

EAR RAT MAGAZINE

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The Boring Plague.

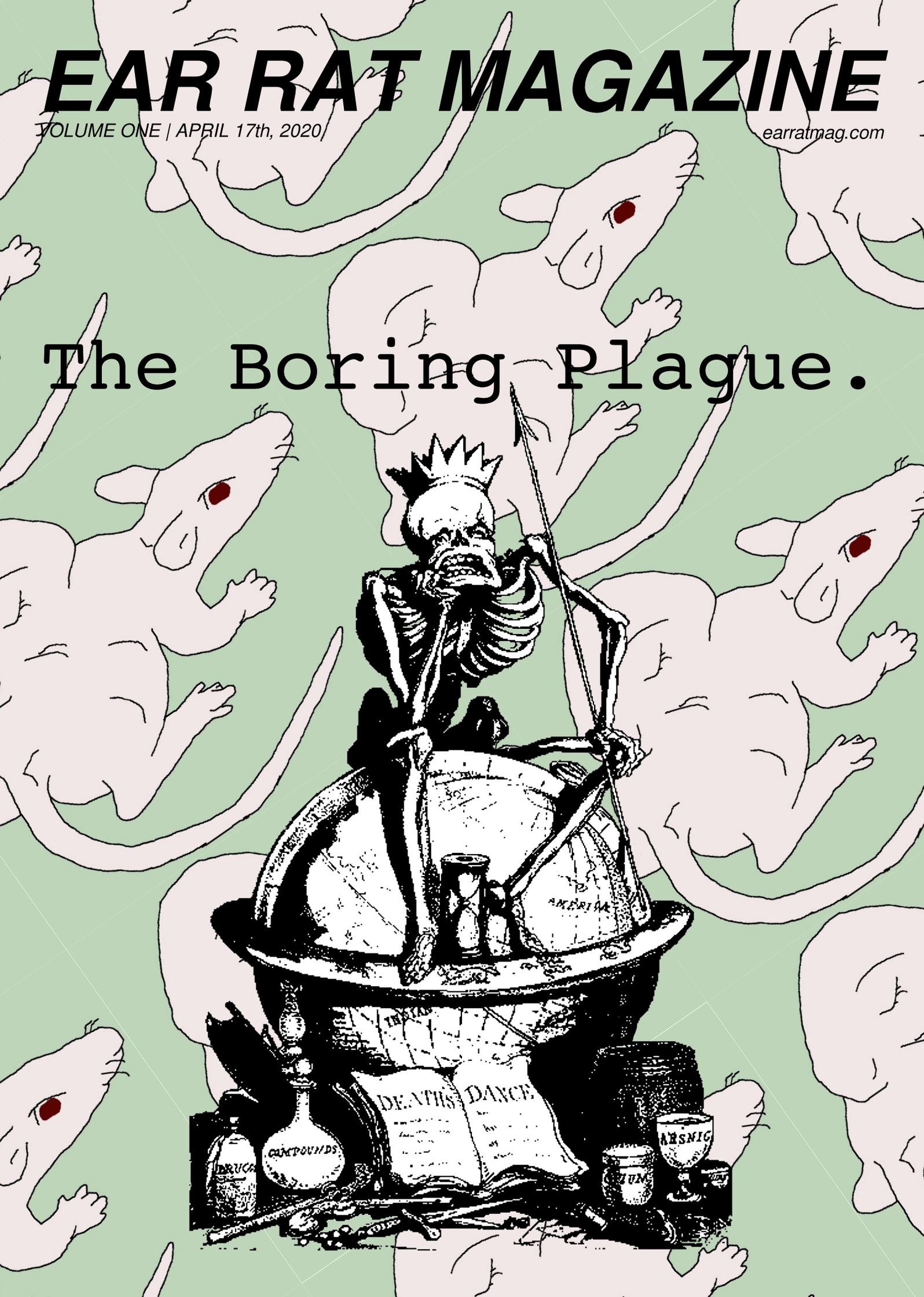


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Introduction From the Editor

It's always a little nerve-racking trying to create something from nothing. The void is all we know; it's all around us at all times and there is a certain comfort in never trying to pull something of your own from the depths of that cozy abyss. When I started reaching out to various creators on Neocities about putting together some sort of "publication," I was expecting most people to either ignore me completely or to politely decline, citing the fact that they had their own things to work on, and the world was currently drowning from a pandemic, and who are you again anyway? You write little things about your life or something?

Instead, we've started something here. Humble, sure. Not quite great yet, definitely. Arguably, bad and ugly, yes I will allow that. But something is here, and we've started it and the only way through is forward.

The theme of this issue, like virtually every other possible thing in our lives at the moment, is related to COVID-19. "The Boring Plague." A poking of fun at the current times, but still an acknowledgement that the indifference of disease can come for anyone. It might be boring to stay safely inside your house all day, but it's a hell of a lot better than the alternative; slowly dying on a hospital bed, removed from everyone you love.

For the sake of everyone, stay home if you can. Stay safe if you can't.

We have work from the United States, Australia, the UK, Lithuania, and Japan. We have fiction about grocery store clerks and pandemic-dystopia runners, non-fiction covering the first days of pandemic, how to prepare for the days at hand, and what we can expect going forward. We have a small comic about daily life now, and a plague doctored reimagined for our social media existence. And a game review about something impossibly odder than reality at the moment.

I'm proud of the work that was created for this, and excited to see where this journey takes us. I'd like to personally thank all the contributors to this issue who took a chance with me and created some great content on a very tight timeline. Without y'all this wouldn't have happened.

For anyone who wants to get involved going forward, please stay tuned. I can say that issue two's theme is "Heat Death" and we're expecting for an early June release time. So if that's enough for you to start making something, by all means. Otherwise be sure to check the website for further info about what and how to contribute.

Ear Rat Mag is based on the fact that some dude grew a bunch of cow cells onto a mouse and shaped it into an ear and everyone freaked out because they thought it meant we were growing human ears on mice now. It's sort of poetic in a dumb way, just like this magazine.

Thank you.

-Hasty.

COVID-19: Week by Week

by Dann

It was early in March when I started hearing about the "Wuhan Coronavirus" as it was called by most places at the time. Shortly after, the more technical term COVID-19 was used, just like "Swine Flu" became H1N1 years ago. There were some rumblings about that name being insensitive, but since that was the objective point of origin, I'm not entirely sure what renaming the disease accomplished. That said, I'm not really of the opinion that the original name was problematic, nor do I care that it was changed. It's a small point in the grand scheme of things. There were however, some issues with declining business in areas like Chinatown, which seemed bizarre, but maybe that played into it.

Anyway, for the first few weeks my initial thoughts mirrored those of the several disease scares that have happened in the past: Swine Flu, SARS, Ebola, flesh-eating bacteria, etc. While I'm sure they affected people, and for those who had to endure them first-hand it surely must have been unimaginable, nothing ever seemed to come from it. We didn't take any large scale precautions and people didn't really react or alter their daily routine.

Compared to COVID-19, there was almost in inverse relationship between the media-portrayed scariness of the disease and the public's reaction. Ebola was going to liquefy your guts, flesh-eating bacteria would rot your leg off if you bumped it on a coffee table, and SARS/Swine Flu were incurable and potentially deadly inflictions. In contrast, COVID-19 was initially portrayed as just sort of a "worse flu" affecting older people, many of whom had pre-existing conditions.

During this initial time, people I encountered were largely unconcerned. They repeated mortality statistics for the regular flu; numbers that dwarfed those from COVID-19 at the time. Granted the virus hadn't hit stateside yet, but it's also easy to forget how many still die from the "normal" flu season. The only real concern seemed to be from Italy, though it remained a distant worry. Economic troubles began to appear even while the actual virus hadn't. The stock market was a primary concern, but since that's fickle on a normal day and subject to the whims of traders, I personally didn't see it as a worry. It would bounce back again. No harm, no foul.

The second week of March was when things started to shift. I work at a higher education school and saw some correspondence regarding the students studying abroad in Italy. There was a possibility that they may not be able to return home after the semester ended. Also during this week there were rapid-fire emails coming out daily regarding updates and preparedness. I noticed them as well from other companies, mainly utilities or vendors. It seemed like everyone was trying to cover their bases; it felt like more of a formality than anything else.

Thursday, March 12th rolled around and things started to hit closer to home. The elementary schools were

rumored to be closing the following week, and the universities planned on extending spring break, followed by some distance learning before resuming normal classes in mid-April. By the weekend the elementary schools followed the same plan, initially for a one-week duration of break time.

It was at that point when the grocery stores went crazy. There were memes and jokes about toilet paper being bought in bulk before this point, but it hadn't really been noticeable until that Saturday. I had put off my shopping due to some other obligations, but dropped by after my evening shift around 8:00PM. I was warned to go earlier, but I didn't want to play into the panic. In the back of my mind, it was the same virus scare that appears every few years to upset people and raise emotions.

Arriving at the supermarket, I casually went right to the cleaning supply aisle and, sure enough, it was stripped bare. Pretty much everything else was there though, save for hand sanitizer and eggs. I live in an area that has occasional snow storms that prohibit travel, usually not lasting longer than a day. However, people continually buy milk, bread, eggs every single time there's an unfavorable forecast. Sometimes when I see a herd of people while shopping, I wonder if snow is coming. Nevertheless, I grabbed what I needed without much of a problem and had enough of everything else for a while.

Sunday rolled around, and most businesses were just being cautious. If they didn't have customers gathering in close quarters, they just reaffirmed that they were sanitizing things even more, and certain indoor areas might have restricted crowd sizes. I believe the official gathering size was limited to 250 people at this time. Restaurants were still open, but many people were simply staying home voluntarily. We went to a Japanese place for sushi and it was pretty dead in there.

The following week began much in the same way. If you could work from home, there were allowances to let you do so. With schools closed most people had to stay home anyway. My kids' school had already prepared material and video conferencing options, but I heard many other schools simply moved April vacation forward so they would have extra time to get some sort of distance learning plan in action. I still went into work, but I was one of the few. With the lack of coworkers, I didn't see much of an issue with going in. I know many people didn't feel comfortable working though, and this caused some tension between employers and employees. Without a firm state or local mandate, it was left up in the air.

My own business took it pretty hard. Only the faithful customers were coming in, many of them calling ahead since a lot of places were voluntarily shutting their doors. We made sure that everything was extra clean so people felt comfortable. There was also not much of a need for people to hang around in the waiting area, so crowds never became an issue. Still, income was down between 60 and 80%.

During this week the gathering size was reduced from 250 to 20, and restaurants were prohibited from dine-in service, take-out and drive-through were the only approved methods. As the week went on, there were rumors about other businesses being subject to restrictions or outright closures. Those that matched our line of work seemed to be okay, at least for the time being. The slowdown in business was difficult enough; an entire shutdown would be unimaginable.

As the weekend approached, the mayor of a nearby city issued a mandatory close of non-essential businesses, some which did match ours. However since it was a local mandate and not state-wide, it didn't apply to us. The state governor was set to issue a news conference on Sunday though, so that didn't sound promising. We were out and about on that Sunday; the one day off we get a week. Most of the day was then tied up trying to figure out what was actually said at the news conference. It was summarized by local news outlets but they didn't really outline everything in detail. The best we could figure was that more businesses were set to close by 5:00PM on Monday. Ours wasn't mentioned specifically, though it felt close, so I figured the best course would be to call in on Monday and clarify it from the source.

Entering week four, I found out that another identical business in the state announced that they would be open. I gave them a call and it seemed like they were betting on the mandate not explicitly listing our type of business, so he was going to see where it went. I called as well, and the official hotline didn't really confirm things either way. I had a moment of hope, but then got a call from my morning help that the police showed up and ordered our "open" sign to be shut off. Even though the mandate allowed through 5:00PM, I guess it was just to wrap things up.

I've kept the business details a bit vague since they're not important (and no, it's nothing scandalous), but I will state that it is very seasonal. The Spring months typically generate most of the income for the year and carry the remainder months which operate at a net-loss. So while the reduction in income was already hard to manage, a total shutdown was downright scary. Luckily I had enough reserved from the past few

years to float some period of downtime, but it's a double-blow working through the savings, while also not building up that reserve for the coming off-season.

I continued going to my main job, and the remainder of the week wasn't terribly eventful, but there were more signs that this wasn't going to be over anytime soon. The only real additional mandate was the further reduction of crowds from 20 to 10 and the order to self-quarantine if you arrived from neighboring states. To facilitate this, state police would be pulling over everyone with out-of-state license plates, informing them of the quarantine order as well as asking them where they were going and why. Some businesses were also posting signs that people from those states were not welcome. After only a few days, the Constitutionality of this process was questioned via a lawsuit threat against the state, and the police procedure was quickly dropped. A further reduction of gathering sizes: from 10 down to 5. This was announced at a press conference containing 6 individuals.

Hot on the heels of the last mandate, the last day of March brought with it a complete closure of all of the remaining businesses that weren't deemed essential. Liquor stores and weed distributors were considered essential, so it seemed to be at random, or at least for those who had some political pull. My main job vacated everyone for a week, due to a six-degrees of Kevin Bacon type scenario. A vendor had dropped by and someone he knew had the virus, so it was best to err on the side of caution. There was a general stay-at-home order, but it didn't really stop anyone from going out. Finally by Friday, all beaches and state parks were closed to visitors. Well, you could still walk there, but no parking. To be fair the outdoor walking paths were packed with people, but on the other hand no one was really on top of each other. Other options were limited, so getting outside was one of the only viable choices left for most people. There was nothing to really come in contact with at the parks either, so I feel the shutdown was a little restrictive for the payoff.

As the second week of April came, we ventured outside the state for the first time. With all the state parks closed, we had a membership to a private one and took a walk there. On the way there, we had seen several police vehicles parked every so often on the opposite side of the road, so we anticipated being stopped on our return drive. Though the issue to pull over any out of state cars was ruled against, it was simply replaced with a sign instructing all out of state cars to pull into the rest stop for questioning, else they pull you over. Seemed like a technicality, but the National Guard were very nice and waved us through since we said we were going home without stopping.

As we now enter the third week of April, it's looking like the business will be closed through the first week of May. Most of the country is entering the peak of the pandemic, a few states like mine are trailing behind, but should follow suit by the end of April. I'm very much ready to get this all behind us. Truth be told - aside from the business aspect of course - my daily life hasn't been affected all that much. I still go to work, even if it's from home a few days a week. I still see the same small group of people. I still interact with others online. I usually spend a lot of time outside, so that's been unchanged except for the state parks. I suppose the only concern is that I'm down to the last few rolls of toilet paper.

I know this will pass, and we'll get back to normal. Like any catastrophe, our memories are short and the impact of the changes that we endured will slowly fade. I guess if I had any hopes for retaining something positive, it might be to rethink the way we deal with normal diseases. Things like ensuring that people actually stay home when sick rather than trudging through the work day, being better about sanitation of public places, or having more supplies on hand for times when supply wouldn't normally be enough. To be fair, I feel like most of this already happens, and there's diminishing returns for going much further; there's plenty of other places that have been hit much harder. We can't afford to have one of these every year; the impact COVID-19 has had is immense, but it won't be the last we see of it.

I can't wait to get my business back up and running. I needed this Spring season to float the rest of the year, so it's going to be very tough going forward. But we have our health, and that's important too. Hopefully the remainder of 2020 gives us a little break.

What's Next?

by bikerbuddy

When I was asked to write a piece for this publication I quickly dashed out a draft and sent it to our editor-in-chief, then settled back to count my toe nails again while I waited for Coronavirus to pass over our house like God's vengeful wrath during ... well, Passover. For those not familiar with the tradition (I feel like a child explaining how trains work to an engineer here, so bear with me) Passover marks the tenth plague of Egypt as told in the book of Exodus. The firstborn sons of Egyptian families died in the plague while Jewish families were spared by marking the doorposts of their homes with the blood of a slaughtered lamb. As I write this during the Easter of the Coronavirus pandemic while practising social isolation, it's hard not to make the connection.

But in the manner of my mind's working, which resembles a dog sent to walk itself on its own lead, I immediately connected the whole matter of the pandemic with an apocalypse in my first draft. After several peregrinations, I managed to say something about the 'plague' – COVID-19 – which has confined a good portion of the world to social isolation. But our editor-in-chief pointed out that dogs walking themselves rarely end up any place they mean to, and that I was somehow to explain my connection between boring plagues and exciting apocalypses, or turn in my pen licence.

In my defence, I was left unsupervised. But I also might add, the connection is not so daft. It's not that I believe COVID-19 is the beginning of the end for human civilisation. I don't. I think we will eventually manage to live with it like we have learned to live with other diseases. I'm old enough to remember government ads on Australian television in the early 1980s for AIDS when it first hit the scene. Now that was apocalyptic stuff! The agency hired by the government came up with a wonderfully reassuring metaphor: a bowling alley of death. At the end of the alley stood fearful families in the place of bowling pins. The atmosphere was dark, the voiceover threatening. And there stood Death – the Grim Reaper himself, complete with scythe – cradling a bowling ball, ready to send it down the alley with gleeful abandon, scoring strikes and picking up spares. The families were knocked down with disturbing cuts and the jarring cacophony of the bowling ball. Their symbolic deaths sobered Australians.

Many people have died from AIDS over the years, but society now manages HIV infection, and I think that is what will happen with COVID-19. But until a vaccine can be produced we all face an altered life, even if parts of society manage to limp back in the shorter term. Meanwhile, it's pretty awful and many people are already struggling to cope at home.

So, while COVID-19 is mostly a dull affair if you and everyone you know is lucky enough to avoid it, apocalypses somehow remain pretty cool. Post-apocalyptic fiction – books and movies – seems

more popular than ever. I have a friend who motivates herself to run by fleeing fictional zombies described in her headset from the people at *Zombie's Run*. She even buys merchandise. If you know about *Runner 5*, you need no further explanation.

Novels and movies have been feeding us a steady diet of post-apocalyptic narratives for some time. In *The Terminator* Sarah Connor is plucked from 1980s mundanity to kick arse and raise a revolutionary leader. In *Shaun of the Dead* and *The World's End*, Simon Pegg's characters find a solution in drinking at the local pub. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss not only does it for her district, but man she looks hot while doing it! Name a post-apocalyptic narrative and somewhere you'll find it's about saving the world or surviving its perils while looking yummy. How many teenage novels about the apocalypse feature a female protagonist who's destined to right wrongs, just as soon as she can figure out which hot guy to date?

It's interesting how popular dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives have become. Your world is about to end in one of several awful ways. Enjoy. Why, thank you! The truth is, I have often enjoyed books and movies in this genre, while also understanding there is a certain kind of modern Millennialism involved. Millennialism is common to several religions, Christianity among them. It involves a belief in some kind of destruction of the current order of things; the kingdom of God is at hand. That sort of thing. And a thousand years seems to be the yardstick for this thinking. In Christianity it's been the Bible's last book, 'Revelation', that's been Millennialism's poster child. You can imagine the kind of dread some people faced as the year CE 999 was about to tick over. For a long while it had been presumed that the end days were nigh. It's harder to imagine what their equivalent was for hoarding toilet paper, though. Because this sort of thinking isn't extinct, a thousand years later people went nuts over the Y2K computer bug. This year in Australia we've had pretty bad bushfires, followed by pretty bad floods, followed by a virus that is now shutting everything down. I've seen several predictions from people whom I know are sincere in their beliefs, that these are the first three modern plagues sent by God. I guess there are four to go.

Even without a Millennialist mindset, the pandemic is still linked with apocalyptic thinking for many and it's not hard to see why. The Zombie Apocalypse which has been anticipated by some for years, while used as a metaphor for the fragility of civilisation by others, is so often triggered by a new pathogen which causes the plague to begin with. In *The Girl with all the Gifts* civilisation is ended by a zombie-like pathogen. A much better book is Max Brook's *World War Z* which presents a zombie apocalypse in a manner that comes to represent any pandemic that might overwhelm society's ability to control it.

"You can imagine the kind of dread some people faced as the year CE 999 was about to tick over. For a long while it had been presumed that the end days were nigh. It's harder to imagine what their equivalent was for hoarding toilet paper, though."

Since the Coronavirus lockdown started here in Australia, things have been okay for me. I have a wide variety of entertainments in the house – books, movies, my website, even jigsaws and LEGO – and the guidelines set down by the government doesn't restrict my movement in any appreciable way. Australians have been given sixteen reasons why we may be out of our homes. For my part, I'm allowed to go to the shops to buy food, and I can exercise outdoors close to home as long as I have no more than one other person with me. I usually go walking alone, anyway.

Staying at home and following guidelines are about all I can do. Meanwhile, others have to face the brunt of the virus: small business owners, health professionals, parents trying to home school their children and families directly affected by the virus, for instance.

I also don't have any social media accounts and I think that's a good thing, given what I read in the paper about the effects social media posts have had on people's state of mind and the reactions to social media content from people I know. Nevertheless, I've been shown a few things that others know will make me smile. Which is how my mind was taken for a walk when I first started writing this article. You see, one faux-disappointed meme pictured an image of what the meme-creator was promised in the apocalypse and their reality: not

the kinky studded harness worn by those facing the apocalypse in *Mad Max*, but instead comfy pyjamas.

We've all seen footage of people playing instruments from their balconies in Italy, or of a woman having a window dance-off with people in a neighbouring apartment block. But what do they do when they're no longer performing? Is she dancing as frenetically when the camera runs out of battery? How much of the day – for how many days – is this possible? I was handed the phone last night, again to look at an amusing social media post I would otherwise have missed, and I was treated to a woman playing piano on Facebook. She was wearing nothing more than a skimpy pair of knickers and a loose shirt that barely covered her otherwise naked breasts. She was young and well-endowed and had great talent, so I watched her for a moment before flicking through a few more posted videos. Here was another woman opening and closing her legs on a children's swing, just like Sharon Stone; yet another rode an escalator in a seemingly empty shopping mall and pulled up her skimpy dress for the camera with the same result. It reminds me of that saying about new inventions (and possibly new circumstances): the first place the human mind goes is "how can this be used for sex?" This week I hear that online orders for sex toys in Australia is at an all-time high. Clearly, some people are managing to amuse themselves. Would they be happier in a *Mad Max* world? Kink suits and kicking arse? Probably not.

The thing about our current situation, is that instead of giving us a new role – someone who proactively fights the virus, preferably in a heroic way and quite possibly with a very sexy outfit that shows off the best features of our anatomy – almost everyone is passive. It's not just the problem of how to spend the time, but that we've all been consigned as extras in a dull film, not as the heroic protagonist.

But talking about this boring plague in apocalyptic terms – an assumption that the popular imagination will link them, anyway – also allows for a wider perspective. Because there are also rational concerns about the prospects for humanity, too. I say this despite my sympathy with many of the tenets of Steven Pinker's *Enlightenment Now*, a book I've been reading lately, which is a defence of reason, science and Humanistic thinking in a world which has increasingly eschewed these values under right-wing leaders like Donald Trump, due to populism, under the continued influence of religion and plain old human scepticism. Pinker does what any good child of the Enlightenment would do to answer the sense that people in the modern world have: that things are getting worse. In fact, he argues things have gotten much better for everyone since the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment began to be applied to solving issues like disease, food shortages and problems of mass production. To make his case, he uses many graphs and statistics, naturally, and reveals how much popular thinking is driven by false reasoning. I'm on board with all this. Because the alternative can be characterised by what I watched this last week; another press conference with Donald Trump giving information on the virus, or his decision to cut funding for COVID-19 testing. Once again, I have felt despair that so many people support him. Having again stated, without any substantive scientific study to back him, that hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malarial drug, could be used to treat Coronavirus, Trump then prevented his medical officer, Dr. Fauci, from answering a question directed to him. Trump was irritated and said the answer had been given fifteen times. There seemed little point in preventing the doctor answering, however, except that he may have contradicted Trump, and Trump was concerned that a medical message might undermine his political one. When people talk about a boring plague, this is what I think of: that stupidity and mendacity might be more powerful now than science and reason. That accepting this involves a mental vacuity bordering on intellectual vacancy.

Yet Pinker's assertion that the concerns of the many are critical of progress because they are misinformed or that their concerns are based on faulty reasoning does not stand entirely, either. A belief that neoliberal ideals can furnish humanity's needs and desires now and into the future has been rightly questioned in the last few decades. I remember an impression in the media of environmentalists as radicals and trouble makers in the 1970s. Yet environmentalism has become a mainstream tenet, partly because of this mistrust. The effects of global warming, for instance, will remain a political football while ever dealing with it is perceived as negative to the interests of capital. Here in Australia, we have a strong coal industry, and our federal politics has been riven in the last decade with the corpses of Prime Ministers and party leaders over the environmental debate. Tony Abbott, a former Prime Minister, first became leader of his party after ousting Malcom Turnbull over the issue of emissions trading. Abbott was a divisive leader, and his intention was to drive a wedge into the bipartisan approach his party had been taking with the Labor government. Since then, much of the opportunity for progress has been lost due to Abbott's approach. He repealed Labor's Carbon Tax when he became Prime Minister and our current Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, is famous for having brought a lump of coal into parliament, showing what interests he supports.

All this seems much removed from the Coronavirus, but the point is that neoliberalism does not always serve the interests of ordinary people, nor is it right to always trust leaders. With the relinquishing

of much responsibility by the federal government in America, States' struggle to secure ventilators exemplifies this. In the case of the current pandemic, the real questions are about how well governments respond to the crisis and what comes next. While the spread of COVID-19 is not the coming apocalypse, the failure of the Trump administration to address it, despite all the resources of America, may be a sign of the country's fragility. And if that is true, will something good come of this situation in the longer term, or will Australia, America, and other countries simply be relieved when it's over? Already Trump has tweeted that he hopes it will be forgotten. Minister and our current Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, is famous for having brought a lump of coal into parliament, showing what interests he supports.

The thing is, up until the Industrial Revolution and the changes brought about by Enlightenment thinking, humanity was more often at the mercy of pandemics. Thomas Malthus, the somewhat maligned 18th Century cleric, expressed concerns in his book *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, that periods of human progress were inevitably followed by periods of human catastrophe. His prime concern was the disparity between food production and population growth. Because population growth outstripped society's ability to produce food, rises in population would inevitably be checked by things like famine, wars for resources and yes, disease. Of course, one of the weapons provided by scientific endeavour has been better health care and vaccination. Those who rail against vaccination are getting to see a little of what the world looks like without it this year.

Malthus's assessment of endless cycles of boom and bust was about right. The Black Death that famously hit Europe for six years beginning in 1347 was not limited to that period, but was a fact of life, to varying degrees, for centuries. Shakespeare wrote poetry while English theatres were closed for two years due to plague. Isaac Newton developed his key scientific principles while isolated from the plague.

And that's an important point. I know that here in Australia – I suspect it's much the same everywhere – people are being encouraged to learn new things, read books and develop skills while they're self-isolated. Very commendable. Even dancing in front of a window seems like a damn fine thing to do; why not? Being a little bit naughty, I've ordered my leather harness, just in case this thing goes on longer than I expect. But there is a larger issue in all this, and it's not about whether we're stuck at home bored, but whether something more interesting and positive will grow from this period for society, too.

It's a long bow to draw, I know, but one can argue that much of the modern world finds its catalyst in the human tragedy of the Black Death. Like now, the economies of plague-ravaged Europe virtually shut down in the 14th century. But after the plague, labour shortages ensured that wages rose, farming techniques changed and the relationship between bonded serfs and masters was weakened. Initially, the Church was strengthened by the plague, but clerics had suffered more than any other group in society – they administered last rites – and poorly trained clerics and rising corruption in the Church later undermined its power. The plague was the catalyst for social and intellectual change, not only of the questioning of Church power, but of those in government. In Florence, the poor took over the government of the city in 1378 for four years. In short, through a series of historical factors, secularism and Humanism gained ground in Europe, and houses like the Medici grew powerful enough not only to furnish two Popes, but also patronise secular artists. The Renaissance provided much of the intellectual bedrock for the Enlightenment, as it became known; of scientific and humanistic endeavour. The scale of that change was too large for any individual to perceive. But even though we can't see the totality of the grand narrative of history from the tiny spot in time and place we inhabit, we believe our lives must mean something. Hopefully, what we experience will contribute something to the future. The desire that our children should lead better lives than we have led is part of this; it is innate and that requires us to speculate, what comes next?

It's a horrible thought to think that thousands more might die from Coronavirus. In the last few days I read that American victims have reached about two thousand a day. That is part of the context of Trump's press conference. A health epidemic out of control endangers Trump's narrative. And despite what some have asserted – that to consider the political implications of this pandemic is to crow with joy that it might happen – is to miss the point: it might happen. And then, what does this mean?

I've heard stories this week of conservatives in America who have continued to go to their offices, refusing to believe that the virus is nothing other than a hoax, as Trump initially claimed. His own refusal to wear a mask and his conflict with medical professionals won't have helped his staunchest followers change their minds on the matter, despite his official shift. But what if someone they know dies? What if many people they know die? Would that change their minds?

More importantly, how might our sense of historical imperative change? Imagine a scenario in

which the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party is weakened, to the point that China gains a more liberal and transparent government; in which right- and left-wing populism is weakened; in which scientific and humanistic ideals are strengthened; in which social and environmental concerns are treated with a greater sense of urgency. I'm not American, but I sense this kind of thinking, if not accurate in the specifics, might account for the passionate following Bernie Sanders achieved.

These kinds of changes would create a better or worse world depending on what you currently believe. But the thing is – drawing upon the analogy of 1347 – we don't yet know what opportunities exist for the future. Will politics and capitalism transform as a result? For instance, can the plight of the poor, of minorities and the environment be properly addressed? Without clear short-term benefits it has always been hard for governments to address these kinds of issues. But governments have been forced to act on COVID-19. Is that kind of action sustainable? In short, will it be possible to achieve the promise of the Enlightenment and continue to grow into a better world? It is an exciting thought, that the world might continue its historical shift to a better life for as many people as possible, à la Pinker's positivism. Yet, it might – a prospect I find more dispiriting than sitting at home for a few months – fall back, the potential collapsing like a star under its own gravity, to once again eschew intellectualism, scientific evidence, human brilliance and our unique historical opportunities to progress not only material wealth, but our social and creative possibilities. I hope things don't get that boring. has been better health care and vaccination. Those who rail against vaccination are getting to see a little of what the world looks like without it this year.

The scale of that change was too large for any individual to perceive. But even though we can't see the totality of the grand narrative of history from the tiny spot in time and place we inhabit, we believe our lives must mean something. Hopefully, what we experience will contribute something to the future. The desire that our children should lead better lives than we have led is part of this; it is innate and that requires us to speculate, what comes next?

It's a horrible thought to think that thousands more might die from Coronavirus. In the last few days I read that American victims have reached about two thousand a day. That is part of the context of Trump's press conference. A health epidemic out of control endangers Trump's narrative. And despite what some have asserted – that to consider the political implications of this pandemic is to crow with joy that it might happen – is to miss the point: it might happen. And then, what does this mean?

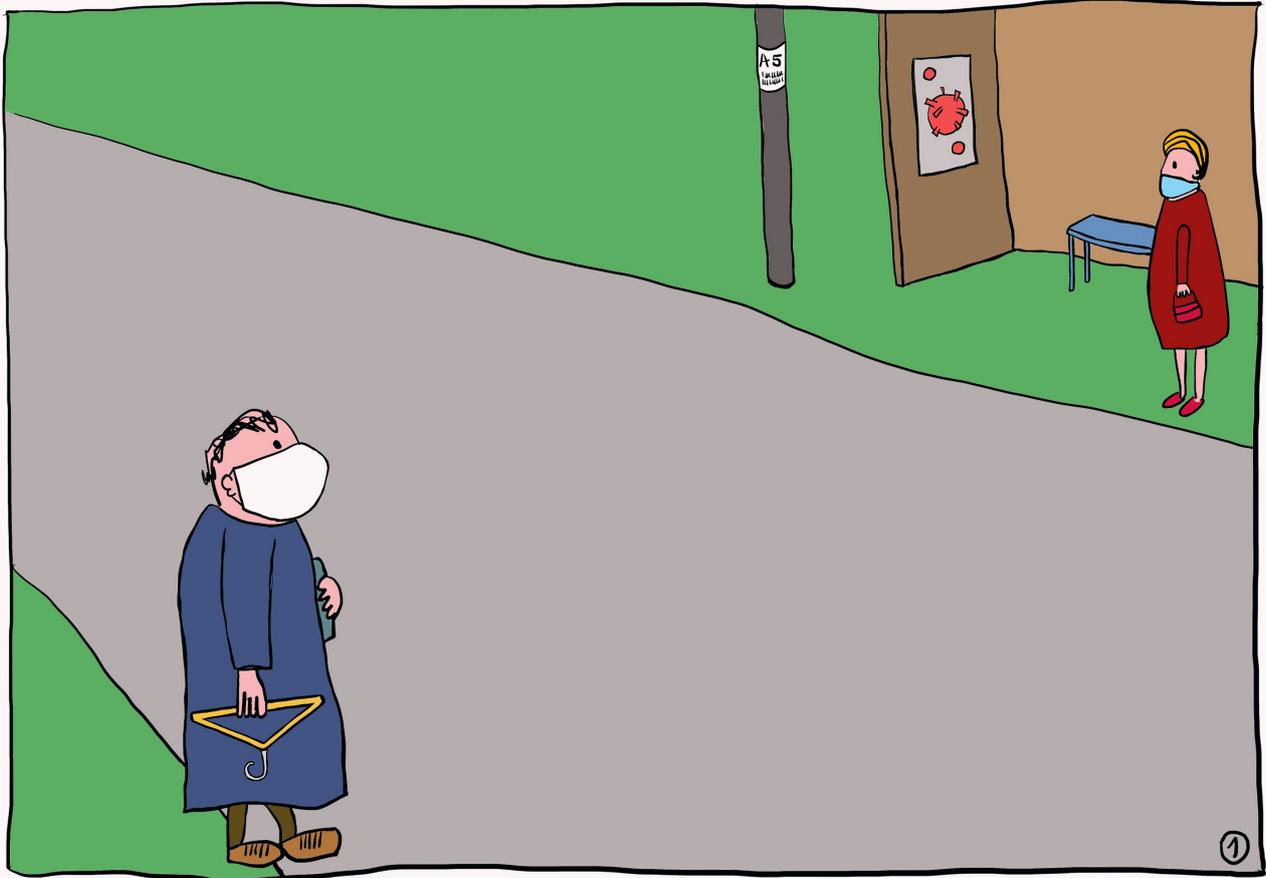
I've heard stories this week of conservatives in America who have continued to go to their offices, refusing to believe that the virus is nothing other than a hoax, as Trump initially claimed. His own refusal to wear a mask and his conflict with medical professionals won't have helped his staunchest followers change their minds on the matter, despite his official shift. But what if someone they know dies? What if many people they know die? Would that change their minds?

More importantly, how might our sense of historical imperative change? Imagine a scenario in which the credibility of the Chinese Communist Party is weakened, to the point that China gains a more liberal and transparent government; in which right- and left-wing populism is weakened; in which scientific and humanistic ideals are strengthened; in which social and environmental concerns are treated with a greater sense of urgency. I'm not American, but I sense this kind of thinking, if not accurate in the specifics, might account for the passionate following Bernie Sanders achieved.

These kinds of changes would create a better or worse world depending on what you currently believe. But the thing is – drawing upon the analogy of 1347 – we don't yet know what opportunities exist for the future. Will politics and capitalism transform as a result? For instance, can the plight of the poor, of minorities and the environment be properly addressed? Without clear short-term benefits it has always been hard for governments to address these kinds of issues. But governments have been forced to act on COVID-19. Is that kind of action sustainable? In short, will it be possible to achieve the promise of the Enlightenment and continue to grow into a better world? It is an exciting thought, that the world might continue its historical shift to a better life for as many people as possible, à la Pinker's positivism. Yet, it might – a prospect I find more dispiriting than sitting at home for a few months – fall back, the potential collapsing like a star under its own gravity, to once again eschew intellectualism, scientific evidence, human brilliance and our unique historical opportunities to progress not only material wealth, but our social and creative possibilities. I hope things don't get that boring.

Idea

by Ausra Bar



American Prepping and Agency

by incessantpain

I've been preparing an emergency bag lately. I used to be big into camping/wilderness survival as a kid, and going through the motions have really brought those memories back. Playing out scenarios in my head, logging shopping lists, drawing out neighborhood plans. The idea is to stock PPE, important documents, and a couple days' worth of food in preparation of evacuating to a school or community center. Last year's hurricane got me shitting my pants, and apparently my sister's friends did come home to a flooded apartment.

The contrast between the US and Japan is really interesting within the context of disaster preparedness. I think the moment Japanese people are necessitated to stay at home for long periods of time without relief, it's time to call off the whole "country" thing. Disaster relief is a very centralized affair over here, dependent on government and NGO resources in a particular location rather than local cooperatives (not like US preppers have that in mind either). As such, emergency bags are much more focused on personal protection and hygiene for when you're stuck in a stadium with other evacuees, like an unpleasant open-air hostel. There's no fire starters, water filters, or animal traps for this reason: it's presumed that it will be provided by institutions or organizations. Is this rationale reasonable? To me, it's just fine. You saw the same relief effort patterns after the Hanshin and Tohoku earthquakes. To presume otherwise means that the disaster is severe enough that the state, military, and NGOs are completely unable to provide relief or outright evacuations to a centralized location, at which point it's right to assume that Japan has ceased to be a pleasant, functioning society.

So everything is short-term; a bridge between disaster and settling at an evacuation center. In contrast, US "survivalists" have this rabid preoccupation with the "rugged individual," really a perfect allegory for the American "fuck you, got mine" ideology. The fantasies go that after a disaster all services and utilities cease to function, therefore all needs have to be met on an individual level at home. Stockpiled food, power generators, water carboys, and guns are analogous to American prepping. Does this have a basis in reality? Only partially. Katrina and Puerto Rico come to mind where the state was utterly unable to provide for citizens following a disaster. Both are also populated by black and brown people, strange how that goes. Anyway, you almost never see gas stoves or tents in American bug-out bags for this reason; everyone figures they can just collect brush or firewood for use at home. Everything is in bulk and set for long-term settling before disaster relief in the US. /r/preppers, finding itself rejuvenated with justifiably concerned people, has been lit a

blaze with righteous masturbatory posts about peering over sickly bodies panic buying. And yet, posts about donating PPE to hospitals and reaching out to neighbors dot every other post in between post-apoc fantasies by posters itching for a justification to shoot someone.

Turns out pandemics aren't terribly sexy. Everyone's sort of stuck indoors because it's the sensible thing to

What are you afraid of next in this fiasco?

preppers 8h 1 • self.preppers • 85% UpVote

Martial Law? Reinfection? Economic collapse? Dictatorship? Aliens? (Kidding, hopefully ;)



26 pts • 7h

Job loss.

Oubliette_occupant

16 pts • 7h +2

When this shit is about to end, our wildfire season will have started.

Staying safe and healthy been preppin for years 13 pts • 7h

I'm most worried about breaks in the supply chain, over burden of the hospitals, and the reactions of the masses. You think the

do. Cultural norms have not given way to barbarism either, people panic buying at the supermarket will still grimace at your CBRN katana cover. Governments also tend to be more inept at fulfilling their institutional 1984 fantasies. Flat out denial seems to be trending among world leaders from America to Brazil in the most depressing cultural intersection since slavery. [And here's an absolutely fantastic rationalwiki](#) article unraveling rugged survivalist rationalizations endemic to American preppers, with SHTF examples from Argentina and Somalia. Turns out classic prepper scenarios also aren't very arousing or individualistic for that matter. Either that or they result in your timely, solitary death.

I get it though, there's a

definite allure to the level of agency during a dire situation. Fantasizing about a disaster is a refreshing contrast to our numbers' based day-to-day of productivity, consumption, and death. A plane crash or shipwreck exists as a vacuum of value systems. I'd love to be a Crusoe or Robeson, blazing my own trail of self-determination free from the long-winded conventions of modern society. As any camper will tell you, sleeping under a dwelling you made is rewarding. Making improvised tools feels good. Catching and cooking your own food somehow adds flavor. And a big axis to that contradictory freedom is money.

"Time is money," despite the milieu of cultural attitudes it occupies, pretty well sums up the intimate bond between capital and human morality. Time, any time, can be spent on producing capital. The one enveloping force behind everything in our daily lives, reduced down to "productivity." If not producing, you're occupied with something surely lesser, a childlike value system subservient to cold hard cash. Getting an education is increasing your human capital. Learning a new language is increasing your human capital. "Experience" adds to your human capital. Forgo the interactions that make you a better informed, more well-rounded human being, that is secondary to your value to the enveloping economic system we live under. You don't match up? You are inherently worth less as a human being.

Yet descents into financial ruin today will not lead to a quick death, there's always a comforting buffer as you resort to subsisting on a steady diet of saltines and Tampico. Today, you don't construct dwellings, you pay rent. Why do you even have tools if you have a desk job? Why interact with your food when you can just drive to the corner store? Why buy things when they will surely depreciate in value? Just like that, directly rewarding interactions are replaced with numbers. Your work is worth this much. You're existing here? That costs this much. That item on the shelf? That took this many hours to produce. Not in this country of course, one where human life is inherently worth less. Pre-agricultural societies did not have these distinctions, and the line between adolescent play and work simply did not exist, the former would transform into the latter as the child took on greater responsibilities:

"The hunter-gatherer way of life had been skill-intensive and knowledge-intensive, but not labor-intensive. To be effective hunters and gatherers, people had to acquire a vast knowledge of the plants and animals on which they depended and of the landscapes within which they foraged. They also had to develop great skill in crafting and using the tools of hunting and gathering. They had to be able to take initiative and be creative in finding foods and tracking game. However, they did not have to work long hours; and the work

they did was exciting, not dreary. Anthropologists have reported that the hunter-gatherer groups they studied did not distinguish between work and play—essentially all of life was understood as play.

"In sum, for several thousand years after the advent of agriculture, the education of children was, to a considerable degree, a matter squashing their willfulness in order to make them good laborers. A good child was an obedient child, who suppressed his or her urge to play and explore and dutifully carried out the orders of adult masters. Such education, fortunately, was never fully successful. The human instincts to play and explore are so powerful that they can never be fully beaten out of a child. But the philosophy of education throughout that period, to the degree that it could be articulated, was the opposite of the philosophy that hunter-gatherers had held for hundreds of thousands of years earlier."

- Peter Gray, Ph.D.

And purpose is alluring. I can live my life utterly uninvested in my surroundings and the globalized economy will pander to my apathy offering morally questionable commodities at similarly questionable prices. The conditions at which you live and die feel less proximate, your agency under a set of qualifiers. Self-indulgently thinking about the end of days is a strange fantasy but it pairs well with the dystopian nightmare the US is currently living under.

Tiger Balm

by Pike M.

"Retreat, you bearer of the plague." That was my mother from the doorstep. I couldn't tell if she was joking but I took a few steps back, pulling the dog away from the street. "But leave the shopping!" Snatch was pawing at the gate and whining. I balanced the bag of groceries on the garden wall. "Won't you even say hello to Snatch? Look, he's missed you."

"Go and take that plague hound with you." My mother was taking self-isolation very seriously. She'd researched online for a way to hug someone without touching them. Apparently, you put your hand on your heart. Dad was waving through the second floor window. He hadn't opened it.

Christ, there was the whole length of the garden between the house and the wall. Who was I going to infect, the postbox?

Just as I was retreating, my mother shouted that she hoped my studies were going well. If she put her hand on her heart, my back didn't see it.

In fact, the studies were going well, and even better without me. I'd quit a month ago, unable to balance the competing responsibilities of essay deadlines and Fortnite. Instead, I got myself working for the Man; working for all the men in town who ever run out of milk or fags.

* * *

Saturday was unbelievable. This woman – Christ, this woman – got really upset that she couldn't find any more paper towels on the shelves. She insisted I was hiding them in the back.

"I swear, we don't have any. I'm not lying to you." I tried to get away from her, but she had me cornered by the breakfast cereals.

"I. Want. You. To go to the back and get it for me. Right now!" I had no sympathy for her entitled, demanding ass, but the fear behind those glasses got to me. We were all scared. She was digging in her tiny handbag, which was really just a purse with shoulder straps. "Here, I'll pay more, is that what you want?" she said. "Money grabbing bastards, all of you."

A couple of coins dropped out of her hands and she bent down to pick them up, heaving and propping her hands on her knees. I wanted to help but I felt like running away. I ran away.

I am told things got much worse on Sunday when we did receive a stock delivery of toilet paper, amongst other things. The shelves were empty again within two hours. Cheyanne and Rob, my colleagues, got mobbed. Later they told me about it like it was all a hilarious joke, but I'd gone to high school too and I know what a brave front is. Luckily I was off on Sunday, so I spent the day on my laptop, reading the

paper. Infection statistics. New Spring fashions. Top tips on how not to get bored in quarantine. Apparently, boredom is bad for your mental health.

* * *

Unsurprisingly, management overstepped the double line of decency. Before we opened on Wednesday, Cheyanne and I asked if we could have some priority access to the hand sanitizer, since we worked the tills and handled money. The manager's response was that we couldn't, because "we have to put the customers first." Me and Cheyanne consoled ourselves by stealing Maltesers from the back, but I got a distinct sense that no petty theft could ever right this wrong.

In the afternoon I was on the till and we had what my manager calls a "DC" which stands for "difficult customer," but Rob says it should be "damn cunt."

"What are you doing?" the older man in a baseball cap looked at me. The DC. There was a bottle of vodka, a four-pack of cider and a single pouch of Uncle Ben's on the belt. Uncle Ben's was clearly a decoy.

"Just sanitising, won't take a moment." I was rubbing my hands together as quickly as I could.

"You don't need to do it!"

"I most certainly do, I'm handling money." I was perhaps a touch snarky in my response, but it had been a long day.

"I DON'T HAVE IT," he shouted all of a sudden. My heart started beating very fast.

"I'm not saying you do, it's just a precaution."

"I DON'T HAVE IT! CAN'T YOU HEAR, I DON'T HAVE IT!" Thankfully, Rob jumped in and took over the till. I backed out of that situation, with DC still staring me down four tills across.

* * *

Sometimes when I'm bored at work I imagine that me and Cheyanne are dating. In my imaginary life, we pretend to be smokers so we can hang out at the back of the shop and smooch on a pile of toilet paper. Every night a secret car pulls in. We load it with stolen goods and go out to play Robin Hood in the dark. And that's all. There's no hidden fountain of emotion where all my inner animals go to drink. If someone says thanks, I just give them the thumbs up. In my imaginary life, I'm older, quite a bit heavier and a lot harder to move.

After work, I cycled to Katie's house. My actual girlfriend. I asked her how she was.

"Not bad, just kinda bored. You?" She was pretending to spit on me through the open window. I didn't flinch. It's just the sort of relationship we have, no bodily fluid gets left out.

"Yeah, bored out of my head." I dragged out my vowels to sound convincing.

I haven't had the chance to tell Katie that I wasn't studying anymore, needless to say. But it's a low-risk fib. Her family don't shop where I work. They shop at Waitrose and have it delivered. Of course, in these testing times they cannot get a delivery slot, so they drive over and hand-load their 4x4 with partridge mousse or whatever it is that counts as their bare essentials.

If I sound bitter it's because I use up my sweet demeanour on the old and disabled customers who haven't made it onto the government's magic list. They come in droves every day. Sometimes I get called "darling" or "sweetheart" and I bask in it like it's a golden shower. It is very embarrassing, but now that there is nobody other than Snatch that I can touch, old people praise is my Tiger Balm. I think it's supermarket conditioning. You learn to get a flood of oxytocin and dopamine each time someone's vaguely nice to you. And against the backdrop of the pandemic lockdown, every crumb is a pie.

What does it for the old folks? I don't imagine many (normal) people call them sweet names. Maybe the old folks just sit home alone, eyes closed, and slowly stroke their own hand, pretending it's someone else's touch.

* * *

Friday was my day off, so I went out to get my own shopping. Apparently, so did everyone else, taking advantage of the sudden heatwave.

"One person per household," the security guy was shouting from the door. The queue snaked outside, with yellow lines marking two metre distances. I waited for my turn in line and absent-mindedly watched a woman with her young daughter. She was shouting across to a man further down the queue in a language I didn't know. I was mildly curious to see whether security would let them in, since it seemed like they were trying to get around the one-person-per-household rule, but then my turn came and I went inside.

It was not quite hell, but perhaps a waiting room for hell. People helplessly cornered in the aisles with their giant shopping trolleys. Empty shelves, desperation, a shortage of everything except for brussels sprouts. My skin crawled with irritation but I made my way through the sweaty crowd, piling my basket with whatever I could find.

Then a small girl, the young daughter from the queue, ran up to me and started feeling up the items in my basket. I cannot account for what happened. I jerked back involuntarily, bumping into her mother, who had followed in order to retrieve her daughter. A paper bag of mushrooms fell out of my hand and spilled on the floor. "Oh for fuck's sake!" I snapped as she raised her hand in apology. She started saying something. Christ, the heat in that store. "Just fucking leave it, alright?"

It's like I could feel myself slipping. Perhaps I could have apologised and turned it around, but I was too far gone. Now I hated her for putting me in a situation where I had to be the asshole.

Almost immediately, a security guard appeared behind me. "Sir, I have to ask you to leave." The underlined politeness was infuriating. I just couldn't believe it.

"You are asking me to leave? Me? What is wrong with you?"

"Sir, I have to ask you to leave right now."

"You fucking people, I can't fucking believe you!" The security guard put his hand on my shoulder and I shuddered. How many people have touched me by now? What did it matter?

Some people were looking at us. He put his hands on either side of me and tried leading me out of the shop, at which I jumped back. Then he grabbed me.

We tussled for a bit, and I did some ineffectual punching. Another guard turned up and they carried me outside like a heavy parcel, then dropped me face down on the warm concrete. "Are you done?" they asked as they shook me. I didn't reply, I was crying. My face was scratched and bleeding, and snot was dripping into my mouth.

With a farewell shake, they released me, stepping aside and watching me from a distance. Shame and incredulity at what just happened held me plastered to the concrete, where it was safe. My brain was blocking out the voices of people, dissolving them into an abstract murmur. Then I felt a hand on my arm and someone picked me off the ground. It was the husband of the woman from the shop.

"You good?" I nodded, wiping tears and snot away with my sleeve. He gave my shoulder a few pats. "It's bad time. Next time, better time. Go, go home."

I tried not to feel the stares like fish hooks in my back. It was such a hot day.

* * *

Everything changed on Saturday. The powers that be made a favourable decision and we became key workers, just below the NHS heroes in the Corona Hierarchy. Now DCs were few and far between. I couldn't count the number of times I was told, "thank you for your service."

"What happened to your face, sweetheart?" an old lady asked with concern while I was getting her change from the till. Tiger Balm. I was playing it cool and unruffled, but her concern immediately perked me up.

"Just an accident. And how are you?"

"I'm good, sweetie. Just came out for a walk and to get something for tea. It's just so boring these days, I can barely stand it."

"You don't say." As I placed her receipt down, I glanced at the clock. The next stock delivery was in half an hour.

Plagued with Boredom

by Violet Radd



Reviews in Quarantine: *Hylics* by incessantpain

I once was prescribed Tamiflu after a desperate midnight taxi ride to a Saitama hospital. While the trip was a fevered blur, I remember my mom parroting concerns about me jumping out of windows as she poured the powdered antiviral into a paper funnel. Somewhat excitingly, the medication had a reputation for making sickly bodies believe they can fly, a questionable side-effect in conjunction with the vertical concrete landscapes of Japan. Instead I spent New Year's tripping about steaming the wrinkles in my bed sheets with my body heat, accompanied by repeated visions of LEGO Bionicle ball joints sandwiched between sessions of brief consciousness. *Hylics* is a 2015 indie role-playing game with a deceptively brief description, "a recreational program with light JRPG elements." Just like my drug-fueled influenza experience, going through Mason Lindroth's creation is like recovering from a traumatic head injury.

If its release was accompanied with little fanfare, *Hylics* would have undoubtedly accumulated an *LSD: Dream*

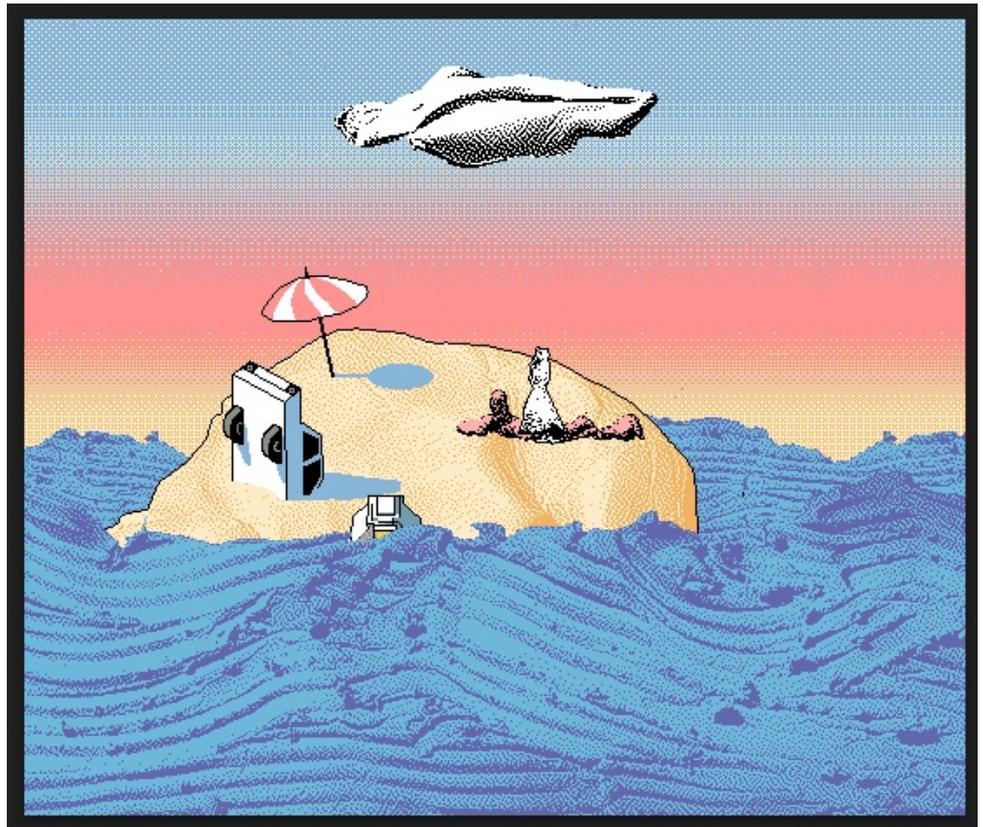


Emulator-esque cult following. Surreal games like this ultimately leave me with a human interest behind the game's developers and their vision for making such a deviant and hypnagogic gaming experience. Derived from a lengthy dream journal by one of the developer's employees, *LSD*'s retina-molesting visuals and obtuse first-person controls efficaciously sells the game play as occupying someone's dream. In contrast, *Hylics* is even less grounded in reality, the unfamiliarity of the game's absurdist art and incoherent character dialogue gives way to exploration driven solely with the player's interest in the author's madness.

Yet through the distorted claymation animations and pixel artifacts, *Hylics* manages to deliver a genuinely

enjoyable and even accessible playing experience. The game play, as expected from an *RPG Maker* derivative, is far from incoherent and maybe even typical. The time-tested collage of HP, MP, and character skills serves as a beacon of familiarity through this salad of weirdness. Secondary only to the artwork in excellence, the pacing is very well done. Enemies present a persistent challenge without becoming overbearing, and bosses have a genuine sense of power that you satisfyingly match with leveled-up skills. The map progression facilitates active exploration through distorted landscapes and a rewarding sense of incremental progress. The music however falls flat, with no region-specific tracks the disjointed guitar sounds easily overstays its welcome within the first hour of playing.

Sedate and strange, you emerge from a confused wanderer to an invested bystander. It's a \$3 escape from reality, its vision matched only by a few obscure Japanese games. Something deliberately incomprehensible is pretty refreshing these days. Grab a copy and sit idly for *Hylics 2*.



Hylics can be purchased for \$3 USD [right here](#).

Even the Plague Eaters Will Collapse

by Hasty

Saw some fox tracks this morning along the trail. I stopped for a moment to crouch down and look at them. Decided to follow them for a bit, I don't know why. I bounded around a hill and down a small berm and found the body of the fox lying there, rotting. I knelt down and thought about saying a prayer of some kind. I didn't actually say a prayer; I just thought that I should say one. But I don't know any prayers.

* * *

Meeting two nights ago was interesting; local chapter of the immune lobbied to expand the scope of essential jobs. Something about how more and more people are becoming immune and there's only so many jobs under the current classification. The mayor didn't seem too happy about it, saying that the town already has a higher percentage of working immune than any other in the county, and more immune meant less federal funding sent to the municipality.

Someone on a screen-cycle asked if the mayor thought it was a bad thing that more residents were becoming immune. The awkward silence that followed was thick enough to suffocate under. James gave the best political non-answer he could, mainly rattling off statistics of fatalities from the pandemic and talking about how we still had an active scrubber, the longest surviving one in the country. Maybe in the world. A bunch of the screeners started clapping at that, and a few of the immune in-person did as well.

Of course, the mayor himself is immune, so if he did try to give a real answer, it would've pissed off a bunch of people regardless. I was sort of nodding off throughout the meeting, so I don't know what came from that discussion. Probably nothing.

After the meeting, Dr. Sellers came up to me and asked how I was feeling. I told her I was feeling fine, the miles kept increasing but I didn't feel overexerted. "That's good," she said as she jotted something down in her notebook. "Have you been sick at all lately?"

"Well doc, I don't really get sick. Kinda the whole point here ain't it?"

"I don't mean that, I mean anything; a cold, sore throat, sniffles, stiff legs, a headache, even."

"Nothing to report. Do I have an exam coming up or something?" She finished writing in her notebook and looked up at me. She let out a breath and her eyes became unfocused as she thought of what

to say.

"No, not until next year. I've been hearing some strange things from other panel members so I just wanted to check in with you." Her gaze was at me, but she didn't meet my eyes.

"Number nine is good to go, Sarah." I smiled at her big; obnoxious even. She smiled back before turning to walk away.

* * *

Saw some rabbits today, in the front yard of Mrs. Arndt's house. Supposedly she passed sometime during the first resurgence period. Still a closed-door house, so who knows. Maybe she's holed up in there with her cats, binge-VRing new episodes of *The Office: At Home* and living off a hoarded supply of daily rations that she saved through the years.

But it's more likely that her body is little more than a mess of bones and blood stains on her carpet now, her cats having picked through the meat and organs after a few days without food. I try not to think much about it. The streets are empty either way; doesn't matter if your old math teacher from elementary school is breathing or not.

I looked for the rabbits on the return route, made a slight diversion to pass Mrs. Arndt's house again instead of going the pre-planned way. By the time I got back though, they were nowhere to be found. Maybe the cats got out and gave 'em chase. Maybe one of the immune saw them and shot 'em dead for some easy protein. Everything is dead anyway, might as well use what you can.

* * *

Just got the newest set of routes, these fucking people are crazy if they think I can clear 170 miles this week. Diego told me that if it ever went as high as 150 even, that'd be the peak. "Imagine how many streets we cover if they give us 150!" I remember how he would always laugh when we teleconferenced, whether he was just asking about my day or telling me how we lost another scrubber. I think it was a defense mechanism for his lack of confidence with English, an unconscious reaction to the words feeling weird inside his head and flowing from his mouth.

I miss Diego.

* * *

Last night, went out later than I originally intended to, but still completed the full route for the week. That's all they really care about, so as long as my logs show the right GPS coordinates then I don't think it matters if it was at 2:00 in the morning or not. This is the first time in a while it took me the whole week to hit my quota.

To be honest, I just couldn't muster it in me to get out for most of the day. My legs had a dull ache, not sore and not tired, just this unending, elongated throb of discomfort. I took a nap to see if that'd help, but it didn't. I just woke up 20 minutes later, a little groggy and not being able to line up the memory of the past days any longer. Did I run already? Was that run by the lake yesterday, or today? Did I eat breakfast? Have I ever eaten anything?

I sat on the floor of the bathroom with the shower running for a long time, just trying to mentally retrace the events of the past few days. They just sort of bleed at the edges into one another. If you do the exact same thing every day, does it matter if it's been one day or one hundred?

I checked my route mapper to confirm. It was 9:00 at night already, normally I would be long done for the day by that time, but I had nothing in me worthy of burning on the streets. I drank a beer to soften the feeling in my legs and to make me indifferent to going out. One became two, two became three. I haven't been eating as much, so three was plenty for me to walk dizzy and everything to sort of smooth over in my head. I didn't care anymore.

I geared up, full kit including the reserve rations. It's not like I thought I'd be gone a whole day or anything, but there was also this thought in the back of my head. A little leaf of a thought that I knew didn't have any feet under it, but still something I couldn't shake entirely. "Go out and see how far you can make it." The run went fine, full kit untouched other than a few ounces of water. Nothing unusual. Hit the quota, uploaded the logs and went to sleep.

* * *

Doc Sellers called, asked if I could come by the lab tonight. I asked her what it was about but she wouldn't say. Told her I would if I had the time, was falling behind on my miles and needed to put out a lot of effort today and tomorrow to make my week.

"Okay, no problem. I understand. Can you upload your logs to my database at least? I haven't seen anything for a few weeks." Sarah was badly lit in her office and she looked like she had been working for a few days straight. I was walking around the kitchen trying to finish putting together my meals for the next few days, so I wasn't paying much attention. I could hear it in her voice, though. A desperation.

"Yeah, how about when I finish tomorrow I'll send them over to you. You want the usual?"

"Full vitals, too." She looked at her screen and saw me thinking about what she had just said before adding, "just because I haven't seen them for a while." I gave a half-smile and nodded, then clicked to end the call.

* * *

The latest routes came in at 220 miles. I checked it again, refreshed the maps. My legs ached, like they could feel all those miles of pavement slowly scraping through the bone and sinew until nothing was left but an ugly pulp.

Immediately I called the hotline, told them my call number, as if I needed to at this point, and pretty much just started cursing at whoever was on the other line. I sort of went into a fugue state and don't remember everything I said. The line got transferred to someone I've never even heard of before and I was still fuming. They started to recite how rates of infections were lower than they'd been in years, how immunity was increasing, how the work we were doing was so important.

"The work I'm doing, you mean. I'm the one out there. You all sit inside an office and send me maps. I'm the one who's actually out there, keeping people alive."

"We all do the work that we can. You were given the gift to remove the disease from the atmosphere. The scrubber program has done so much good--"

I hung up the phone and dropped it onto the floor. Walked over to the hall closet and grabbed a hammer from the toolbox. Phone was ringing already, they were calling back. I heaved the hammer down as hard as I could, the phone screen cracked and spidered, but it still rang. Another hit quieted the phone.

I grabbed my full kit and suited up. I packed another bag with an extra set of clothes, a sleeping bag, tarp with guy lines and stakes, and as much food as I could fit in the rest of the bag.

I walked over to my computer and opened the upload portal. I selected the full archive and sent it to Dr. Sellers. When I got to the comment box at the bottom of the upload window, I thought about writing something, but I don't know any prayers.

Contributors

Dann is an IT professional/teacher/small business owner, who also has a passion for technology, macro photography, and nostalgia. Starting with his first computer, the IBM 5152, he's witnessed the rise of personal computing and the World Wide Web through all of its stages. He now splits his time between application systems at a University and smaller personal web projects ranging from large database driven e-communities for Oakley Sunglasses and the smaller irreverent humor on Neocities.

bikerbuddy, for reasons known only to him, never uses a capital letter for his name, except when he assumes his alter-ego, Mark. He lives in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. A former English teacher, he now spends his declining years behind a keyboard when not buried beneath a mountain of books. His life's ambition was to be a monastery monk, working in a scriptorium. But with few career opportunities, he chose to run a book review website, the Reading Project, instead. He has a badly-behaved dog, likes building garages and enjoys correcting people on the correct use of the apostrophe. He is fun at parties.

incessantpain is a Kanagawa based rambler. Perennially occupied with sewing, film photography, romance manga.

Pike M. doesn't use third-person: I try to live bravely. My age is 32. Sometimes I go to train stations to hang out. Write me anything: pike.malarkey@tutanota.com

Ausra Bar is 58 years old and a photographer who likes to draw. Their motto is: everything's for the best; if it's not for the best, you chalk it up to experience.

Violet Radd is a 21 year old from central WA state, USA, who enjoys art, music, web design, and quesadillas.

Hasty is the founding (and only) editor of Ear Rat Magazine. He is a writer based out of New Jersey and identifies too strongly as being "from Jersey" than he really should. He creates essays and articles for his website, Hastiest Handiwork, and produces the No Happy Nonsense Podcast when he can be bothered to do so.

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