

Small Figures in a Vast Expanse

by Frederick Brantley '07

1. The first video game goes unremembered - probably Super Mario Brothers, Spy Hunter, or video Jeopardy. What I remember is waking up at odd hours, or scratching at my forearms under my covers, aching for the fluorescent hum and the 8-bit music. The first I begged for - Final Fantasy 7. The first I truly strove for - Chrono Cross. In July, before I had a car, I walked from my house in Hillcrest to Park Plaza Mall in pulsing Southern heat - nearly two miles. I sat, with great relief, on a bench outside an Auntie Ann's. I paid for the game with my saved cash, but for an orange soda I paid with my mother's credit card.

2. The experience of playing a video game like that is anti-social, on more than just the obvious level. So many games now encourage you to bring friends over, plug in, turn on, get down. Street Fighers, Mortal Kombats, Mario Parties, Tekkens, Dance Dance Revolutions. These require contemplation, if not necessarily skill. This, in video game criticism, is one of the largest flaws brought up in the genre, referred to as "Role Playing Games" - the idea of "linearity," or how immutable the play becomes or feels - how preset your destination is, and how predetermined the journey. On one hand, games like the Final Fantasies are loved for their high production values, and sturm-und-drang plotting, but hated for the relative lack of freedom in play. On the other, games like Saga Frontier are celebrated for their customizability, and loathed for their lack of a comforting resolution.

3. If I could write this for you, I would - how it feels to play a game like that. It's not much different than watching a movie, than driving through vast expanses, than being sewn to the sky.

4. If I could write this for you, I would - how it feels to be completely adrift.

5. A valuable life lesson learned from these games: a recurring conceit in the play of the game (not to be confused with its narrative), often times, the biggest prizes one can get by the end depend on key actions taken near the very beginning. To get the ultimate weapon, you must remember to pick up a tchotchke in your hometown. To learn the ultimate power, you must learn everything from the very bottom up.

6. A representative scene: a frail, powerful woman making the ultimate sacrifice. In Final Fantasy 7, Aeris, a flower-girl from the slums (whose body contains the most powerful magical force in the universe) prays to the "Holy Materia" in a guarded forest. As she prays, Sephiroth, a Lucifer figure of mysterious origin (hinted: a genetic experiment gone awry) impales her on a sword. It was 1999, so part of this is to blame on the relative lack of processing power, but the scene, even in high-resolution, computer generated animation is like Noh - an exercise in lack of affect. The little blood you do see trickles and drips like tiny gems, more than it does blood. Aeris' face expresses shock, but no pain, and the corners of her lips can barely move. Nonetheless: I am crying.

Another representative scene: the end of the world. I'll get back to that.

7. Scenes like this don't just exist for me in such maudlin forms, I swear. They are just a larger part of things that I am very susceptible to: grand gestures, finales, spectacles. Christian Metz wrote books about it, but he perhaps intended to undercut the power of the movies when he created a Lacanian framework for understanding them. With me, it just turned me into (in the words of Jessica Coen) "a big fat fallopian tube."

8. The ability to feel a part of something big, operatic, that turns your body into art is so heavenly, it must be criminal. I imagine this is why in sixth grade, my mom insisted that I finish my homework before I play video games.

9. Nerds, fangirls, dweebs, dorks, spazzes, fags. Oh, I'm over high school. But I do wonder what attracts the aforementioned (myself included) to games like these. This is not to equivocate: for all the pleasures of the image, they are very different from movies, from novels, from the 2nd symphony. I genuinely wonder why the divide exists.

10. *apocalypse* (n.) -- Any of a number of anonymous Jewish or Christian texts from around the second century B.C. to the second century A.D. containing prophetic or symbolic visions, especially of the imminent destruction of the world and the salvation of the righteous.

Great or total devastation; doom: *the apocalypse of nuclear war*.

A prophetic disclosure; a revelation.

eschaton (n.) -- end of the world, end of time, climax of history

11. "*Science fiction is never really about science, it is always about disaster*," says Susan Sontag.

The end of the world, in these games, is always a conflation of two terrible possibilities. Storybook knights and wizards discover a lost technoculture on the eve of eschaton. Cyberwarriors from a nuclear holocaust discover a writhing, poisonous jungle at the center of the world.

I have played many of these games: 10 Final Fantasies, 3 Star Oceans, 3 Breath of Fires, 3 Secrets of Mana, 2 Grandias, 2 Legends of Legaia, 2 Chrono Triggers, 2 Legends of Lufia, 2 Dragon Quests, 2 Wild ARMs, and 2 Tales of Destiny. There are certainly more, but my point is this: whether or not they all end at the end of the world (and many do), you without fail, get a glimpse of the end.

I did not need video games to see the end of the world many times, but I now wonder if when I come upon big things, that I instantly think it is the end of it all. The details: I am driving through the New Mexico desert on I-10, which had long ago stopped being the Santa Monica Freeway. It was 7 o'clock, and the sky had turned a color of purple I imagined only existed in Georgia O'Keefe, Willa Cather, and paintings in the dentist's office. At that moment, I was listening to a song that you probably don't know, a song that you might know, and then I was fixed and frozen. There is something terrible and distasteful about the project of living your life to pop music, nonetheless, I insist you try doing it from time to time.

12. In eleventh grade creative writing, we all wrote poems where we began each line with "I am" and we were only allowed to write objects and places. Some were very maudlin, some were very charming, and a few were very good - I was at that time, the first: "diet soda, the Sunset Strip, Frank Black's guitar, and the Spiders from Mars."

In spidery manuscript on college-ruled pages - I am the 110/10 intersection, where the future-spooky Downtown LA skyline faces into the desert and into South Central; I am the 635/35/Turnpike mixing bowl in Dallas, where the chaos of the South spirals upwards into a new Tower of Babel; I am the 440/67-167 split in Jacksonville, where a ramp takes the forces of your body and the forces of the earth, and flings you into space.

13. Not necessarily the chronological end, but the last flickering edges of the world.

In Grandia, there is a wall (named, cleverly enough, "The End of the World") that cleaves the world into the known and unknown. Like something out of a Cortazar story, it seems to have a life of its own. People disappear when they go near the wall. Air warps near the wall. One night, I drove from my house in Hillcrest onto Chenal Parkway, which cuts through the strip malls in West Little Rock into Wildwood and Ferndale, places in Pulaski County that go largely undeveloped. I kept driving and driving, to places I only had seen in car commercials - a lone station wagon against the world. The road ended at the Highway 9/10 junction in Perry County. I had moved laterally 30 miles west of my house, and drove home over the rivers.

14. I imagine most days, that I will be caught in the end of the world - that it will come during something terribly quotidian but something will have predicted it. I will have taken Cienega a very long way, and gone to Ralph's for pudding mix and pretzels. I will pick up a six pack of Diet Cokes. I will linger at the cigarette stand. I'll think about buying food for dinner but just decide to order in. I will have bought an Esquire, a Wired, something that says in its coverline - "THE END OF MEDICINE!" Then, heat will fill the building, the produce will wilt, the meat will sizzle and brown in its wrapping, and I'll be floored in Aisle 7.

15. As I began this, I wanted to draw a road map for you with proper markings and signage. The Fritz Brantley Memorial Expressway, with exits at the proper tourist traps - my self-obsession, my weak spots, my fantasy life. Am I infinite within? I don't know. But I am finding it difficult to know where to end. I don't think anyone is infinite - we are in the end, warm bodies in cold shells, alone on the Hollywood Freeway.

16. Famous ending: in Lufia 2: The Fortress of Doom, the heroine, Selan, uses the last of her strength to save her lover, Maxim, from the implosion of the titular fortress. Maxim, chooses to end his own life to try and save both her and the planet. They turn to little wisps of light, and shower the world as a music box plays in the background. The earth is saved, and they live on to be the stars.

17. I wonder now, what it means to try and turn myself into a map. I have always been terrible with maps.

18. Los Angeles was a desert once, and it's only possible to see it from an aerial view.

19. What I am saying is that my body is simply too dull to become a map. What I am saying is that I am overtaken by a body too vibrant to turn to signs.

20. I would like to stand with you in the middle of the desert. I would like for a plane to look down, and see us. Then not.