JamaicaStation

THE PLAYER'S GUIDE TO FLESH POND ROAD

PLUS ESSAYS ABOUT GAME DESIGN, CITIES, TECHNOLOGY, AND OTHER THINGS THAT I LIKE

By Peter Toubanos

JamaicaStation

TOUBANOS
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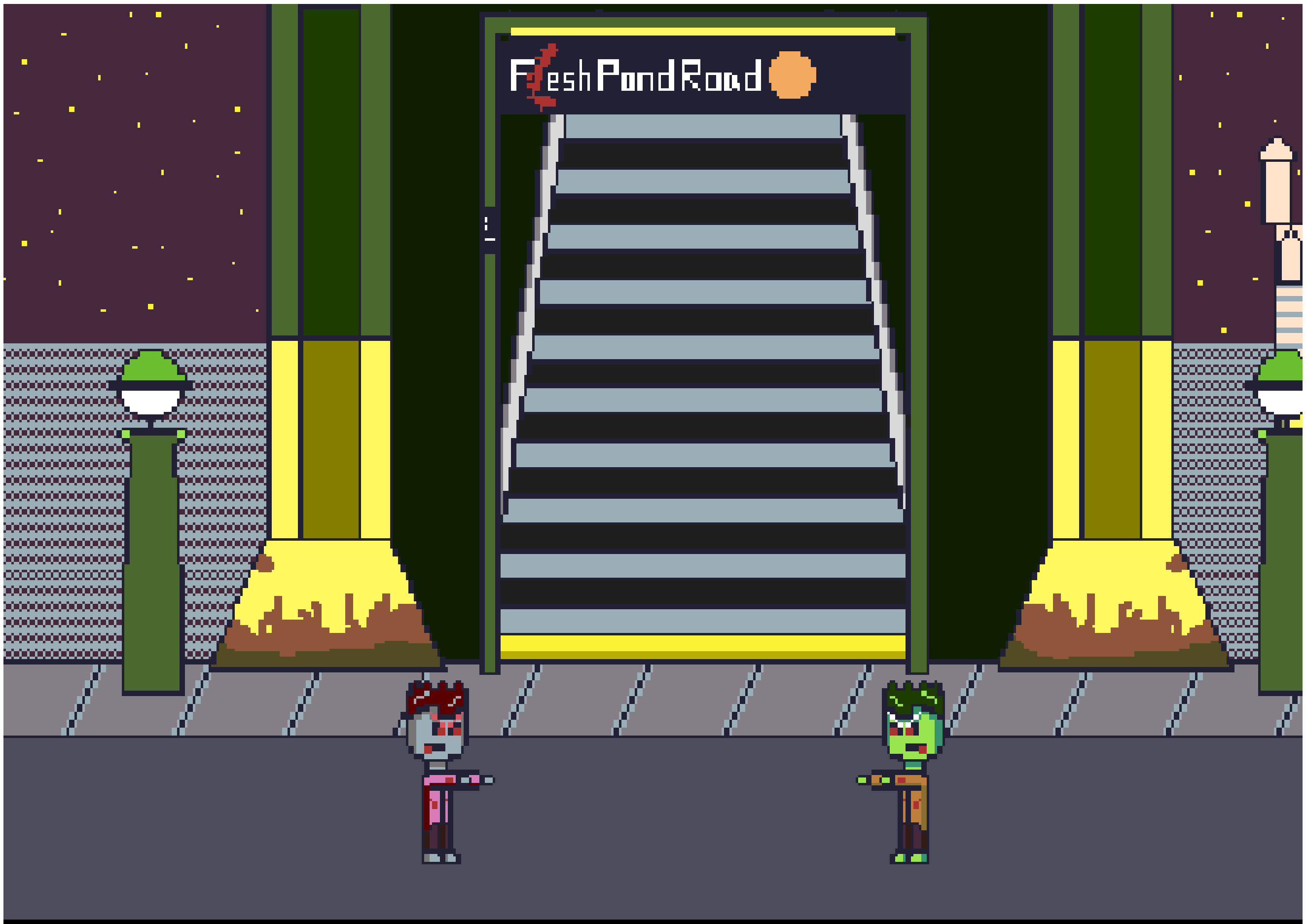
STORY

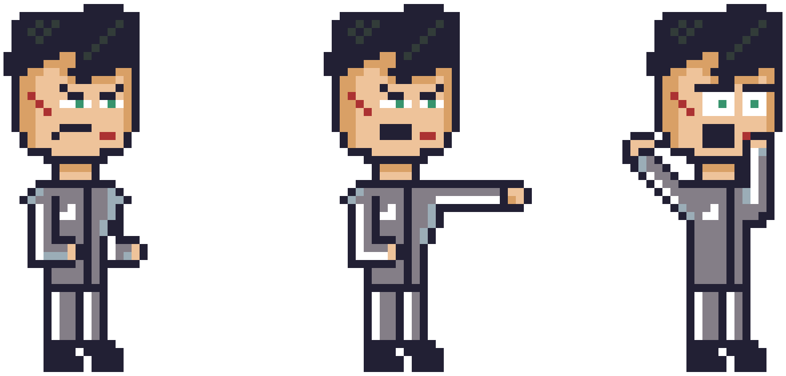


THE UNDEAD HAVE TAKEN OVER QUEENS, NEW YORK

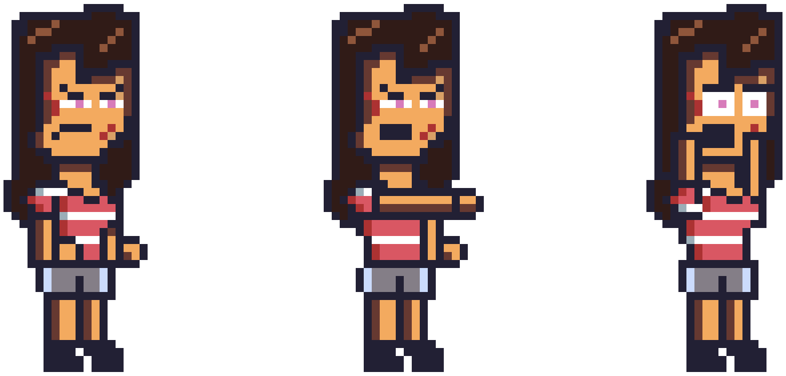
IT'S YOUR JOB TO GET TO THEIR HEADQUARTERS, THE NEWLY RENAMED “FLESH POND ROAD”, AND RECLAIM YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD!

PLAYABLE CHARACTERS

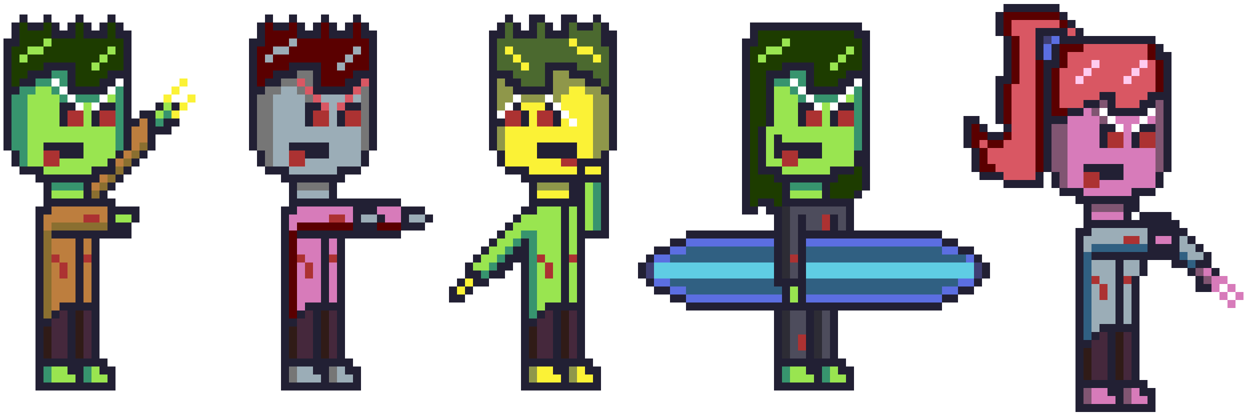
BRANKO



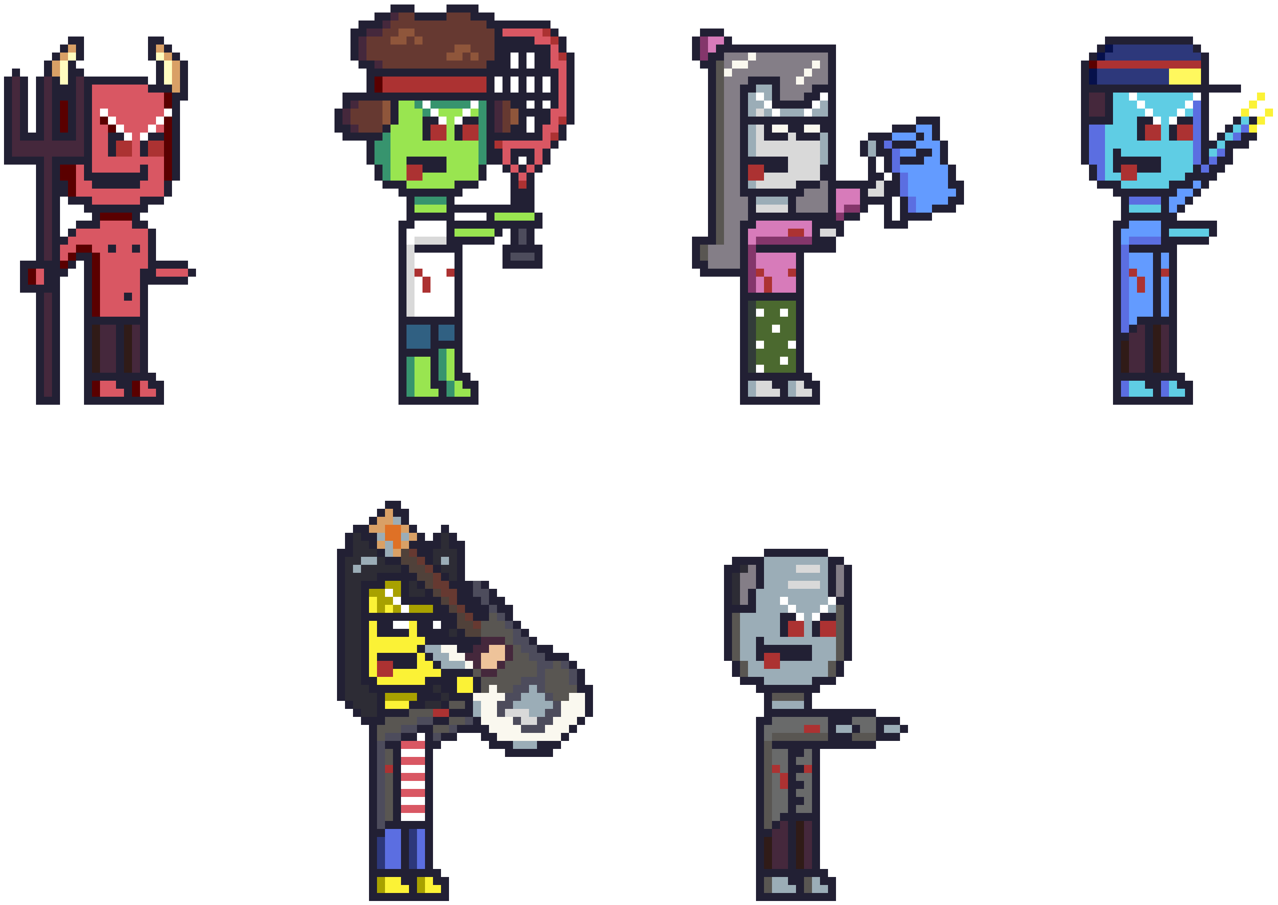
LUZ



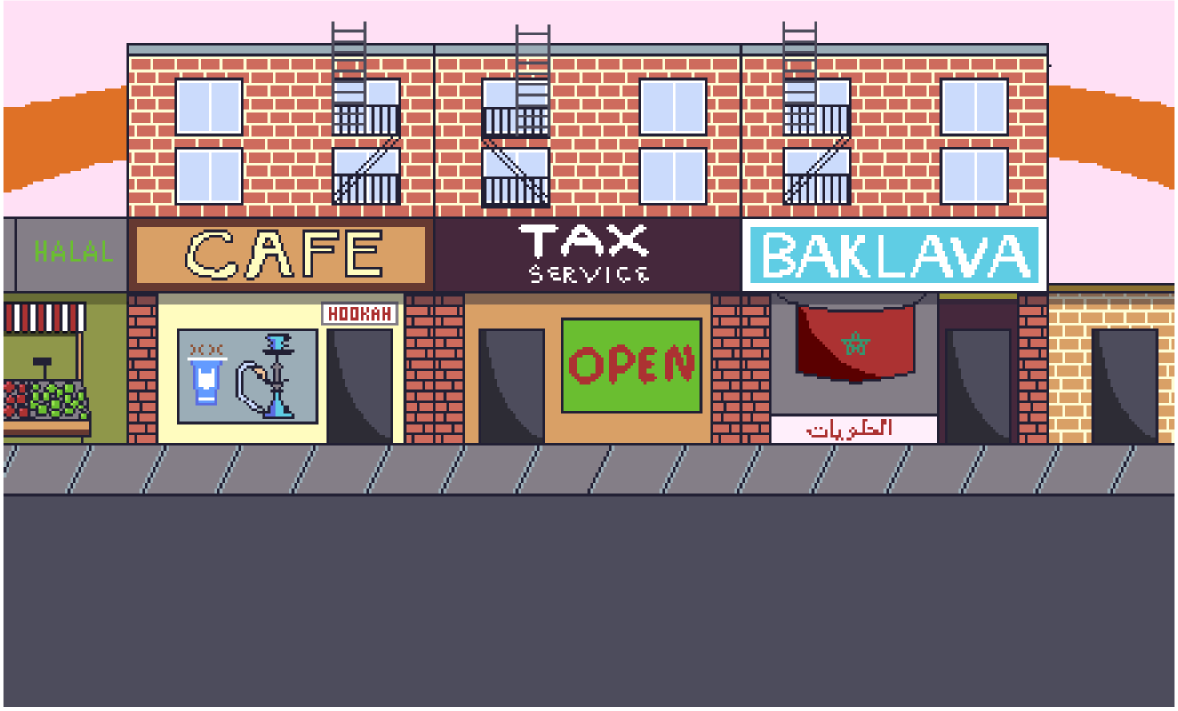
ENEMIES



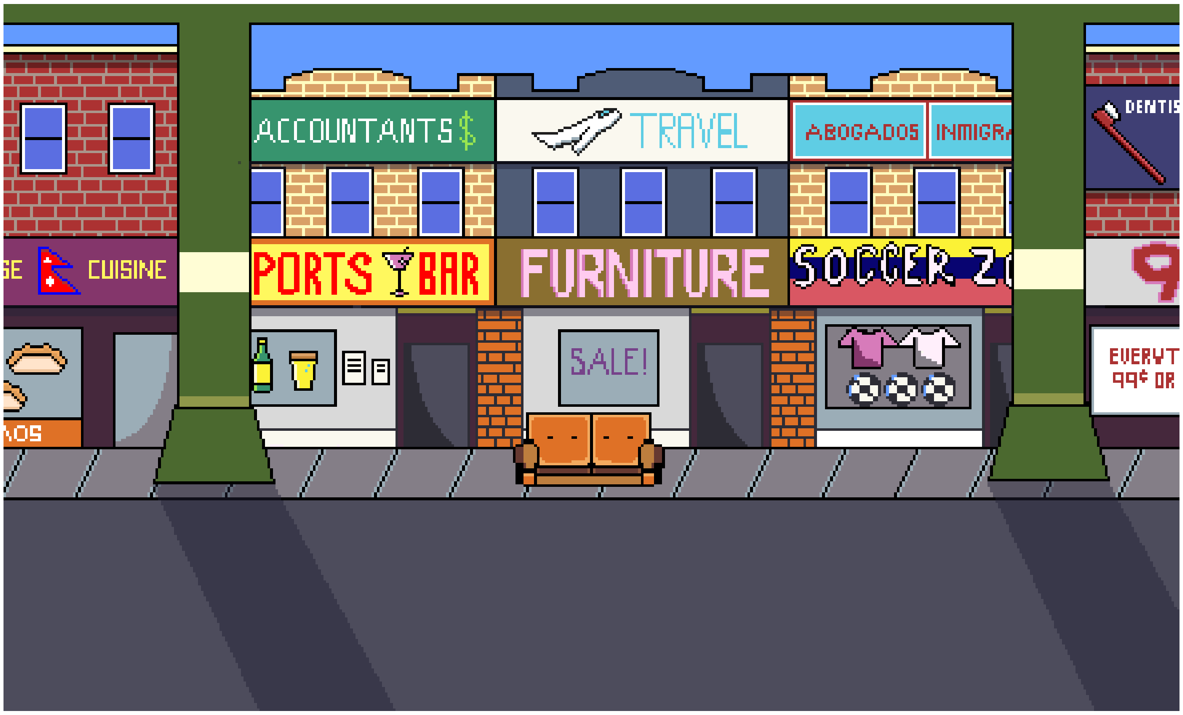
BOSSES



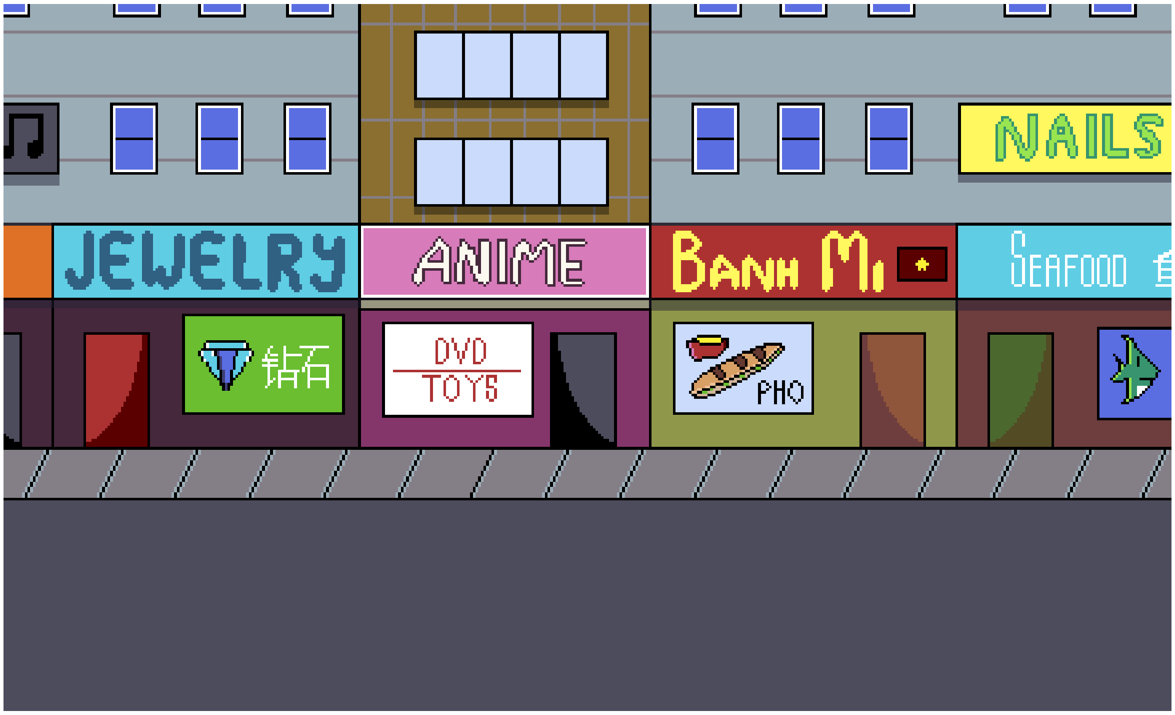
STAGES



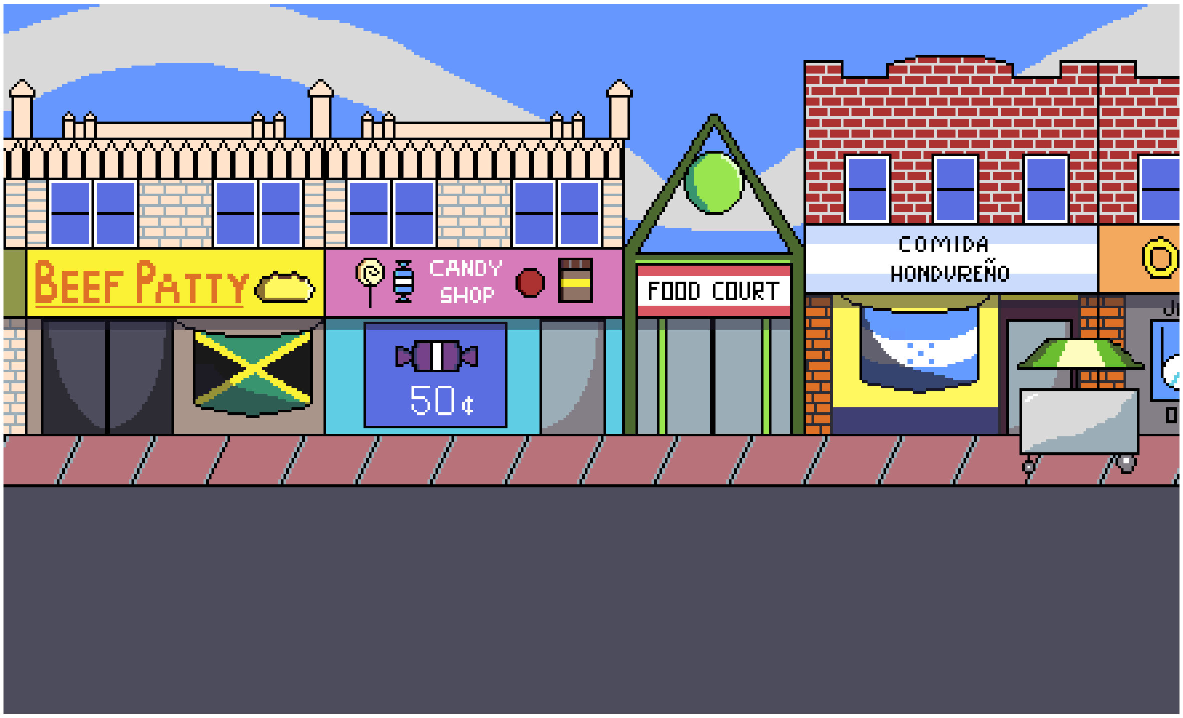
LEVEL 1: STEINWAY STREET



LEVEL 2: ROOSEVELT AVENUE



LEVEL 3: MAIN STREET



LEVEL 4: JAMAICA AVENUE

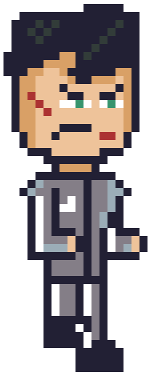
LOBSTER ROLL
JUICES

LEVEL 5: ROCKAWAY BEACH BOARDWALK

BAR
BUREK
WASH
TAQUERIA
Mexican Food

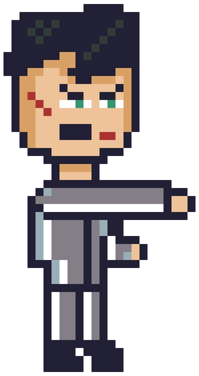
LEVEL 6: FLESH POND ROAD

CONTROLS

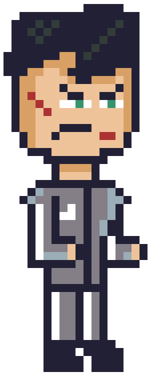


WALK: WASD OR ARROW KEYS

JUMP: SPACEBAR



PUNCH: "P" OR CLICK MOUSE



PAUSE: ESCAPE

The Path to Flesh Pond Road

I try to spend as much time on my bike as possible. Bike rides are a cleanser to clear the mind from the stress, noise, and ennui of everyday life. About a year before I started this project I took my bike to Upstate New York for a long weekend with the intention of riding about 65 miles on the Erie Canalway Trail between Syracuse and Utica over the course of one Sunday. I can't recall why or how, but the name "Flesh Pond Road" popped into my head while I was on this trip. I thought that it could be a great name for a zombie movie (or maybe a porno) that takes place in Ridgewood, the wondrous neighborhood in Queens, New York.

Unfortunately, creating great cinema is not something I'm particularly interested in doing. That would require a lot of money to pay for cameras, lighting equipment, props, makeup, and other equipment that I wouldn't even know how to work. And getting filming permits in New York City? Forget about it. The act of filmmaking is also not something that can typically be done alone. Unless you're Stan Brakhage pasting dead moths to a film strip and calling that a "movie", you're generally going to have to put together a team of actors, artists, editors, and other miscellaneous crew to make a movie happen. Budget aside, I'm also on the introverted side and averse to conflict, thus don't really have interest in managing a crew of people like that.

There was one medium that I felt capable of attempting that involved toiling away over my computer keyboard for months, obsessing over the placement of pixels, and looking at Unity development forums to find some C# coding wisdom. I could do it at my own pace, by myself, with little financial investment, and have full creative control. *Flesh Pond Road* will probably never become a movie, but it did become a very small-scale independent video game. While I've made a couple games before Flesh Pond Road, this is the first one that I had a large scale vision for. This is something I'd consider a bit more than just a tech demo. It was my opportunity to take a realized concept and see if I could really put my game design skills to the test.

Although I do consider making a video game more feasible than making an entire movie, it's still quite a bit of work that's reliant on the creator(s) being relatively adept in a number of fields. For reference here's a list of things I had to do in order to finish the game.

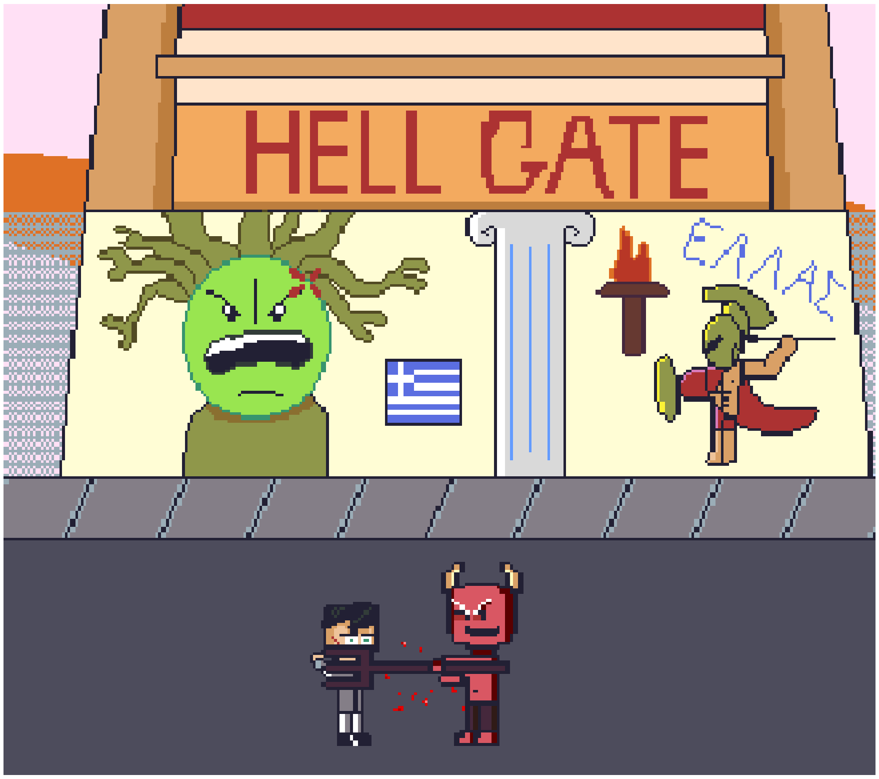
- Visit the six locations I based the game on to take pictures and notes for reference
- Draw all the level backgrounds
- Draw all the character sprites, including playable characters, enemies, and bosses
- Animate all the character sprites that I've drawn
- Adjust the hitboxes for each enemy and player
- Design the main menu, character selection screen, and level title cards
- Make the 3D rendered map of Queens on the menu screen
- Write the code for the player controller, level manager, game timeline, enemy AI, menu interfaces, music, sound effects, and pause screen
- Source sound effects and music from free game libraries
- Play test the game repeatedly

In five months I was able to complete all of these to varying levels of competency. If you're trying to make a game from scratch, being multifaceted in your skillset is a necessity.

For those not in the know, *Flesh Pond Road* is named after Fresh Pond Road, a street that defines Ridgewood itself. It's one of the neighborhood's major commercial strips and has its own subway station. I have never lived in Ridgewood and have no personal connection to the area, but I find it a fascinating place. Not too long ago, it was a sleepy neighborhood, popular among immigrants from the Balkans, Poland, Egypt, and Latin America. During the 2010s, the neighborhood became increasingly popular among young American-born men and women in their 20s and 30s, traveling further inland into the boroughs in search of cheap rent beyond the already gentrified areas of Williamsburg and Bushwick in Brooklyn. By 2022, Ridgewood was named the 4th coolest neighborhood in the world by Time Out Magazine. I'm not aware of any other depiction of Ridgewood in video game form, but if this is the first, it comes at a prescient time for Ridgewood.

Ridgewood is not well known outside of New York City, but the story of gentrification is one that is familiar in many cities around the globe. *Flesh Pond Road* takes place in Ridgewood, but it doesn't have to. Flesh Pond Road could be part of Shoreditch in London, Parkdale in Toronto, Wicker Park in Chicago, Fitzroy in Melbourne, or La Condesa in Mexico City. The game's premise of zombies taking over Ridgewood is based on a silly pun that was bouncing around in my head, but it also is fitting for a neighborhood that's facing a major demographic shift, with new residents redfining the implications of what “Ridgewood” and the “fourth coolest neighborhood of the world” even is.

Flesh Pond Road also serves as a love letter to Queens and New York in general. I’m not from Queens originally, but my mother was born in Astoria, and when my father emigrated to the United States from Greece, he came to Jamaica where he lived for 20 years. Our family mantained close ties to extended family who still lived in the borough, despite us living on Long Island. Through most of my adult life, I have chosen to live in different parts of Queens. Creating levels based on Queens came easily to me due to the high volume of neighborhoods that are distinct and memorable due to the unsual circumstances of Queens, in which nearly half of all residents are foreign-born.



In the making of this game I traveled to Steinway Street, Roosevelt Avenue, Jamaica Avenue, the Rockaway Beach boardwalk, and of course, Fresh Pond Road. I took pictures of unassuming storefronts and apartment buildings for reference, surveying architectural details, concerning myself with gutters and the placement of bricks, and painstakingly trying to recreate them in pixel form. My appreciation for the little things that make up New York streetscapes has never been greater than after making this game.

Flesh Pond Road is a silly diversion. That being said, it's also a personal exercise in not just video game design, but also graphic design, urbanism, and computer programming. It's not a long game, but it required a lot of time to make it. I spent countless hours making sure every pixel was perfectly placed in every single frame of animation, hours surveying the architectural styles of Queens, and even more hours scouring Google trying to figure out how to make C# do anything with my very limited coding experience. And when all is said and done, there's still a bunch of glitches and design issues that were left unfixed.

Making this game took a lot out of me and built upon so many skill sets, which is what I like about it. I feel like I've used every part of my brain to make this thing. It also helped me appreciate how much work goes into making not just video games, but really anything creative done by just one person or a small team. This game is not long or particularly detailed, but it took a long time to perfect, and it was very hard to do so.

Late last year, Frank Lantz released *The Beauty of Games*, a short philosophical book on games and their value as aesthetic and cultural works. He describes the difficulty in making games very well, in a way I wasn't previously able to put to words.

"Videogames, in addition to being expressive cultural works, are also machines. And they can be broken in ways that don't really apply to poems, paintings, or plays, broken in the objective sense, at the level of the software."

"This is one of the main reasons that making games is so difficult. Making games combines everything that's hard about building a bridge with everything that's hard about composing an opera. Games are operas made out of bridges."

Lantz's point is why I've unexpectedly come to enjoy making games so much. In order to make something, it puts my entire skillset to the test, marrying engineering and art to create a project. Even my understanding of math and physics has improved greatly. If it weren't for game design I wouldn't be able to tell you what a rigidbodies or Euler angles are.

I hope you enjoy playing *Flesh Pond Road*, one of the hardest and most enjoyable projects I've ever worked on.

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Generation Unity

Part I: 2006: The Year of "you"

In 2006, an eager nine-year old sat in front of his family computer following instructions on how to crack the serial code for PhotoShop. I was sitting on the phone following instructions from a trusted family friend who was into computers. He told me that I was making a foray into illegal activity, but I was more excited about making my foray into computer art. When I was nine years old, I was convinced I could make the next big internet webcomic and animation sensation. I was inspired by the perceived independence and do-it-yourself attitudes of websites like Newgrounds, Albino Blacksheep, and Homestar Runner. I didn't think that I needed to go the traditional route, wait to get into an art college,I and hope to get hired by Cartoon Network to become an animator. It seemed like with a little knowhow and sweat equity that anyone could do it on the internet. Something about the then-DIY nature of the internet made it seem like taking such an endeavor would be easy with no experience. With pirated copies of Adobe Photoshop and Macromedia Flash burnt to CD-ROMs by a friend of my parents, a handful of books I came across, and a few weekend art classes, I knew a bit more about motion tweens and the magic wand tool than the average child did.

After learning the basics of Photoshop and Flash, I wanted to take it to the next step by creating my own website to put all my new comics and cartoons on. In the third grade, one year earlier, I discovered freewebs.com which allowed you to host a website for free using their templates. This was incredible for me as an eight year old who had no knowledge of what HTML even was at the time, and also had no way of paying for anything online without bothering my parents. I spent a significant amount of time in third grade creating websites with what I can imagine was mostly embarrassing content into the website's easy to use templates. These websites are definitely lost to time, but one dares to even think about what kind of stuff I had decided to put online back then.

While these websites were amusing to make, they weren't real websites, at least not in my eyes as I grew older. I wasn't in third grade anymore, I was in *fourth*! The websites I had made the year before used cookie cutter templates that thousands of other people had already used. I wanted my own design. The templates also didn't support embedding Flash animations which was something I wanted to showcase. I dug a bit deeper on Freewebs and discovered that there was a more advanced HTML editor. I didn't know HTML at all, but my nine year old brain was somehow crafty enough to go to the absolute most basic GeoCities websites it could find, look at the source code, and paste things into that free HTML editor to see what they did.

This is the story of my first proper website and how I somehow hobbled together enough knowledge to make a rudimentary but still usable website. Thinking back to this time in my life, it's pretty astounding to think of the skill set I was able to build over such a short period of time at such a young age. Creating online content was such an interdisciplinary experience between drawing the art, coming up with stories and jokes, learning animation software, and figuring out the basics of HTML. I learned a lot about computers in just a couple years, even though computers weren't my primary interest. Comics and animation were.

The year I started work on all of this was 2006. YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook were in their infancy, and internet culture was still dominated by original content. The internet as a whole, was more decentralized than it is today. If you want to watch almost any video online in 2024, YouTube is your best bet. However, in my early years of browsing the internet pre-2006, there were a lot of websites where you could find video entertainment. Newgrounds, Albino Blacksheep, and Keenspot were hubs for aspiring animators while Homestar Runner, Weebl's Stuff, and JibJab were websites for singular individuals or teams of animators. Internet humor sites with unique content were once abundant. Websites like Fark, Something Awful, YTMND, and Maddox's The Best Page in the Universe all come to mind. Making my own personal website in 2006 just seemed to make sense. It was the only way that I wanted to get my own universe of comics and cartoons on the internet. With my own website, I didn't have anyone to please but myself. I had full creative control and didn't need to wait to grow up and get a job to be a creator.

In 2002, media theorist Lev Manovich dubbed a generation of creators “Generation Flash” in an essay by the same name. He writes *“Flash aesthetics exemplifies cultural sensibility of a new generation.This generation does not care if their work is called art or design. This generation is no longer is interested in "media critique"* which preoccupied media artists of the last two decades; instead it is engaged in software critique.” Manovich recognized a new kind of creator with a brand new toolbox to work with. Manovich names Flash specifically as the framework to dub his generation, but equally recognizes the importance of other tools like Shockwave and Java which were also huge during the early internet. Generation Flash is a catch all term for the time in which he was writing this essay, when software became trendy.

He continues, *"Flash generation serves us the modernist aesthetics and rationality of software. Information design is used as tool to make sense of reality while programming becomes a tool of empowerment."* While Manovich focuses on the art world for his essay, heavily relying on works from the Tirana Biennale for his argument, I would expand the moniker of Generation Flash to the many creators of short cartoons and games from the Web 2.0 era. When Manovich says programming becomes a tool of empowerment, the freedom that creating your own software, animation, website, or whatever and publishing it yourself gave artists and creators a new kind of ownership, one that wasn't possible when the means of distribution were out of the hands of individuals. Software was interesting because of its ability to disrupt the media landscape, something that is becoming increasingly harder to do.

2006 was indeed a pivotal year in online content. This was the year that Time Magazine named "You" as its person of the year in reference to the explosion of websites that thrived of user-made content. MySpace was at its height, while YouTube and Facebook were new but growing exponentially. Sharing your content online was becoming easier for the layman. Today, there are many centralized apparatuses for getting your own content online from YouTube to Instagram to TikTok. 2006, as I see it, was the end of the era of a pre-smartphone and social media Internet. Social media, Facebook and YouTube in particular, exploded the following year in 2007. 2007 also saw the release of the iPhone, bringing smartphone technology to the broader public.

I wonder what my relationship to online content might have been had I been born in 2006 instead of 1996. There's no reason I would have had to learn any of the basics of HTML to get content online if I were an ambitious fourth grader in 2016 instead of 2006. If I wanted to make animations, I could put them on YouTube. If I wanted to make comics, I could put them on Instagram. All my friends, and even people who weren't my friends, could follow me and see what sort of creative work I'd be up to. I probably wouldn’t even have needed the Adobe Suite, instead using any of the free smartphone apps that can be used to accomplish similar goals, albeit with less professional features. In 2006, I didn't know anyone else who had created online content. It was really my "thing". If it were 2016, I don't think I would have been the only one making online content at that age.

Almost any kid living in a developed country nowadays knows to put photos on Instagram or record themselves doing a TikTok dance. It's really easy to make something and put it online compared to the early to mid 2000s. In a sense everyone is a creator now from an independent filmmaker showcasing trailers for feature length films on YouTube, to your grandmother posting a blurry photo of her blueberry muffins on Instagram. Considering the case of YouTube specifically, on this singular website you can rent the movie *Barbie* for $24.99 USD and also watch a three second video of a sunset in Cedar Rapids, Iowa that someone took using an outdated cell phone camera over ten years ago.

Vilem Flusser predicted the acceleration of content creation and creativity in the digital era in his prophetic media theory text Into the Universe of Technical Images, which was originally published in 1985. Describing something he called the "Telematic Society", he describes the collapse of authorship, and an abundance of media in which everyone is a creator of some sense.

"The telematic society will not therefore abolish creation but will, on the contrary, invest it with its real meaning. Creation there will not be limited to a few "great people" who produce informative works empirically by means of a lonely inner dialogue. The time for such creative individuals, such heroes, is definitively past: they have become superfluous and impossible at the same time. One should add that the time of history (in the sense of linear consequence of res gestae) is definitively past. Instead everyone will participate in the creative process and test their intuitions and inspirations against the theories embodied in apparatuses, of whose riches we as yet have no inkling. This information will no longer comprise works, objects, but messages without substance, challenges to everyone to continually produce new information from them. And yet this information will be more eternal than historical works, for not only can it be reproduced eternally but it can also be stored in eternal memories."

Reading these words from Flusser leads me to imagine him as a sort of Nostradamus figure in the realm of media theory. Flusser's description of the Telematic Society sounds a lot like the media landscape of today where much of, if not the outright majority of media consumed are memes, Instagram photos, and TikToks. This sounds as though it would be exciting for aspiring content creators, but with this ease of technological media output comes the issue of oversaturation. Creators have to find ways to stick out from the crowd and rise above it all. This has facilitated a turn away from the community and has sowed the seeds of aggressive competition and corporate consolidation.

Online content creation is still huge and even bigger than what it was when I first became interested in it during the early 2000s. Something has changed in online content from the days of Generation Flash however, something called the algorithm. The algorithm was something I was blissfully unaware of in the year of 2006. I was making comics and cartoons and was more than satisfied with having them on my own website for anybody with the link to find. I remember meeting someone for the first time in sixth grade for the first time, but he knew who I was because someone else had told him about my website. Motivation to find an audience for online content is now heavily dependent on being able to get your content in someone's Instagram or Twitter feed, or even on the front page of YouTube. Having first started using the Internet in the early 2000s, the dream of creating a website and finding an audience felt like something that could happen organically by word of mouth to me. It could happen to anyone.

While that dream still exists to an extent, it's one that feels less attainable. The majority of online browsing today is on a handful of websites. Meta (Facebook and Instagram's parent company), ByteDance (TikTok's parent company), and Google (YouTube's parent company) are massive corporations dependent on revenue from advertisers, and benefit from specific types of content doing well. The question for content creators now is not simply to create a quality product. They are equally concerned with figuring out the most eye-grabbing YouTube thumbnail and creating a title that makes you want to click on it. It's also not enough to just make something people will want to consume. You must also make a related Instagram page, Facebook page, and Twitter account to promote it. Reliance on a handful of corporations feels like the only correct way to showcase your creativity online. It's not good enough for creators to simply make a quality product. You also have to play the game that algorithm is playing, whether you like it or not. If you're an animator, you could put things on your own website, but the audiences have all been consolidated on larger platforms like YouTube and TikTok. You'd be making animations that no one will ever see. Because audiences are no longer going to specific websites to find your work, it's easier to get lost in the endless stream of content on platforms like YouTube, so keeping up with the algorithm is extremely important for maintaining an audience. While some might argue the benefits of having a central organization for distribution of content, I do have to say that I miss when the internet felt more personal and more tailored to creators doing things on her own terms, not on the terms of Google employees.

You probably aren't shocked to hear that I never became a successful animator or webcomic creator. As I moved into my tween years I became less interested in comics and cartoons and didn't keep up with the hobby. I still enjoyed using Photoshop for photo editing and making memes for years to come, but I stopped using Flash and making comics around the time I turned 13. Additionally, my experience on the internet was starting to become less of a fun place for cartoons and games on individual websites, and more of a cluster of news articles, photos of events I wasn't invited to, and notifications from my friends' FarmVille accounts, all on one website, Facebook. Flash itself was in crisis and on the verge of becoming an outdated technology. iPhones, the ubiquitous smartphone, did not support Flash and developers began looking for other ways to get their content viewable on the device. In 2010, Steve Jobs published an open letter entitled “Thoughts on Flash" criticizing the software’s security, energy usage, and lack of touch support, among other perceived issues. Jobs died in 2011, but ultimately won the war on Flash posthumously. Adobe announced its discontinuation of Flash in 2017, and by January 2021, Flash was blocked by all major internet browsers.

Through my teen years, online entertainment was becoming less original, and about half of what I would end up watching on YouTube was material you could also watch on TV. The website filled up with things like clips from late night talk shows and news reports. Not only was I less interested in making animations, the ecosystem that fostered the success of the kind of animations I liked, offbeat and independently produced, was disappearing. Less of my time was spent on people's personal websites. People had them, but they weren't nearly as important as social media controlled by major international corporations. Want to be a photographer? You better have an Instagram to showcase your photos. Want to make videos? You better have a YouTube account. Want someone to eat your music? You better put it on Spotify. Sure, you could find independently produced material on these platforms, but this material has to compete with content produced by corporations that have larger budgets and better understanding of the media landscape. The internet isn't quite the democratized landscape that it felt like it was for amateur content creators in the early 2000s.

While my own website never became well known outside of my friends in elementary school, I'm glad that I made one, and that it happened in 2006, which feels like the last year it could have possibly happened the way that it did. I'm thankful that I could, for a brief moment, feel like a larger group of DIY content creators who did it without the corporatized web of today and to be part of a generation, Manovich's Generation Flash, that had to be industrious to get anything online in the first place.

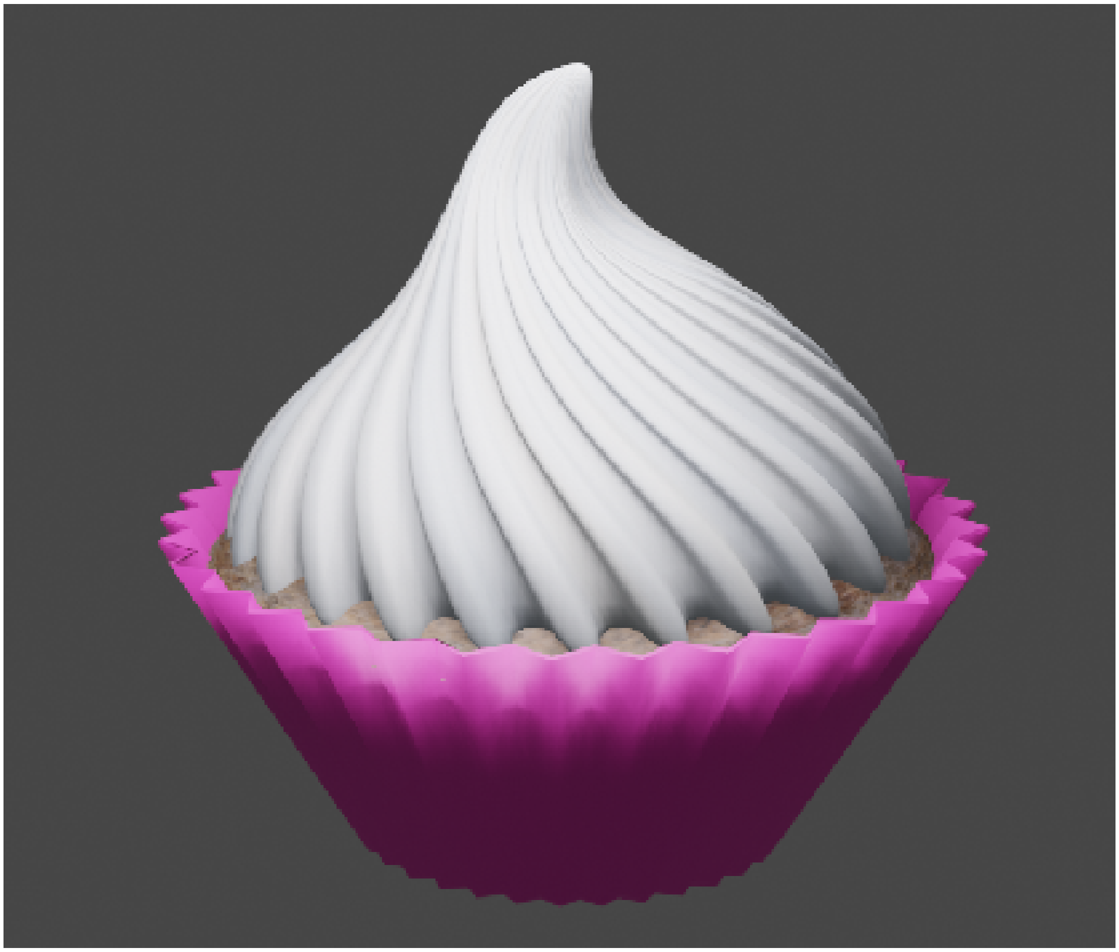
Part 2: Independent Video Games: a Rebirth of Generation Flash

As a teenager and into my early 20s, I moved on from animation and comics, which I had lost interest in as my interests and tastes changed. I spent most of my creative energy on writing. I wrote movie reviews, angsty poems, and essays like the one you're reading now, publishing on Tumblr and later Substack. I also created zines, independently produced magazines to house my writing and related photos. My use of the Creative Cloud for anything but school, work or entertainment was dwindling as I eschewed Photoshop and Flash for Microsoft Word or even just a pen and paper. It was hard for me to rekindle my early love of using computers as a creative force as I moved into adulthood, as it wasn't aligning with my interests.

When I was in college, I took Intro to Web Design and Creative Coding as mtechnical skill-based elective classes to pad out my Media, Culture, and Communication degree which focused more on the theoretical side of media. That seemed to make sense given my previous interests. However, the two classes did not capture my attention and I received Bs in both due to my lack of particular interest beyond doing just enough to get the coursework over with. I honestly couldn't tell you much about what I earned in those classes. What made learning new computer skills so much less interesting to me as a child instead of when I was a college student? Namely, I think it's just that I think school is boring. I didn't want to make a website that I don't need or care about for homework. I didn't have any particular goal I was working toward besides keeping up a decent GPA. My professors and fellow peers framed the class around building skills and acquiring tools for finding jobs in tech later on, something that I was never really interested in. I learned how to make a website for myself in a couple weeks when I was ten years old, but was pulling my hair out trying to get my Processing homework assignments done on time ten years later.

After graduating college, I was experiencing a post-graduate ennui and wanted an additional creative outlet. I was still writing the occasional piece on Substack, but I wanted something else to keep different sides of my brain active. Remembering my passion for computer art in 2006, and having observed a former roommate who was studying 3D animation, I started learning how to use Blender, a free and open-source 3D computer graphics software. I used it to draw a number of objects in the third dimension including a soccer ball, a Super Nintendo controller, a soda can, a house, and a robot. I was happy with the results, but it was hard to keep myself motivated. This wasn't something I did every day and often fell out of using the software for months at a time. To keep myself more motivated, I saved up my money, and bought myself a new powerful gaming PC, and used it to import my 3D models into a video game to showcase what I had learned. I figured investing the money would force me to become more invested

My early attempts at 3D modeling



in the craft. Using a basic tutorial I found online, I created a 2D space shooter in a video game development program called Unity, one of the most popular softwares for game development. I turned my 3D rendered images into 2D sprites.

I had always enjoyed video games as far back as I can remember playing them, but never to the level of interest of wanting to make a game. I definitely did not consider myself a hardcore gamer either. In the 2010s I didn't even play games much at all. I didn't own any consoles during high school or college. My only computer at the time was my laptop which couldn't handle any technically intense releases. In 2015, during my sophomore year of college there was one new release I decided to try that I was sure could run on my laptop called *Undertale*. *Undertale* was like no game I had played before. It was a fully playable RPG like *Chrono Trigger* or *Final Fantasy* which was made almost entirely by one person, Toby Fox. Around this time I learned about the independent games scene where guys like Toby Fox and Lucas Pope were making gameswith just a vision and a lot of passion. I had no idea what AAA million dollar budget games were being released on PS4 at the time, but I played things like *Papers Please* and *Dropsy*, which seemed interesting as more artist-created games, and more importantly, would definitely run on my only computer which wasn't a gaming PC. When starting my own game, I wanted to do everything from scratch. The indie game mentality was where my head was at.

Becoming invested in indie games, I started to reminisce to those early content creators who made games using Flash, the same software I used to make animations, as an inspiration. I never used Flash to make games, but I can remember countless hours spent on Addictinggames.com playing games like *The Impossible Quiz*, *The Helicopter Game*, and *Fancy Pants Adventure*. These were games made by hobbyists but they were available to play online and just as fun as any game you could buy in a store. Certain Flash games like *Alien Hominid, Meat Boy*, and *N* were later made into expanded versions that would be sold for consoles.

After a month of following this tutorial and making the graphics, it was at that point that I discovered I really like making games, much more than just making 3D models. By necessity, learning to make games as a one-man team forces you to learn a lot of knowledge from different fields. I, of course, had to learn the basics of good game design which could include everything from enemy AI, designing a menu screen, and how many points each successful action adds to your score. I also had to make decent looking art for the graphics which has definitely improved my ability to make 3D models and pixel art. I had to learn C# coding to make the game work. Another thing which I hadn't even considered before getting into game development was the amount of math and physics terminology I needed to familiarize with. I could now talk to you about the importance of Euler angles, rigidbodies, vectors, quaternions, raycasting, inverse kinematics, and the 3D coordinate plane system in video games.

I could keep going on about storytelling, music production, sound effects, and user experience design, but you get the point. Video game development is interdisciplinary. Making games reminds me of that exciting time when I was ten years old and had to learn a little bit about a lot of different fields to get a project completed. It was really motivating and I learned a whole lot in a short amount of time, something my college classes fell short of motivating me to do.

Personal websites have become less fashionable as becoming a content creator has become increasingly easy, but by the same token it's harder to build a community online. There is now a sea of endless content thrown onto the internet at a rate where no one could ever view it all. The individual creator's relationship to the empire of global capital cannot be ignored. Creating online content in 2006 could be done without the aid of any massive corporation. It was akin to making a zine to sell in an independent bookstore or releasing your own mixtape on an independent label. It's hard to have the same independent spirit when your only perceived option for mass distribution is to get content on one of the big social media platforms to purvey your content and be beholden to their nebulous algorithms and terms of service.

Unlike music, videos, and visual art, which no longer require a lot of technical knowledge of computers to get online, making a decent game still requires a pretty hefty background in computing knowledge. As a result the community is smaller, and social media companies haven't played nearly as pivotal a role in independent games as they have in online video or independent music. Video games are a unique exception to this culture of increasingly homogenized and corporatized media online. Making a video game is hard. I don't say this to denigrate people who make other types of media. Making movies, recording music, and taking photos is also hard if you intend to be good at any of those things. But these are all still creative acts you could do pretty much entirely with just a cell phone. Making an original video game with just a cell phone is not something that can easily be done. Compared to film, for example, video games are relatively recent technology and haven't found their way into the creative hands of the general public in the same way quite yet. This doesn't mean it can't get there eventually.

Because game creators are a relatively small slice of the content creator pie, creating games still has that intrepid spirit of the early internet that feels independent of the corporate empire of social media. The most popular website for hosting independent video games is itch.io, which is more akin to a website from the old guard of the internet. It's similar to Newgrounds was at its height. It runs zero ads and is independently owned. It is also not uncommon for creators to host games on their own websites and allow players to download straight from the source. Game developers do still often advertise their games using YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, but these websites are not typically where their products are hosted. The only exception might be Facebook which hosts games, but it is really more of just one option out of many for hosting a game. Using these platforms feels more optional in the world of independent games compared to say, online video or photography. Using your own website is even a viable option. Designer and video game theorist Pippin Barr hosts games based on Marina Abramovic and *Citizen Kane* on his own website where it can thrive with a limited audience in dignity.

In Alexander Galloway's prolific 2006 book, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, he made a prediction of the future of independent gaming. He writes, *"An independent gaming movement has yet to flourish, something that comes as no surprise, since it took decades for one to appear in the cinema. But when it does, there will appear a whole language of play, radical and new, that will transform the countergaming movement, just as Godard did to the cinema, or Deleuze did to philosophy, or Duchamp did to the art object."* Galloway's comparison of the timeline independent gaming to that of independent film is one that fascinates me. Video games are a much newer form of media than film, so at the time of Galloway writing this line, independent video games were not really a thing quite yet. Today, this line no longer holds true. Independent games like *Terraria, Cuphead, Rocket League, Undertale, Among Us*, and *Fall Guys* have seen impressive sales numbers and mainstream popularity. Even the current best selling game of all time, Minecraft, was originally released as an independent game made by one person as a passion project. I believe we are living in the moment that Galloway envisioned, a moment where independent games take risks that a big budget development team cannot. Like Manvoich's

Generation Flash before them, Generation Unity (or Generation Unreal, Generation Godot, Generation Gamemaker and whatever else you want to call it) is now in the position to shape an era of gaming, and solidify itself as part of popular culture.

Witnessing the beginnings of an independent video game scene that Galloway described, developer and writer Anna Anthropy released her manifesto *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* in 2012. She writes with excitement about the future of game development as a creative medium finally being in the hands of regular people, not just computer engineers She writes, "*And new voices are important in an art form that has been dominated for so long by a single perspective. Engineering students and venture capitalists have given us valuable pieces of culture, but there's more to the human experience than orcs, elves, and wish-fulfillment power fantasies. If people don't take videogames seriously, it's because, as an art form, they tell us very little about ourselves, so far. But authors outside of the mainstream—those who haven't spent fortunes to bring their works into the mainstream—have revealed much more. They have shown us a new perspective through their unconventionality, their creativity. They have shown us new ways for games to use rules, new ways of giving the players liberty to act and play within those rules, new ways to create experiences that are unique to games.*" I think Anthropy's vision has come to fruition in some capacity, though like all other media industries, the corporate giants of gaming still have the most sway over the industry. It is important to remember that independent gaming is still in its infancy.

The question now is for the future of games. Though games are hard for most people to make now, they are increasingly becoming easier. While using Unity, Unreal Engine, GameMaker, RPG Maker, or Godot still require a certain level of coding knowledge, they still offer a much lower barrier to entry than what would have been necessary for an aspiring game developer in 1980 when the only option would be either employed by a video game company or have access to a university computer lab. Using a pre-made engine significantly streamlines the video game development process. 70 years ago, becoming a photographer involved acquiring expensive equipment, learning how to set ISO and aperture, and then getting yourself into a photo lab to develop it. Now almost anyone who has ever seen a cellphone knows how to take a picture. Similarly, video games, a much younger technology, have become easier to make.

If other media technologies are any indication, as Galloway noted with independent film, technology could advance to the point where making a basic game will require little to none of the technical knowledge that was required in previous generations Nintendo is a company at the forefront of this notion. Games like *Super Mario Maker* and *WarioWare D.I.Y.* offer players the ability of making a video game in the styles of their popular Super Mario and WarioWare games respectively with use of existing assets rather than user created art and code.

Scratch, an block-based visual programming language developed by MIT Media Lab, also appears to be an early example of code-free game development. While still technically being a coding language, Scratch uses blocks instead of a type system, to offer a more visual option to code. Scratch is aimed at children learning to code for the first time, but the development of a visual based coding software holds great value for individuals who are more interested in the game making part of game development instead of the coding part of game development. A tool like scratch allows someone to make a game using their own artwork in a matter of minutes without typing a line of code.

While *Super Mario Maker, WarioWare D.I.Y*. and Scratch are not going to be enough to put together a full length and original game, they offer some perspective into what the future of game design could be in a world where it becomes easier to design games, much like it's become easier for anyone to take pictures or shoot video.

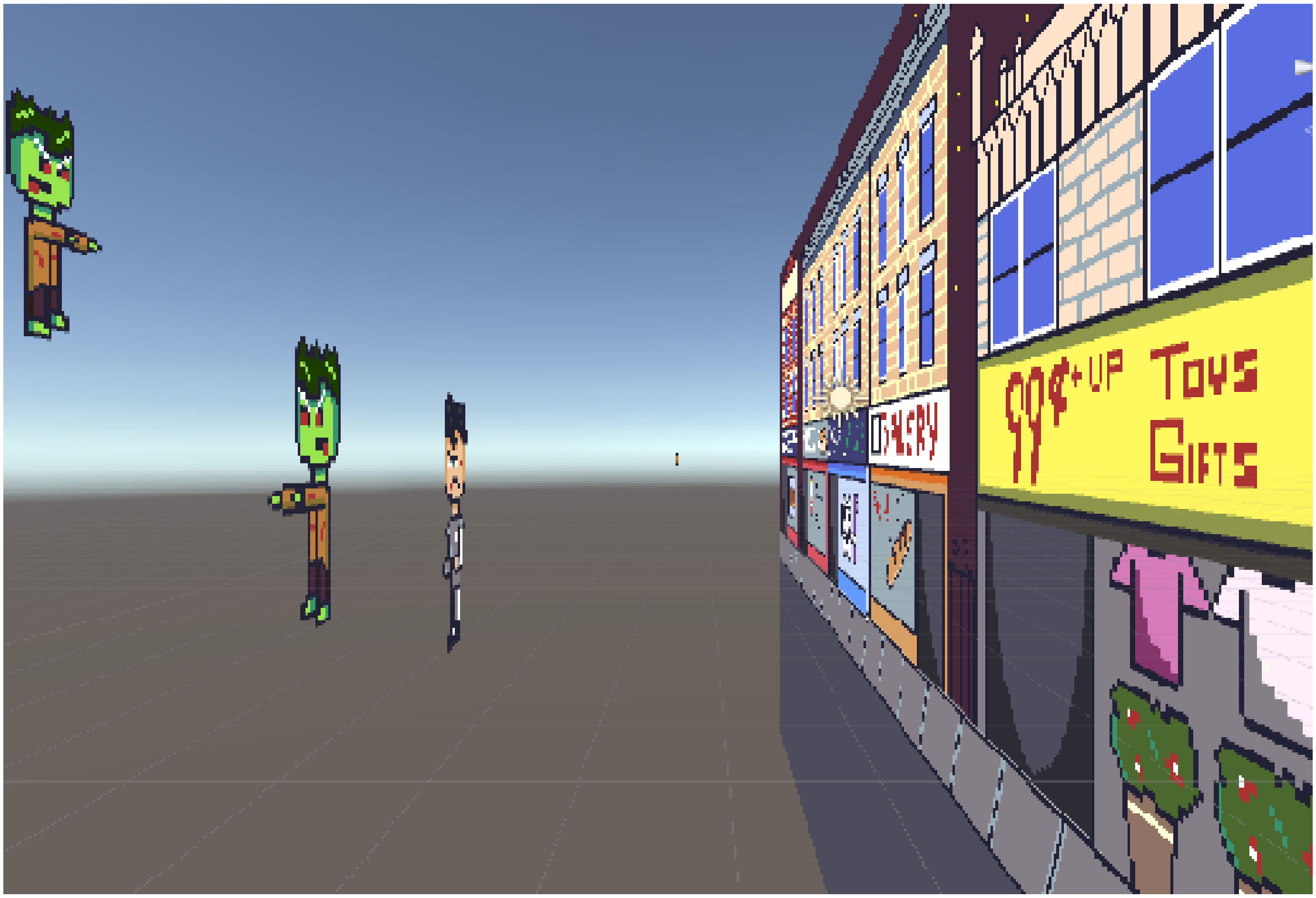
I have taken you from my journey of being a doe eyed cartoon loving kid to my adulthood as a very new video game developer, if you could even call me that at this point. The point I'm trying to arrive at is that there could be at some point in the future, a robust social media platform for aspiring video game developers to showcase their work, one controlled by a corporate entity, driven by advertising dollars and not the love of games.

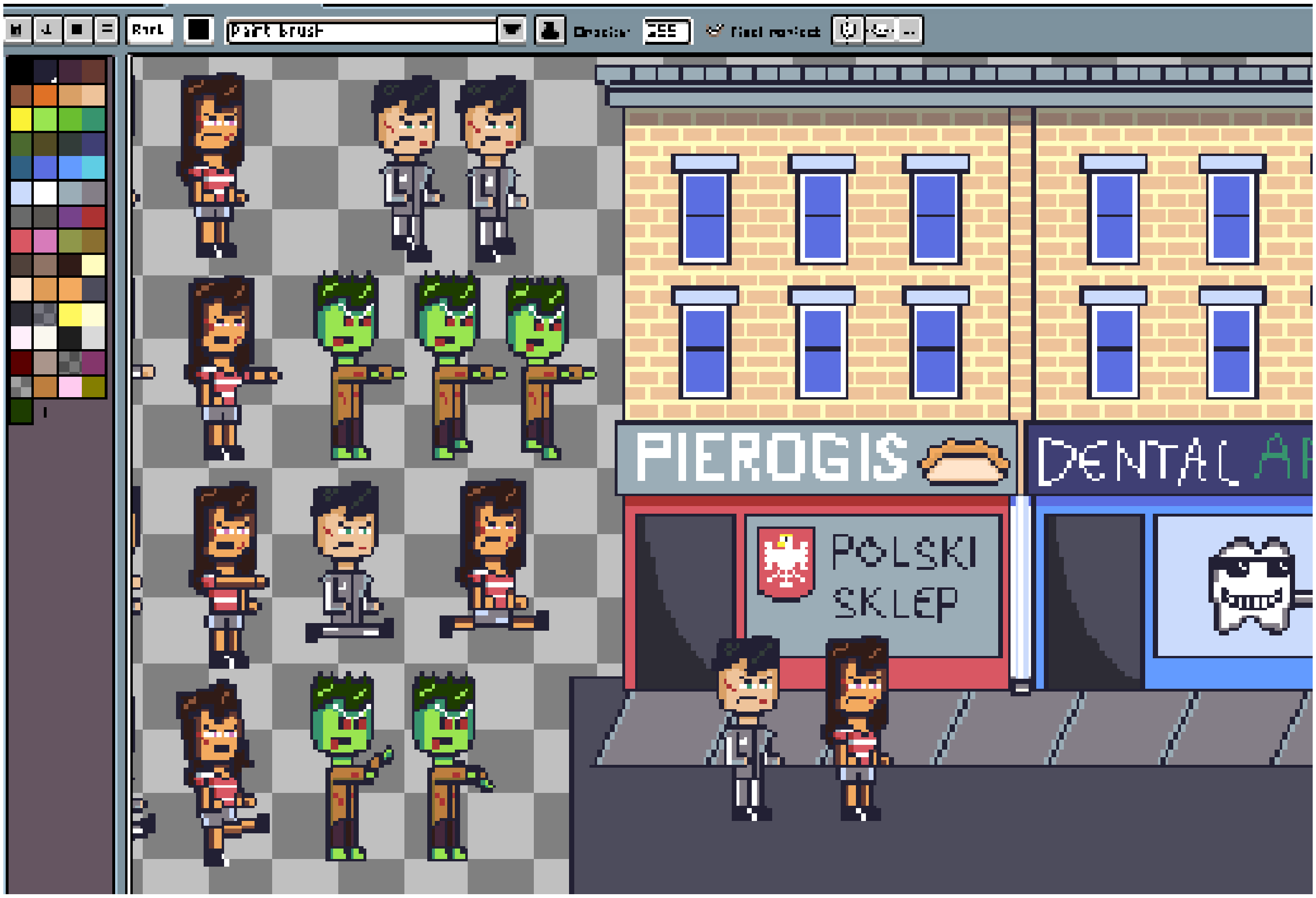
The future of Unity, the software I use to make the few games that I have, is in a bit of a crisis itself. Many of its users are upset with the announcement of runtime fees which would cause games making revenue behind $200,000 to pay fees to Unity per installation. Unity is, after all, a private company. Game creation has that DIY feeling now, but might not stay that way forever as corporate interests creep into the field of independent games. Upon the arrival of this news, comparisons between the demise of Flash were made across almost every game development forum. Unity developers are part of that same "hacker class", as McKenzie Wark would put it, that Flash developers were in the early 2000s, creative and incredibly industrious. The intense backlash to Unity's announcement indicates that this is a community that is driven by passion and will not standby for increased corporatization. Wark describes the hacker class, saying that *"As the abstraction of private property is extended to information, it produces the hacker class as a class, as a class ableto make of its innovations in abstraction a form of property."* The creators who used Flash to seek their own path to creative fredom find their successors in Unity or Godot developers.

Returning to Anna Anthropy's original vision, she had described a landscape where creators owned the means of production in video game creation, writing "*I want zinesters to find new, inventive ways to distribute games. Fuck Steam and the App Store! Let's invent new networks for letting people sell their games online. Let's bring back CD compilations of games, available at your local co-op or coffee shop or by mail. And let's take advantage of what our predecessors, the shareware authors, never had: a fast, centralized Internet to distribute our games for free."* Itch.io launched in 2013, a year after Anthrophy's book was released, and offers a more community-based model of distribution. A game engine, Godot has also since been released putting up a serious alternative to the industry standard of Unity, and has been used to create critically acclaimed games like *Cruelty Squad* and *Cassette Beasts*. In Brooklyn, New York exists Wonderville, a bar that hosts independent gaming events and is home to several arcade games produced by indie developers. Independent video gaming, while still niche, is really off to the races in recent years and could become as prevalent as amateur filmmaking or photography as the media landscape changes.

For now, I'm enjoying being a small part of what is still the early culture of independent video game development, one of the last thriving bastions of Generation Flash, and one of the last truly independent and decentralized digital cultures.

Flesh Pond Road in development





Urban Gaming

Cities are endlessly fascinating places to me. At no point do I tire of wandering the pavement of cities around the globe. I have had the privilege of traveling to cities of all varieties around the globe finding pleasure and curiosity. I have made it a major point to save money to pay for trips to whatever cities I can make it to. Over the last year alone, I found myself major metropolises like Bogota, Warsaw, and Madrid, as well as smaller and lesser known cities like Perpignan in France, Freiburg in Germany, and Hattiesburg in Mississippi. I approach these locations with enthusiasm regardless of their size or significance, often finding that some of the places I enjoy the most are places that are the least traveled to. Cities are interesting to me because of their ability to marry a complex systems of buildings, streets, water, commerce, human beings, and culture into one singular cultural entity.

As an adult, I became interested in video game development. I had tried my hand for a few years in 3D graphics modeling years prior, but rarely kept up with it. I decided to try making some rudimentary video games as that would give me reason to utilize 3D models for something. I quickly became enamored with the craft of game design. Game design is an intense process of making a complex system of computer code, artwork, animation, sound, and rules to create a cultural work.

What I like about cities are the same things I like about games. They are extremely complex systems that can take a lifetime to fully grasp the scope of, yet they are quickly navigable to someone who puts in the effort. Throughout the upcoming words you read, I will describe some of my favorite aspects of urban life in video games and interesting instances of play in real life cities.

Cities in Games

In 1999, video game enthusiasts took the role of Ryo Hazuki for the first time. Ryo is the protagonist of *Shenmue*, an action-adventure and life simulation game released on the Sega Dreamcast. *Shenmue* is my personal favorite interpretation of the urban experience in virtual form.

The plot is a pretty mundane set up for a video game. Within the first few minutes of the game, your father is killed. Ryo, the teenage martial artist vows revenge on the killer. Simple enough. It's a "good vs evil" scenario that sets up the premise of the game. What follows this first cutscene is an atypical video gaming experience. Given the game's plot, you'd expect the whole gameplay loop to be Ryo fighting enemies in a virtual interpretation of something you'd see in a Bruce Lee movie. And you'd be partially right - that does happen, mostly towards the end. Leading up and in between those action sequences you are tasked with feeding stray cats, playing darts, eating at a cafeteria, driving a forklift, collecting toy capsules, and speaking to a fortune teller. You get to do all the things you'd do if you were just living your life in the Japanese naval city in which it takes place. Shenmue was created with the concept of FREE ("Fully Reactive Eyes Entertainment). The game's director, Yu Suzuki, sought to make as immersive a game experience as possible and he succeeded.

Shenmue takes place in Yokosuka, Japan, a real city, about 60 kilometers outside of Tokyo. I had never heard of Yokosuka before picking up Shenmue, but I now know a few things about it. One of its main business streets is Dobuita Street and it is also home to a United States Navy base. Any player of Shenmue could tell you this because of the attention and care taken by the games' developers to recreate the city as faithfully as possible in 1999.

Shenmue also follows an in-game clock and Ryo has to restart hisintervals. This means frequently backtracking to his house in order to get sleep. I walked between Ryo's home in a residential neighborhood and Dobuita Street dozens of times in the game. I spent a week in-game commuting on the bus to Ryo's job at a warehouse. There are certain points in where you need to wait until a certain time of day to advance any further, so you have no choice but to wait out the clock. This is when you might start to explore the arcade on Dobuita Street or feed the stray cats. The game begins to feel like life itself, Yu Suzuki's goal. I've never been to Yokosuka. I've never even been to Japan. I can say with conviction however, of all the places on the planet where I haven't been, Yokosuka is the only location where I felt like I spent a week. For my experience, playing *Shenmue* was a strange video game experience, one in which I occupied a foreign city and lived a day in the life of one of its residents who happened to be avenging the death of his father.

The computer as a metaphor for the city is one with a lot of history. Friedrich Kittler's classic media theory text "The City is a Medium" lays out the many overlappings of urban life and computation. He begins by citing John von Neumann's urbanist terminology to describe computer architecture, writing -

> *"When the World War II mathematician John von Neumann laid down the principles for sequential working-off or computation for almost all present day computer "architectures," he bestowed the fitting name "bus" on the parallel channels between hard drive, gate, and memory, and thus extended the Biedermeier tradition of metropolitan traffic."*

He pivots to describing the advent of digitized urban planning.

> *"Von Neumann's prophesy that only computers themselves would be capable of planning their own, more intelligent, next generation, because the complex knot of networks would surpass the planning ability of the engineers, has been fulfilled by computer programs called "routing": network models, like Shannon's mouse, which operate as if they were street plans (with all the aggravations of jaywalking and traffic jams). Entire cities made of silicon, silicon oxide, and gold wire have since arisen."*

Kittler's text was completed in 1996, and in the years following the marriage of urban planning with data science and computer programming have only grown stronger. The parent company of Google, Alphabet, notably tried to reinvent the city in the image of the computer when Sidewalk Labs took on a project in the Quayside neighborhood in Toronto. By monitoring constant foot traffic, air pollution, and travel patterns Sidewalk abs envisioned a city run by data, at the expense of the freedom not to be constantly surveilled. Given the computerization of the city over time, it's unsurprising we have a fairly faithful representation of urban life in a game like *Shemmue*. Games and cities alike can be boiled down to a series of overlapping systems and architectures to create a larger product.

Like cities and computers games are run by complex systems. This project did not come to fruition, but it was the topic of ire of many urbanists and was proof that there was an appetite to pounce on the chance to embrace the algorithm in a city.

New York City, the city in which I live, has made numerous appearances in games and served as the basis for the most recent game I created, *Flesh Pond Road*. One of the most memorable uses of the city in game is in *Deus Ex*, which I consider one of the best games ever created. The first level has you climbing the Statue of Liberty and later explore the neighborhood of Hell's Kitchen. The New York skyline and The Statue of Liberty are seen during the training sequences in *Mike Tyson's Punch Out*. The majority of *Metal Gear Solid 2* is set in the city. New York also served as inspiration for Liberty City in *Grand Theft Auto IV*, Wood Oak City in *Streets of Rage*, and New Donk City in *Super Mario Odyssey*. Of course, all of these were heavily modified from the original cityscape for the sake of game design. Hell's Kitchen in Deus Ex feels more like the downtown of a midwest metropolis with its wide streets and various back alleys. Such was going to have to be the case for the game I created.

For *Flesh Pond Road*, my beat 'em up game, I designed levels based off of real streets in Queens. I decided to study not only the real streets of Queens, but also virtual worlds from other games to turn Queens into pixels. During development, I traveled to the real Fresh Pond Road, as well as Steinway Street, Roosevelt Avenue, Main Street, Jamaica Avenue and the Rockaway Beach boardwalk to take pictures of different buildings and other details for reference, taking note of architectural styles and businesses typical of the area. It was meaningful to me to recreate these locations that I had traversed many times. I have distinct memories riding down Steinway Street on my bike during peak pandemic in 2020 when all the hookah bars moved outside, creating New York's accidental massive outdoor club, deemed "Steiami". I can also recall being stopped on Jamaica Avenue to be witness for a gambler about to take part in the "Shell Game", and being forcibly taken as a dance partner by an old woman the on Rockaway Beach boardwalk.

Despite using photos for reference, I wasn't going for a particularly realistic, or even necessarily accurate look. I needed to turn these buildings into pixelated sprites, something I'd never done before. I thought back to cities I'd seen in retro games to get stylistic inspiration. Other beat 'em ups had done urban locations well in the past. For inspiration, I looked to *River City Ransom, Double Dragon*, and the *Streets of Rage* games which all had urban cityscapes in the backdrop. My best inspiration came from an unexpected place, a game that wasn't even a beat 'em up. Onett, Ness' hometown in *Earthbound*, portrayed perfectly, pixelated storefronts in a typical urban neighborhood. Its cartoony and colorful aesthetic matched perfectly for my goofy and comical game about zombies in Ridgewood, Queens.

Over the course of making this project, I spent hours creating pixelated versions of buildings to put in the background of levels. I began considering the overlap between the role of architect and game designer. Like architecture, video game design straddles the line between art and engineering. The merit of video games as an art form has long been debated. Prolific film critic Roger Ebert once penned an editorial entitled "Video Games Can Never Be Art" and stated quite bluntly "No one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great poets, filmmakers, novelists and poet". While I cannot say definitively whether or not I agree with Ebert, video games at minimum can be defined as cultural objects, and require a certain level of artistic vision to create. These objects also function as computer programs and are enormously technical. The job of a game designer is to make a functioning product as well as an aesthetic experience. Architects are tasked with a similar duty, designing an aesthetically pleasing structure that also has to fulfill the practical needs of a building. If games are not an art in and of themselves, they are at least an artistic endeavor at some level.

Though I wasn't creating any real built environment, I had to consider the presence of space and the usability of my product by the general public. The architect or urban planner faces the same task of a game designer, creating a beautiful cultural object with a utilitarian purpose.

Cities as Play

After 18 years living on Long Island, just a half hour away from the Queens border, I moved to Manhattan to attend college in the city. I spent much of my time, time that I probably should have been studying or thinking about what kind of job I was going to have after I graduated, traveling to far flung areas of the city, wandering down residential streets. I started by taking the subway to different areas that I found interesting, but eventually upgraded to riding a bike so I could cover more ground more quickly. Quickly, I became obsessed with visiting "every" neighborhood, which I eventually accomplished. I've since expanded trying to visit every major park, cemetery, and beach. I had gamified the city itself, for no reason other than my own pleasure.

This is just a a cloudy thought that's constantly been running in my head, but the city as a game is not a concept I came up with. Noted French intellectual Guy Debord theorized the derive, a practice of random movement throughout city streets, similar to my practice of wandering, as a political act. Fábio Duarte and Ricardo Álvarez explain it better than I can in their text *Urban Play*, where they write, *"Amid the rise of the automobile and the full-fledged modernist cities and districts that marked the mid-twentieth century, a group of European intellectuals and artists launched a movement known as situationism. Guy Debord (1955/2007a), one of the main figures among the situationists, wrote about the quest for "observation of certain processes of chance and predictability in the streets" (p. 8) and the idea of random but attentive wandering through the city as "total insubordination to habitual influences" (p. 11). The situationist proposal included the dérive, defined by Debord (1958/2007b) as a "playful constructive behavior" in which one or more people abandon their regular activities to let themselves discover the city, "drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (p. 62).*

Drifting through the city, though perhaps not "winnable" is certainly an act of play, done for the purpose of amusement and leisure. One individual, Matt Green, turned the concept into a lifestyle by attempting to walk every street in New York City as documented in hr film *The World Beneath Your Feet*. In 2016, the concept of wandering was capitalized by Niantic, Nintendo, and the Pokemon Company to massive success, through the release of *Pokemon Go*, a game that encourages players to seek out new parts of their city or neighborhood in the elusive quest to "catch 'em all."

Skateboarders are a population that approach cities with a different mindset than the average person. Where one individual sees a handrail, a skateboarder sees an opportunity to pull off a potential set of tricks. The infrastructure objects that populate a city like a park bench or a drained fountain offer unseen opportunities for the skateboarder to use as their system of achieving "sick results".

C. Thi Nguyen wrote on the virtues of skating as a practice of play in his work Games: Agency As Art, writing, "Skateboarders usually pursue the goals of stylishness and increased difficulty of tricks, but those goals aren't easily assessed or commensurated. Improv comedy may be another such game, since the goal of "being funny" isn't easily assessed or ranked. In general, informal competitions where an aesthetic element is among the in-game goals are often subtle value games. Such value-unclear gaming practices often work because there is no need to declare a winner. Skateboarders can spend an afternoon competing to come up with the coolest tricks, and go home satisfied without ever having had to definitively settle on who actually won."

The gamified experience of skating was easily transferred into gaming from the early *Skate or Die!* on Commodore 64 and NES, to the immensely popular, both with critics and gamers, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* series of games. Skating video games turn the fun of pulling off tricks into a points system that rewards players for performing them correctly. *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* uses the "city as a playground" metaphor by using real life cities like Los Angeles and Rio De Janeiro and using the cityscape as an in-game level.

The other great gamer of the urban landscape is the graffiti artist. To the average observer, graffiti may not have any particular "ruleset". Such an idea might seem contradictory by nature for a typically illegal activity. However graffiti artists often have their own goal and there are recognized achievements in their milieu. Many graffiti artists aspire to go "all-city" meaning they are well known throughout the entire of their city. In the case of New York, where the term originated from, this meant being known throughout all five boroughs. It is also a symbol of achievement in graffiti art to paint "heaven spots". These are places like the undersides of freeways, bridges, water towers, and other places that are typically hard to reach. Graffiti artists rarely make money from their endeavors, and do what they do just for the "love of the game" as some of them might put it.

Sega was able to turn the high of painting graffiti into a video game in *Jet Set Radio* and its sequel *Jet Set Radio Future*. Typical objectives in the games are to cover up graffiti by a rival crew as well as avoid police officers, things actual graffiti artists might find themselves doing.

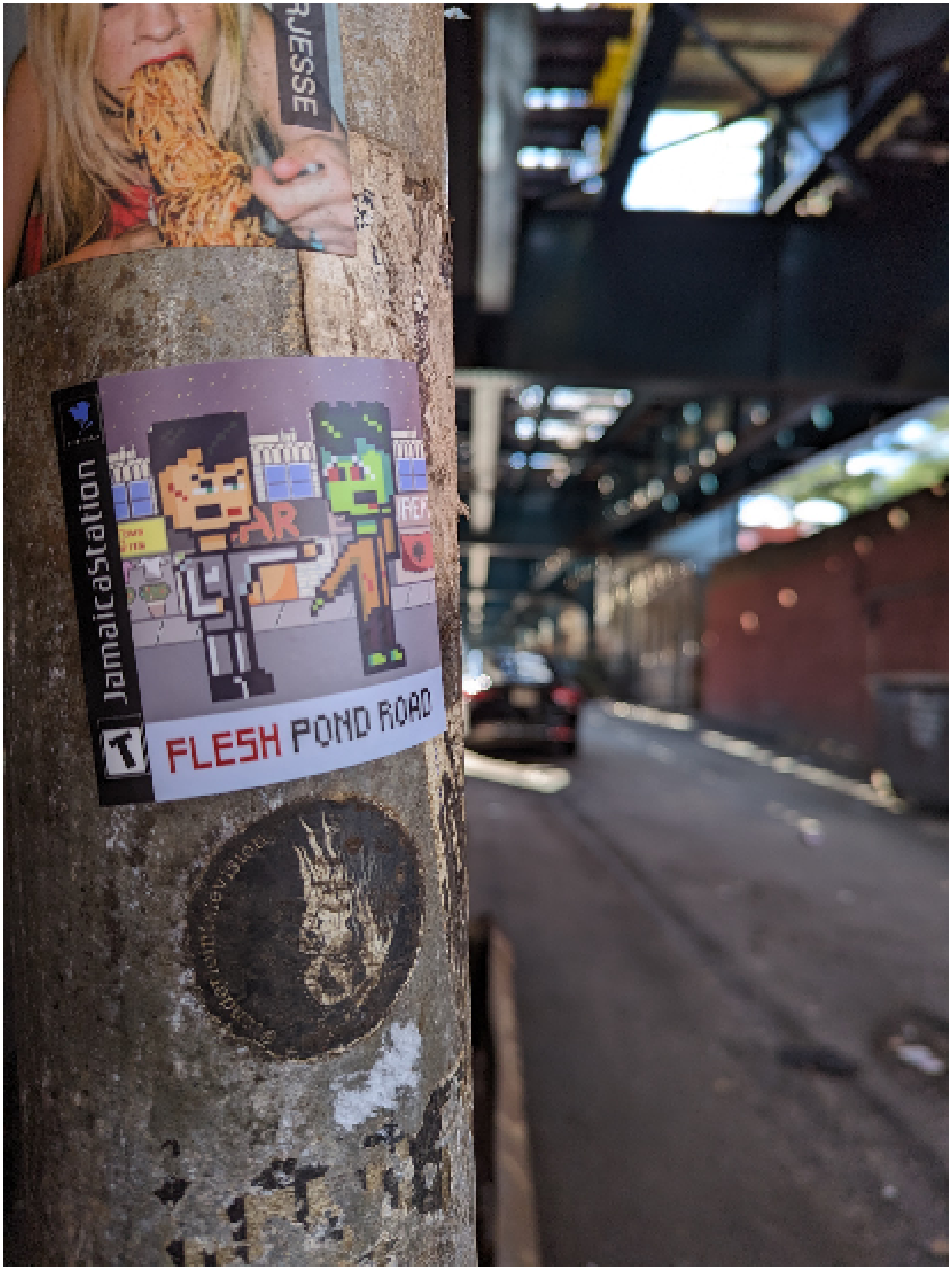
Drivers for apps like Uber and Lyft must approach their jobs with a sense of gamification, looking to find more passengers for more money and attempting to provide the best possible service to receive a higher rating on the app. As a driver for one of these companies you are now thrown into a frenzy of competition with thousands of others competing for a similar market and high rating. These companies have found a way to turn the lessons of game design into a career. This exact concept was quite literally a video game, in the form of Sega's 1999 arcade classic *Crazy Taxi,* where your proceeds are based not only by the amount of passengers you pick up but also speed and skill. Driving apps are only possible with a videogame-like user interface through the use of a mobile app, where the map looks like something you might see in a mission-based driving game.

Gig economy apps like Uber and Lyft are commonly criticized for their treatment of workers, especially in comparison to existing taxi services, which are typically unionized and more strictly regulated. While taxi drivers are expected to perform well and can boost their income by tips, they also receive a base salary and benefits. Uber is a different beast entirely, where individual drivers are working towards reaching a certain number of customers and level of service just to survive off their work. The gamification of driving services has been a negative for the industry.

As the games industry continues to push the limits of technology, other technology will follow suit peering into other fields including urbanism as shown by these examples.

Sticker adorning the Fresh Pond Road subway station

Ridgewood, Queens, March 2024



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Terraria (2011)
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EarthBound (1994)
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Jet Set Radio (2000)
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Super Mario Odyssey (2017)

FLESH POND ROAD
PLAY
CONTROLS
TS
VIOTEK
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