

“*Cuphead* and Elitism: How We Foster Entitlement in our Society”

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TUTORIAL

A thin black book opens, inviting us into a new world: The magical world of Inkwell Isle, where cups are sentient and Satan runs a casino. Cuphead and Mugman, two bizarrely Mickey-Mouse-like brothers, are introduced as the protagonists of the story whilst they wander to the wrong side of the tracks (literally, train tracks) and wind up at the Devil’s casino. As the boys take up gambling, accompanied by “the casino’s sleazy manager,” King Dice, we begin to see that they are in fact NOT Disney characters, for they are quickly carried away with the thrill of chance. The dice seem to work magnificently in the more impulsive brother (Cuphead)’s hands, as he finds himself on a winning streak at the Craps table. Until... a mysterious figure approaches. Cuphead and Mugman find themselves impressively face to face with the Devil himself—the casino’s owner—who seems to be suspiciously impressed with their winning streak.

“Now, how about we raise the stakes?” he offers, extending his cold, clammy palm which contains a pair of red dice. He proposes an arguably bad deal for the brothers, in which their statistically improbable victory of one more roll would yield their gain of all the riches in the casino, but their highly likely and devastating loss would provide him ownership of both of their souls. Dollar signs in his eyes, Cuphead rolls quickly, without questioning the fairness of the suspicious new pair of dice that has been dispensed to him by his hellish opponent. Naturally, Satan wins, because the story needs a conflict to continue.

Entirely aware that his idiot brother has literally gambled away their souls, Mugman begs the Devil to have pity and let them pay off their debt in another way. Surprisingly, it works. Satan explains to them that he apparently owns the souls of most residents on the Inkwell Isle, but they've evaded signing their soul contracts and he'd really like those so he can officially own their souls and all that. He offers the brothers a new deal: They collect these contracts and he'll pardon them of their debt. Thereby, the player is thrown into the harsh and unforgiving world of *Cuphead*, in which a rash mistake must be undone by a methodical onslaught of battles with the Devil's runaway debtors.

When faced with a battle, the only controls at the player's dispense are jump, shoot, dash and parry. Using these limited skills, players must dodge many small and fast moving particles thrown at them, sometimes while conquering platforming challenges, all whilst aiming themselves to shoot at the boss. No matter how much platforming and dodging you do, damaging the boss is the only thing that will ultimately end the repeated assault from dozens of moving attackers. Oh, and you only have three health points to do all of this with. If any attack touches you so much as once, you lose a health point and will not be able to regenerate it, with the loss of all three triggering the level to restart from the beginning, no progress saved.

INKWELL ISLE ONE: Reliving History

Released in 2017 by Studio MDHR, *Cuphead* is a hand-drawn rubber-hose style video game inspired by the bullet hell "run and gun" games of the 90s. Boasting the nostalgic animation of a pre-war era and the "brutal but fair" difficulty of classic games like *Contra*, *Metal Slug* and *Gunstar Heroes*, *Cuphead* sold over a million copies within only two weeks of hitting

the market. The combination of uniquely sentimental difficulty and art reminiscent of old Disney movies provided a broader audience with a sense of “revival.” Consumers were thrilled at the gorgeous installment presented to them, but many were quick to complain once they had actually faced the much anticipated 90s inspired boss rush: “Where’s the ‘Skip Boss Fight’ button?”

Each fight is more elaborate than the last: A pirate ship comes alive to summon sea creatures to bash us, a starlet laments the story of her life while trampling us, a series of ghosts that possess a train try to stop us in our tracks with giant bouncing eyeballs. Every boss contains multiple phases, getting progressively harder throughout the battle, requiring players to rely on intellectual and technical skills to learn the unique attack patterns of twenty-eight bosses and conquer them. As you progress further along the game’s storyline, collecting soul contracts and nearing a fight with the Devil himself, the bosses gain difficulty, building on previous patterns to equip the player with the skills necessary to overcome the impending final challenge. But it’s always possible, it’s always fair, and the game prepares you for what’s to come. *Cuphead* is about learning from your mistakes and overcoming obstacles, and provides a good reminder that no matter how hard a challenge is, you can get through it. So why are so many people demanding a button that bypasses the very intent of the game?

Art is full of revivals—From the new surge in past-musician-biopic movies, to the slew of jukebox musicals overtaking Broadway—People are always remaking things in new ways, often out of desire to relive the nostalgia of the past within the political correctness of the present. Games, specifically, present us with enough of a flashback to lose ourselves in childhood joys without the worries of the present day weighing on us. It’s a truly unique art form in terms of escapism, because nothing else actually gives you the chance to “live” in an alternate

reality, forgetting the one of the present day. Yet, we are of the present, and we do not forget the present when we consume deliberate modifications of the past.

In Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation," Sontag presents a thesis that our interpretations of old art pieces are so skewed to the larger social mindset of the new generation, that we mentally create new pieces through our present-day interpretations. "...Then interpretation was summoned, to reconcile the ancient texts to 'modern' demands" (Sontag). So, when we see revivals, we are thrilled at the opportunity to consume a pre-modified iteration of history, in which we need not filter the way things truly were to fit our modern sensibilities. *Cuphead*, however, is an example of a piece too close to the actual past for some people, especially as it is mixing two different eras. A greater audience is reached with the Disney-esque cartoon style, welcoming casual cartoon gamers into the world of brutal but fair games. These consumers, wanting to simply relive delightful animations, are overjoyed by the nostalgic art filtered into a more modern plot, but the true slice of history, the game's unavoidable difficulty, is cause for much dispute.

Do we present an accurate portrait of the impartial brutality in old games, or cheapen the authenticity so the masses can feign they have experienced such? Sontag feels it is most important to allow a piece to exist in the cultural context it was created in. But when we are creating revivals, how much of the original source is malleable as a documentation of the society that adapts the material? When we have a piece like *Cuphead*, that strives to be more of an artistic time machine, can it realize its intent *without* unbridled authenticity? And yet, we stand in the way of this artistic interpretation, citing failure to adapt to the present day. Is the mass clamoring for a "Skip Boss Fight" button just a reflection of society's refusal to consume the past

through any lens but that of the present? Possibly. But if we are truly meant to experience the games of the 90s through this game, we need to experience the full challenge and the full overcoming of such—A challenge which can be translated into other portions of our lives. Interestingly, this is the part of the game we decide to cheapen as “not modern enough.” The value of hard work.

INKWELL ISLE TWO: Experiencing Freedom

When we enter art museums, we cannot touch the paintings. When we watch a film, we cannot rearrange the shot sequences. When we read a book, we cannot rearrange the chapters to our liking. Within a game, we follow a predetermined route with a series of outcomes a game developer has created to take us on a specific interactive experience. Free choice is a part of it, but we are still working within the rules of the reality a game developer intended to present us with. To rethink, or even remove, certain rules from games is to fundamentally alter the artwork that has been created, against the intent of the creators. Why does the increased free choice in the structure of video games make people think they are entitled to a say in the design?

In the case of *Cuphead*, adding a button to skip boss fights would diminish the very integrity of the game. The storyline itself is about brothers, Cuphead and Mugman, working through an immense challenge that was brought on by a desire for quick gratification. To be able to identify with these puny protagonists up against such astronomical odds as the Devil himself, we have to struggle ourselves, oftentimes quite astronomically. The “easy out” of a “Skip Boss Fight” button would muddy the message of endurance found in the brothers’ quest by making instant gratification both the way in and out of their predicament.

Even Studio MDHR acknowledged this in their meticulous creation of the game. They painstakingly animated each frame by hand and intended for it to be experienced at the difficulty of games from the 90s. To experience the piece they worked so hard on in a way they did not intend is to devalue the time they spent as creators by demanding they change their creation for consumers who do not want to invest the same time. We are blaming others for not adapting to our universal attention span problem, instead of simply finding a different and easier game that is meant to be experienced in a shorter form.

A question I encountered recently in a *Polygon* article struck me as sadly telling about our present approach to entertainment: “Should we deserve to see the end of a game because we bought it?” (Kuchera). To me, the answer to this question is a blatant and blaringly obvious no. People buy games for a number of reasons, but I can’t imagine any enjoyment coming out of a credits screen that was ill-earned. Unlike other forms of entertainment, games are unique in their demand for the consumer to interact. To progress in a game, you are the one who has to do the work. It is your technical skill, or lack thereof, that drives the storyline, providing a uniquely intertwined collaboration between the art style and the consumer. In games, we are asked to overcome challenges using our humanity, and we may not like it, but that purpose inevitably means failing. A lot. The idea of being owed the end of a game because you spent money on it is the same entitled attitude we shame in real life when celebrities throw money at their problems to make up for moral shortcomings. The difference is that in games we have to face our human shortcomings ourselves and aren’t handed an “easy out” because we threw money at something.

One of the most common arguments in favor of the “Skip Boss Fight” button is the idea that people should be free to enjoy the art form however they please. I agree with this sentiment,

but would go further as to say that adding the ability to coast through a game until the end would not be adding freedom to enjoy the art form, but marring the art form itself beyond recognition. Games are meant to be a step into a new world with new rules, and by creating a universal set of rules to ensure that everyone ends up in the same place, you end up no longer entering new possibilities, but replaying the same predestined outcome in different styles—more like an interactive Hallmark movie. Some new worlds are harsh and require more effort than others, but that's the joy of games—There's always one with different rules. Sure, the only real reward to overcoming challenges in games is pride, but shouldn't we be allowed to be proud of our hard work? Everyone has different gifts, and we should celebrate them instead of devaluing them for the feelings of those who are less skilled at video games. By artificially lowering the value of skill in society, are we not marching towards a dystopian future similar to that of Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron?"

Now, there is always the pro "Skip Boss Fight" button argument to be made regarding the physically disabled. In fact, able-bodied reporters seem so increasingly concerned with the feelings of those of us with disabilities that they disregard the largest demand of all from the disabled community: to be treated just like everyone else. As a video game player myself with Muscular Dystrophy and neuropathy affecting my hands and wrists, I feel I am quite qualified to speak from experience on this matter. Yes, disability impairs my ability to play certain games, but I find that if I work hard (unfortunately often harder than is required for able-bodied people) I am able to reach the end of a game with minimal mobility aids. I, myself, have beaten *Cuphead* multiple times without any adaptation other than a controller with larger buttons. If I can defeat

the game with hard work and perseverance, is it really that difficult to ask the average gamer to simply invest more time into it?

I'm aware that I don't represent all disabled people, so I spoke with two other disabled gamers I know of with varying abilities and they too were against the concept of a "Skip Boss Fight" button for the sake of disability, citing that it would cheapen the victories they could achieve and that if certain games aren't playable around their disability, they can always play a different one. Yes, we need a movement for greater accessibility in video games, but in ways that don't damage the integrity of the games themselves. We need audio-captioning options, subtitles and compatibility with more controllers—Things that address the player, not the game. We should be raising people up by allowing them to start equipped with equal tools, not bringing people down by devaluing the experience of the work itself. So what real reason is there to skip the fight?

INKWELL ISLE THREE: Defying Perseverance

We are in a period of time where we are overly fixated on not constructing something new to be known for, but on devaluing authentic memories of prior decades. Instead of making new games to fit the present social state, we are requiring revivals to fit into the box of modernity. Instead of striving to raise people up, we have begun to bring people, and thus society as a whole, down to a common endpoint. If we start buying into the idea that people are entitled to the end credits of a video game, what's next? We're entitled to a promotion we didn't work for? An A+ on an assignment we turned in late? Happiness at anyone and everyone else's expense? These are extreme situations to jump to from an assault on video games, but they're

sadly very realistic. These qualms over video games are merely a symptom of the entitlement we've been accidentally fostering for years in our gradual shift to an egalitarian society. Don't get me wrong, we've come a long way in a lot of areas and still have a long way to go in some, but we've come to disrespect certain critical elitist values that are fundamental to the greater success of our society. Namely, hard work and uneven distribution of skill.

William A. Henry III further delves into this issue in his novel *In Defense of Elitism*.

Henry opposes the currently common idea that we should not be proud of some achievements because it will make others feel bad, and further, remarks on the alarming restrictions we are putting upon the success of the elite to permit the feelings of the many to stay unharmed. In order to provide the illusion that the masses are performing on par with the elite, we are demanding that everyone end up in the same place, whether it be college, jobs, report cards, or the end of a video game. The reality of the situation is that we need the elite to excel, because they are the ones to make changes that improve life for the rest of us. We do not succeed as a society by bringing them down—We succeed as a society by allowing them to bring us up. Video games may not be life, but they are art, and art reflects life at any given time. So how do we see these problems occur in our approach to games?

Presently, the masses entertaining the idea of a “Skip Boss Fight” button to such an extent implies the desire to implement measures which entitle greater success to the individual who is not willing to work for it. This perseverance deficit is concerningly present in other aspects of society as well. (Henry cites the decline in merit of a degree as a result of the gradual movement towards easier school curriculum: A movement that was structured to artificially raise the passing rate of inattentive students). As we've become lazier in the digital age, video games have become

easier, wanting to hand out victories as consolation prizes so we can feel as though we've earned something. We don't want to stick with games that make us work because there are plenty that will just hand things to us, and by enforcing the market for such games, society itself is telling us that things *should* be handed to us.

A lot of people are probably personally insulted by *Cuphead's* implication that in the 90s we may have been more willing to work hard for our successes (at least in terms of video games). We want to see nostalgic games through a modern lens because the modern lens tells us we are *owed* a victory, thereby relieving us of the weight of accountability in our own failures. It is always easier to blame a game developer than our own lack of technical skill. This greater entitlement epidemic is likely why *Cuphead's* difficulty, modeled after the 90s, caused such fuss. It demands that you actually earn a victory, unlike the many, many games nowadays that simply reward you for showing up. You are accountable for your own success, and thereby, your own failure.

INKWELL HELL

We are in a cave. It's undeniable by the stalagmites and stalactites framing the eerie darkness—bearing resemblance to a giant's oral cavity. The rigid walls are the hard palate, lining the space between the jagged row of rocky canines and the pendulum shaped epiglottis tower ahead. The darkness is overwhelming compared to the rest of Inkwell Isle. At this point, we've beaten the buzz out of beehives, rained on a fire-breathing dragon's parade, and mashed a potato to a pulp, all within the canonical timeframe of one day. Along the way, we've been encouraged by such atrocities as a walking coin, a barbershop quartet minus one, and a literal phonograph.

Though they offered support in the form of coins and stories, the victories were ours. At the end of the day, we had to overcome the challenge.

We are in a cave. But it's a jazzy cave. A red carpet rolls out where the tongue would be in the metaphorical mouth, presenting a clear, but ominous trail forward, lined in golden lights. A building awaits at the end of the trail, boasting glitzy lettering: CASINO. A slow jazz music plays, enticing us to enter, but warning us of the doom we are bound to find. Nonetheless, the only place to go is in.

“I see you’ve got my soul contracts, as agreed! Hand ‘em over and join my team!” The devil’s grubby hands reach out to the player, presenting a yes or no option—the only choice in the game—one final opportunity to back out of the onslaught ahead. The only one of the twenty-eight boss fights where the player has the opportunity to skip the battle. It would certainly be a lot easier to give in, hand over the contracts, and allow the Devil to take possession of more souls. On the other hand, Cuphead, impulsive as ever, could beat the Devil to a crisp with the hard earned skills we learned along the way, knowing that the only way out thus far has been through. Every fight was brutal, time consuming, and oftentimes hope-draining... but always possible. With a bit of hard work, every challenge was possible, preparing us for this moment. And isn’t that truly what *Cuphead* is all about?

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