Beyond the Event Horizon of 2017

To look ahead to 2018 and beyond, we need to look back at the games whose influence extends beyond our current calendar year.

As the ash falls from the darkened sky like December snow across the hills of Los Angeles, the time for lists also descends upon us. In principle, I rather like the process of looking back on the year and trying to get some perspective of my and my communities' trajectory. But I also understand that though it determines the schedule of our taxes and hangovers, year-end rankings can quickly become an unhealthy obsession for fans, pundits, and creators of videogames alike. After all, we know the span of January 1st and December 31 hardly bounds the influence of any game.

Working both the esports and videogame art critic beat is probably a big part of why I have a weird sense of time in relationship to videogames. In esports, not only can teams can rise and

dissolve overnight, but glory is often separated from failure by hundredths of a second; yet the games themselves stick around for years, or even decades in the case of titles like *StarCraft* or *Counter-Strike.* On the other side, working as an art critic for videogames, my goal is to help audiences understand the nuances of their experiences with specific titles. This often means having to put aside the bleeding edge, and instead wander the tangled depths of history, so that I can illuminate the long arc of an idea.

In that spirit, I wanted to invite you to take a delve into a few games from 2016 (and before) that are poised to majorly impact our community in 2018.

ZOOM

Photo source: [Kotaku](#).

Sports for Sports' Sake... And Money

Esports is booming by almost any measure. But compared to other professional sports, it is still very much an awkwardly provincial affair born of basement LAN parties and Korean cable television. Dominated year after year by the same slim half-dozen titles, there is only one major game that hasn't already sped far beyond the outer limits of a videogame's typical lifespan.

Compared to other professional sports, esports is still very much an awkwardly provincial affair.

The youngster in the bunch, *Overwatch*, might be a love letter to the aging *Team Fortress 2,* with some classic MOBA elements added on, and all dressed in a '90s Image Comics skin, but *Overwatch* and Blizzard's *Overwatch* League (OWL) might well determine the future of professionalized esports.

The big change is OWL's recent move to a franchise system. This might seem most exciting because teams will spread (like the characters in the game) to cities around the globe rather than huddle together in drab apartments in Los Angeles or Seoul. But geolocation is only a byproduct. The biggest change is happening in the accounting ledgers, and its success or failure will all but determine the course of esports: revenue sharing.

Overwatch's long-term success as an esport is still in question.

Previously, almost all esports competitions happened with players being sponsored by companies, participating in events run by other private companies, usually either a telecom company or the organization which released and owns the game. This means that players made money from prize pools and the occasional contract, team sponsors spend money as advertising for their products (a telecom service or website or piece of gamer hardware), and the game company itself is using the whole deal as a way to build its core player base. Selling games or cell phones was always the reason for the investment; esports was just the method.

Franchising and revenue sharing, on the other hand, mean that investors will now be directly putting money *into* and getting money *from* both their teams and the league as a whole. The

better the league does, the more viewers they have, the more tickets teams sell, the more they cultivate stars, the more merch they sell, the more profits come back to the team owners. In short, this means for the first time, the esport itself is the end product.

The prospect of franchising and revenue sharing is the reason you see owners of major sports organizations like the Mets and the Patriots buying into OWL. With *League of Legends'* LCS following a similar structure, the success of these two franchised leagues would mean looking back at 2018 with the same nostalgia as the formation of the Yankees or the Cubs. But if it fails, whether from casual videogame community racism/sexism limiting audience appeal, or by rising cost due to the removal of net neutrality, esports could become a pariah, locked out of mainstream channels by the traditional sports communities that just saw their investment go up in digital flames. The future of esports will be determined by a two-year-old game with an untested viewership and a grizzled game with a community known best for its toxic behavior.

Videogames Are Bad/Good/Null At Stories

Far from the coming roar of the esports stadiums, *Kentucky Route Zero'*s brooding amalgamation of Southern Gothic literature, experimental theater, and David Lynch films has been on a slow burn toward prominence since its 2013 release. It wasn't until 2016 that Act IV (of five) was released that KR0 seemed to solidify its position to affect the conversation in the eternal war about videogames and narratives, and its finale in 2018 could serve as a touchstone for a new way of thinking about videogames.

Alongside *Firewatch*, *Tacoma*, and *What Remains of Edith Finch*, games like *KR0* that shift the focus from graphics and reflexes toward rich characters, subtle worlds, and literary storytelling have grown into an increasingly popular genre. Yet reactionary trolls and other self-styled pundits

throw around invectives like "walking simulator" and "not games" (and much worse abuse), decrying these titles' turn away from their marketing-slogan vision of "pure" videogaming.

Kentucky Route Zero has achieved a *Twin Peaks*-like cult status among a certain set of players.

As a fan of *Kentucky Route Zero*, I'm generally thrilled to see how its final act lands in 2018. But I'm maybe more excited because the story itself seems to suggest a new way of looking at this eternal war. Specifically, the story has been slowly working through the lost connections between these exploratory games and the long arc of digital media. It suggests that while seemingly alien, these types of games share the very heart of the medium through works like *Riven* and *King's Quest*.

To have a work that is both radical and popular with critics would be astounding. Similar to how certain works, from T.S. Elliot's "Wasteland" to N.W.A.'s *Straight Outta Compton*, are radical yet empower audiences with the tools to understand these new visions for art, *Kentucky Route Zero* could serve as a linchpin to the future, with its by deft allusions to the mists of adventure game and hacker history from the 70s and 80s, as well as deep ties to art films and theatre. Who's to say, maybe *Dark Souls* and walking simulators are just lost siblings slowly growing closer after being forcibly estranged?

The main voice cast of *Critical Role* dressed as their characters.

We're Such Social (and Famous, please don't forget Famous!) Nerds

Continuing deep along into games history, if you had told me that one of 2016's breakthrough media hits would be a pair of shows featuring performers playing *Dungeons & Dragons*, which came out in 1974, I would have thought you were trolling me. Hell, I suspect even the people making *D&D* would have laughed at that prediction. But here we are: *Critical Role* and *Adventure Zone* are the pinnacle of fan media, with *HarmonQuest* ramping up as well, and everyone from suburban teens to famous actors are loading up their dice bags and doing their best wizard voices for their webcams.

In very real terms, the renewal of the tabletop game scene is already radically changing the future of videogames.

In very real terms, the renewal of the tabletop game scene is already radically changing the future of videogames. As I've gotten older, tabletop games have started to eclipse videogames as the social entertainment of choice amongst my friends. Even the local esports bar, Guild Hall, has a wall of tabletop games whose tiles and dice are in constant use by its videogame devoted patrons, while videogame streams sit unnoticed on the flatscreens all around.

Those friends who used to play *World of Warcraft* together, sitting alone in rooms across the town? Now they drive to each other's houses, clutching miniatures, sitting around custom made tables, and performing feats of great heroism and drama (or just relaxing by connecting train lines across Europe). These tabletop games often come in direct competition for time and money with videogames, since they share such a large overlap of audience—and when money is on the line, the market scramble to make a quick buck from that changed demand.

NBC's *Community*, created by Dan Harmon.

But what are consumers inspired by Matthew Mercer, the McElroys, and Dan Harmon demanding when they flock to game stores? It is important to remember that though these seem like DIY recordings of real sessions, these meteorically popular *Dungeons & Dragons*-styled shows are now meticulously crafted by highly-practiced professional performers with the backing of media production and marketing teams. Unsurprisingly, streaming seems to have become the new dream of fame that led people to be in bands; tabletop is the current flavor for the self-identified geek set. Yet, as the rest of the streaming, podcast, and video ecosystem struggles toward an uncertain future, how many famous tabletop celebrities can the market really bear? What happens to tabletop's focus on local community and open imagination when every dice roll reaction becomes practice for your close-up screen test for a sponsorship?

These two intertwined but opposed impulses, to be intimate with friends and to have a practiced persona with hopes of fame—to be physically present in our local community and to have our

likeness spread all across the vastness of the digital universe—will both be increasingly exerting their pressure on videogames long after all the soda is drunk and all the chips are eaten and dawn rises over 2018.

Welcome to The Metaverse, We Got Fun and '80s Metaphors

"Computers rely on the one and the zero to represent all things. This distinction between something and nothing—this pivotal separation between being and nonbeing—is quite fundamental and underlies many Creation myths." So goes a typical bit of bluster about digital worlds in the 1992 cult-classic novel *Snow Crash*.

If you've ever wondered where the near-religious fervor shown in recent multi-billion dollar **investments** in VR comes from, all you need to do is wade through the occasionally dubious prose and glib metaphors of *Snow Crash*'s hyper-masculine, techno-libertarian software-cum-game-cum-place called the "*Metaverse*." For many folks now working in tech, the Metaverse is the formative experience of virtual reality. And that virtual reality, formed from ink on paper, will always be a neon lit place filled with dreams of shadow hackers, digital samurai, and radical information equality going to the highest bidder.

Cult 90s film *Hackers* drew significant inspiration from cyberpunk literature like *Snow Crash* and *Neuromancer*. We remember it fondly, if perhaps for the wrong reasons.

As 2017 ends, so ends another year of VR hype. Once again, so many excited people are betting that the future of entertainment—even the future of human existence—involves a similar desire to transcend our bodies and live in a more exciting digital ether. But this magical digital place is always oddly specific: taking the form of a well-rendered, action movie version of life, complete with guns, swords, lens flare, glowing kanji, trench coats, and a predilection to ignore non-business conversation... Oh, and buying lots of expensive technology that requires emptying out your living room.

VR may very well radically change the world, at the very least the porn industry.

VR may very well radically change the world, at the very least the porn industry, but *Snow Crash*'s vision of VR has ossified the imaginations of the already overly-homogenous demographic that directs digital technology. In 2018, the Metaverse will remain the dominant influence on VR hype. But that very narrowness, the very exclusiveness, is also prompting the ever-more diverse group of people to reimagine it. The harder tech pushes these hegemonic consumer visions, the more it becomes clear to everyone else who hasn't and won't ever benefit from paying thousands of dollars to be a digital samurai in an empty room, that they will have to start imagining new relationships, new futures, for our relationship to digital technology.

Saber Some Champagne for Me

Maybe that's the theme here: as 2017 comes to a close, the shiny newness of digital technology and social media seems to be wearing away. Maybe if you're in speculative investment in Silicon Valley, you're full steam ahead. But the rest of us are starting to see a degree of complexity in all these relentless trends. Indeed, whether we want to or not, we are seeing our hobbies as part of a much longer conversation about how we structure our communities. Videogames are an ever-more regular part of the cultural ecosystem, and in each of these four threads, you can see the tension that comes with multiple histories, multiple desires coming into contact.

Rather than lurching from one hot-take to another, from one hype PR announcement to the next, our conversations in 2018 and beyond will be so much better if we keep a broader historical perspective. That's my New Year's wish as I scrape the ash from Los Angeles's latest fires off my car window.

#	DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS
#	LEAGUE OF LEGENDS
#	OVERWATCH
#	ESPORTS
#	KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO
#	OVERWATCH LEAGUE
#	CRITICAL ROLE

RELATED READING

Japan's best Dragon Ball FighterZ player grabs top title with a near-flawless victory

ICYMI: Pokken just crowned its first American world champion

ICYMI: Dota 2's esports scene has turned into a real-life sports anime
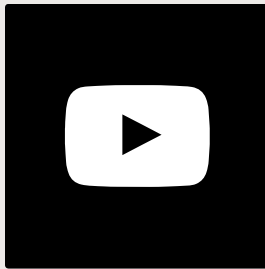

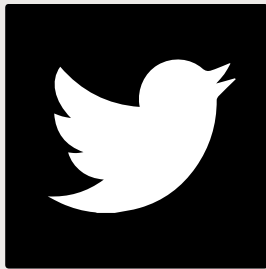Geared Up! Lucio's Sonic Amplifier

5 games you missed in August

READ MORE OPINION

ZAM

SIGN UP NOW

Featured Sites

Wowhead

Lolking

TF2Outpost

DayZDB

Hearthhead

Database Sites

Wowhead

Lolking

Addon Sites

MMOUI

WowInterface

ESOUI

About

About ZAM

Advertise with us

Privacy Policy

Terms of service