbols. But the popularity of #cozygaming represents a new ideal of technologically enabled self-soothing,

both onscreen and off. The world-weary pursuit of comfort has filtered from video games to other forms of gadgetry and entertainment, with each new video and accessory designed to foster a sensory environment of unrelenting harmoniousness. As the physical world becomes more alienating, we build ourselves benign parallel universes to burrow into. The archetypal cozy bedroom becomes a form of virtual reality.

↳ Coziness is achieved not only through what's on our screens but through the look of the screens themselves. One feature of the cozy-tech era is that our technological devices conjure something increasingly comforting and organic. Where once Apple's designs were defined by a sleek geometric flatness, whether the razor-thin MacBook Air or the iPad Pro, they are lately getting blobbier and more intimate — designed not just to be held in our hands but attached to our person. The Apple Vision Pro V.R. headset creates a holistic digital environment, even broadcasting a simulation of the wearer's eyes on its external screen. The Apple Watch monitors your vital signs; AirPods can now function as hearing aids. All of them provide the coziness of a technological second skin, a diaphanous filter that regulates your sensory input, insuring comfort before you even have to think about it.

987-654-3210

4:03 PM

I'm outside

↳ For all the anxieties surrounding the advent of artificial intelligence — the threat of deepfakes, the surge in bot spam — A.I. technology has also ushered in visions of sweetly humanoid devices that adjust themselves to our personal preferences. On Apple TV+'s gently techno-dystopian mystery series *Sunny*, released this year, Rashida Jones plays a woman named Suzie opposite a feminine robot named Sunny, whose huge, spherical head features a face glowing forth from a screen like an emoji sprung to life. Sunny is the creation of Suzie's husband, who died under ambiguous circumstances, leaving her alone in their life in Kyoto. "I was programmed for you," the robot tells her during their slapstick detective quest to find out what really happened to him. Suzie's home is cozily warm and insulated, filled with funky furniture that she lies around on in a haze of grief, swathed in soft, thick fabrics. She often gazes at her phone, a rounded, blue device that has the plastic texture and saturated hue of a Playmobil toy. Sunny initially speaks in an obsequious *ChatGPT*-generic tone, but the robot gradually adopts Suzie's speech patterns, softening Suzie's initial skepticism. Suzie and Sunny sit together on the couch, watching TV like snug domestic companions. In one scene, Sunny cuddles into bed with Suzie to comfort her, emitting fake breathing sounds. A.I. is something intimate and tactile, the show seems to promise, capable of lulling a user into acceptance by emulating human traits. The user is coddled by the machine, voluntarily infantilized.

↳ The first generation of actual A.I. devices is adopting the cozy aesthetic, too. These devices have organic names — *Rabbit, Humane, Friend*. Like *Sunny*, they are playfully designed, compact, and blob-like, unthreatening and trusty confidants. *Humane*'s Web site describes its product as an "intelligent, voice-powered wearable companion"; it's a pin that gazes outward from your chest and analyzes the world with its camera. Friend, the creation of Avi Schiffmann, a twenty-two-year-old entrepreneur, is a necklace hung with a plastic orb, with a light embedded at its center to represent its "soul," Schiffmann told me recently. Scheduled for release early next year, it uses A.I. to process conversations and sounds around you, and then it texts you its observations about whatever is happening, whether you're going through a breakup, hiking in the woods, or getting a promotion at work. It's a "superintelligent, omnipresent entity that you talk to with no judgment in the most intimate way," Schiffmann said. Friend swaddles its

user in protective surveillance. Schiffmann's inspiration for the Friend product included his childhood encounters with games and animated shows from the nineties — Tamagotchi, Pokemon, Digimon — which featured little creatures who follow their owners around. The design of Friend recalls the Digivice from Digimon, a handheld gadget with buttons, antennae, and a tiny screen on which a user's digital companions appear, before they are summoned by the Digivice out of the digital world and into the real one. Like the Pokemon trainers of yore, the modern adult A.I. user who ventures out into the wider world can draw comfort from knowing she's never really alone.

↳ Social media in its original form reflected an urge to connect with other people living their lives somewhere else in the real world. The coziness trend suggests that the Internet and artificial intelligence can lead us ever inward. In the cozy era, our screens and the related accoutrements of digital life fulfill all of our emotional and sensory needs. Stef Kight, a journalist in the D.C. area, and a fan of cozy content, told me that the trend is connected, in her mind, with a *TikTok* mantra: Romanticize your life. As she put it, "Let's romanticize even the most insular, habitual things that we do. We can still make it enjoyable and aesthetically pleasing and comfortable." Last winter, Kight hosted a reading retreat for her book club, gathering twenty women in two plush houses in Virginia to read and discuss books amid a snow-covered landscape — another aestheticized act of coziness, though a notably social one. By contrast, the archetypal cozy figure at her desk, plugged into multiple screens, is an image of loneliness which is also meant to assuage loneliness. #Coziness, in a way, stylizes isolation, making it look desirable. This is an old paradox of the digital world: the same platforms that provide connection also have a way of cutting us off. But #cozygaming suggests that the solution is to surround yourself with yet more gadgets and devices, whether an ergonomic Aeron desk chair, a video projector that turns your wall into a scene from "Harry Potter," or a new A.I. companion who follows your every move. As *Friend*'s Avi Schiffmann told me, "I do think the loneliness crisis was created by technology, but I do think it will be fixed by technology."

↳ Liv Charette, a cozy-gaming *TikTok* creator and musician living in Nashville, told me that the message of cozy video games is <mark>"It's O.K. to be childlike."</mark> Others have described the pursuit of coziness as a way of "healing your internal child." As the usual markers of adulthood — establishing a career, buying property, starting a family — become more elusive for today's young people, cozy gaming offers a form of domesticity through the worlds on their screens. A post on Threads, in October, pinpointed the irony: <mark>"*Stardew Valley* is a game that lets you live out your wildest fantasies like: Making friends, owning a home ,earning a living wage, and going outside."</mark> *Unpacking*, another popular game, involves moving into new spaces and putting objects away. *Vampire Therapist* features the titular figure helping his patients improve their immortal lives through cognitive-behavioral therapy. *Wylde Flowers* is about a witch who arrives in a new town and begins cultivating a coven. The themes are interchangeable; the underlying format remains the same. You develop relationships, construct residences, and customize landscapes. If one digital world or another doesn't work out, you can just reset the game or pick a new one, the way you might shift the position of a pillow to make yourself that much more comfortable.



↳ Within the cozy games and the footage of people playing them, though, there seems to be a desire for something beyond the screen, the sorts of physical experiences hinted at by the games' analog subject matter — farming, potion-mixing, construction. Similarly, A.I. products answer a yearning for social interaction and the comfort of community with a simulacrum thereof, a machine friend who never needs anything from you in return. Eleanor, a young British gamer, got into cozy content creation on *TikTok* under the username @cozy.eleanor after dropping out of college and moving home to her parents' farm, outside of Cambridge, to deal with chronic illness. She turned to games such as *Stardew Valley* and *Life Is Strange*, an interactive narrative about American adolescence, in part because they offered tangible forms of achievement during a stalled time in her life. "Video games for me have been a savior," she told me. In a recent video, titled "lazy sunday evenings," Eleanor sits in dim, warm light at her desk, where she plays *Animal Crossing* on her Switch, crochets, and completes a page from a coloring book while watching a *Studio Ghibli* animated film on her monitor. A lit candle glimmers next to the screen and a vase of flowers decorates the desk. Her accessories — keyboard, mouse, controllers — are tucked away into neat cubbies.

↳ Turning her childhood bedroom into a zone of maximal coziness — including, recently, with the addition of a white *Aeron chair* — was a way of asserting control. "I don't see a lot of progress in my day-to-day life getting better, so seeing the progress of arranging my desk, it was like a physical progressing," Eleanor said. Her surroundings are "immersive," she continued, "you're keeping the vibe going"; the outside world is kept at bay. Beyond the walls of the house, her parents run a farm with real chickens and ducks and fields of wheat. Eleanor knows that the cozy aesthetic is a fantasy, just as role-playing games and neighborhoods of anthropomorphized creatures are fantasies. It is ultimately an expression of alienation, an indulgence in the kinds of unreality that technology excels at providing. She said, of the agricultural life, with all its physicality and mess, "The reality, for people who play farming Sims, would not appeal quite so much■"

TAKE CARE

*Baby Girl*
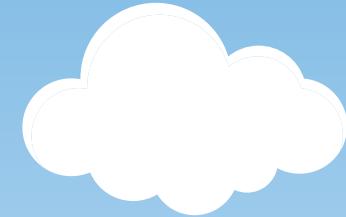
# LEVEL 12: CROSS WORD

CREATED BY CATE MCPHEE

## Across

1 Semi-liquid lump
5 Post-wildfire problem
9 What Mario does best (sorry, Goombas)
14 Ackerman from Attack on Titan
15 Three to card players
16 Mario's 2D form
17 Easy Bake _____
18 A little over 5,000 feet
19 They might spit on you in *Minecraft*
20 Fancy way of saying "game over" in a medieval RPG.
21 Pleased
22 Stardew _____
23 Metric unit of length
25 Unfortunatley
27 Walk sluggishly
30 How your villagers feel in ACNH when you're gone
35 Actor Scott from Severance
38 Narrow strip of land
40 Aswan Dam's waterway
41 Emerald or Topaz, e.g.
42 Container
43 Embark on a journey, say
45 Popular game during the pandemic
48 Maple product
49 Talks excessively
50 Needleworkers
54 Frolic playfully
57 Desire or impulse
60 Leave out or exclude
61 Problematic food bacteria
63 In the place of
64 Wander
65 Starbucks emblem
66 Usual or typical for short
67 Item to collect in Mario 64 to advance to next level
68 Adversary of God
69 Source of withdrawal?
70 The true horror of Super Mario 64's underwater level
71 Waves in Spanish

## Down

1 Red substance that drains life in Zelda Tears of the Kingdom
2 Embankment to prevent floods
3 Not secret or hidden
4 Trash container
5 Website developer's code
6 Solo in opera
7 Hyrule princess
8 Organ of sight
9 Pool noise
10 Lanky or lofty
11 Shimmering, iridescent stone
12 Viral image
13 What you do at a statue in Zelda to get more hearts
21 Used to keep hair in place
22 Hudgens actress
24 Meas. for a motor (abbr.)
26 Move heavily
28 Spoken
29 This may be floppy
31 Not wanting the company of others
32 Type of subatomic particle
34 You ain't seen nothin' _____
35 One of the fundamental states of matter (two words)
36 What every celebrity does after a Twitter scandal
37 Arabic name meaning prince
39 Masculine German article meaning "the"
42 Superhero accessory
44 Coffee-related Summer
46 Blathers runs one of these
47 Pearl producers
51 It's not better
52 Streamer chat pictures
53 Enemy
55 Roman goddess of death
56 Requests made in an urgent manner
57 Forearm bone
58 Violent disturbance by a crowd
59 Microorganism that can cause disease
62 Dragonfly _____ (operated by Lorelai Gilmore)

2024 anthem
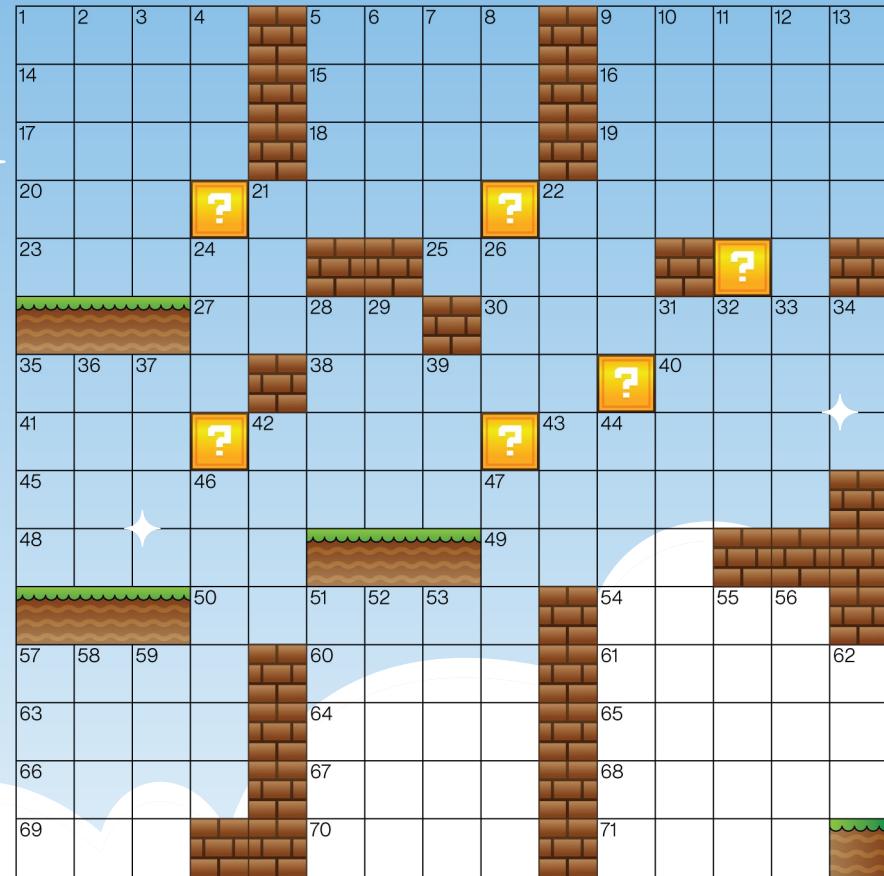
## GAMES MENTIONED

| | |
|---|---|
| The Sims | 48x |
| Wordle | 38x |
| Stardew Valley | 32x |
| Minecraft | 6x |
| Animal Crossing | 4x |
| Mario | 4x |
| Harvest Moon | 3x |
| Zelda | 2x |
| Grand Theft Auto | 1x |
| Madden | 1x |
| Call of Duty | 1x |
| Unpacking | 1x |
| Vampire Therapist | 1x |
| Wylde Flowers | 1x |