

Selected essays and reviews from The Page of Reviews in 2015

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Whitewashing: The New Normal in Genre Movies

Originally Published: January 12, 2015

Scarlett Johansson is quickly becoming the avatar of everything that pisses me off about Hollywood. First, she was the voice of the insipid manic-pixie-dream-Cylon in the (sigh) Oscar award-winning *Her*. Now she's landed the role of Major Motoko Kusanagi in an upcoming, live-action adaptation of Masamuni Shirow's anime masterpiece *Ghost in the Shell*.



Nothing personal, ScarJo, but you have about as much business playing a Japanese cyborg as I would playing Detective John Shaft. Imagine the outrage at the idea of a white man playing Shaft. Now ponder why so much of Hollywood's white washing at the expense of Asian peoples goes unanswered.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again; this is why we can't have nice things.

Did we learn nothing from M. Night Shyamalan casting a bunch of white kids for a live-action adaptation of *The Last Airbender*? I guess not since the majority of film critics gave a pass to ~~*All You Need is Kill*~~ *Edge of Tomorrow* *Live, Die, Repeat*, despite Hollywood turning the originally Japanese protagonist, Keiji Kiriya, into a white guy called William Cage played by (double sigh) Tom Cruise. Nor should we stop talking about the fact that J.J. Abrams gave us an Englishman second only to Winston Churchill in Englishness for the role of Khan Noonien Singh. The 1960s were more progressive in casting a Mexican to play Khan.

It is on that note I think we must acknowledge peak-incredulity when it comes to Hollywood's shitty casting decisions. After all, Sir Ridley Scott has very clearly illustrated the face of the shape of things to come in his explanation of why he cast an Englishman to play Moses and an Australian to play Ramses in *Exodus: Gods and Kings*.

"I can't mount a film of this budget, where I have to rely on tax rebates in Spain, and say that my lead actor is Mohammad so-and-so from such-and-such. I'm just not going to get it financed. So the question doesn't even come up."

Well excuse us, Cecil B. DeMille. Does this mean we get to throw pies at Ridley Scott the next time he dares to talk about the "art" of film-making?

If an auteur of Scott's caliber is content to offer up a rationalization that, in terms of cultural sensitivity, is a stone's throw away from the "durka-durka-jihad-jihad" scene in *Team America: World Police*, then what hope should audiences hold for Rupert Sanders casting an Asian Major Kusanagi? I'm sure the director of *Snow White and the Huntsman* is in a place where he can tell the

studios to fuck off and cast whoever he likes in his movie. I can't imagine a single scenario where doing so doesn't get him kicked off the project and replaced by some other up-and-comer who cares more about working than he does whitewashing and cultural appropriation.

If this is the mentality within the industry, a mindset likely fuelled by focus groups filled with people who don't know any better, or are too slack-jawed to care, then it doesn't take an oracle to forecast the situation getting worse before it gets better. *Katara*, *Kusanagi*, and *Khan* are only the beginning of the tidal wave of whitewashing. There's a world of much loved anime, and non-English stories in general, waiting for their turn at a big-screen, live-action adaptation.

Macross starring Daniel Radcliffe as Hiraku Ichijyo, Nathan Fillion as Roy Fokker, Natalie Portman as Misa Hayase and Liam Neeson as Admiral Gloval

Evangelion starring Jack Gleeson as Shinji Ikari, Benedict Cumberbatch as Gendo Ikari, and Kristen Stewart as Misato Katsuragi

For the benefit of any Hollywood types that ever stumble across these words, I'll point out that I am, in fact, a 33-year-old, white, male and I'm perfectly content to see Asian people in leading roles on both the big and small screen. Alas, I'm sure said Hollywood types would quickly rebut that I, and likely you, gentle reader, are not within their target demographic; we are not "*the North American Market*".

Recall the words of Tommy Lee Jones in *Men in Black*: a person is smart; people are dumb, panicky, dangerous animals. People make up *the North American Market*, and said market demands endless seasons of *The Bachelor*, *Honey Boo Boo*, *My Big Fat Fabulous Life*, and watching a man be eaten by a snake. *The North American Market* is terrible, and until it does better or demands better – either option is fine with me – there's no reason to believe the whitewashing won't continue along its current trajectory.

Better Living Through Shadowrun: Dragonfall

Originally Published: February 5, 2015

I can't recall the exact number of times I watched my character die as I tried to make my way through the techno-noir action of the SNES *Shadowrun* game. Let's say, a lot. A few decades after those halcyon days, I discovered the PC release of *Shadowrun Returns* and, more recently, *Shadowrun: Dragonfall*.



Where *Shadowrun Returns* was a good reminder of everything I liked about *Shadowrun's* cyberpunk meets urban fantasy aesthetic, playing

Dragonfall has given me cause to reflect on the narrative flavour of the *Shadowrun* world.

Specifically, *Dragonfall* is an excellent way to have a conversation with gamers about the kinds of social issues that often make gaming look like a juvenile and retrograde enterprise.

Allow me to explain.

What little I remember of the Seattle-based *Shadowrun* lore is that it includes a considerable cultural transplant from the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Rusty as my SNES *Shadowrun* memories are, I think I recall characters talking about their Haida and Salish backgrounds. The game never made a big deal about this representation; it was simply a part of the world. Looking back, this level of inclusion is fairly significant for the early 90s.

From today's point of view, and given the current debates orbiting the world of gaming, I think it's fair to expect more than simple representation. We live amid a cultural climate where a vocal collection of nitwits refuse to acknowledge any room for growth within the medium. Thus, if games want to be taken more seriously as art, they need to engage an audience in some deeper conversations.

On said note, *Dragonfall* offers an excellent dialogue on privilege. In addition to blending magic and technology, *Shadowrun* features a cast of fantasy races. Humans live alongside Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes, Trolls, and Orks. These Metahumans are often treated as second and third-class citizens in the tumultuous nation-states of the "Sixth World". Metas have to struggle with discrimination in the workplace, presumed identities based on species, and a greater tendency toward being exploited by the Human and Dragon dominated systems of power. Even inclusive nations, like *Dragonfall's* Berlin Flux-State, show Humans as often begrudgingly tolerant of Metas.

Dragonfall is also noteworthy in its refusal to present Metahumans as racially/species coded beings. This is in opposition to someone like Tolkien, for example, who aligns the relative good and evil of his fantasy species around skin tone. Humans, Elves, and Hobbits are almost always good, and they just happen to be white-folk; whereas Trolls, Orks, and Uruk-hai are almost always evil and of a darker complexion. Other works of fantasy, both high and low, are equally

guilty of this coding. Consider the contrast between the noble Wood Elves and the spider-god worshipping Drow of the D&D tradition.

It's an obvious act of genre subversion when *Dragonfall* sets up Trolls and Orks as white, European characters, who actively struggle with a system of oppression based singularly on how they happened to be born. Should a player choose to interact with the homeless shelter in the Kreuzbasar, *Dragonfall's* central neighbourhood, they learn that the majority of its residents are from the more traditionally "monstrous" species. Most of those residents use the shelter as the first step to finding a third way between a the lives of crime or poverty that Human society foists upon Orks and Trolls i.e. you're big, strong, and dumb, so you're only good for menial work or as a hired thug.

The added benefit of this primer on privilege is it occurs in a neutral environment, absent any recrimination for what a player may or may not comprehend about inequality. If a person plays *Dragonfall* as a Human character, the narrative very specifically points out all the ways in which Humans keep themselves on the top of the heap e.g. denial of civil rights, racial profiling, drugs, and so on. Likewise, if a person plays as a Meta, they have to experience all the prejudices and presumptions foisted upon non-Humans. Even playing as an Elf – a race described in game as the most privileged of the Metahumans – I've witnessed instances where being a human character would have made my life easier.

As an added bonus, no group of actual people is used as an object in *Dragonfall's* lesson. I can't imagine anyone looking at an Elf or a Troll in *Shadowrun* and seeing their personal identity being used as a teaching tool. Nevertheless, listening to an Ork businessman share his anxieties about how his co-workers presume his incompetence, based solely on his race, should prove a clear allegory for what many people deal with in the real world.

Dragonfall might not change how everyone who plays the game thinks about race, identity, and discrimination, but it provides an easy point of entry to understanding how these issues effect distinct groups of people. Should *Dragonfall* give a gamer a moment to pause and reflect on how art may be imitating life, then I dare say it will have done more than entertain its audience. *Dragonfall* would have helped make that said person a little bit better as a human being.

Elite: Dangerous – Space Cowboys and Free Market Economics

Originally Published: March 31, 2015

My name is Adam Shaftoe, but some of you might know me as Commander Adam Shaftoe.

I'm what you call a combat pilot. Politics and ideology don't really matter to me. Show me the credits, whisper the target's name, and I'll get the job done.

To date, I own two starships, including a brand spanking new Core Dynamics Vulture, and I

have about 10,000,000 credits in the bank. I know I'm not the most successful Commander in the Pilots' Federation, but I'm no rookie, either.



It's fair to say *Elite: Dangerous* pushes a lot of my buttons. It lets me tell a meta-story with other pilots in a vast, online universe. For a few hours every week, *Elite: Dangerous* lets me climb into the cockpit of a space ship and live out my childhood fantasy of blowing things up in space. Rick Hunter, eat your heart out.

This, alone, is enough to keep me playing *Elite: Dangerous*. Mind you, when I'm not tearing around the galaxy, I like to think I'm a reasonably capable critic. The critic in me wonders why I'm still playing *Elite: Dangerous*.

As much as I enjoy being a bad-ass space pilot, I'm not blind to some of the serious shortcomings in the game – notwithstanding the lack of ownership as elucidated [in this piece](#).

About two patches ago, Frontier Developments introduced community goals into *Elite: Dangerous*. Players could now work together on large scale projects that would carry forward within *ED's* persistent world. My favourite of these community goals are combat operations, which are a lot like fundraisers only with more murder. The game keeps a running tally of all combat payouts a pilot secures within a certain operation. As all players involved in the community goal meet an escalating series of milestones, they qualify for a final payout commensurate with said milestone and their contribution to the goal.

Here's where things get weird. I worked for the Federation in a recent combat-focused community goal. I supported this particular government within *Elite: Dangerous's* political triad because I knew they would send a capital ship to the war zone. I then switched from open play, where I can interact with other human players – some of whom might choose to work for the opposing faction – to solo play, where it was me versus the AI.

A quick FTL to the war zone, and I was in the thick of it with a Federal capital ship, Federal starfighters, and the soon to be dead opposing force.

Experience has taught me to hang close to the capital ship during these situations. Rather than

engaging in ship-to-ship combat, I set my ship's turreted beam weapons to fire on any enemy who crosses my path. Meanwhile, the capital ship hammers away on everything within its combat radius. At the time of this post, *Elite: Dangerous*' combat system is set up so that AI ships can't collect combat bonds. Meaning, all I have to do is tag an enemy ship to collect the full combat bond when the AI starfighters or Cap ship eventually takes it out. This system doesn't always work, but it works more often than not.

I devoted three hours of play time to this scheme the first time I tried it out. For my efforts, I scored roughly 2,000,000 credits in combat bonds, which amounted to two-thirds of the value of the ship I was flying at the time. No small sum of money. Here's the best part, my contribution to the community goal put me in the 40th percentile of all pilots working on the mission. This earned me another 15,000,000 credits.

This seems excessive even by the Federation's standards. Within *Elite*'s lore, the Feds are a bloated and often incompetent bureaucracy. Don't get me wrong, the mercenary in me is more than happy to take the Federation's money. Yet as a critic, I have to ask if this is the game functioning as David Braben and team intended. Should I really be able to cheese my way to riches on something that feels like a design oversight?

I suppose it could be some sort of commentary on the economics of wealth. If it weren't for the fact that I already had a ship worth 3,000,000 credits, which is a long way off from the junker I started in - market value 32,000 credits - there's no way I would be able to milk the Federation for an easy 17,000,000. My wealth, in a game whose economy leans toward *lassiez-faire*, put me in a position to make literal fuck-tons of more money.

There's simply no way a poorer pilot could have pulled off what I did. I have the disposable income to buy and sell ship parts without consideration. I don't have to worry about losing a significant portion of my net-worth on insurance claims if I get blown up. And more importantly, my money bought me an engine that gives me access to the entirety of civilized space and all its juicy bounties. No new pilot can claim those things. In *Elite: Dangerous*, as in life, my modest wealth put me in a place to earn considerable wealth. Even though "considerable wealth" will reach a point where its windfalls no longer represent a meaningful percentage of my net-worth, for the time being my money makes me more money than my lazy combat skills.

Is this side-effect of unabashed, unregulated, capitalism meant to be *Elite: Dangerous* condemning the status quo? Shall we put in a call to Thomas Piketty and his observations on a return to gilded-age economics? Am I meant to reflect on the fact that as a rich player, I now stand to get richer so much faster than when I started? Or is this an exploit to be patched in a future update? My inner space pilot doesn't care, and my inner critic refuses to give up the game until he gets an answer. Either way, I keep playing.

If nothing else, it's a hat tip to David Braben and his team for creating a game that makes me want to keep playing, even when my critical instincts say I should move on to something else. More on this story as I murder my way toward an answer.

Book Review: Westlake Soul

Originally Published: April 10, 2015

I know, it's not exactly a timely review of Rio Youers' *Westlake Soul*. If you want timely, you can always try Publisher's Weekly. Wait, no, bad idea. Stay here. Read my review of a novel that hurt more than the last time I boxed. Then, and only then, are you free to go read about new books on PW.

The boxing comparison is not an idle one. Reading Mr. Youers' book honestly evoked memories of my last sparring session. In both cases friends and colleagues told me I would be in for a world of hurt. In both cases I brushed off the warnings. Now, two words come to mind as I reflect on *Westlake Soul*: body blow.

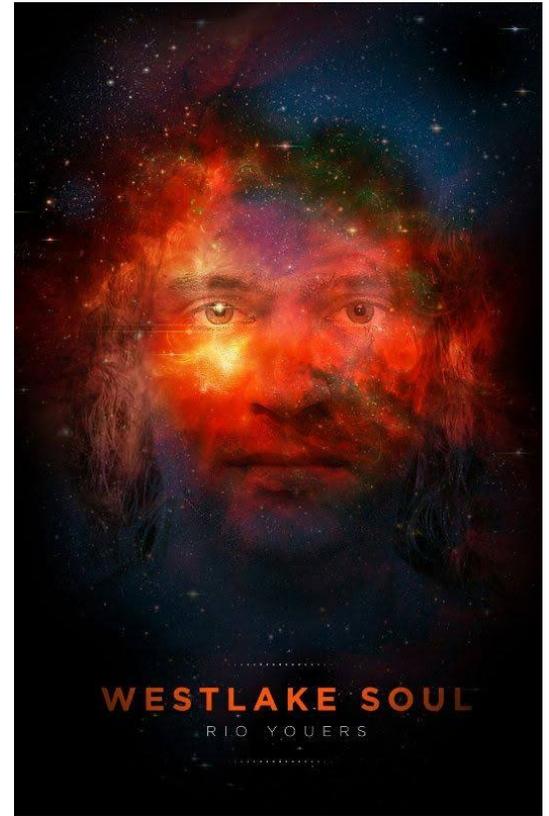
Body blows make it hard to breathe. They make a person's lungs desperate to inhale as air is being forced out. Unlike in physics, the two opposing forces don't cancel out. Instead, they leave a person off-balance, stunned, and struggling for purchase. That's what it is like to read *Westlake Soul*. It's a series of perfectly timed and precisely measured body blows. All of these strikes left this extraordinarily cynical – not to mention grouchy – critic reeling in their wake.

Packed within the novel's relatively modest word count is a world's worth of ideas on disabilities, metaphysics, justice, and surfing. The eponymous character, Westlake Soul, is the smartest man on the Earth, capable of reading minds (after a fashion), astral projection, and talking to dogs. The last bit might sound trivial, but there's nothing in the world to drive home the sadness of a scene like a dog whose dialogue is reminiscent of Jeff Bridges as "The Dude" being morose about Westlake Soul's pending doom; for the story of Westlake Soul is that of the final days of a man in a persistent vegetative state.

Unpacking everything that Rio Youers poured into this tragic figure would likely take a few thousand words more than the average person's attention span. Since I think I've driven home the book's evocative strength, I'll devote the balance of this review to a theme this novel explores rather brilliantly: frailty.

A thread woven through the entirety of the narrative is the notion that life is cheap, fragile, and wonderful. In the turn of a page, Westlake goes from a surfing prodigy to a man incapable of consistently blinking under his own power. And where Westlake demonstrates the physical nature of frailty, his parents are a study in mental fragility.

While *Westlake Soul* doesn't present itself as an overtly political novel, the questions it asks are politically charged. I dare say they've become even more charged since the novel's original publication in 2012. Life and death is easy as a binary, but what happens when said definition falls on spectrum? Westlake is very much alive, even if his astral projections are nothing more than the product of his imagination. To the outside world, his life-status is a matter of debate and hand-



wringing. The character is a study into the questions every family has to ask themselves when they are confronted with a long-term care situation. They are questions this writer hopes will remain firmly in the realm of fiction apropos of his life and loved ones.

Only through hubris and chance do we imagine ourselves as titans; this is the idea *Westlake Soul* singed into my thoughts. Perhaps the lesson at hand is that Dr. Quietus, a character whose name is derived from the Latin for “finishing stroke” and the “super villain” *Westlake Soul* offers as the counterpoint to Westlake, will come for us all.

Westlake Soul hurts like a dropkick to the stomach. However, I would gladly read it again if only to better understand myself and my own frailty. Much like the title character, *Westlake Soul* is a novel that makes a person turn inward to examine themselves. It is a Voight-Kampff test: a measure of a reader’s ability to plumb the depths of their own memories and empathize with a character who is both imaginary and also an avatar for every person with a life-altering disability. To call the novel powerful, is to commit a most grievous sin of understatement.

Game Review: N.E.O. Scavenger

Originally Published: May 5, 2015

Imagine a broken world. It's a world where people hunt other people for a splash of clean water or the comfort of warm clothing. A place where coveting a person's boots could lead to murder. And now, just to drive home the point, picture the last bastion of civilization as the city of Detroit. This is the world of *NEO Scavenger*: a place where *Detroit* represents a refuge from a savagery.

Yeah, yeah, I know that was a cheap shot. Since Paul Verhoeven turned Detroit into a litmus test for dystopian futures, there's no small irony in *NEO Scavenger* transforming the Motor City into the last bastion of civilization.

NEO Scavenger is a hex-based, survival/role-playing game. Unlike many RPGs, which often open on a note of exposition, *NEO Scavenger* tells players precious little about what's going on in the world. Likewise, the game opts for a minimalist approach to character management. There are no stats, leveling, or THACo to deal with. A player's abilities are singularly governed by a handful of perks.

Though the game's interface has a bit of a learning curve, its seeming simplicity quickly gives way to a highly complex role-playing and crafting system.

One of *NEO Scavenger*'s most remarkable features, and the thing that has earned me more than a few strange looks when talking about the game, is the way it elevates the most banal parts of a role-playing adventure to literal struggle for life or death. Players start the game as that old RPG standby, the amnesiac. Emerging from a rundown cryogenics facility, one begins the game absent any clothing or tools for survival. Within the wastelands, players face the sort of challenges and dangers one would expect to find if Cormac McCarthy wrote a D&D module. For all the monsters, aliens, and cannibals walking about the map, it is exposure and starvation that present as the player's foremost nemesis.

This *need* for the essentials of life informs many of the choices a player may make as they work toward the glow of Detroit. Though it's all the rage for games post-*BioShock* to offer a morality system, *NEO Scavenger* makes this issue of idealism versus pragmatism an internal matter. Should a player keep digging through a burned out apartment building to find a much needed backpack or right shoe, or should they plunge a fire-hardened spear into the back of another unsuspecting wanderer of the wastes? The game is generally agnostic to such choices. However, like any Dungeon Master worth their salt, it makes a player well aware of what they are doing as they do it.

I can honestly say I was not prepared for the powerfully evocative nature of *NEO Scavenger*'s turn-based and largely text-driven combat. Clicking the button to deliver a coup de grâce to an



unconscious NPC has an unexpected weight to it. In fact, every choice seems to be paired with a moment of reflection on the need of a given action. In my experience, it was all too easy to cross the gossamer-thin line between civility and savage. And, frankly, restraining myself in lieu of finding a clever solution often lead to my death.

While other writers have been quick to award *NEO Scavenger* the “rogue-like” label – a moniker which attracts and repels in seemingly equal measures – I think there’s more to this game than a call back to a something most people never played. *NEO Scavenger*, like life, is about finding nobility in the struggle to survive. As in life, it is possible for a player to make no mistakes in *NEO Scavenger* and still lose...or freeze to death. The game is at once cathartic and cautionary. It’s escapism but also a reminder that were I to find myself stripped of the trappings of civilization, I would probably last as long as a player character freshly decanted from their cryo-tank.

Bravo to Daniel Fedor, the game’s designer, programmer, and artist. *NEO Scavenger* is a prime example of how a minimalist approach can be a wholly engaging experience. Though some might say games like this are about recapturing the “good old days” of gaming, I like to think that a younger version of myself would not have appreciated the subtle nuances which make *NEO Scavenger* stand out from the crowd.

Movie Review: Mad Max Fury Road

Originally Published: May 26, 2015

As you read these words, assuming you're reading them on the day I post this review, it has been a little more than a week since I screened *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Between seeing the movie and writing about it – because gods forbid I want some time to chew on a movie as visually resplendent as *Fury Road* – I've seen the internet go through three discourse shifts on the film.

The first was, “*Holy shit this is the most feminist action movie ever.*”

The second was, “*Check your privilege, Mad Max is still the product of the patriarchal movie industry, thus it's the fruit of a poisonous tree and you are wrong to like it.*”

The third was a reaction against the second. It generally boils down to Loki's Paradox and defining feminism to either prove or disprove the value of a person's view on feminism and *Mad Max*.

Why do I bring up this meta-narrative in something titled a review? Primarily to illustrate *Fury Road's* evocative power. When was the last time an action movie generated this level of actual discussion?

The collective reaction to *Mad Max* demonstrates exactly what movies are supposed to do: make us talk, argue, and (eventually) consider other opinions. This post-curtain dialogue is what action movies have been missing for ages.

Meta discussion over. We now return you to your regularly scheduled review.

It's hard to tell where *Fury Road* fits into the *Mad Max* timeline. Instead of wading into the various fan theories and parsing every single visual clue within the film, I think it's enough to say *Fury Road* is very much in dialogue with *The Road Warrior*. Much like *The Road Warrior*, *Fury Road* is a story about survival amid the end of the world. Unlike *TRW*, which explores survival as an almost black-and-white conflict between survivors clinging to civilization and the bandits who would tear them down, *Fury Road* leans more toward a visual study into the chaos and mythology of the apocalypse.

George Miller's current masked “evil” demagogue is Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne). Joe is far from the image of physical strength we saw in *The Great Humungus*. This bloated and cancerous albino evokes the Baron Harkonnen in David Lynch's *Dune* as a nearest visual comparison. He is a rotting body desperate to hold on to life and produce a healthy offspring.

Joe is emblematic of the decaying world in which the film is set. Likewise, Joe's warboys, the fanatic and suicidal devotees of the religion Joe has built around huffing chrome paint, V8 engines, and glorious death, are all sickly beings. To these people, possessed of a “half-life”, Joe



is the All Father, presiding over an impenetrable fortress of green space and fresh water. While the details connected to Joe's mythological system are entirely visual, they nonetheless convey a truth of *this world and our world*; when life is miserable, people will turn to religion for its promise of a better world to come.

As for Max (Tom Hardy), the movie's titular character, his function principally speaks to *Fury Road's* desire to up-end the audience's expectations of an action film. There's little reason to believe Max is the protagonist, let alone the point-of-view character in this movie. Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) catalyzes the action when she uses Joe's War Rig to lead his former wives from their gilded cage. Max only becomes involved in this story as a blood donor strapped to one of Joe's pursuit vehicles. He is, quite literally, along for the ride.

Which brings us to Joe's brides. Joe keeps his wives in a modified bank vault. The imagery, combined with Joe's reaction to their escape, frames the women as property. Before the first act is done the wives come into their own as individuals who have (mostly) rejected the system around them. Yet this transformation invites the audience to question if their and Furiosa's motivations are truly righteous. The wives, and by extension, the audience, might be wholly naive to the world around them.

Everything within Joe's dominion mobilizes living beings as components of a greater whole. It would be simplistic to assume he does this out of malice. However, it is obvious Joe's actions are the consequences of a world both burned and broken. While the wives may be Joe's possessions, they also represent the best chance for making healthy humans amid the wretches of the wastes. Pair this with Joe's role as patriarch of a religion that encourages suicide (i.e. thinning out the non-viable genetic material) and perhaps the seeming antagonist of this movie is a thesis on the brutal necessities required to keep humanity alive without the trappings of civilization.

This is the strength of *Fury Road*. In a world gone mad, it eschews the temptation to reduce humanity to the simplest possible components. There are no binaries of good and evil in *Fury Road*. All of the characters think themselves righteous. None are so one-dimensional as to be written off as maniacal super villains or chronic do-gooders.

Likewise, the movie is neither a pro-feminist piece nor an anti-male manifesto. *Fury Road is a visual story*. Visual stories, be they a single painting or 216,000 frames of study into entropy and decay, are not meant to be sorted into simple dialectics. Rather, they are conversations waiting to happen. To understand *Fury Road*, a viewer must accept the first lesson of the wastes: one does not survive without compromise.

In sum, *Fury Road* is a gonzo and over-the-top testament to the power of physical sets, working props, visual storytelling, and contemporary mythmaking. Beyond all the high-octane explosions – which are many and glorious – is a richly developed and highly nuanced world. George Miller does a first rate job of showing everything about this world while telling the audience almost nothing. It is both a turn-off-your-brain action movie, and a deeply evocative piece of storytelling.

It is the type of action movie audiences sorely deserve.

On Doom, Morality, and the Video Game Hall of Fame

Originally Published: June 9, 2015

On June 4, 2015, six video games were inducted into the Video Game Hall of Fame at the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York. A cabal of video games editors, scholars, and other notables selected this first wave of inductees, which included *Pong*, *Pac-Man*, *Super Mario Brothers*, *World of Warcraft*, *Tetris*, and *Doom*.

Before the dust could settle, the [Christian Science Monitor](#) reported on anti-video game activist Jack Thompson protesting *Doom*'s inclusion in the hall of fame. This from Mr. Thompson,

"It's only a matter of time before *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty* and *Halo* are in there. Obviously if they put *Doom* in there, morality is not playing a role in their selection process."

Part of me wants to take this joker to task. I love *Doom*, and I won't quietly abide somebody shitting on something near and dear to me. As a critic, I could argue for hours about *Doom*'s technical merit and the complexity of its level design compared to modern games (looking at you, *Bioshock Infinite*). Say nothing for its ability to spin-off mods and daughter projects from the fan base. If you've never played *Brutal Doom*, you should. Likewise, *Doom* is fantastic for its subversive use of Christianity imagery – something horror movies did for decades before I shot my first demon possessed UAC Marine.

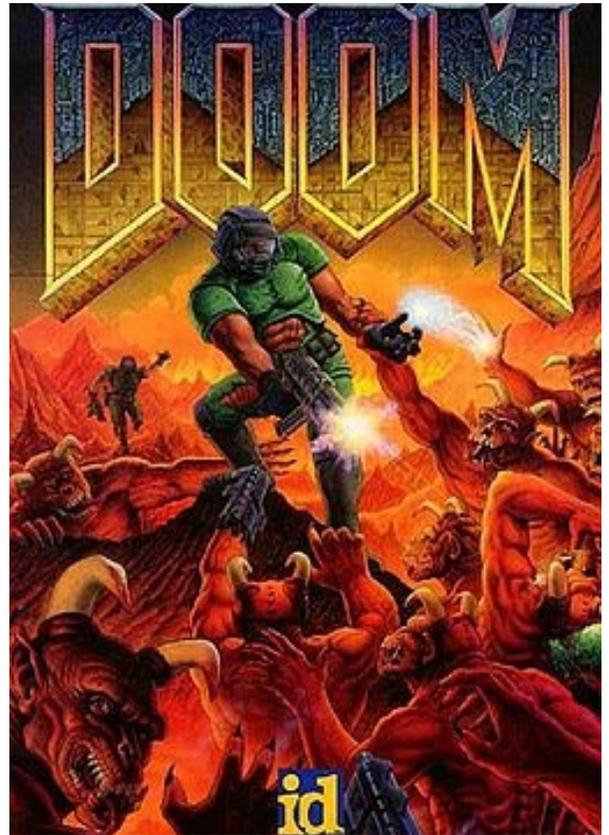
There's also the very simple fact that ***Doom* is 22 years old**, and we're still having pissing contests about it. Do we need another argument in favour of this title's significance beyond its ability to stay relevant for more than two decades? I think not. Instead, I want to tackle the notion of morality that Mr. Thompson invokes in his criticism of *Doom*. The first and most obvious question, ***how is Doom an immoral game?***

Asking the question invites a debate on the definition of morality, the likes of which could go on for pages, accompanied by endless comment threads of trolling and counter trolling. Who am I kidding, nobody reads this blog...except for you, mom. Hi mom.

Nevertheless, I'll offer up a working definition of morality from Bernard Gert's *Morality: Its Nature and Justification*.

"Morality is an informal public system applying to all rational persons, governing behaviour that affects others, and includes what are commonly known as the moral rules, ideals, and virtues and has the lessening of evil or harm as its goal."

In order for *Doom* to be immoral by this definition, one would have to demonstrate that it has the effect of increasing evil and harm in society. Alternatively, we could call *Doom* immoral if,



through intention or design, it promotes evil and harm through a set of values. Finding proof that *Doom* contributes to harm while working within the confines of a **public system** applying to **all rational persons** sets the bar high for those out to argue for *Doom's* immorality.

Gert's definition of morality rejects any religious argument against *Doom's* morality; therein, I submit objections to *Doom* based on Judeo-Christian morality (or that of any other faith-based system) do not meet the burden of being public or applying to all rational persons. At the risk of being glib, an impassioned belief in the supernatural to the point of allowing said supernatural being to proscribe corporeal behaviour is not, in this critic's opinion, a rational thing. Moreover, denominational religions do not meet my understanding of a public system. Religion, by its nature, is an exclusive system built around semiotics and metaphors. That sound you're hearing is the god argument going up in smoke like so many plasma burned cacodemons.

With the religious definition of evil and harm taken off the table, we're left with a question of *Doom's* morality as it intersects with the physical (i.e. secular) world. At this point, we could easily be drawn into a quagmire of trying to determine the intention of *Doom's* creators. Though I doubt anybody at iD Software created *Doom* with the goal of producing moral rules for the promotion of harm – a point I will return to in a moment – let us suppose those desires were in play. If, hypothetically, *Doom* exists to promote harm and evil in the world, [research from Rutgers and Villanova](#) would suggest iD made a complete hash of their endeavour. Gamespot paraphrased the results of Rutgers and Villanova's study below.

“Annual trends in video game sales for the past 33 years were unrelated to violent crime both concurrently and up to four years later. Unexpectedly, monthly sales of video games were related to concurrent decreases in aggravated assaults and were unrelated to homicides. Searches for violent video game walkthroughs and guides were also related to decreases in aggravated assaults and homicides two months later. Finally, homicides tended to decrease in the months following the release of popular M-rated violent video games.”

Even if *Doom* had the intention to create harm – a highly dubious notion – it, nor any other video game, has managed to bring about widespread immoral actions like assault or murder. For the record, murder happens to be the primary action available to players in *Doom*.

As an audience discussing morality as a public system applied to all *rational* people, does it earnestly make sense to interpret *Doom* as the spectacular failure of a group of black-hearted maleficarum intent to ruin the world? Is it not more sensible to presume the moral objections to *Doom*, like those witnessed from Mr. Thompson, are better seen as taste-based objections (e.g. I don't like this and neither should you) or morality as defined by a religious dogma, which likely fails at least one test of being rational or rooted in public understanding?

Assuming no outward ill-intent on the part of *Doom's* developers, we're left with only one course in exploring *Doom's* morality: taking the game at its face value. On this front, *Doom's* message is as plain as a shotgun to the face. Only a critical tendency to over complicate matters obscures the fundamental fact about *Doom's* moral compass.

In *Doom*, a player's foes are the very embodiment of evil. They colonize humans, turning the living into zombies. These infernal forces are beyond reason or compassion. They kill everything in their path. Should this horde escape the confines of Mars, they pose a clear threat to life on Earth. *Doom's* protagonist “aka Doomguy” personally resists said evil. Indeed, he quite literally reduces the evil threatening the Earth with each and every righteous shot of his plasma rifle. I submit the game's moral code is clear: resist and reduce evil in all its forms.

Doom is certainly a violent, possibly frightening affair for someone not disposed to science fiction horror. At its core, *Doom's* narrative is about the reduction of harm to humanity, using force as an

absolute last resort against an utterly inhuman enemy. When individual taste and morality parsed through religious systems are set aside, *Doom presents itself as a perfectly moral video game.*

Slaughtering the Sacred Cow: Adam Rewatches Neon Genesis Evangelion, Part 1

Originally Published: June 9, 2015

First, and for the record, I would like to say this post and all those that follow in this series can be blamed on Leah Bobet. Her tweets about *Evangelion* inspired/inceptioned me into rewatching the series.

For the sake of my sanity, I'm going to break this diatribe up into parts. Part one focuses on the first seven episodes of the series. There's no particular reason behind the number, beyond *Evangelion's* wack-a-doodle story reaching a saturation point in my head.

I should also be very honest about the fact that I hold no special love for *Evangelion*. Despite Wikipedia calling it "one of the most successful and critically acclaimed anime television series of the 1990s," and "a critique and deconstruction of the mecha genre," it has always managed to confuse me more than it has impressed me. My reaction to the series when I was twenty-two was mostly along the lines of, "what the fuck did I just watch?" Eleven years and seven episodes later, little has changed.

On that note, let's get into it in the finest fashion of Mr. Plinket.



Number 1: Space Jesus

Evangelion is a show about robots, religion, and Space Jesus aka Shinji Ikari. There's hardly a scene that goes by where somebody isn't saying something, doing something, or blowing something up in a way that references religion. Shinji's first fight with an "angel" features multiple explosions where the blast patterns are in the shape of a cross. As for Shinji, who resents the pain he feels at the hands of an aloof, all seeing, father, well I don't have to draw you a picture on that one.

Though there's no shortage of pillaging from Christianity, the series doesn't limit itself to the Abrahamic faiths. Shinji, Rei, and Asuka (a trinity) were all augured to be Eva pilots from something called the "Marduk Report." For everybody without a degree in classical studies, you made a good life choice. Wocka Wocka.

For everybody else, Marduk was the patron god of the city of Babylon and head of the Babylonian pantheon. Don't say you never learnt something on my website.

The problem is the aesthetic is seemingly absent message. As such, it wears thin very quickly. A person can abide only so many nuclear cross explosions before the "deconstruction" of religion feels more like shoe-horning so much ephemera into an ark.

taps mic I said ark. It's a religion thing. Get it?

Maybe as an uppity undergrad I was content to bask in the symbolism and feel clever for picking up on its presence. Now, it's tedious and makes me feel like I should have done a useful minor, like business.

We get it, Hideaki Anno, you either love religion or hate religion – I honestly can't tell.

Number 2: The Plot Is Flimsy

The addition of one qualified therapist or mental health professional on the NERV staff would break the entire series. If Shinji didn't have to A) single-handedly deal with critical incident stress B) work in an office with his asshole father C) stumble through his job with insufficient professional development D) suffer indifferent coworkers – looking at you Ritsuko – and then E) go home to life with a high-functioning alcoholic roommate/boss, he might not end up a giant hot mess of self-loathing. Nor should we forget he's doing all of the above *while going to high school*. High school: literally, the worst place on Earth for gawky introverted teenagers.

On that point, *Evangelion* might best be seen as an historical artefact. It shows the audience how far we've come from a time that would imagine an agency like NERV spending billions of dollars building over-engineered kill bots without considering the fallout of sending a manic depressive teenager into battle. Now, such an omission would likely be seen as the creators being a little too on the nose with writing their feelings into the story. Either that, or some snarky bastard like yours truly would come along and write off the entire story for not having considered its giant plot holes.

Number 3: Misato's Theme

Want to convince me the world is in constant peril from a cosmic threat beyond my comprehension? [Don't play Misato's Theme](#) four times in an episode where Shinji and a Penguin practice eating synchronized breakfast for the 2016 Tokyo-3 Olympics.

Number 4: Misato's Creepy Hot for Teacher Thing

This one goes hand-in-hand with why NERV should have a staff therapist. If there were even a single responsible adult running Earth's last line of defence against a Third Impact, they would have realized that letting Shinji live with his boss is a terrible idea.

As a sideshow to Shinji saving the world, there might be some room to channel *The Odd Couple* into his home life. Except as odd couples go, Misato's part in things is almost perpetually creepy. She's alternatively Shinji's disastrous but well-meaning surrogate mother or his step-sister, who gives the poor confused lad some odd feelings. What the hell message is this relationship supposed to

be sending to the audience? Teenage boys alternate between depressed and awkwardly horny? Brilliant, Holmes, how do you do it?

It's also clear Misato is only outwardly put together when she's working. All things being equal, she's one of the most capable characters on the show. At least until she gets home and we see her life through the lens of a messy apartment, morning beers, and weird relationships with teenage boys. Am I missing something? Does anybody else see the series reducing the woman who should be running NERV into a punchline/object of fapping for teenage boys?

Okay, that's enough for now.

To be continued...

Book Review: The End of All Things

Originally Published: August 14, 2015

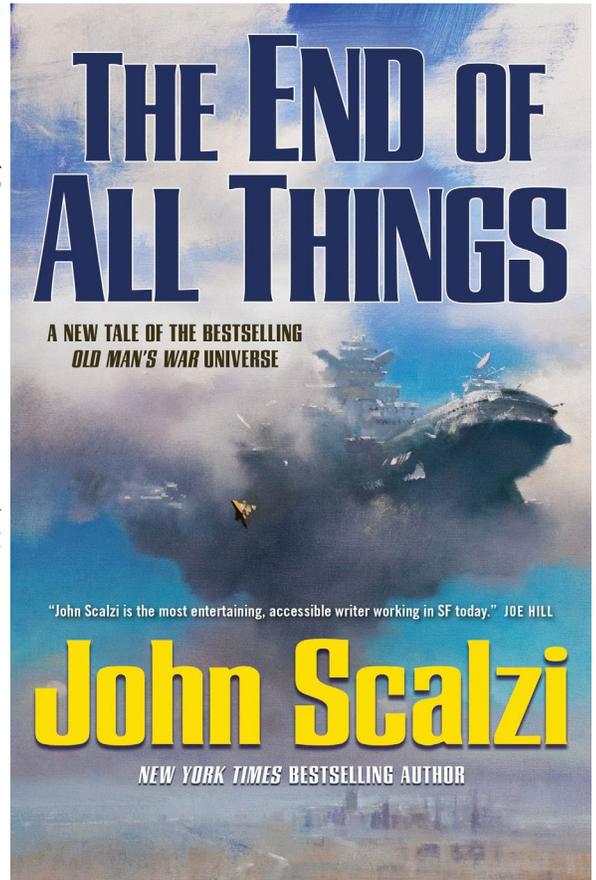
Let's start this review with a quick story, shall we? Set the wayback machine for Sunday morning at Ad Astra 2015 in Toronto. After a weekend of drinking (because I'm at a con hanging out with other writers) pain pills (because I did something to my back before the con) and not enough sleep (see the above) I found myself on a panel with Charlotte Ashley and Derek Newman-Stille. If I recall, the topic of the panel was contemporary issues in science fiction. Being hung over, exhausted, on meds, and *desperate* to seem clever, I ended up bloviating pretty hard. Rookie mistake. I should have known better.

The one decent thing I remember saying was that it would be interesting to see a space opera working to deconstruct empire, rather than using it as a convenient narrative vehicle. I think John Scalzi does just that in *The End of All Things*.

Even if the latest volume in the *Old Man's War* universe doesn't fully dismantle the romance of the space empire in space opera, it does put empire, as a concept, under a magnifying glass. The Colonial Union shows us the cost and hubris of a hard power empire. To maintain its dominion, the CU uses its corps of super-soldiers against human colonies seeking independence. In contrast, the six-hundred alien races of the Conclave – a more pragmatic United Federation of Planets – illustrates the soft-power empire. Where once the Conclave existed as a mutual defence (against the Colonial Union) and trade organisation, its hegemonic power has given way to a modified Bush Doctrine of "get the humans before they get us". This cold war on the verge of going hot continues the central theme that began in Mr. Scalzi's previous novel, *The Human Division*: even the grandest house of cards can be undone when someone bumps the table.

A reader might expect to find this story told from the perspective of the upper echelons of power. With only a single exception, *The End of All Things* leans heavily toward telling the stories of working people on behalf of their greater whole. One of the most important characters to the story is the third-string pilot on a cargo ship. A pair of lieutenants within the Colonial Defence Forces anchor half the book. Even with the fate of the galaxy is at hand, Mr. Scalzi subverts expectations that might see space Jack Ryan rubbing elbows with the space Joint Chiefs.

Perhaps this is the great strength of Mr. Scalzi's writing. He is an expert at writing people, even when he's working with non-human characters. The aliens of *The End of All Things* are not hideous and unknowable Others. One particular alien takes up arms against humanity because there is widespread unemployment on his planet, and fighting means having a job. This doesn't mean humanity is cast as the galaxy's foremost monsters, either. If anything, humans are seen as tiresome and exhausting. To paraphrase one particular alien leader, "I'm sick of thinking about



humans.” Aren’t we all, Madam Premiere?

And while we’re on the subject of being tired of humans, there’s a delicious snark running through each of the book’s narrative voices. Nowhere is this more evident than when the author pays attention to fine details that might get lumped into the category of social justice. This isn’t to suggest the novel is a manifesto. In point of fact, it is the exact opposite.

The End of All Things is effortless in the way it promotes institutional equality, tolerance, and compassion as *de rigueur*. I picture the Robert Heinlein fanboys reading *The End of All Things* and being horrified at the presence of “SJW” propaganda leaking into “*their*” genre. In truth, it doesn’t take much imagination to envision Mr. Scalzi intentionally biting his thumb at the kind of people who feel threatened by women written outside the confines of the male gaze or the use of alternative pronouns in reference to non-gender binary characters.

At the end of all things, Mr. Scalzi challenges his characters, and by extension his readers, to see beyond the monolithic ideas of their/our times and toward something better. I’m told there’s a certain hubris, perhaps even a privilege, in and about narratives of hope within science fiction. If this is the case, I trust the internet will deputize the appropriate taxation authorities to collect on my complete and total satisfaction with this novel. It’s one thing for a novel to impress me. It’s something else when it stirs an optimism I thought long since crushed under the weight of cynicism and a popular tendency toward darker narratives of entropy and annihilation.

If this is the end of the *Old Man’s War* universe, then Mr. Scalzi has given the old girl a fantastic send off. If not, he’s driven his universe toward an uncertain evolution that should make for some fantastic novels to come.

First Impressions: The Last Man on Earth Season 2

Originally Published: September 29, 2015

The first season of Will Forte's apocalypse comedy, *The Last Man on Earth*, fell flat with me. Other than the occasional sight gag, I found the show to be painfully unfunny and a salute to the worst parts of the human experience. To wit, Forte's character, Phil Miller, was an asshole. Granted, two years of being alone might turn anybody into a bit of a self-involved narcissist. Yet the more I tried to give Phil Miller the benefit of the doubt, the more the writing let me down. On Sunday night, the season two premiere of *The Last Man on Earth* gave me a reason to think the series might have grown up a bit.



There's a substantial change in tone between the first and second season. Though some might chalk it up to a long arc of emotional growth for the Phil character, I'm more inclined to think that the writers realized they had reached the limit of what they could do with an emotionally stunted prick as the main character. The first episode of season two sees Phil and Carol (Kristen Schaal) remarried and looking for a new home in the ruins of America. True to form, this is no somber road trip. In fact, the light hearted, "I can do anything I want" gimmicks actually land as something other than tone deaf slapstick.

Sure, it's supremely goofy watching Phil and Carol use an F-117 stealth fighter as a pickup truck, but now the whimsy isn't poisoned by Phil being an asshole. The kiddie pool margarita is as gross (or genius, I can't really tell) a concept as ever, but seeing Carol in it with Phil gives the show the warmth it was otherwise missing. And weird as it is to invoke two adults bathing in a party drink as a symbol for the rest of the show, I can think of no better tableau for the episode. Phil and Carol are now, finally, both in it together.

Phil is still a bit irascible. Carol is still a bit of a nitpicking weirdo, but now both characters are in on the joke. Carol isn't simply the wet blanket half of the odd couple. The duo might revel in congressional themed puns while having sex in the White House, but the weird coitus is no longer a tool for laughing at Carol. *The Last Man on Earth* is finally letting me care about Phil and Carol as equals.

What's really remarkable is how effortlessly the writing is able to sell me on Phil and Carol as actual people in a somewhat unconventional marriage. Carol's art book is mobilized as an effortless tool to fill in the missing parts of the couple's story. It catches the audience up on their past, while also injecting some much needed humanity into both characters.

From where I left it last season, *The Last Man on Earth* seems almost unrecognizable. No longer

will I be tuning in to hate watch the show. Twenty-two near flawless minutes of comedy has me wanting to see Phil and Carol reunited in the next episode. Likewise, my trust is restored that Phil, though still a bit of a jerk, isn't going to jump at the first chance he gets to abandon Carol for someone more physically attractive.

Now the only question remains what role Jason Sudeikis will play as Phil's astronaut brother. He's not bad as the cut-away joke guy, but that gimmick will play itself out sooner rather than later.

Book Review: Slow Bullets

Originally Published: October 16, 2015

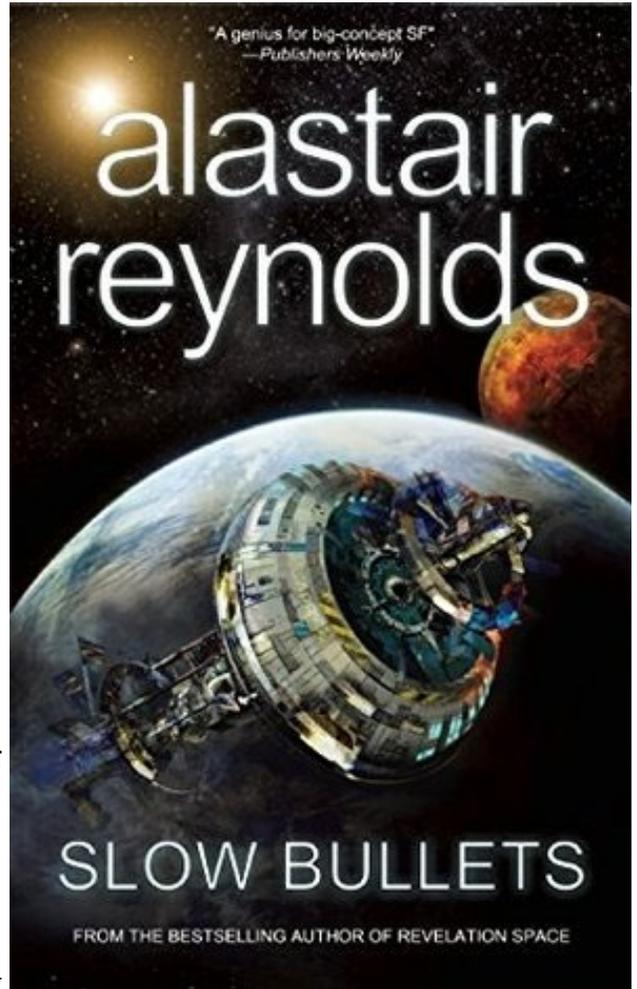
Slow Bullets is, I'm embarrassed to admit, my first exposure to Alastair Reynolds' writing. Based on what I'd heard of Mr. Reynolds' works, I expected a story that would put a premium on the details of a hard science fiction environment. Instead, I was treated to a war story that is too complex for the all-encompassing label of space opera.

I suspect a reader will see my invocation of the words "war story" and "space opera" as an invitation to view *Slow Bullets* as military science fiction. Indeed, I initially thought about applying that label, myself. However, it feels like doing so risks minimizing the nuance at hand within this short book. Mr. Reynolds has written what I'm going to call a "peace story". Though he borrows from elements of about half dozen tropes and sub-genres, their coalescence is something delightfully fresh.

Slow Bullets is told through the memoir of an ex-soldier called Scur. The voice and tone are well suited to the nature of the story, inviting a measure of intimacy between narrator and reader. Scur's narrative begins on the eve of a cease fire between an interstellar human hegemony divided against itself. The details of the war, such as why it happened, are left intentionally vague – save for the occasional nod toward a religious fuel fanning the flames of war. I suspect this is both an intentional allegory to contemporary times, and also a means of accentuating the grand pointlessness of armed struggle (i.e. all fighting is arbitrary to the outsider). In the opening pages, readers witness Scur's capture and torture before she wakes up in a cryopod aboard a prison transport.

The balance of the story brings together the narrative threads of a space ark, interstellar disaster (with just a soupcon of cosmic horror), and the survivor's tale. The first half of the book, which concerns itself with how people of disparate ideologies forge an uneasy peace despite being centuries removed from their own time via an FTL accident, is considerably less interesting than what I see as the novel's central question: who are we without our culture?

Mr. Reynolds uses Scur and her shipmates to explore questions of identity and shared history. In the wake of a cosmic disaster, Scur's ship is more than a lifeboat for the survivors; it is a cultural ark for the collective knowledge of humanity. The novel posits that with a single shove from an external force, the culture and wisdom of the ages can be lost. Civilization, even among space faring peoples, is a fragile thing. Staring at the pieces of a broken world, Scur and her shipmates are forced to ask themselves if their individual identity is worth more than the identity of the species. It is hard not to look at that question and reflect upon it outside of a science fiction



context.

Replace the cosmic horror with something much more pedestrian, like ocean acidification or a solar flare, and ponder how much our own national identities or religious affiliations should mean to us. How much of ourselves would we be willing to sacrifice to protect the greater whole of humanity? Would a Christian devote their life to protecting the last copy of the Quran? Would a Marxist give over part of themselves to the collected works of John Maynard Keynes? These are the sort of questions at the core of *Slow Bullets*. Again, if I have a single criticism of the novella, it's that we only see these questions come to the forefront late in the story.

This isn't to suggest that the first half of the novel is unsatisfying. One should not jump into an existential crisis without allowing a reader time to make the allegorical connections between their world and the fictional one. At the same time, I wanted more of this crisis once it was recognized. I expect this desire for more should suffice as a ringing endorsement of *Slow Bullets*.

Military science fiction almost always asks its readers to examine soldiers giving up their lives for the greater whole. It can show the absurdity of conflict, or reinforce the notion that the cost of freedom is vigilance eternal. Mr. Reynolds uses *Slow Bullets* to take the traditional war story in a different direction, asking its soldiers, even in peace, to continue sacrificing their individuality for a greater whole. While it might be somewhat self-serving of an author to suggest that poetry and art is worthy of an individual sacrifice, this critic sees no reason to disagree. If the transcendent isn't worth protecting, then what is the purpose of anything? A person would do well to keep this question in mind as they read *Slow Bullets*.

Book Review: Star Wars Aftermath

Originally Published: October 27, 2015

Wherever a reader lands on this novel, I have to marvel at the fury it has produced. The stream of festering vitriol I've seen directed against Chuck Wendig is as astonishing as it is tragic. Who knew a gay character turning down a taste of the alien strange would set a corner of the internet ablaze? Oh wait, it's the internet, never mind.

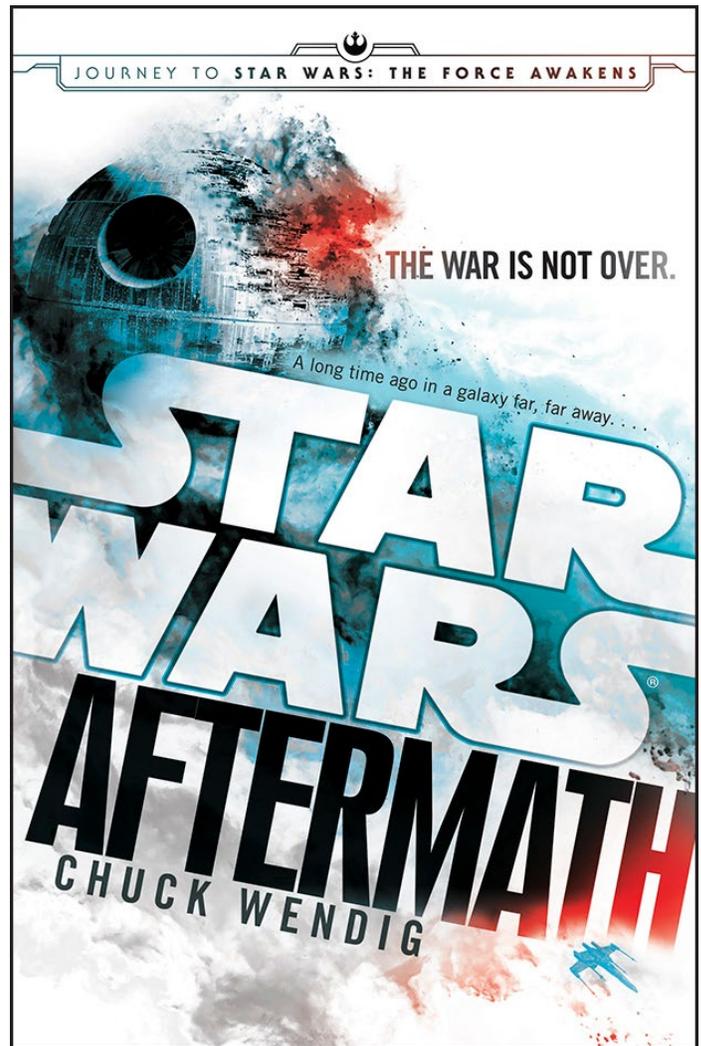
Moving swiftly on, allow me to establish a baseline for evaluating this book. *Star Wars*, on screen, is as good as it is bad. From my point of view, the line between good and bad in *Star Wars* is Lawrence Kasdan, Dave Filoni, and Matt Michnovetz. I'm the guy who thinks that *Empire* is better than *Jedi*. I'm the guy who thinks the *Darkness on Umbara* arc of *The Clone Wars* is on par with *Empire*. I'm the guy who thinks that *Star Wars* is better when it goes deeper and dirtier (phrasing), and that's why I think Chuck Wendig wrote a hell of a novel.

Whatever you think of George Lucas, one has to accept that he writes *Star Wars* for children. I don't say this to cast aspersions, so much as to point out the obvious. Consider the good people of Coruscant pulling down a statue of Papa Palpatine after the Battle of Endor – as it appears in the Lucas-finagled cut of *Jedi*. A child would be fine with this scene because good is triumphing over evil – historical allusions notwithstanding. Adults look at that scene and ask why Stormtroopers aren't cracking some skulls. Wendig begins his novel with the Imperial police opening fire on this very crowd.

A post-Endor Imperial summit on the planet Akiva, an Outer Rim world that houses the balance of the story, provides a necessary catharsis for *Star Wars* fans who dare to think about the mythos in a serious way. Here we learn how Imperial power fractures absent Palpatine. Likewise, readers encounter Imperial voices far removed from the jackbooted caricatures often seen on screen. Admiral Rae Sloane (don't call her the new Thrawn) asks her Imperial cohorts why the people of the galaxy *wouldn't* be afraid of the Empire.

To quote the Admiral, “*We're the ones that built something called a Death Star.*”

In between the ever-so-brief interludes to fan favourite characters, Mr. Wendig focuses on players who embody the working people on both sides of the galactic civil war. Norra Wexley is a retired Y-Wing pilot with PTSD and a messed up family life. Sinjir Velus is an ex-Imperial Loyalty



Officer (i.e. commissar), who escaped from Han Solo's strike force on Endor, only to hit the bottle on Akiva. The aforementioned Admiral Rae Sloane is an Imperial starship captain intent staving off the Empire's collapse while also demonstrating that not all Imperials are incompetent idiots. These are the stars of the novel, and they work because they buck the *Star Wars* convention of playing to easy archetypes.

The novel's penchant for politics manifests in the New Republic, the Rebel Alliance's successor state, coming to terms with itself as a once and former military junta. Even as the Republic's strength grows, Mon Mothma argues for military disarmament. As readers watch the story unfold on Akiva, while both the New Republic and Imperial Remnant wring their hands over what to do next, they see why both the Old Republic and the Empire were/are failed states. Simply, neither could offer the Galaxy Far Away stability or peace.

The Rebel Alliance, by its very nature, was a destabilizing force. The Empire was as corrupt as it was brutal. Wendig takes it upon himself to build the New Republic as something that purports to let the galaxy find some semblance of calm. He's not doing this singularly through high-minded speeches about peace and democracy. Nor is he pandering to what we might want in terms of epic space battles where Mon Cal Cruisers give Imperial Star Destroyers epic pastings. For that would only make the Republic a new sort of empire in and of itself.

Instead, Wendig gets his hands dirty with the inevitable, ugliness of war. Child soldier brigades on Coruscant, for example. Not bleak enough? How about refugees fleeing the anarchy of their homeworlds in the aftermath of the Alliance freeing, but not holding, an Imperial world. Mr. Wendig uses the 20th century's hangovers of military occupation and liberation as a thematic foundation for giving *Star Wars* some much needed depth. Some readers might cry foul at his making the Galaxy Far Away a dirty place, but like so many who lamented the loss of *Star Wars: 1313*, I'm content to roll around in the mud.

So no, gentle reader, you're not going to learn about what happened to Han and Leia after Endor. Nor will you be treated to a story of Luke rebuilding the Jedi Order. Instead, you're going to get a story that treats *Star Wars*' adult fans like reasonably intelligent people. We all know there's more to the Galaxy Far Away than the dysfunctional and incestuous antics of the Skywalker clan, so why not explore it?

Mr. Wendig, like Kasdan and Filoni, puts the 'war' in *Star Wars*. War happens on many fronts, involving many people, and the line between those people is often a messy and changing thing. *Aftermath* effortlessly captures this notion, injecting a decidedly thoughtful and politically aware aesthetic into *Star Wars*. If you expect anything less than that in reading *Aftermath*, then (hand wave) this isn't the novel you are looking for. Move along.

On Kilgrave and the Monster Inside All of Us

Originally Published: December 4, 2015

I'm currently seven episodes into Marvel's *Jessica Jones*. At this point, I think *Jessica Jones* stands alone within the MCU as being something that is both profoundly meta and effortlessly didactic. Rather than getting into all of that, I want to talk about Kilgrave. More specifically, I want to talk about Kilgrave's powers.

At first blush, Kilgrave's power to compel anyone to do anything seems almost subdued. Within the pages of the Marvel universe and the MCU, there are beings blessed/cursed with much more grandiose abilities. Likewise, mind control is far from an original ability. Professor Xavier, for one, could reduce anyone on the planet to a meat puppet. Of course, Charles Xavier would never use his mutant gifts on something as crass as cheating at poker. Xavier is a paragon beyond the reach of mere mortals.

In contrast, I've seen Kilgrave use his powers to make money, skip the bill at restaurants, kill people, torture people, rape people, and generally shape the world around him. But the thing that makes him a stand-out villain within the MCU, a place where so many antagonists are little more than the opposite of the person headlining the movie/series, is the fact that ***Kilgrave's powers would probably turn anyone into Kilgrave.***

Think about yourself for a moment, dear reader. Are you a good person? Do you generally adhere to some sort of moral or personal code in your daily life? Now consider where that code comes from. Do your behaviours stem from a system that provides an immutable right way to live your life? Alternatively, are you good because you recognize, on either a conscious or unconscious level, that civil society depends on a social contract where individual needs are subordinate to a collective good?

In other words, what percentage of your interaction with society is governed by your fear of punishment? Now suppose something (e.g. Kilgrave powers) stripped away your obligation to said social contract. What if you were free to revert to a state of nature, a place of absolute Hobbesian freedom, while everyone else was still bound to a social contract? Would such freedom change you?

For all the good we think we have inside of us, Kilgrave's ability to compel anyone to do anything, filtered through a personal lens, forces us to consider where our good natures come from. How could any person (other than Batman) resist using his powers? How many compromises could a person make to their self-identified good nature while using his abilities? When would a person cross the Rubicon between man and monster? When would the monster begin seeing themselves



as a god?

Would you, gentle reader, Kilgrave a misogynist into a feminist? Given the chance, would you tell Donald Trump to go home and retire from public and private life? Would you use the power to talk yourself into a dream job? I'd probably do all three. And even after running headlong into *Jessica Jones*' central ethos – that any act of coercion is a violation – I could probably come up with some way to rationalize my actions. And with each rationalization, I, a generally good person, take another step to becoming Kilgrave.

Kilgrave can then be seen as a meaningful example of what might happen to a normal person if they were given god-like powers. Arguably, none of the Avengers meet my definition of being normal. The unique circumstances that make them who they are (e.g. war hero, billionaire, royalty) prepare them for the responsibility that comes with being empowered beyond mere mortals. Also, Jessica Jones and Matt Murdoch may have powers, but they are hardly the equals of the Avengers in raw ability, and their early childhood is likewise a product of a heroic archetype. ***When I say normal, I mean someone born outside of the confines of Mr. Campbell's monomyth.***

Kilgrave powers speak to the common person because they can be applied in such utterly banal ways. *Jessica Jones* hints at this in the way Kilgrave uses his abilities to always get what he wants to eat. Imagine what would become of a person if they won every argument about where to go for supper, what to say on the office Christmas card, and who should take out the garbage? If a person never had to compromise, how long would it take before things like compassion and empathy atrophied? How long could a person be eternally right before the people who would dare to contradict them became tiresome pests? In such a mental place, tolerance and understanding become acts of largess rather than fundamental patterns of behaviour.

On the opposite side of the coin, how long could a person use their Kilgrave powers before they created an existential void for themselves? Think here of Homer Simpson when he became the Chosen One. Would absolute power over others lead to isolation and alienation? While there's a chance this distance from other people might make a person with Kilgrave powers cling to their humanity, it might also encourage them to use their abilities in the pursuit of new ways to fill the void.

Notwithstanding the old *Wargames* maxim that the only way to win is not to play, I don't see how a person could have Kilgrave's powers without progressively surrendering the behavioural constructions that make coexisting with other people possible. Courtesy, manners, and etiquette go out the window when a person can act like the most boorish of French monarchs absent any real consequence.

As superhero antagonists go, Kilgrave is something far removed from the likes of Doctor Doom, Whiplash, Loki, or Ronan the Accuser. Unlike most of the MCU's rogues' gallery, Kilgrave is not a foil for the protagonist. Rather, he is a foil for the audience. He exists to remind us of what we would become if we woke up with his powers. ***He is why we can never be Batman.*** It doesn't matter who Kilgrave was before his powers, because we, as humans, are not uncompromising enough to wield them without becoming monsters. Only the truly saintly among us can look in the mirror and not see a Kilgrave waiting for his day in the sun.

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