

# SHENMUE

by Levi Platt

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Guest editor/author JONAH HOWELL writes: Weaving several strands of narrative essay into an emotionally virtuosic piece, Levi Platt's writing bears resemblance to David Foster Wallace and the concept albums of Gabriel Kahane. It is sincere but not cloying, informative but not didactic, flawed but highly aware of it—I often hear it said that the goal of any art is to transpose the essence of its artist into the work, and Platt has achieved this goal without falling into the usual longform traps. All those who proclaim the death of the author may read and weep: Platt's essay has a pulse, a quick-paced breath, a restlessness that infects. It shoots off the page in all directions, driven by a focused devotion to detail: "Thinking about it only makes the watering in his eyes harder to stop, and the knurl sitting in his throat more stubborn," Platt says of his preteen self. "He can add the knurl and tear to the growing list of items that he is realizing dictate his ten-year-old existence. Those things he is subject to." There is no self-righteousness here, no claim to perfection, no endeavor to solve the world's ills. In the place of these, there is honesty—I know when Platt edited something, when he changed an endnote, when the writing became emotionally hard.*

*Therein lies the strength of "Shenmue": At the surface, it is the story of a ten-year-old's relation to a beloved video game. Beneath and beyond that, it is **contact**, a raw communication from Platt to reader. I have no poetic description of that, no theorizing to do. I intended to read "Shenmue" in several sessions, so that I could think deeply about it and review it. I started, then the next time I had a thought, I was reading the endnotes. And I could feel Platt's pulse. (Spacing is author's own.)*

## SHENMUE

Pay attention to what videogames do, to what they have to say; if you're willing to listen, they'll speak to you. Like all art, video games can move us. I sat down once and tried to trace that understanding to where I learned it. I was ten. I remember the game. I remember what it spoke to me. I've kept it all with me like I would any piece of literature or film. I look for it in everything now. That videogame is called *Shenmue*. It was created by Yu Suzuki.

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*We'll be here a while I think!*

How many times was this now? Three?

Four<sup>i</sup>.

Four new cities, four new schools; does a ten-year-old have the character to shoehorn themselves into everyone else's friend group four times over? The short answer is no. Overwhelmingly no. Does a ten-year-old have the resilience to go to another school and not make friends yet again? Also no.

In February of 2001, a father props his feet, bare and thick with the smell of leather and stress, on an ottoman he bought from an Amish man at a swap meet. It's reeks of cedar and lacquer.

A ten-year-old boy sits at the feet of his father allowing himself space to breathe without catching the angry whiff of work and wood stopping up his nose. He tries not to think about his fourth first day of school at his fourth new school the next day. Thinking about it only makes the watering in his eyes harder to stop, and the knurl sitting in his throat more stubborn. He can add the knurl and tear to the growing list of items that he is realizing dictate his ten-year-old existence. Those things he is subject to.

*Handmade!* Says a man gravely frocked in tones of black and white in a place he has no business being.

*I love this, Ken. Let's get it.*

A father considers a mother's request. Though the ten-year-old can only contrive what really transpired, he wasn't there. All he had was his father's galumphing through their front door triumphant with his wooden trophy under-arm. He sets the ottoman down and opens up the top piece to show the peculiarity of workmanship found within.

*You see that? That's how you know it's handmade.*

There's nothing to be seen, but a simple space left unstained and untreated.

*I saw it, and your dad said we gotta have it.*

The father smiles wryly at the mother and gives the tufted woodbox a hefty rap on its side. It chirrs and shakes at the blow.

*This things' gonna go with us wherever we go. It's built to last!*

The boy doesn't want to go anywhere else, not again, not ever- but, a want is simply just that. A want, something felt, not something he can control or effect.

He can't help but wonder how his parents found and purchased a piece of wood furniture made by an Amish man in the middle of Vallejo. All he knew was his parents went somewhere without their kids and his brothers left him in his room with his beloved and scrappy video game console--a Sega Dreamcast<sup>ii</sup>. His Sega Dreamcast.

The ten-year-old's room is shared with his younger brother. Nuzzling the far corner of the bedroom is the brothers' bed: a twin-sized hand me down that's been getting smaller with each move, like it loses a little bit of itself every time he's dragged it into a new corner. Frequently the ten-year-old's leg ends up dangling and numb each morning. More often now he sleeps on the floor in front of their television. He stays up later than ten-year-olds should just so he can play. It's his favorite time, when he feels like there's nothing else but him and the place his favorite video game takes him.

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In 1989, across the Pacific, past the smattering of islets the ten-year-old boy would come to know as his ancestral home<sup>iii</sup>, a man takes a train from the central railway station in the heart of Tokyo Japan and heads south. He's going to meet with a few colleagues for drinks on a street called Dobuita, in a town called Yokosuka. The Japan Railways station is Tokyo's largest railway company and transports nearly ten million<sup>iv</sup> commuters in and out of Tokyo daily. Its lines wander and flow out from the heart of the city like arteries of steel and aluminum carrying the lifeblood of people from the surrounding prefectures and districts. Shinjuku, Shibuya, Toito, and Kota each sink back behind the man; he watches each of them become breaks in the line of the horizon as he barrels further south.

The man is Yu Suzuki. He's has little use for saying more than he needs<sup>v</sup> and loves to tell stories--and on this particular train ride, the idea for a new story begins to form. In 1989, he is the golden child of Sega Corporation having designed *all*<sup>vi</sup> of the company's most successful and popular arcade cabinets. Yu is also unassuming appearance and nature, where even by this point in video gaming history, the lager than life names and personalities of Miyamoto and Kojima<sup>vii</sup> are already household brands,

synonymous with mushroom loving plumbers and steely eyed agents of espionage, Suzuki's name remains only well known to those within the industry. Heading south, the train ride takes exactly one hour and fifty-eight minutes. Between Tokyo and Yokosuka there are exactly fifteen stops. Between each stop, Yu thinks of the streets he wanders in Yokosuka: Yamanose, Sakuragoaka, and Dobuita. He thinks about a story he wants to tell of a boy seeking a master, and the old man he meets underneath a peach tree.

*"Do you know where I can find the master?" He's young, barely not a boy, and draped in a weathered suede bomber. The jacket is a dusty rust, it's back is embroidered with the image of a tiger lunging forward as if it was able to tear itself from the fabric and attack any passerby.*

*"Ahhh. Good question, if you would be so kind as to humor an old man, I'd be happy to help find the master you seek."*

*The boy, growing impatient, but desperate to find a worthy teacher to complete his martial arts training, agrees to the request. "Fine, but you must tell me where to find him after."*

*"I will help you as much as is in my power to young man. Do you fish?"*

*"What?"*

*"Fish, do you enjoy it? I find it to be a wonderful sort of meditation. It calms the self, it centers us."*

*"I don't understand old man, what is it you want me to do? Do you want me to catch you some fish?"*

*"Ahhhh. Would you be so kind?"*

*The boy looking around, sees no pole in sight. He looks past the shoulders of the old man and sees on the pond the skipping bodies of fish as they flail up and out several feet above the water's surface. They're playing. Next to the old man, resting at his feet is a pile of large peach pits, most assuredly from the tree they stand beneath.*

*"You don't have a fishing rod, old man. Do you think I should just swim out to the fish?"*

*“That would be most inadvisable, look closer at the water, listen.”*

*The young man focuses on the water and at first sees nothing, it’s a still sitting pond, clear and serene. Then he catches it, a constant shifting, it’s a whisper at first then a motion. Just beneath the surface he sees the sway of reeds and pond lilies as though being blown back by wind towards the shore where he and the old man are talking.*

*“It’s a river. There’s an undercurrent somewhere isn’t there?”*

*“Quite correct, young man, and you would surely be swept up and under it and be washed out lifeless and pale if you tried to swim out to those fish.”*

*The young man braces himself on his knees and takes a half hearted horse stance as he regards the old man more closely. Feeble, half bent over, old--nothing more.*

*“So, what is our recourse old man?”*

*“Ahhh, now that, that is a good question.” he reaches down and picks up one of the dried peach pits and begins to rub it between his hands as though to smooth out its ridges. “I’ve always been of the belief, if you look to the place you are, if you learn to call it home and to treat it as such, it will always give you what you seek.”*

*The old man produces a twine made from river reed and ties it to the pit. In a motion the young man can scarcely track, the old man whips the pit like lightning across the water towards the fish. It whirrs as it skips once, then twice before perfectly shredding through a fish just as it jumps up out of the water. The fish is dead before it lands. The old man then gently pulls it in back towards the shore and meets it in the water. The young man is speechless.*

*“How, how did you--”*

*“One always finds what they seek, when they treat where they are like home.”*

*For a few moments of silence, the young man contemplates the advice, but then remembers why he was there in the first place.*

*“Yes, now I have humored you. Please I must know, where can I find the master?”*

*The old man disheartened replies “I’m sorry young man, I don’t believe there is a master, at least not the one you seek.”*

Somewhere between the end of this new story Yu begins to conjure, and the 11th and 12th stop before Yokoska, a boy on the now nearly empty railcar sitting three seats in front of Yu, vomits. Yu hears the spill from mouth to floor before he sees it. He watches the other riders in the car to see what they’ll do. Two men in dark suits, one black, one navy, a young woman in a yellow sundress, and an elderly woman now more tightly hugging the purse in her lap, recoil in complete horror. The boy begins to dry heave and cry.

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*Those are some primo tits right?*

In 2001, the ten-year-old boy doesn’t know how to reply to the thirteen-year-old boy who sometimes gets off at the same bus stop as him. The thirteen year old hit an early growth spurt, he says it gave him stretchmarks and his back hurts all of the time. The ten-year-old doesn’t know what any of that means as he tries to avert his eyes as his older bus buddie insists on pushing the picture of the naked woman under his nose<sup>viii</sup>.

*That’s pretty cool. Hey, do you play any video games?*

*Yeah, but only the good stuff, you play Diablo?*

*No. Is it good?*

*Good? It’s fucking the best man! You fight the demons of hell and it’s crazy gory. There are like five different classes and each time you play it, it feels different for each class you play!*

*Oh, is it on Dreamcast?*

*Dreamcast? The fuck is Dreamcast? It’s for the computer, you gotta play it. What do you play?*

At the question the ten-year-old lights up. He can barely contain himself as he tries to explain his favorite game.

*Have you played Shennmue?*

*Shennmue?*

*Oh yeah, it's the best. Its about this kid who's goes on an adventure to avenge his dad's murder!*

*That sounds pretty cool, do you get to kill anyone?*

*Well, not really. You get into some fights I guess. But those only happen a few times.*

*So you don't kill anybody? Do you have to like beat levels and stuff to advance?*

*Well, no. Everywhere you can go is sort of all there for you to visit right when you start.*

*So you don't kill anyone, you don't really fight a whole lot. What do you do?*

*Tons of stuff,* he fails to find the words at first and then stumbles into an explanation. *You see, you're supposed to solve a mystery so all the stuff you do helps do that.*

*Like what?*

The ten-year-old can see he was losing the older boy's interest, so he thinks hard about what his favorite parts of the game are.

*Well, you can talk to people.*

*But you can't fight them?*

*No, but that's not the point.*

*Who can you talk to?*

*Anyone really, sometimes it's an old lady walking her dog in a park, sometimes it's a man who's staggering around in the street drunk. There are even characters who are best friends with your character, you can talk to them too!*

*Why would you talk to any of those people, what do they tell you, do you get quests from them?*

*They'll tell you lots of stuff! Sometimes they'll talk about their day, or maybe about how their family never visits, or maybe they'll give you advice about respecting your elders. Sometimes they'll give*

*you a clue about where you need to go next and who you can talk to for help. Really they talk to you like a person would I think. It's really neat.*

*That doesn't sound fun at all. What about your friends do they help you fight?*

*No, but they do tell you how worried they are about you, and they'll ask you to go out with them.*

*To where?*

*Oh, sometimes a bar, or maybe an arcade, I really like the arcade there are these great mini--*

*Oh cool, can you get drunk at the bar and fight people?*

*...You can play darts while you talk to your friends. That's really fun I think. And there's a Jukebox.*

*The fuck is a Juice-box?*

*Juke-Box--it's a, it's like a record player. Like an old-timey cd player.*

*Oh! He nearly forgot--the forklift races! You can race forklifts with your co-workers before you start your day at work.*

*You have a job? This sounds like a stupid videogame. You should buy Diablo then we could play together.*

*The ten year old is both hurt and enamored with the suggestion--*

*Then we could play together.*

The two jump off the bus at the final stop of an hour long ride home with a wave and a "thank you" to their surly, silver-haired bus driver Nancy. Her voice is harsh like a bark from an old dog as she tells them to be good. The boys depart walking in opposite directions toward home. The one thinking about girls, homework, and the growing hunger pangs he feels with each step to his front door. The other counts the number of lamp posts between his bus stop and the apartment complex his family just moved into. He realizes the road he walks curves and breaks upwards just like the one in his beloved video game. Each day after, he hopes when he counts the last perfectly spaced lamppost, he'll reach the pair of warm wooden doors under the cover of verdant and faithful black-pines leading home. Each day, he greets a

coral painted iron gate whose combination his parents left for him on the apartment counter, but he continually forgets to bring.

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In 1993, Yu Suzuki creates yet another wildly popular video game franchise<sup>ix</sup>.

In 1995, Yu Suzuki thinks back to that fateful train ride to Yokosuka and remembers a boy who cried alone and terrified of public transit. After he saw that no one was going to move to help the boy, Yu got up from his seat and walked over to the boy, placed his hand on his shoulder, and pulled out a handkerchief and gave it to the crying, motion sick child.

“First time?”

The boy can only shake his head between heavens. Grateful, he took the offer from Yu and wiped his eyes and face. The boy didn't look up from his crying--too embarrassed to meet the adult's face. Yu wished the boy would, so he'd know it's ok, there's nothing to be ashamed of.

“Hey, it's alright, the same thing happened to me.”

The boy nodded in understanding and whispered thank you.

“Where you headed?”

“Yokosuka.”

“Hey me too! Are you visiting?”

“It's home.”

“It is.”

The two talked of home for the last few stops before they both got off at the Yokosuka train station. The boy gave one last profound thanks and the two parted ways. Yu paused on the station platform and looked out over the harbour<sup>x</sup> where the final train stopped.

There were fishermen, draped in neon colored windbreakers lining the edge of the harbor shipyard every forty or so feet; they kept the light mist of ocean water ever present in the air away with identical down turned bucket hats. Each fisherman, meditatively, serenely engaged in a gentle game of trickery with an invisible opponent they knew was circling their fishing line. Each scaled opponent moved

beneath the impenetrable sheet of dark blue and shifting turquoise, navigating the bob and dance of what they believed was their next meal. They looked like living statues to Yu. He only knew they did in fact move from the periodic wagging or bend of their fishing poles. Off in the distance where the peninsula Yokosuka was built opened into the Pacific, Yu caught the waning bleat of a fog horn emanating through the grey and green of harbour air.

Yu thinks about that day, and is sure<sup>xi</sup> his new game must be set in Yokosuka. He also thinks about the young man, the master, and the peach tree and knows there's something to that in his next game. For several weeks now, he has mulled over large details, impressions and intuitions. What are the movements of the game? What are its themes? What does it feel like? Yu creates for his new game the musical suites that will give the game life, dictate its tone, and move the player in the way he wants them to feel while playing. The keywords he imagines that guide the music and themes of the game are “Leisurely”, “Fully”, and “Gently”. He has a name for the game too: Shenmue, its hero's name is Ryo.

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In 2001, No one hears the music like the ten-year-old can. No one feels it the way he does. The first bar and measure of the introduction begins as he stares at black screen: a single erhu is playing in a minor, contemplative key. Second Measure: a stoic, aloof profile against the backdrop of a blue and green harbour sky fades into focus from the once black screen. A young man, his brow furrowed and mouth slightly turned down adorned in a rusty brown suede jacket. Third measure: blue lettering in a language the boy has no idea how to read appears across the top of the screen: シェンムー followed in parentheses (Shenmue). The theme music begins to surge behind a wall of violins, then resolves, easing back to just the lone erhu<sup>xii</sup>.

He's Ryo Hazuki now, in a harbour city called Yokosuka wandering down the sleeping piece of Dobuita street looking for sailors in 1987. The architecture and store fronts are cozy, postmodern, and have an sensibility of economic design-- a mixture of bright wood and warm gray cement. He stops at a park, there's an old man there. He's half bent over holding an umbrella while he watches the children he's brought with him play. Ryo/the ten-year-old approach to speak to him.

"You look like a man on a mission, Ryo."

The boy thinks *I am*.

"Do you know where I can find sailors?"

"Sailors hmmm? When I was young, they always hung out at the Jazz Bar."

"Jazz Bar. Thank you."

"Take care of yourself Ryo, remember this is your home."

"Yeah."

The dialogue is stilted, cumbersome and barely acted; the ten-year-old has never seen or experienced anything like this. It feels so real, like he can climb into his tv screen and he's there. Everyone here knows his name. It makes him feel at peace, like he belongs.

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In 1998, a three hundred man team looks down a list of nearly 10,000<sup>xiii</sup> items and bug fixes they have to implement in their continually growing and unwieldy adventure game. The game itself was impossible to compress onto discs for the Sega Saturn<sup>xiv</sup> forcing the Sega Corporation to begin developing an entirely brand new video game console in order to play Suzuki's new game. The development cost since the start of the project has ballooned up to thirty million dollars, but Yu is only getting started.

He's set it in his mind, this game will be more than a game. It's not just an eleven chapter kung-fu epic of revenge and redemption, Shenmue will be an expansive, immersive experience down to the most minute detail. If you want to stay home all day and practice your martial arts training at your family dojo, you can. If you want to talk to every single person on the crowd<sup>xv</sup> streets of Yokosuka, you can. If you

want to search through every shelf in a convenience store for something to buy, shop to your heart's content. Maybe not every action or side road taken will progress the overarching hero's journey of Ryo seeking to avenge the murder of his father by the hands of a mysterious Kung Fu master, but Suzuki is going to ensure that each action will make Yokosuka in 1987 feel like a living breathing place. Yu Suzuki wants the player to see Yokosuka the same way he saw it that day he got off the train.

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*I promise this will be the last time.*

In 2001, a mother tries to comfort her ten-year-old son. They're moving again. The boy resigns himself to the regular intervals of upheaval and instability, but it never makes the process any easier to bear. His father in a tender gesture of understanding takes him out to his favorite place to eat. A Dairy Queen that makes chicken strips *juuust*<sup>xvi</sup> right.

*I know it's been rough, but this is it bud, this is the big one and then we're set. We're gonna stay put forever.*

The boy doesn't trust the optimism in his father's voice, but he's been plied into a good mood by the chicken and soft serve, he nods at the round and mustached face assuring as it folds over itself creating the deep fissures of cheek and mouth as he smiles. His features are heavy but baby-like, and his hair is cut high and cropped. It's the same cut his father's had since he was in the navy, but it's made more severe by the wide and far back line of his hair.

*Hey I got a surprise for the family when we get back.*

It's an extended cab Ford F-150 in pearl black. To this day riding in trucks makes the boy sick to his stomach. He doesn't care for the truck, but on their way home he spent his time thinking about packing away his friends and beloved city into a box padded with the softest things his ten-year-old brain can imagine. He wants to make sure they'll be safe for the journey, ready to greet him happy and unscathed.

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In 1999, Yu Suzuki finishes the first two parts of the grand story he conceived on a train to Yokosuka in 1989: Shenmue I and Shenmue II. Interestingly, China as a setting for his video game finds its place in Shenmue II. It ends up being a natural progression of narrative for Ryo to travel to China in order to find his father's killer. Even more important, the change of setting to China affords Yu the chance to tell the second but equally important story of a character he would later call his "life's work". In Shenmue II Yu introduces the mountain girl from Guilin, Shenhua.

Shenmue's final development cost is seventy million dollars, the most expensive video game ever developed (by miles) thus far in videogame history.

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*Pack your things tonight or we're throwing it away before we leave.*

In 2001, he knows his mother isn't bluffing, but the ten-year-old is enthralled with the ripple layered upon the mystery of Shenmue. He/Ryo has a dream, and in this dream they see a young woman sitting beneath a sheet of falling pink petals holding a jade mirror engraved with the image of a phoenix. She's clothed in colors of the earth, a warm deep orange like a waning day, and the gentle gold of wheat swaying under the breath of wind. The tree fades into black as the screen tightens in on the young girl's face. She looks up from the mirror and stairs back at the boy/Ryo, through them. Ryo awakes with a start, nearly falling out of his bed. Eyes still half closed, he squints at the harsh green of his digital clock<sup>xvii</sup>, 3:45.

The ten-year-old is dumbfounded and furious that it's at this point he has to pack his beloved console away until his family finally reaches Missouri. Lovingly he ties each of the Dreamcast's av cables and tucks them into a ziplock bag pleading in black sharpie "PLEASE DON'T LOSE ME". He then puts the sturdy off white console in a pillow case he's filled with socks and sweaters; he makes sure to take the oldest and softest socks out first so he can wrap the console in the softest cotton. After placing the cables, then the console into his pillowcase, the ten-year-old finally places his two controllers--the same color as the box--with the rest of their compatriots. The second controller hasn't been touched by his brothers in nearly two years.

Shenmue is the only videogame they have for the Dreamcast that's single-player. He knows they've been busy killing alien invaders on a far off planet on the newer console his older brother bought, but he packs the second controller just in case someday maybe they'll want to come back to the place where they all started. The place where they learned to love videogames, where he learned to pay attention to how something can move him. Where he learned how something can make him feel grounded and not so alone.

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In 1999. Sega finally releases their new console, the Dreamcast. It is the culmination of seven years worth of development alongside Yu Suzuki's magnum opus *Shenmue*. Unfortunately for Sega, Sony and Nintendo, both much larger and more successful video game companies at this point, released their consoles in 1994 and 1996 respectively. The landscape of video gaming has been dominated by the two giants for the better part of the decade while Sega silently, and maybe even foolheartedly bided their time and placed all of their eggs in the basket Yu had built.

In terms of sales, Sony's Playstation sold more than ten<sup>xviii</sup> times the amount sold by Sega's scrappy system<sup>xix</sup>. Nintendo sold four<sup>xx</sup> times as many units. The death knell for Sega and Shenmue though, came not even six months later when Sony released its seminale Playstation 2. In its first two years, Sony's system would sell more than the Dreamcast ever would over the course of it's entire lifespan<sup>xxi</sup>. Despite positive critical reception and strong sales numbers, there was no way Suzuki's game could be enough to pull Sega out from behind in the race the company had lost years ago. In the wake of the failure of his beloved game, where once Yu's creative output before Shenmue was staggering, it completely stops. <sup>xxii</sup>

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In mid-summer of 2001 the ten-year-old sits in front of his trusty, decades worn Zenith television and presses the power button underneath the old magnetic tube screen. The set pitches in a frequency that rings gently in his ears, it's become a sort of comfort to him over the last few years. A faithful constant amongst shifting spaces and varying piles and colors of carpet. He likes the blue carpet of his family's

modular home here in Missouri. It smells like the ten-year-old thinks a blue carpet would--a profound scent of fabric and soil. It's a scent he could curl himself into for warmth.

The television's low ring and glowing black screen sits still and expectant, knowing exactly how it will play its part over the next several hours. It is the window in, the door through. Of mountains and nature, the boy has never seen things so peaceful and perfect. The trail he walks in a place called Guilin is canvased in the bright pastels of spring. Fields of delicate pinks and soft purples go off in every direction he looks--forever. The sky wanes down turning from blue to a warm gold with the sun now at his back. It pushes him onward along the mountain trail he walks. And there in front of him, is his mysterious new friend. The girl he dreamed robed in the colors of the place he now finds himself. Shenhua, her name is Shenhua and she says they have so much ahead of them. So much more to see, to be done, to discover.

But

The ten-year-old knows it's a lie. He beat the game several weeks ago when his family first moved and settled in their new home at the beginning of summer. His beloved trail is about to end and end suddenly, without closure, without fulfillment of the words promised to him by his traveling companion. So, he counts each precious step and stops at each poorly rendered landmark to take everything in for as long as he can.

When he turns off the screen well into the late hours of the night, and past any reasonable time he *should* have gone to sleep, he'll dream of the places he loves. Yokosuka, the Harbour, Guilin. He'll see the faces of his friends and they'll call his name with warmth and familiarity. He'll carry those dreams, those places with him everywhere he goes after. He doesn't know that yet, and while he dreams in those moments, it doesn't matter. What matters is that it's all there for him still, each voice pleading for him to come back as soon as he can, each face telling him they've missed him when he was gone.

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There's a peculiar game mechanic in Shenmue that I've always wondered about. Shenmue has a day and night cycle that functions at an accelerated pace. Each day starts at the same time, and weirdly, each night ends in the same way. At exactly 10:30pm of any evening, Ryo Hazuki peers down at his

watch, and the screen cuts to a zoomed in shot at the time: 10:30 pm; at which point Ryo mutters to himself “I need to go home”. The game then automatically transports the character back to his house, directly to his room. There you can save your game, look over the notes you’ve compiled throughout your day of amature sleuthing, and go to bed.

It’s a baffling mechanic in a game full of baffling mechanics. Why create a historically<sup>xxiii</sup> accurate day/night cycle but not allow the player to access the entire day? Why force the player to go home every night and have to start over each morning.? Some say it was to create a sense of authenticity to the sort of mudanity that would accompany the daily life of an individual touched by the fantastic. Though they might experience things far outside the realm of the norm, they’d still be grounded to the reality around them. Others think it was a programming practicality. From a design standpoint, not having to program for ten more in-game hours takes loads of work off a developer’s plate. Both these explanations I think miss a personal point.

I was speaking to a friend of mine who spent his formative years growing up in Japan. He’s half Japanese, but feels every bit like Japan and everything there --is who he is and what he loves. I talked to him about this mechanic, and how I couldn’t make sense of it.

“Oh, no, that’s easy. At least when I was growing up it makes sense. You see here, what do we do? We grow up, we move out, we strike it out on our own. Our drive here is built on the idea of always moving forward. To go back is to fail, to die. Home is a place of nostalgia and revelry, that’s it. Over there, when I was young, Home was everything. It was a constant temporal space that went on in every direction of time--it would always be there for you, as it was for those before you, as it will be for those after. So, you always wanted to go back. It was the anchor point you knew would keep you tethered to something real, to something that wouldn't change on you. For better or worse I guess.”

For better, if I’m speaking for myself. It’s always been for better.

Notes

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<sup>i</sup> It was actually five times-- I can't remember the second time, but family says it was five.

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ii I once wrote the ending of my essay in this footnote, alas, you're gonna have to suffer through the rest of this rubbish to find out what I once mistakenly put here.

iii Samoa-my mother is from Samoa, all of the family I'm close to, that I'm profoundly connected with is Samoan. This is for another set of words in another essay though.

iv This is a half truth, there isn't really any statistical data that I can read (as I can't read Japanese) that has an exact number, but currently, daily count of commuters to Tokyo is 16M and if I account for the percentage change in population from 1990 to 2020, the average count for that time would be close to that, probably.

v See any number of his interviews over the last twenty years, of which there are maybe five.

vi Namely Space Harrier (1985) and Outrun (1986)

vii For the uninitiated: Shigeru Miyamoto is the creative head of Nintendo, the *father of Mario Brothers* so to speak; Hideo Kojima--Creator of the *Metal Gear*Series-- is as close to an auteur for video games as much one can be-people talk about him in the same way film nerds talk about Orson Welles and *Citizen Kane*.

viii I've thought back to this memory for a really long time, and the more I try and remember, the more I'm convinced the picture was in fact a crude drawing they boy did himself. His name was Ben, and one time he got caught masturbating on the bus by our driver Nancy. I'm fairly sure she was a lesbian. She had her hair cut aggressively short and she really hated men. When I was the last person on the bus (which was almost always) she talked to me about all the cute girls I liked at school, then she would talk about all of the young actresses that she thought were "real nice to look at". I loved those two dearly, still do.

ix *Virtua Fighter*, the first fighting video game to utilize a fully three dimensional environment. Also, it was a killer video game.

x New Yokosuka Harbour, both a robust and busy shipping area for the city and station of a US Naval Base, and also the final area in *Shenmue*. It was especially noted when the game was released how one of the weirder things a player could do was daily forklift races. One of the beloved and also maligned quirks of *Shenmue* was that the player also had a mandatory job in which they had to move freight for several hours of the game time in said forklifts. In real time this amounted to a mandatory twenty minute minigame they player was forced to do for every hour of play.

xi Also after spending the last six months in China doing research and location mapping and realizing that it would *definitely not* be the setting for his new video game.

xii The theme song of *Shenmue* "*Sedge Tree*" Shenmue the word roughly translates to "Spirit Tree"

xiii Most of which were smattered about multiple rudimentary Excel pages and hand written notes. In a later interview Suzuki would go on to say about their process "It's frightening to think we managed this project basically by pushing around pieces of paper"

xiv On the Sega Saturn, the defunct antecedent of the Dreamcast, Shenmue had to be spread out over 50-60 CDs.

xv This is obviously relative to the era of video games when *Shenmue* was released. There were up to thirty characters on the street when you were playing, each with their own sort of route they would walk every day. In the modern video game, we talk in scales of thousands, or tens of thousands sometimes.

xvi They had the consistency of being tough and sinewy, like they'd been under a heat lamp all day. I still prefer my chicken strips like this; it baffles my family and now my wife to no end.

xvii It's actually a regular analogue clock, I only remember it as digital. I don't know why.

xviii 104M

xix 9M

xx 35M

xxi Between 2000 and 2002 the Playstation 2 would sell just over 11 million units.

xxii Putting this in a footnote would have spoiled the entirety of the essay--see foot #7

xxiii *Shenmue* takes place between November 1987 and February 1988 in Yokosuka Japan. Since it takes place in an actual city in Japan, Yu Suzuki decided that the depictions of architecture and weather should be as faithful to that era and time of year as possible. He was so particular about this point he made his staff go back and find all of the local weather reports for that span of months in order to make sure each day in-game matched what it would have been in real life.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Shenmue was actually more of meditation for me about what exactly are those ways that art moves us and why. My goal though was to explore a pretty universal and well tread idea from two specific frames of mind: when I/we say that art moves us, what does that mean? For me, especially in era of cultural globalization and mega platforms of social media—a constantly shifting, fluid, and tenuous foundation to try and live within and upon—the way art often moves me is in its ability to call me home. I don't necessarily mean a literal physical home, though it can mean that at times too, but rather those totems, and spaces we can tether ourselves to in order to feel grounded. To feel safe. The second framework is of course understanding videogames as art that can move us, but also my trying to create a narrative of a man-- a middle aged professional, creating a commercial product, from another era of time, from a culture wildly different from my own (having grown up in the Midwest)—completely removed from my own world could make something that spoke to center of a terrified, and lonely ten-year-old boy at time when he was slowly realizing just how much of his life and world were outside of his control and how much that scared him. What I ended up doing was piecemealing details from interviews, conference videos, and articles about Shenmue's development history in a sort of narrative mosaic built almost like a myth from facts.*

*For readers, my hope is by reading, they reflect on what those things are, no matter how odd, how banal, they might be and be encouraged embrace them; because in the end, I sincerely believe that one of the strongest ties we have to each other is our yearning for home—whatever home may be.*

**AUTHOR'S BIO:** *I am currenty finishing up my undergrad in Creative Writing where I have taken a weird turn as a fiction writer originally and moved more towards the realm of creative nonfiction. I still am not sure why. Maybe it's a masturbatory thing. What do we make our homes in our time? Where do we find "home"? How do we find it, if at all? This is essay is a piece of that meditation that I am hoping to turn into a set of essays on the subject. It is both a telling of a place where a ten-year-old me found "home" at a time when I really didn't have it amongst family and my attempt to weave a narrative together that tells the story of the development history and release of my favorite video game--based on various interviews, wiki/fan pages, and articles throughout the years that have followed Yu Suzuki since he made the game. To be clear, it isn't reportage, it's more like me trying to piecemeal a narrative that makes sense that could explain how a game made by a middle-aged Japanese man could have such a profound and ultimately artistic impact on a child. Or in short, trying to understand what the man intended to make, and what the boy found in his creation.*

**EDITOR'S BIO:** *Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. His recent work has appeared in Expat Press, Surfaces, and Waxing & Waning, and his debut collection of poetry and essays, Empathology, is forthcoming from BHN Books.) His story **Amor Fati** was published in Issue 5.*