



Going on a Never Ever Quest with the creator of Katamari Damacy

Features

2 months ago
by [Eron Rauch](#)

Roll me on up into the sky.



Keita Takahashi's new project, *Never Ever Quest*, released on iam8bit on June 13th, has made over \$25,000 from in-gallery-purchases of 52 pieces of hand-drawn cosmetic content for your

home. Charming indie graphics, but not very interactive. I can't tell you what the score this show has, because visual art doesn't have a Metacritic yet.

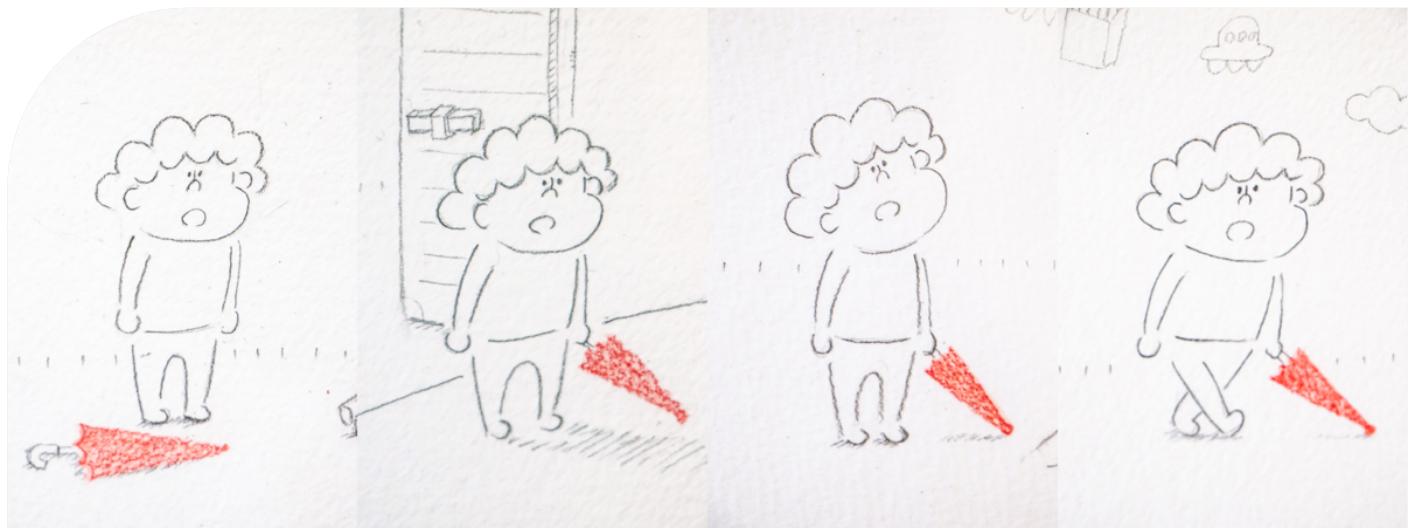
No, that's not right...

After a long time avoiding the public eye following the release of *We Love Katamari*, Takahashi's newest project is an RPG by-other-means. It uses 52 static screens to craft an on-the-rails tale of a protagonist named Boy, as well as all the loot he gathered grinding from level 1 to 2, such as "Bass Riffing Red Umbrella (Rare)."

Hmn. Not that either...

Hidden in a small art gallery in the hipster epicenter of Silverlake in Los Angeles, Takahashi unexpectedly debuted a playable demo of the highly anticipated *Wattam*. Opening against E3 -- the commercial game industry's largest annual trade show -- *Never Ever Quest*'s installation also contains an artist's statement of sequential pencil drawings, lampooning what Takahashi sees as the many misguided core practices of the video game industry and fandom.

Better... maybe? But still not really accurate...



ZOOM

Illustrations from Keita Takahashi's *Never Ever Quest* (all photos by Eron Rauch).

These three failed starts are both a bit true and a bit facetious at the same time. Which is an honest reflection of how tricky it initially felt to understand Keita Takahashi's 2018 show of drawings titled *Never Ever Quest: A Solo RPG Exhibit*.

A quick glance at the work certainly suggests a pointed commentary on the joyless, bureaucratic tropes of modern video game design. However, the details are so steeped in playful surrealism

that it never settles into anything resembling a rigid polemic. I kept finding myself asking, what is this weird faux-game art project trying to do?

Boy finds himself on an “unintentional quest” when he forgoes eating a salad to gorge on a triple cheeseburger and chili fries and takes the “Long Way Home.” The story unfolds from left-to-right along the West wall of the iam8bit gallery, snaking into the back room where a *Wattam* demo station waits. Before we get grandiose, let’s back up to the basics. The show is 52 framed drawings, each about the size of a piece of notebook paper, a few larger or smaller. Most of them are simple black and white pencil drawings with clear outlines that evoke 70s kids manga. Occasionally there is some light shading with colored pencil. Each of the drawings illustrates a sequential moment in an RPG-styled story about character called “Boy.”



 ZOOM

Never Ever Quest uses the vertical space of iam8bit's gallery to tell its story.

Like old *Nintendo Power* maps assembled from each game screen, the drawings are hung to mimic the landscape through which Boy travels. For instance, when he reaches the Doom Tacos tower, works are stacked above each other as he ascends. At the pinnacle of the tower, the frames eventually touch the ceiling in a piece where Boy worries that his Silent Soft Blue-Striped Pillow (Kinda Rare) might not protect him from the unplugged Vacuum Monster.

Let's pause for a moment in our text-based walkthrough. You're probably asking, how do I know such specifically unspecific character names and pointlessly specific loot names depicted in the drawings? One of the more subtle but experimental moves that Takahashi's show employs is to use the wall tags as a main part of the show. Typically these little stickers are a discreet place for each works' title, price, and date. In *Never Ever Quest*, the curious viewer will find the wall tags filled with paragraphs of Boy's story, like mouse-over lore in a game.

As I explored the show, it becomes clear that text is a major clue for how these RPG-drawings are commenting on video games as an art form. This relationship is made quite clear in the first drawing of a mock loading screen. "Ever Quest" is rendered in cheerful orange and green bubble letters, but "NEVER" is appended over the left of the logo, red and dripping blood. From drawing #1, Takahashi has already fired shots, calling out by name the first commercially successful MMO, notorious for its brutal loot grinding and ruthlessly punishing rare mob spawns.

This title screen is perhaps Takahashi's manifesto for what follows (including *Wattam*): He is never going to make something like *EverQuest* and the drawings will demonstrate why these kinds of games are toxic. The wall tag text follows this line of criticism by hammering home the point with overly generic character names such as "Anthropomorphic Mushroom" paired with sadly over-specific loot names that reference the impersonal workaholic design of MMOs and *Diablo* clones.



Keita Takahashi (1975)



Never Ever Quest

2018

Colored pencil on Watercolor Paper

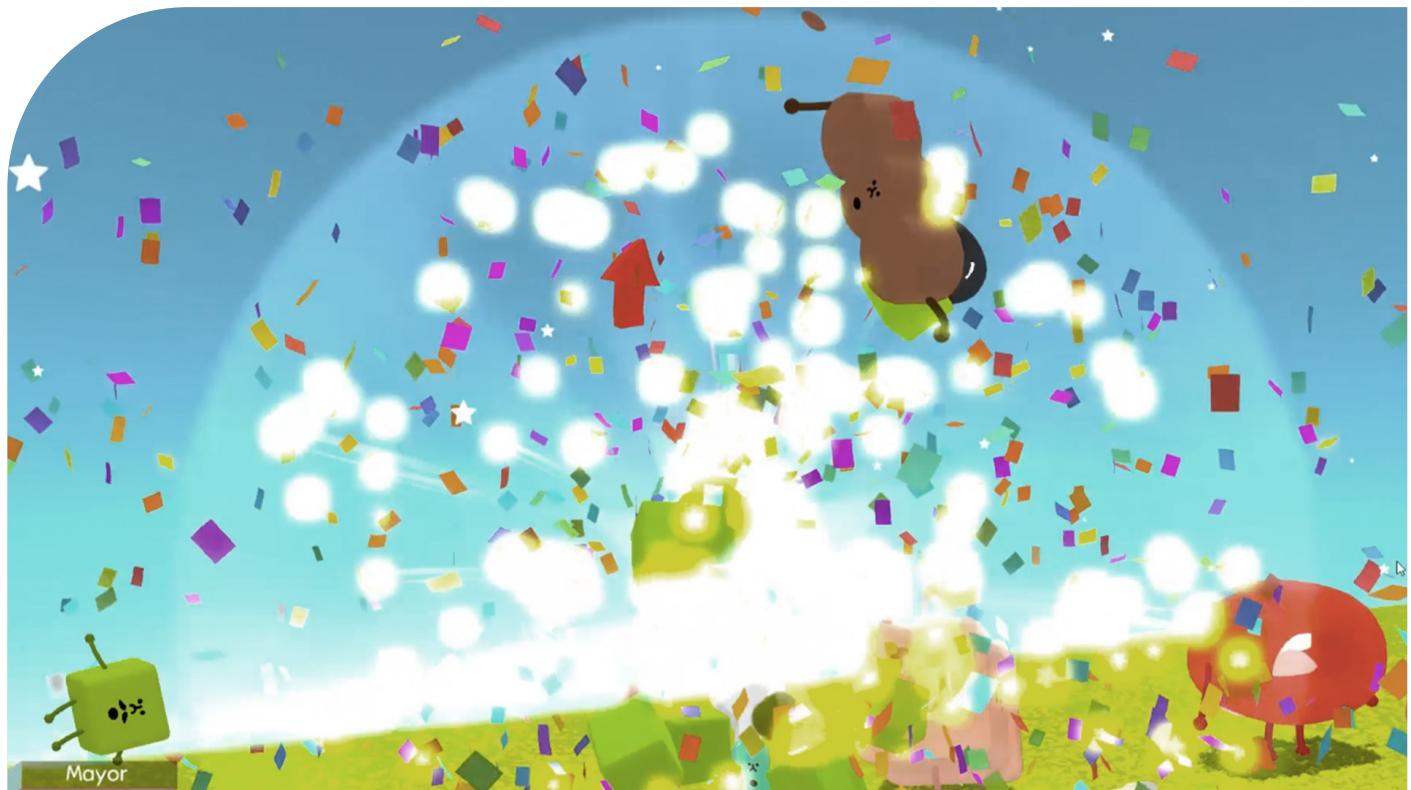
One day, Boy was walking home from lunch (which was going to be a salad until he got too hungry and ordered a triple-cheeseburger and chili fries instead, a decision he was already beginning to regret) when he came across a duck and her dozen and three ducklings blocking his path. Not trusting himself to step over the ducklings and incapable of waiting for them to waddle out of his way, Boy decided to take the Long Way Home. And so his rather unintentional quest began...

Never Ever Quest uses the conventions of gallery spaces, such as these wall tags, to tell a story in an unorthodox way.

However, the art style goes a more joyfully comical direction. Most of the imagery that is parodied and remixed in the drawings is pulled from NES and SNES games. The dopey NPCs would be perfectly at home amongst *Dragon Quest*'s Akira Toriyama-designed slapstick monsters. Level 2 of the Taco tower is an ocean level with squid creatures similar to the denizens of *Mario*'s water worlds. Throughout, various potions and doors are adorned by *Zelda*-esque skulls.

There's a tension that builds between the drudging game tropes and the way the world also breaks into gleeful dream logic. This tension is amplified with how the show debuted during E3 but was located far from the convention ground zero, in a small community-focused gallery. Echoing this tension with the world of commercial spectacle, the show segue into a playable demo of *Wattam*, the latest from tiny indie studio Funomena.

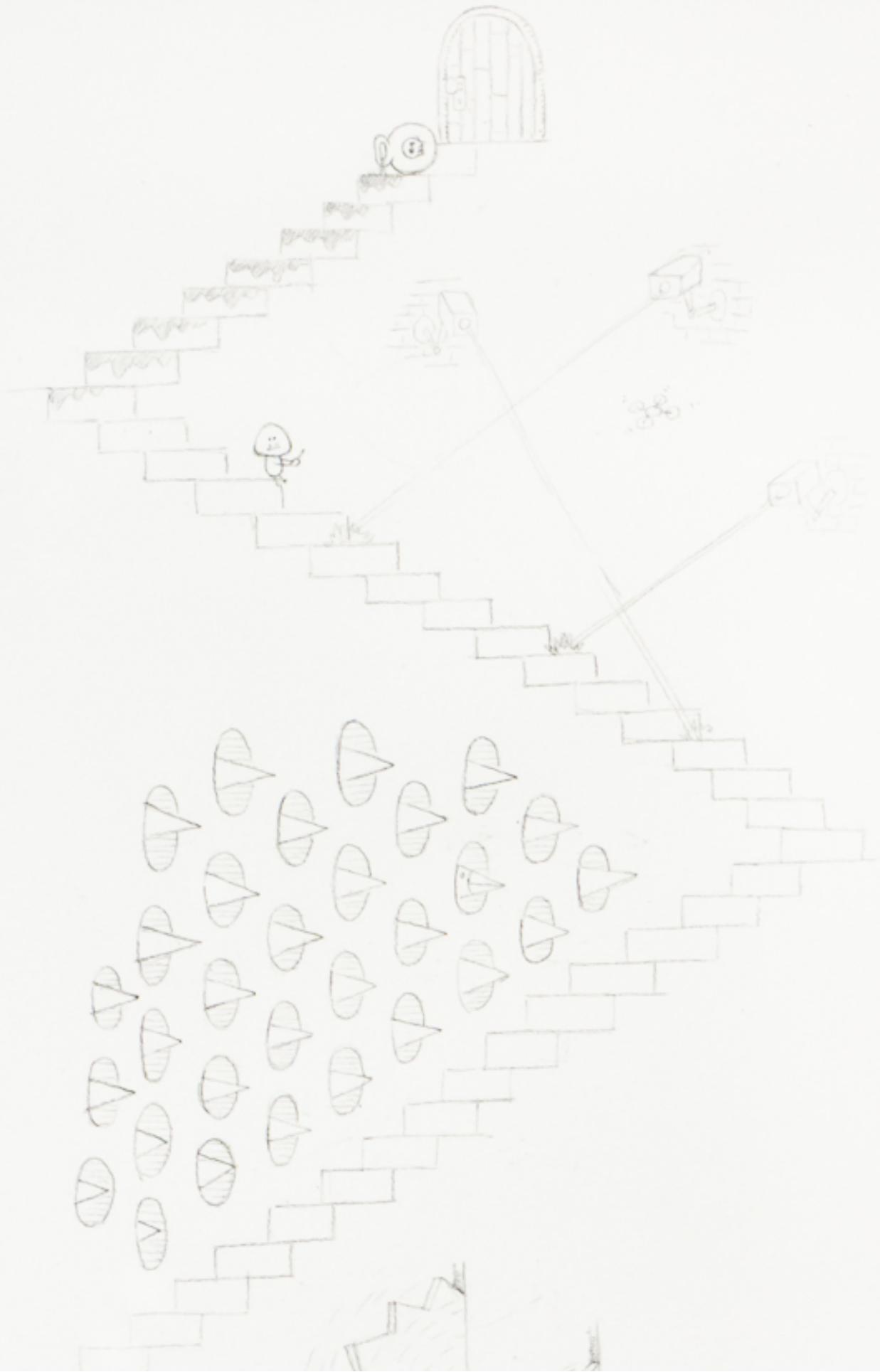
It is hard not to see the drawings as an embodied re-performance of the tension between the joy of creation and the genre strictures of the commercial video game industry. The drawings seem crude at first glance, but when you look at them closely, they show a vital deliberation. The pencil lines of Boy are expressly etched into the paper's surface, but that palpable energy is forced into the exact same form over and (holding a key) over and (holding an umbrella) over again. The way the conventions of video game RPG tropes restrain the playful freedom of the drawing hand becomes a central metaphor underlying the show.



Wattam, which was also on display at the E3 show floor concurrent with the gallery's opening.

This is more than a small detail of craft or industry politics. It highlights the very limited way we're trained as video game consumers to see and value the world. At its most extreme, when Boy arrives at his home, shockingly rendered as a towering, amorphous shadow demon, the whole reason we can read this unsettling creature as somehow being a "house" is because we know what that door icon is supposed to look like in a video game. Video games have trained us to ignore the awesome and sublime and to strip everything down to the functional.

We look at this fearsome amorphous beast and reduce it to a door icon with the same training that tells us that being a video game fan is a white dude drinking Mountain Dew and screaming over a stream at getting a rare drop while thousands of fans spam copypasta into *Twitch* chat. We as fans are taught to aspire to that for marketing simplicity. We as games journalists reinforce this and a thousand other functionalist stereotypes.





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The surrealism of Takahashi's illustrations recall classic game design tropes, but they also point to a larger aesthetic sensibility.

With *Earthbound* in mind, I want to return to Boy's towering creature-house. At IndieCade 2017, Takahashi pointed out that his biggest artistic influence was the sculptor Taro Okamoto. Initially working alongside many of the leading surrealists in 1930s Paris, Okamoto most famously constructed the [massive anthropomorphic Tower of the Sun](#) for the '70 Osaka Expo. Inside the tower is glowing biomorphic 150 foot "tree of life" showing the bustling evolution of life crafted by the same studio that made most of the monsters from *Ultraman*. Maybe you're all wishing I'd keep 'politics' the hell out of my review and instead talk about the silly bears in the show who sing pop music. But even the bears correct Boy referring to a "fork" in the road as "Trident, actually." With all of the focus on language in the show, do you think that Takahashi's inclusion of that mansplaining staple is an accident? Great art plays with the way we value and categorize the world, and with the way *Never Ever Quest* twists video game conventions and pairs them with distorted details of daily life, it feels like a spiritual continuation of the work of *Earthbound*. Both use a combination surrealism, nostalgia, and parody to reflect on the relationship of the player, post-WWII media, and our complicity with commerce to question the way video games structure our imagination.

Surrealist strategies are common throughout Japanese games in the last three decades, from *Earthbound* to *Final Fantasy 7* to *Nier: Automata*. We need to start seeing these tactics as serious

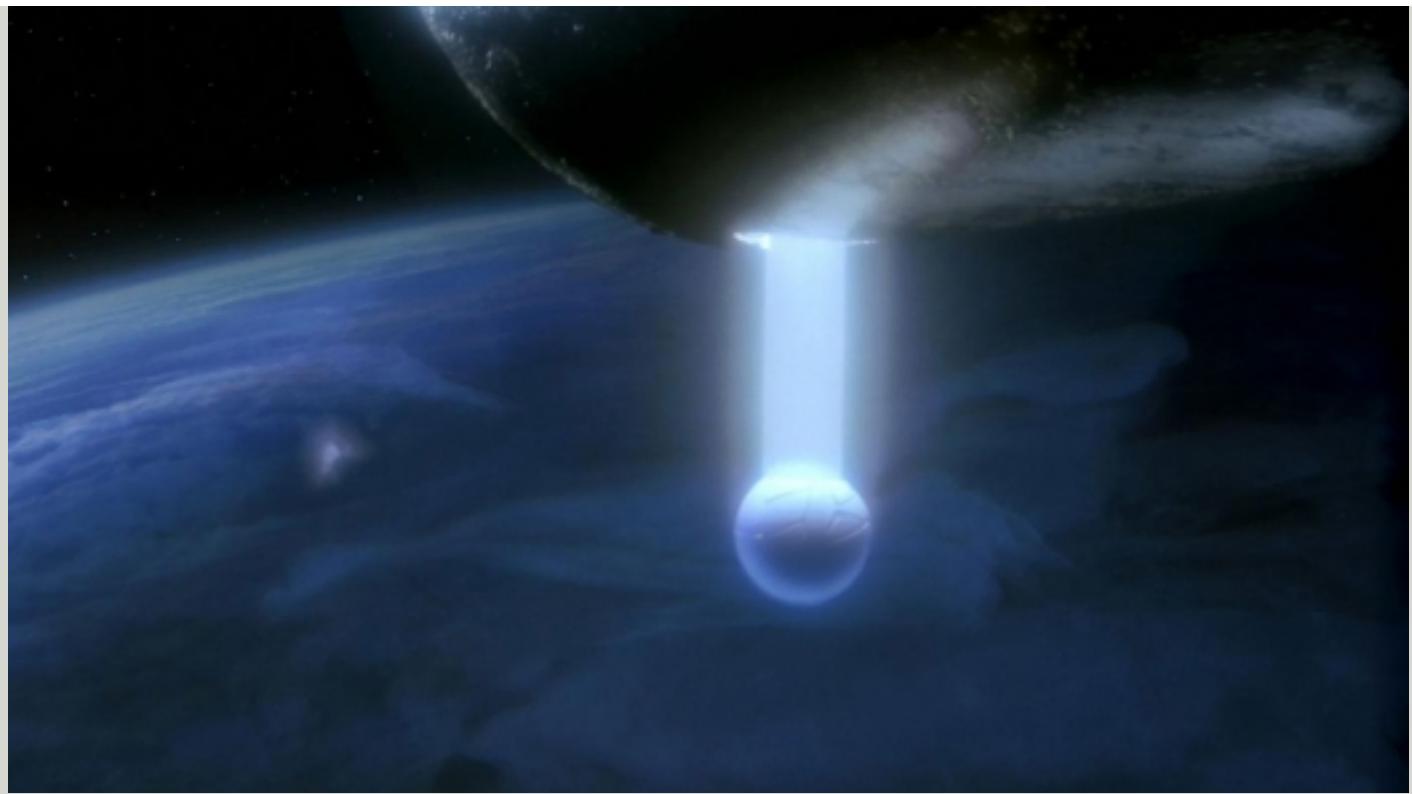
and deliberate (even if they are sometimes humorous) ways to disrupt our usual way of viewing the world, in the same lineage of artists like Okamoto. The reason I bring this up is that it is too easy to dismiss the serious implications of Takahashi's show with the Orientalist stereotype of laughing at "Those wacky Japanese!"

World renowned artist and activist Ai Wei Wei has said, "An artwork unable to make people feel uncomfortable or to feel different is not one worth creating." In light of this, and alongside the frothing evolutions inside Okamoto's *Tower of the Sun*, *Never Ever Quest* slowly reveals itself as more than nitpicking criticism of videogames. With some cheap pencil drawings, hardly more highfalutin than an artist alley's DIY zine, good humor, and astute observations, Takahashi demonstrates that we don't need to make the next *Battlefield* to participate in the creation of our culture. Quite the opposite: maybe it's at the small scale that we have the most power to challenge, change, and grow the quests that define us.

Keita Takahashi's *Never Ever Quest* runs until July 31st. So, if you find yourself in the Los Angeles area, [you may wish to pay the iam8bit gallery in the near future!](#)

#	WATTAM
#	KATAMARI DAMACY (SERIES)

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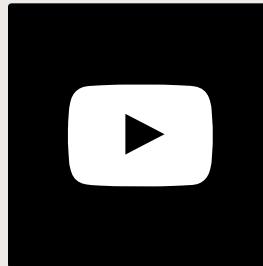
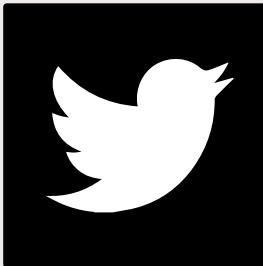


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