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~ Acknowledgements ~

For Chris Remo, and Aisling

STARS OF CAMPO SANTO

WITH THE RELEASE of Firewatch looming on the horizon, a few facts about its developer. Sean Vanaman and Jake Rodkin founded Campo Santo on October 14, 2013 in San Francisco. On that date the Sun was in Libra, and Venus in Sagittarius, in the eastern section of the sky. That part about the Sun isn't recorded in the California Secretary of State's official register, so I did what any normal reporter would do and paid a professional astrologer for that information.

Firewatch is Campo Santo's first title, a mystery about a Wyoming fire lookout named Henry and his supervisor Delilah. It will be released "sometime this summer," according to Vanaman, "but we don't have a particular date locked down yet." Whenever it happens, this is the year we will learn whether Firewatch's success is enough to justify Campo Santo's ten-person development team; the financial investment of the Portland software company Panic; the insane luxury of a regular Quarterly Review that consults astrologers; and the decision of everyone who left a job for their belief in this game and this company.

During the Game Developers Conference earlier this month, Campo Santo handed Firewatch over to the general public—specifically, about 20 playable minutes of the early game, polished to the level envisioned for the final product. That small slice was largely praised in press previews, and individual impressions were enthusiastic. Now, the team is back in the office to make all the other minutes of the game—which either don't look a thing like that demo, or don't exist—live up to what's in everybody's heads.

"We are far behind where we need to be in terms of both quantity and quality of content," programmer Will Armstrong told me in January. "I am worried that we won't have the time to polish and bug-fix as much as we like. I am worried that the game won't be as professional a piece of software as I would like. We are a small team, making a big game, and I think we won't have a lot left in the tank by the time we get the game done."

The timeframe concerns designer Nels Anderson, as well. "I think we have a solid handle on what we need to build, but we have to still get it done. And most importantly, I think, is we get it done with enough time to playtest the hell out of it.... The moments in Firewatch that [are] the most surprising and exciting are when the game is really reactive. But it's often hard to predict what people might want to do in any given situation. Someone comments, 'I really wish I could do X here' and often that leads us to not only want to support that interaction, but think about how that interaction could be used in other situations. It's self-reinforcing in a really good way, but the more of that kind of playtesting we can do, the better the game will be."

Beyond that, says Rodkin, there are "a lot of environments left to set dress, a lot more dialogue to write, to fill in the cracks between big story beats, to cover all the things we think a player might do as they decide to wander away from the main story and explore

the world. And the player animation and controls are a part of the game that are never done, just refined and refined until it's time to ship, so that will be ongoing."

The success of the project, says animator James Benson, "is basically all or nothing. Everyone at Campo is effectively running 'at cost', in the sense of, we are running the company as cheaply as our lives allow, so as to afford us the chance to make a cool indie game and not have to work on a worse project. So if Firewatch isn't successful to the extent that Campo can stop operating at that level, it will be hard to justify doing it again, [because] everyone here is in a position of 'I am temporarily running my life differently in the hopes that this will work'."

That's the road to finishing Firewatch: paved with a TBD number of months in which there can never be enough labor, or time, or money, and when the work stops is more of a financial decision than a creative one. "Games get finished in the in the same way monogamous relationships get maintained, it's slightly unnatural, and you really have to will it to happen," says Benson. With high expectations and higher stakes, there's tremendous responsibility there, and if that responsibility rests on your shoulders, it might be comforting to think of Firewatch's development as guided not by fallible human beings but something more immutable, ordained…

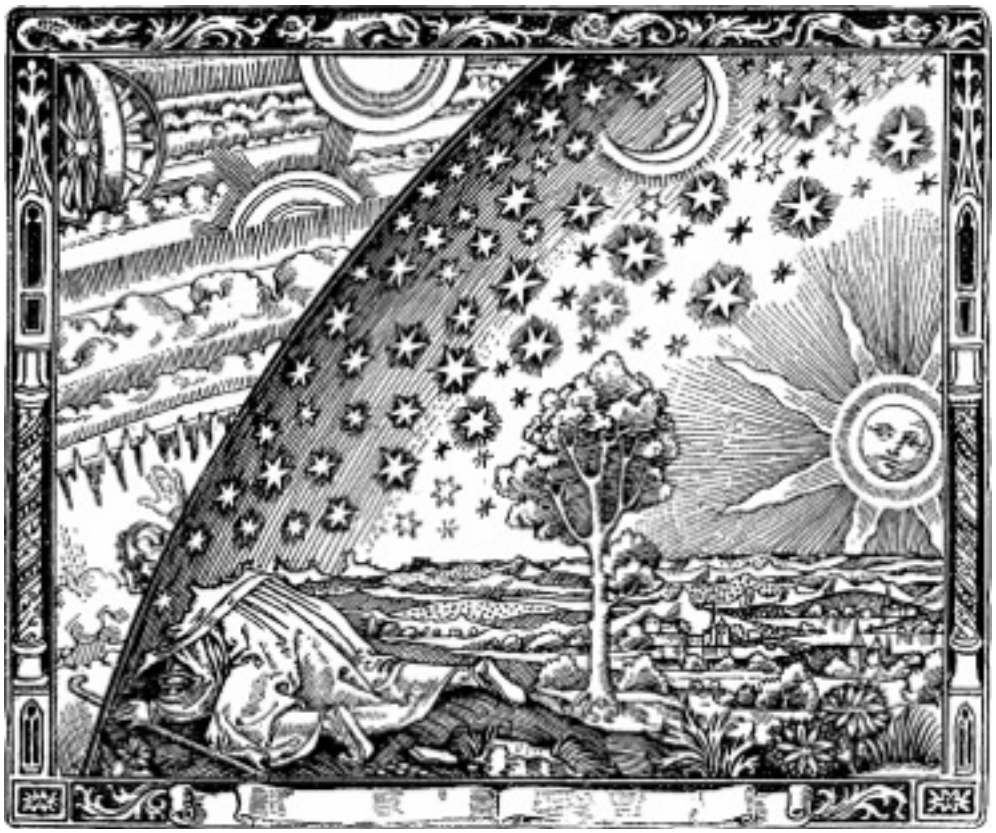
Look, I'll just get right to this. I got an astrological forecast done for Campo Santo, with a birth chart calculated from the date it was registered as a limited liability company. The constellatory arrangement when whatever clerk in the Secretary of State's office approved Vanaman's application augur positive outcomes for the company regarding collaboration, charm, use of technology and the employment of the "technically adept, future-oriented, individualistic, innovative, unconventional or [people] from foreign countries."

Campo Santo's birth signs hint at how it might find success with Firewatch. The presence of Venus in Sagittarius suggests that identifying the product with a specifically female energy could yield success, and Campo Santo would do well to think about how Firewatch could appeal to women and young girls. The opposition between the Sun and the dwarf planet Eris represents an aggressive energy that will be helpful if the game "deals with conflict themes or features aggressive characters." (If a video game features those things.) And then there's Mercury in Scorpio in the eastern section of the sky: a curious energy suited to making something dark, mysterious, or occult-themed, or which deals with abuse of power and mismanagement of resources. This is all on point: Firewatch is a mystery, and the Campo Santo Quarterly Review is presently occupied with the occult and its existence could be described as a mismanagement of resources.

Of the coming months, though, the planets paint a frankly bizarre picture. Venus's "independent, innovative energy" will come back into play, and Campo Santo may benefit from the generosity of a heretofore-unidentified "foreign woman." On the nineteenth of June, Campo Santo should be on the alert for deceptiveness and manipulative appeals for sympathy. And in April, the north node in Libra forms a T-square with Uranus in Aries and Pluto in Capricorn. Pretty self-explanatory, but what

that means is an approaching conflict “between freedom-seeking individuals and powerful organisations whose motive is to control and dominate society.” Which sounds far bigger than any video game, but Campo Santo should be on the lookout for that, as well as deceivers and a mysterious female benefactor, in the next financial quarter.

All of which sounds pretty thrilling, and more imaginative than the reality, certainly: that Venus and Sagittarius have jack shit to do with any of this. The reality is that this is all on the people of Campo Santo: about a dozen regular human beings all capable of fucking up, and, if they do, there is nothing larger to blame than themselves. “I’m feeling very confident now in our ability to close it all out,” says Rodkin, “at this exact minute in time, before the Fates have had a chance to conspire and render my remarks cutely naïve.” (The Fates are whole other issue entirely.)



And what comes next? “Campo beyond Firewatch is hard for me to predict,” Rodkin says. “We don’t have another game idea that’s itching to be made, but we didn’t with Firewatch either. It was one idea of many we eventually latched onto, and the design was informed by, and evolved because of, the strengths of the team that’s making it.”

“That’s what Firewatch is,” adds Vanaman, “the byproduct of everyone’s skills. I hope. We’ll see.”

Lost Boys

“But where do you live mostly now?”
“With the lost boys.”
“Who are they?”
“They are the children who fall out of their perambulators when the nurse is looking the other way. If they are not claimed in seven days they are sent far away to Neverland to defray expenses. I’m the captain.”
“What fun it must be!”
“Yes,” said cunning Peter, “but we are rather lonely. You see we have no female companionship.”
“Are none of the others girls?”
“Oh no; girls, you know, are much too clever to fall out of their prams.”

– J.M. Barrie, Peter Pan; or, the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up

One of the reasons that the Campo Santo Quarterly Review is written by someone who doesn’t work for Campo Santo is that I can be free to criticise the company, or talk about the complaints that others have about them. As gigs go, it’s pretty straightforward, since literally the only complaints I’ve ever heard about Campo Santo have been these:

“Firewatch looks amazing, why isn’t it out already?!”
“Campo Santo should print more of Olly Moss’s Firewatch posters.”
“I put my name in your draw for the chance to buy an Olly Moss Firewatch poster and was supposed to get an email telling me if my name wasn’t drawn, and instead you emailed me something called the Campo Santo Quarterly Review, which I certainly don’t want.”
I’m not kidding. That’s all anyone finds objectionable about Campo Santo: “I can’t purchase enough of your beautiful products.” Not a lot there for a critic to get his teeth into, which Campo Santo knows full well. “Your Ombudsmanship is a farce,” Sean Vanaman told me last year, his legs crossed and arms flung over the back of a sagging couch in his office. Nobody wants to hear that.

That was the situation, anyway, until last November. That was when these questions started to be asked, loudly, en masse, and with grand indignance: who does Campo Santo’s environment artist Jane Ng think she is, is she doing something illegal, and should she be fired?

If you’ve paid attention to the video game industry at all over the past nine months, you can probably guess the source of those concerns: an agitated, self-styled “consumer revolt” called GamerGate.

Arriving at a consensus explanation of “GamerGate” is a challenge, as the members of that “movement” reject definition for the reason that any honest summary of what GamerGate gets up to must be incredibly unflattering. The campaign eventually named

and hashtagged #GamerGate began last August with a blog post/psychotic diatribe inveighed against the independent game developer Zoe Quinn by an ex-boyfriend. The post alleged infidelities on Quinn's part with various figures in the specialist game press and wider industry in exchange for positive coverage and promotion of her free game Depression Quest. That such claims were verifiably false did not deter members of 4chan and Reddit from targeting Quinn for extensive harassment. Trading flattering press for sex would be a clear breach of journalistic ethics, so it's suspicious that GamerGate's attentions were overwhelmingly directed at Quinn over any of the male journalists named in the conspiracy. Which rather gives away the game that at its core, the "movement" is not about ethics in game journalism as claimed, but a campaign of retaliation instigated by men against a woman for the crime of betraying one of their own.

Beyond Quinn, GamerGate claims to stand for general objectivity and ethics in reviews and coverage of video games, which sort of sounds fine, but what it means in practise is that if a critic finds things about games or the industry to be sexist or racist, they should shut up about it. The stigma that GamerGate was anti-women stuck pretty easily, and GamerGate answered those charges by encouraging its adherents to make outspoken Twitter accounts for pro-GamerGate women and people of colour, and designing a sassy girl gamer mascot to be the face of GamerGate—a mascot later, inevitably, sexualised and drawn in porn by GamerGate's members.

Jane Ng first spoke up about GamerGate on Twitter, after seeing students of game development with industry aspirations tout their affiliations with the hashtag as a banner of the persecuted majority rising up against the politically correct ruling class that wants games to be all about Gender and not Fun. "The way the pro-GG students talked about their position was so assholey that I thought Jesus, even if they have an actual point, the way they were trying to express it alone would make one not want to hire you," Ng remembers thinking. "It seemed obvious that being an asshole about anything is not gonna be a very desirable trait especially if one is so publicly indignant about it."

In November, Ng tweeted, from her personal account: "Sad to see some pro-GG students think not hiring them equals discrimination. Sorry but being an obstinate asshole isn't a protected class." The possible insinuation being that at Campo Santo, GamerGaters need not apply.

When women in the wider video game industry have been threatened with everything from professional boycotts to school shootings in the name of GamerGate, that sentiment coming from a woman is hardly something you'd expect them to be cool with. ("I know that's sort of tired to point out at this stage," says Sean Vanaman, "but it is actually infuriating.")

To appreciate what Ng was up against, know that by the time of her tweet, GamerGate had mutated. It retained a sincere constituency at its core: sceptical about political correctness and feminist culture, and fighting to preserve video games as a safe space for

white male fantasy. They, at least, were sincere, unlike the menagerie of allies anointed to serve as their champions, whose interest in the hashtag stopped and ended at selling a new audience snake oil corrective to leftist thought: men's rights activists, pick-up artists, white supremacists, a disbarred lawyer who fought repeatedly to ban violent video games, and arch-conservative actor Adam Baldwin, who eventually shifted focus to asking what reason did Barack Obama have not to encourage the spread of Ebola in the United States?

Given the origin, the collective abuse lobbied at Ng over Twitter was about as weird as you'd expect. If we take it at face value, we are to understand that Ng is a Marxist, post-modernist, misandrist hipster McCarthyite communist racist blacklister who wants to make freedom of speech illegal and deny insurance coverage for prostate cancer. Many agreed she would have a hard time explaining herself when the matter went to trial.

I'd find these attacks on Jane to be funnier if her attackers weren't sincere, and proven capable of inflecting serious distress. "I didn't get any death or rape threats, amazingly, but just a lot of insults and general harassment," she says. "It did kind of fuck me up a couple of days; one just isn't ever ready to see [that] amount of hate and anger directed at you [especially] when you are doing some horrid shit they are imagining."

The whole idea that Campo Santo has a GamerGate blacklist, then—that's imaginary? I asked Ng and Vanaman to explain. "Let's say [you] want to work here in the future, when, hopefully, we're looking to add one or two people to the team in the coming years," Vanaman says. "Let's say you think the gaming press should do a better job in informing consumers about what's going on in the industry and what's in a particular game. Great. Articulate your opinions and be thoughtful. Let's say you think the harassment, doxxing and hate brought onto others under the umbrella of GG is awful and don't associate with that part of the hashtag. Let's say you're able to articulate that very clearly. The problem is, your stalwart association with a hashtag shows a glaring a blind spot in your ability to understand and empathize with other people. It shows you don't get that labelling your opinions with something so compromised makes you careless at best and an asshole at worst."

Ng, adding to Vanaman's comments, says: "I wouldn't want to work with anyone who doesn't have the empathy, emotional intelligence or common sense to get why that hashtag is hurtful to many people. It doesn't matter if skill-wise that person is literally the best on earth."

GamerGate seemed convinced this was illegal, so not being versed in employment law myself, I asked three HR and employment experts, and one senior corporate lawyer, if Campo Santo was in the clear. "Absolutely," said the HR manager of an international hedge fund, who is a woman, and after learning the subject of this article, asked that her name not be published. "You need to feel like your employees represent you, that they're not going to be a risk. In the financial services industry we do background checks, we certify that someone's an honourable person."

That may be the case in practise, but legislation regarding social media is underdeveloped. “It’s a grey area,” she says. "You wouldn’t say [to an applicant], ‘I’m not hiring you based on what you said on social media,’ you would find other reasons, like, ‘we found someone more qualified,’ or, ‘we don’t have the budget to fill this position right now.’ You can always come up with a [valid] reason not to hire someone.”

That’s not something you do just because you disagree with an applicant’s beliefs. “If you can find a real cultural reason not to hire someone, you can ground it in something else more quantitative,” said a specialist in recruitment training—once again, a woman who preferred to remain anonymous. “People don’t realize the impact of the whole individual on getting a job. If just how qualified you were was the most important thing, then it would be so easy to recruit—but recruitment policies can include psychometric tests, they can include sit-down interviews. And it’s about the whole team. If you can’t work with the people around you, you’re basically worthless.”

Everyone I spoke to confirmed that the law is pretty well on Campo Santo’s side, even if, as the experience proved, it’s not the safest sort of thing for a company to be saying out loud. And there’s another, much stronger, impression that I got about the nature of GamerGate’s grievance, which is this:

It’s dumb.

It’s so dumb, and the further outside the industry that you take it, the more apparent that is to anybody sensible. The only reason we take it seriously is that while the ideas are dumb, the threats are real and terrifying. Which basically is GamerGate in microcosm.

Ng, when I spoke to her, was actually positive about her experience. “Harassment had been happening to marginalized devs for a long time, so in a way, GG was not new. It just was never recognized widely as a problem, and thus the toxic elements of gamer entitlement were often dismissed as not really that bad, or that victims were just ‘too sensitive,’ etc, etc. I really believe that progress can

only be made when the majority acknowledges/witnesses/experiences what the minority has suffered in the background. I think we are at that point in the industry."

For her part, Ng considers it a responsibility to be more vocal, and has upped her presence online and at industry events. "I used to enjoy just being a dev, not a gendered dev. I was happy to be Jane, not Jane the non-white lady dev. It used to make me uncomfortable to think of myself as 'different' because I just like to be judged by my work. Now? I don't shy from it as much. It doesn't define me but it is important for other people, other non-white women in particular, who want to walk a similar path."

Vanaman doesn't fully share Ng's optimism. "I think it'll be hard to move beyond 'the GG era' without remembering a lot of the awful shit that has been done and levied at genuinely decent people. That'll personally be tough for me."

Which is sort of where the subjects of Ng's original tweet find themselves. Afforded the most charitable interpretation possible, these are students with eyes on game development careers, who signed up to what they genuinely thought GamerGate stood for—freedom of expression, the right to enjoy video games unfettered by political correctness, whatever—while disavowing all of the bad shit, who got hustled by a bunch of men trying to punish a woman, and have yet to fully realise how much damage they've done not just to others, but themselves. But sympathy is hard to come by.

THE ART OF FICTION #2: MEG JAYANTH

A cooler person than me would have known the name Meg Jayanth before she wrote her most popular work: the video game 80 Days, published in 2014. Developed by the small, Cambridge, England studio Inkle, the game is an adaptation of Jules Verne's classic novel, which follows valet Jean Passepartout and his gentleman master Phileas Fogg in their unlikely mission to go around the world in no more than eighty days.

In the fantastical spirit of Verne's body of work, the adaptation is one or two significant degrees departed from our history, and the original text. Inkle's 80 Days presents an 1872 where women fly pirate airships over Germany, automatons pilot gondoliers in Venice, the Indian city of Agra is re-envisioned as mobile fortress, and a powerful Zulu Federation resists the thrusts of European colonialism with sophisticated machinery. It is a version of 1872 that is both steampunk and socially progressive, a rewrite of history in which the historically marginalised are given voice, agency, and the means to invent robots with top hats. Every city, and every possible journey between cities, is a potential adventure, rendered in Jayanth's smart, rich, reactive prose.

Meg Jayanth studied at the University of Oxford and the Metropolitan Film School in London. She worked at the BBC for two years in a number of roles focusing on social media and game development, before leaving to pursue a freelance career. Her first game, Samsara, a text adventure set in the 18th century Bengal and the dreams of its citizens, was published on Failbetter Games' StoryNexus platform in 2013. She has since worked with Failbetter as a contributor to Sunless Sea, released earlier this year.

Jayanth's work to date suggests an oeuvre of modern historical fantasy, located in carefully-researched, detailed worlds about people travelling places they don't belong, whether every city on an ill-advised adventure around the world, or into the dreams of others. Her writing evokes the romance of classic 19th and 20th century adventure fiction and the optimism of classic science fiction, but, unlike those things, is class-conscious, politically progressive and unsparing about the failures of her influences. Recently, Jayanth authored an expansion for the game—a route for Fogg and Passepartout through the North Pole—and is currently working on further content for 80 Days and a number of unannounced video game projects.

I met Jayanth at London's Soho Hotel (last seen in Campo Santo Quarterly Review #1!) to talk about telling stories, the politics of historical fiction and some bullshit about French fries and entrapment. This is a condensed and edited transcript of that conversation.

Duncan Fyfe: Did you grow up in London?

Meg Jayanth: I grew up kind of all over the place. Part here, part in India, and a little time in Saudi Arabia as well. My parents were working there; they're both doctors. I was twelve and thirteen in Saudi Arabia. I'm very much a third culture kid. I got described as

“British-Indian” in [a] TIME article, which is kind of hilarious. I suppose I theoretically am, but technically I’m just Indian. I’ve got the passport and everything.

Fyfe: What kind of stories did you grow up with?

Jayanth: All the classics, really. I had more of the classic British child’s literary education than most British kids get these days. I think especially in India, there’s a preservation of a certain amount of what Britain was like in the Victorian era, even in the Indian English language. I grew up reading all of the classics and Enid Blyton, all of that stuff. Which, now, everyone is like, “God, really, did you grow up in the 1930s?” But no, I read all of that shit. I totally wanted to go to boarding school as a child, because it just seemed like it would be all midnight feasts and kippers, and I totally wanted to eat tinned pineapple. Even though I was in India and there was real pineapple.

Fyfe: Did you go to boarding school?

Jayanth: No. I’m really glad I didn’t, I think I would have hated it. I think that’s one British tradition too far.

Fyfe: What about writers who are influences?

Jayanth: Probably my two favourite writers, growing up and even today, are Kurt Vonnegut and Jeanette Winterson. I guess they’re both genre via-literary fiction. As a teenager I read a lot of dead white dudes. I was really into my Camus and my Beckett and Chekhov and Russian writers, and then I grew up a bit and was like, “maybe I should read someone who isn’t like a dead white person.” I read more Indian writers now, more women. So my list isn’t completely dudes.

[The Soho Hotel waitress approaches with the two lattes we ordered earlier.]

Fyfe: Oh, thank you.

Jayanth: Thanks so much.

Fyfe: What do you think of interviews where they include the interaction with the wait staff? And they talk about what they ordered?

Jayanth: I think that’s fine in a transcript. Otherwise, I mean, unless there’s something particularly significant or revelatory about one’s interaction, like “oh yeah, Nicolas Cage then went and punched that waitress in the face. That was weird. I’m going to include that.”

Fyfe: Do you know M.I.A., the artist?

Jayanth: Yes, yeah.

Fyfe: Do you know the thing about her and truffle fries? She was, a couple years ago, profiled in the New York Times, and they were talking to her in a swanky hotel much like this one, and she says something about politics, and she's described as saying that while nibbling on the end of a truffle fry. And that paragraph comes very near one where the writer's quoting another person decrying her politics as naïve. When that came out M.I.A was mad, understandably, because it made her look like—"I'm eating this symbol of total decadence"—but she said, you, the writer of that profile, told me to order truffle fries, you made me eat them, and not only that but I have that on audio, I recorded it too. And she did! She was completely strong-armed into ordering truffle fries so she would appear…

Jayanth: Appear to be this monster. Oh my God. That's slightly terrifying. It really says more about that person's journalistic integrity. Right, okay, so I'm going to be on the lookout for truffle fries.

Fyfe: I checked, they're not on the menu. You can't even order normal fries.

Jayanth: No caviar or champagne…?

Fyfe: Oh, there might be champagne.

Jayanth: I'll stick with my coffee. I've very cleverly ordered the same coffee you did so I wouldn't seem pretentious.

Fyfe: Do you remember if there was something in particular that made you feel like writing for games?

Jayanth: Yeah, post-university I went to film school. [For my] final project at film school, I convinced my teachers—they're film people and they think television is déclassé, basically—I convinced them to let me make, instead of a film, a six-part webseries, an interactive webseries. It had text, audio, it's a film, it's different stuff. That was around the time of the ARG, those days of yore when transmedia was still cool. So I made one of those and it was a colossal failure, but interesting in its way.

I always loved playing games. And I love reading, and I did both of those online, and the internet and technology just seemed to open up all of these possibilities for telling stories in a new way. In some ways, the way I felt about it back then was a bit more naïve—like, this idea of, "oh right, we'll have audio logs! And then we'll make people search for things, and make them collaborate, and break enormous codes"—which people don't really want to do. But that was part of the excitement of all these new ways to tell stories. Now I feel more like, well, pick one of those—or two of those!—and tell a good story. I moved away from that gimmicky idea. But that isn't to say that there aren't new ways to tell stories that are interesting, or could be interesting. I think I probably started out with naïve notions and became disabused of them.

Fyfe: What made you decide to do the webseries instead of a film project?

Jayanth: I was always interested [in] the way in which the internet closed down the space between producer and consumer. You could talk on message boards and the creator of your show would be right there and could respond to it. You know, post-Buffy, around Veronica Mars, that phenomenon was happening. I went to film school probably more interested in television, and by the end of the year I think I was more interested in the beginning of the stuff that's happening now, webisodes and shorter-form video storytelling, and things that are a bit more personal.

Around that time, I went to see my first Punchdrunk show, Masque of the Red Death, and that had a huge influence as well. What I loved about that was it was this collective story. You're in the ballroom with everyone, and someone taps you on the shoulder and you get dragged into a room and you'll get told this really personal story. And then you'll come back and tell your friends, and you have a story to tell them. It didn't happen to anyone else, that you saw. And then five of you get told this story, so you feel like there's this enormous possibility space. It isn't just one story that's possible. If you explore, there are hundreds.

That idea that you can give the player, or the audience, an experience that feels unique, that feels tailored to them, that feels personal, I think that's really powerful. That one moment when they dragged me off into that room—they probably do that a hundred

times a night, but in that moment, to me, it felt… You know, it doesn't have to be totally unique.

That's the problem with ARGs, is that they would totally focus on making it completely unique for each and every person, and you can't do that. Telling one good story is hard enough, telling a million good stories is impossible. You're setting yourself up to fail. There are little clever tricks you can employ in immersiveness and interactive fiction that make the story seem [personal to the player.] 80 Days is like that. A lot of it seems very particular, and very bespoke – but it's not necessarily as much as it is. Not to ruin the magic. [laughs]

Fyfe: What do people tell you about their experiences in 80 Days?

Jayanth: What's amazing is people will tell stories and they'll use "I". Which is really interesting because Passepartout—he's really not a blank slate, he's a very well-developed character, but they rarely say "Passepartout did this." A few stories keep coming up. The romances, they come up all the time. "I totally kissed Death in New Orleans." Fewer people have spoken to me about the Polar romance, but maybe because it's been released for less…

Fyfe: I played that, and I didn't get—oh, is that the romance with that guy…?

Jayanth: Yeah, Vitti Jokinen, the Artificer. It's a bit longer because you have that whole journey and it's full of angst and drama. Have you played through…?

Fyfe: Yes.

Jayanth: He feels responsible for the crash, and if you're already romantically involved with him by that point he's really tortured, and then you get where you're going and he's like "I blame myself," and he disappears. Partly because you're not really into a romantic partner hanging about on your journey and partly because he felt very responsible.

And yeah, the romance with your Mongolian princess, Goland. Which [director] Jon [Ingold] wrote, actually. I wrote the character of a beautiful Mongolian princess, and she's studying an algebra book. And Jon, who in a previous life was a maths teacher, was like "She sounds amazing! I'm going to write a romance for her."

Fyfe: When I died in the North Pole, that was shocking.

Jayanth: We tried to message it like, "It's very perilous, it's very dangerous," but of course since you can't die anywhere else, you don't necessarily feel that. That's all Jon and [co-director] Joe [Humfrey] actually, I think we must have jokingly brought it up that we should make Fogg die, and Jon was like, "No, let's definitely do that."

Writing that was amazing. I think the death bits are my favourite bits of my own writing in the game. Which is a real shame, because nobody gets to see them unless it goes

terribly [laughs]. Jon told me that he felt something, and possibly even teared up manfully, when he read it for the first time, which was an enormous compliment. He's been around in IF [interactive fiction] for ages, and he's written some of my favourite interactive fiction, he wrote Make it Good and All Roads, which was my favourite. He's not an easy man to please, so when he teared up, yeah, mission accomplished. Making people cry.

Fyfe: Speaking of writing things that nobody's going to get to see–it's extremely difficult to get that Mongolian princess to meet you back in London.

Jayanth: Jon added all of that very last minute. You'll see, all of my romances are like, well, you had the romance and now it's gone. Jon is coming from that older tradition of IF–he also wrote the murder mystery bit [in 80 Days], which is really hard–and that sense of designing things that are tough, that people are going to have to explore and try multiple times to achieve. What I like about it is in 80 Days, unlike in a lot of other games, you don't have to do that for the game to work for you, but if you have that achievement mindset, there is stuff for you to find out.

Fyfe: I always think with romance in games that either failed or unworkable romances are so much more resonant. Your character gets with their love interest, and then you move on with your life. It doesn't have much resonance for you, but I think you can relate more to the pain of seeing people not get together.

Jayanth: I really like BioWare games, and the romances in them. My favourite romance is an unrequited one. I played a female character in Dragon Age: Origins, and my character was completely in love with Morrigan, who's of course straight in the game, and you go and kill her dragon mother. Then you come back and have what I thought was going to be the "oh we're in love now" conversation! And she's like, "I never thought I'd ever have a friend like you, perhaps even a sister." I'm like, no! No, no! That's not where I was going! Oh my god, you've friend-zoned me. And then of course I had to have my manipulative romance with Alistair and become Queen, just because I'd been spurned.

Fyfe: That's a good arc.

Jayanth: It's a really good arc. But that game is clearly made for you to play the human female noble and then marry Alistair and become Queen. That is the best version of the game. Whereas – you know, I could talk about this for hours.

Fyfe: Is there a best version of 80 Days?

Jayanth: No! No, no, definitely not. There's deliberately not. If we felt like there were sections of the game that were too rapid, we slowed them down. If we there were sections of the game that were too sparse, we filled them in. There are still some bottlenecks in the last third of the game, the last third of the game is a little sparse, which I think was deliberate on our part because you want to see the choice happen in

the first third. And in the last third, there's still a lot of options. In this new content that we're doing, hopefully we'll do some more routes across the Americas.

But no, especially when we were writing [routes] that seemed ridiculous and sub-optimal, like Africa or Australia, or across Saudi Arabia, that's where we put the most fun content. Because it's a reward for exploring off the beaten path or doing something foolish. What we really wanted was the first time you do that—you explore off the beaten path and you find something amazing. It encourages you to do that again. There is no perfect route at all.

Fyfe: 80 Days I've seen described as "anti-colonialist"…

Jayanth: Yeah.

Fyfe: …and "decolonised", so what do those mean, is there a difference between those two things?

Jayanth: I started off calling it decolonised, but I suppose anti-colonial is a bit more of an active term. I suppose decolonised implies you had colonialism and just took it out. Whereas anti-colonial is more actively, I hope, forcing you to think about the issues in a different way. 80 Days I'd say is anticolonial in that it doesn't ignore the problems with colonialism. At least, we try not to ignore the problems with colonialism and progress and all of the attendant issues.

I mean, steampunk is a genre that's about technology. But one of the ways where I feel personally that it often fails is that it doesn't describe the cost of that technology and that progress, like the social, economic, the cultural costs, and often those costs are unevenly distributed amongst the less industrialised nations. That's something we really wanted to address, but we're not being preachy about it. If it at all succeeds at what it does, it's because we focus on people, and it's about the human cost of all of those things. Every one of the issues that we talk about in the game is sort of personified. But without necessarily trying to make these people symbols. I think we really wanted characters that were trying to live ordinary lives but faced with political and social issues and changes and trying to find their way.

Fyfe: When did you decide that was the approach you were going to take in adapting the game?

Jayanth: Right at the beginning. My first thought when Jon and Joe came to me and said we really want to make an interactive version of [Around the World in] Eighty Days was "what the hell am I going to do about Aouda?" Who's the Indian princess. I mean, I love Eighty Days, but as an Indian, the India section has always infuriated me, with the treatment of Aouda. It's infuriating, she basically is like a conquered territory, you know, who loves the oppressor! She's a prize for Fogg, she's a reward, she's all these gender and racial sterotypes, she's just a nexus of badness. She just doesn't get to have her own

life: she's rescued by Fogg, then she uproots herself, and then Fogg marries her at the end.

The first thought going into how we were going to make this work was how do we create a world in which someone like Aouda has a voice, and has agency, and has a story that the player gets to see. And once we started doing that for Aouda, and for India, it felt ridiculous then to not do it for Africa, and all of the other cultures that have been hard done by. The book is very self-prescribed, there's only one journey and it barely leaves the bounds of the British Empire. Whereas here we go everywhere, the world is opened up. Creating a structure for the game and creating a world which would allow us to focus more on people apart from Fogg and Passepartout was really important.

Fyfe: Were you familiar with the book beforehand?

Jayanth: Yeah, I'd read it a couple times, and I'd saw the movie—I mean the David Niven film, but I've also seen the terrible Jackie Chan one which I'd really like to forget. [The Niven film] is immensely popular in India, and I'm sure in other countries, because India's mentioned in it! Even if it's completely ridiculous and exaggerated and sort of offensive, you'd still watch it, and be disgusted afterwards [laughs].

It's the same reason we put loads of cities in the game that just had personal meaning to us. There's Bangalore, which is where I came from; [it's] completely ridiculous to go there, there's no reason anyone would go there. Izmir, which is Joe's fiancée's hometown, and of course Joe and Jon put Cambridge in there. It's apparently a very loving tribute to Cambridge. A lot of people write to me and go "I didn't know you went to Cambridge!" No, I didn't! That's the other guys.

Fyfe: Do you like Jules Verne?

Jayanth: Yeah, I really do. I think my favourite isn't necessarily Around the World in Eighty Days, but probably Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. I really love his short stories as well. There's a lot of influence. Even though [the game] is mostly based on Eighty Days, we really thought about it as the… Verne-verse? You can meet Captain Nemo in the game. Eighty Days is much more straight-up in terms of the technology that it posits, and we steal some of the technological advances and mindset of his other books. One of his short stories features a mechanical camel, and a mechanical elephant.

I think he was a really interesting writer of his time. Even though there are a lot of things I find problematic in his works, I don't think that takes away from fundamentally how forward-thinking he was. He birthed a genre, really, you can't take that away from the man.

Fyfe: I wanted to ask your thoughts on historical fiction as a genre, 'cause I was reading something you wrote about it…

Jayanth: [laughs] Probably something quite mean.

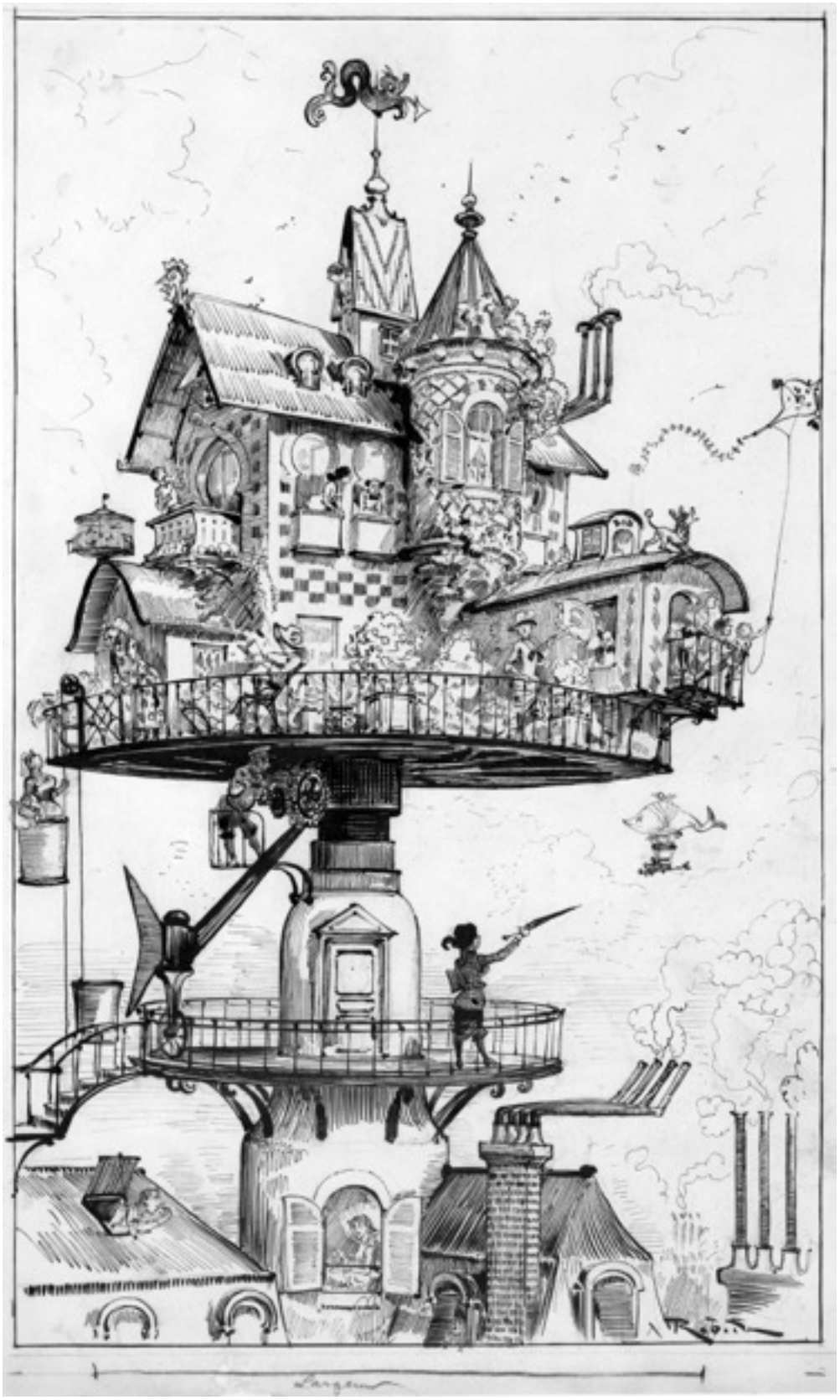
Fyfe: You wrote that it "enjoys the signs and symbols of historicity," but it's "a nostalgic and escapist vision" that you'd call a "fetishistic" vision, with "little room for people of colour."

Jayanth: Yeah… I suppose to me it crystallised watching BBC period dramas–and of course that's changed a little bit now, I think there was like an Edwin Drood that had, like, brown people in it, which is amazing. But generally all these, you know, peaceful adaptations are kind of…

Okay, I think I probably might get in trouble for this story, so… no, no! I was at a leaving do for a colleague of mine at the BBC and off-hand—we're all having a pint—he was like "wouldn't it be amazing to live in, like, Mad Men era?" And I looked him like, no, not really. It's like… you've totally forgotten that I'm brown and a girl, like you've just totally forgotten. It's that moment like, should I be the dick? And point out that I would be your secretary rather than your colleague? Or should I let it go, and go, "Yeah, the dresses, they're amazing!" And of course being the sort of person than I am, I was like, "Yeah, not sure I would like it that much."

Pretty much the modern day is the best possible time for me to have possibly lived. As much as I can enjoy mod and the haircuts and the clothes and the make-up, there is a barrier to enjoyment. You're aware that that isn't necessarily something you'd have access to. When you're an outsider in one way, it makes you aware of all the ways in which people are excluded. And once you start noticing that it's really hard to stop. Reading a historical novel or watching a period drama, you can't help but wonder what is life actually like below stairs. There's this glossy dream of fancy dresses and ball gowns, a kind of different time, I can't help but feel that part of that is a weird nostalgia for a time where men were men and women were women and we all knew our place, and God, everything was so peaceful. Yeah, it was really beautiful, for a select number of people. And it's not just women and people of colour who were screwed over in that time.

The kinds of stories that we re-tell come from such a narrow place, and the fact that we only see a particular white middle-class face in those stories elides the fact that there were people all over the place: they were women and they were people of colour and they were marginalised people and they were queer people, actually doing incredible things and having amazing adventures, but we just don't see them. We have a much more homogenised version of the past. Whenever someone says, you know, like, "Oh, this great fantasy series…" Well, it's really white and it's really male. "Oh well, of course, because you know there were no women around at that time." It's accepted as this kind of history, which is really wrong and not authentic to elide women from all of history. Even if they had no overt power they exercised power in other ways, mostly because people in the past were pretty similar to people today. If you can't imagine every single women you know being perfectly happy being chattel and having no voice and expressing no opinion, at all, in their lives, then they probably wouldn't have done that in the 18th century.



In a purely selfish way, as well, I think the books, the works, the games, the stories that make the effort to look beyond the stereotype actually tell way more interesting stories. And they're more enjoyable because they're unexpected. That was what I kept finding over and over again with [researching] 80 Days. The minute you tried to peel back the official story or the simple story, you found so many people, so many events, so many interesting possibilities. They were surprising to me, and enjoyable to me to read about. I took a gamble and thought maybe other people would be interested in this as well.

Fyfe: So what do you think of writers, especially writers who are working today, who write historical fiction that presents the world as it was but without any sort of commentary or context around what we would see now as injustice?

Jayanth: I think that's lazy. I used the Mad Men example, but Mad Men is actually really great at that. It often makes an effort to comment—not just reproduce, but to comment on it, and that's one of the reasons that it's successful, because it still speaks to us and our sensibilities. If you really wanted to reproduce the past, you might as well go and read a novel from that era, instead of write one now. There's plenty of art, there's plenty of literature, there's plenty of fiction out there that if you're going to write something new, I think, it sort of behooves you to have something to say.

Fyfe: With 80 Days, your approach was to have this slightly alternate version of 1872, in which geopolitics are very different. Women, people of colour, queer people, trans people are in positions of power and authority that they couldn't possibly occupy in our 1872, and there's nothing particularly shocking about that.

Jayanth: I think that's true, but it's also balanced with not wanting to whitewash or minimise things. It was a real balancing act, because on the one hand, if you're going to invent a world with robots and airship pirates, why doesn't that world have female airship captains? If you're creating a world in which invention is spread throughout the world, then why aren't there great inventions that originate in Africa as well as in London? But you don't want to completely elide the problems of that time. While there are women airship captains, we also talk about slavery; very deliberately approach and look at an incredibly weighty subject. It was a real area of concern for us to approach it with the gravitas it deserved, but at the same time this is a light-hearted adventure game. You need to give it the time and the space to treat it with respect, but you also need to make it work within the constraints of the game. I didn't want it to be just a straightforward power fantasy for underrepresented people. Because that does a disservice to the time, as well. And I wanted us to be able to talk about oppression without necessarily everyone being a victim. Even though they might be victimised in some ways, people have power.

Fyfe: How do you find that balance? On the one hand, you're portraying colonialism and imperialism as it did exist, but the real-life victims of those things are not victims in 80 Days.

Jayanth: The thing is, because it's such a vast game and because we're covering so much geography, it means that you can just do a lot. That was a great advantage to have, that maybe the Scramble for Africa is inverted and the Zulu Federation is powerful, unlike in our real world, but that doesn't mean that in the Middle East and in Saudi Arabia you don't have the depredations of colonialism. You can both talk about Western colonialism as it existed and you can kind of rewrite it. Even though there is idealism in the game, that isn't to say that there isn't some kind of colonialism. So for instance the Persian Empire and the Omani Empire are much larger, and they behave in some similar ways that the Western colonial powers did, ruling over different tribes, different religions, sects, cultures. You can still talk about the oppressions that people face [while breaking] out of that narrative of, well, "white saviour" but also white European power and the victimised parade of undifferentiated brown faces. And having lots of different instances was the way we did that. So we didn't have to have this one narrative, we could have a hundred.

Fyfe: In your adaptation, why are Fogg and Passepartout still white? And dudes?

Jayanth: I like them being white, and dudes… actually, there's a bit—spoilery—if you go to Bloemfontein in Africa, Passepartout can sort of maybe reveal to you that actually he's mixed-race but passing for white. It comes up maybe one other time. In my own head it sort of explains why Passepartout's slightly more open-minded than you might expect about different cultures and races and things like that. That's a secret that's been buried. But you don't even really need that to happen. I think it works because in that time, no-one but an eccentric English gentleman and his valet is going to do something as fricking ridiculous as decide "Oh, I'm going to travel around the world in eighty days." It's ridiculous. It's the sort of the bet that would take place in a frat house in America. An overprivileged person has too much time and money on their hands.

Fyfe: I think you credit too much ambition to frat guys.

Jayanth: [laughs] I was saying they might make the bet, I'm not saying they would actually go through with it. I'm casting aspersions on frat boys in America… I know very little about them and their customs, it's totally unfair.

One of our reviews, a podcast discussing us, the Indie Megabooth one with Austin Walker, it mentioned that Fogg and Passepartout's whiteness and Passepartout's French-ness is never erased in the game. I never really thought about it specifically, but yeah, that's one of the things that was really important as well. This idea that they are white could have just been this neutral thing, but it's not, it's brought up. And the fact that he's French has repercussions in a lot of places, depending on the politics of the time. When he goes to Russia, they still remember the war, and so his French accent can get him in trouble, and he has the choice to downplay it or be brazen about it.

It was interesting to keep them as white, and as male. And to actually have the world react to that rather than just assume that that's the norm, for them to pass invisibly through all these places.

Fyfe: You said something really great about the original story, which was that it's about a white guy stalking the boundaries of his estate, and that estate is the entire world. For all that's changed, and for how progressive the game is, that's still the case.

Jayanth: Yeah, though at least in our game you leave the bounds of the British Empire. The British Empire is not as vast. You never leave the British Empire [in the novel].

Yeah, it's an act of great hubris, and partly why I think the game would not work if Fogg was the main character. Because Fogg exists in this bubble of English-ness that he seems to carry around with him. Everywhere he goes, he's like, "Where can I get roast beef, and is my newspaper out?" Because you're playing Passepartout, you can see how fragile and superficial a delusion that is. [Fogg] needs a full-time man to create the impression that he is travelling within his empire. While outside, life is occurring. I think while it is fundamentally the same, we poke a bit more fun at it and deconstruct it a bit more. Even to the extent of the slightly ridiculous actions you take to maintain Fogg's health or happiness or whatever you want to call it: waxing his moustache, pressing his trousers… it just highlights the fundamental absurdity of the quest that you're on.

Fyfe: I like that nobody you encounter gives a shit about your quest. Like, "that's nice for you."

Jayanth: It's actually Jon's running joke to keep inserting "We are going around the world!" [as a dialogue option] everywhere, and to an increasingly bored audience, who are like, "That's nice. I'm sorry, but I have a revolution to plan. I don't have time for your weird antics." Jon started that and then I kept inserting "We are going around the world!" at completely inopportune times.

Fyfe: Do you like those characters?

Jayanth: Yeah, I do. I totally ship Fogg and Passepartout.

Fyfe: Can that happen?

Jayanth: If you die in the North Pole—I shouldn't tell you this, these are spoilers, Jon would kill me—you may have a chance to declare your feelings for Fogg. But there are a couple other moments in the game usually around when you're about to die. There's an airship crash and you can kind of maybe express some of your feelings, but in a restrained manner. You're restrained by the bounds of courtesy and gentlemanly civility. And I think Passepartout swears that he'll tear those entries out of his journal.

Fyfe: So 80 Days has more different races, cultures in it certainly than the original novel – more than, like, any work of fiction.

Jayanth: [laughs] Yeah, possibly.

Fyfe: How do you ensure respect and authenticity when the scope is so large?

Jayanth: You do a lot of research and also, from my perspective, the thing is: you are going to get some things wrong. You just have to be open to the possibility [that] if someone comes to you and says, "I'm from this culture and found the way that you represented this thing in the game to be inaccurate…" I went into this telling myself that I would have an open mind if that happened. Because it's so easy to be really defensive, like, "Oh no, but I did the historical research."

Also, do the right kind of research. One of the things I definitely tried to do was find sources that were from the indigenous culture itself, which is not necessarily easy. We're talking about Africa pre-colonisation, and a lot of the accounts that you have are from Western white missionaries, or they're from adventurers who are really keen to exaggerate. "Then the tribal king lopped off his enemy's head and drunk straight from it!" Did that really happen, or is that a great story to tell when you're back home? So there are a lot of resources, but you have to pick and choose. Find multiple sources, try to approach thing…. for me it's also about a certain amount of realism, which I know sounds ridiculous when you have airships, [but] one of the things is since our world is more technologically connected, it more resembles the world of the 1910s or 1920s. So instead of making up geopolitics whole cloth, we just went forward in time and had a look at geopolitics in the 1920s and used that as a framework. Even just simple things like, we want airships in Africa. Right, what are they made out of? Okay, I don't know, what resources are available at the time? Those small details, they just help tie your fiction into the world and make someone who is familiar with that culture who might be reading your text feel as though you've taken a modicum of time and effort to write something that might seem representative.

Fundamentally, we're all making it up. If you're writing historical fiction there is an active invention occurring. But all you can do I think is ensure that your invention is as grounded as it can be.

Fyfe: What about blowback from people who think it's too progressive?

Jayanth: You know, no one has mentioned that it's really feminist? Which is really weird. And we've not had the-Gate-that-shall-not-be-named attention on us. We got a couple of reviews: "[I] like this sort of thing and this kind of world, but there are gay people in it." What was amazing was it wasn't even complaining about the fact that Passepartout can have gay romances, it's complaining that there are other people in the world that you meet, who are gay. Which sort of blew my mind. It's sad, because I could understand someone saying, "Oh, I could kiss a man, that grossed me out," but actually complaining that you saw someone else and in they were a relationship with another man…

What was amazing about that is someone reposted that, took a screenshot of that, and so many people bought our game. Because of that. Fundamentally there are way more

Passepartouts kissing dudes in New Orleans in the game than there are people complaining about it.

I don't want to give the impression that this is a huge thing. Mostly people have mentioned the diversity and inclusiveness as a positive thing, or they've not mentioned it at all.

Fyfe: Everything you've written has had some element of science fiction or I guess just fantasy. What draws you to that?

Jayanth: I suppose it's the traditional answer of most sci-fi writers, isn't it, the idea that the world seems entirely new and interesting if you just change one tiny thing and watch how that ripples out. I don't know, I think it's easier in some ways maybe, to use a —I've always thought in some ways that you can explore more about the realities of life, it's easier to do that sometimes when you don't have to use a realist technique. All of my favourite fantasy and sci-fi writers are not just writing magic for magic's sake, but they're talking about universal things through kind of a fantastical lens. Ursula le Guin, for instance, and Winterson and Vonnegut.

I think, I don't know, life seems weird to me, and it feels very strange to approach it as if it's this kind of kitchen sink drama. It's a really good question, I suppose I've never thought about it in a studied way before. It feels much more realistic to be fantastical in my writing.

Fyfe: I see that approach in 80 Days, where you're using the license of science fiction to create a world that couldn't exist, and in many ways seems much better than the 1872 that actually existed.

Jayanth: [laughing] Yeah.

Fyfe: Is there a sadness to 80 Days, that this is not what history was?

Jayanth: Yeah… I think so. I think our Quarter to Three review said something like 80 Days celebrates sad transience, you know, the idea of faded glory. I think partly that's the nature of travel writ large; there is an ephemeral quality to all of your interactions, and I guess there is a kind of sadness that you're trying to outrun through this journey, but that's what makes it fun as well, and what makes it poignant and interesting. It's really weird, I'm making it sound like this whole journey is some kind of an attempt to escape mortality [laughs]. Fundamentally, it's just this fun adventure, but then occasionally you have… yeah, there are moments of sadness in it. I feel like it's more triumphant than it is sad, necessarily. The real pleasure of it is getting to take back some of that power. There is a real joy in writing yourself and people like you back into history. And while the truth of it might I think might be more depressing or upsetting, getting to write your own story, it's a way of coping with it, it's a way of dealing with it. Man. [laughs] I've made it sound like—if someone hasn't played it, they're gonna be like, wow, this game is super sad [laughs]. And preachy.

There's this weird idea that you can either confront these issues with something that's sad and slow and not fun, or it can be fun. As if the opposite to complicated and political is fun. And it isn't! [80 Days] is also silly. You can be silly and also talk about complicated political issues. That's one of the fun bits about 80 Days. And it's what we try to tell people, whenever we talk about the complicated politics and the way in which we deal with class and all of those things, I always find myself having to say: it's fun, too, you know? I mean… there are hijinks!

LIES OF THE NORTH

It's 1909: Robert Edwin Peary has been to the top of the world. Peary, the Pennsylvanian polar explorer and navy commander, has become the first man to reach the North Pole, lying 90 degrees north a few miles from the island of Ellesmere, near Greenland.

"The prize of three centuries, my dream and ambition for 23 years," Peary wrote in his diary. "Mine at last."

Peary's expedition left the Arctic aboard the S.S. Roosevelt, after one year abroad. "Only one short year of Arctic work!" thought Donald MacMillan, an explorer and former high school teacher on Peary's crew, who had been forced to abandon the march to the Pole due to frozen heels. One year, that was all? The Roosevelt set off from Ellesmere into the Robeson Channel, where it became caught in the ice. "I secretly hoped," MacMillan wrote later of that moment, "that Torngak, the evil spirit of the North, would keep her there."

Torngak works in mysterious ways. The Roosevelt broke free of the ice, returning the expedition to America, where Congress would honour Peary and promote him to Rear Admiral. But almost immediately, his claim was tested. The American explorer Frederick Cook, thought missing or dead for more than two years, resurfaced in Denmark claiming he had reached the Pole in April 1908, one year earlier than Peary.

Fortunately for Peary, his supporters, including Donald MacMillan, found the perfect means to discredit Cook. In Cook's account of his journey, he claimed an improbable route to the Pole that would have taken him directly through a huge, mountainous ice-island—but Cook made no mention of any land, and by his account he had waltzed unimpeded all the way over flat sea-ice. Peary himself had discovered that island in 1906, which he named Crocker Land, though he had never set foot there. To chart and study that island would disprove Cook definitively. Thus, in 1913, Donald MacMillan organised a scientific expedition to Crocker Land, with the financial support of the American Museum of Natural History, the American Geographical Society, and the University of Illinois' Museum of Natural History. On the team were Fitzhugh Green (engineer and physicist), Maurice Tanquary (zoologist), Walter Ekblaw (geologist), and, of course, Donald MacMillan (leader—second choice.) The first choice to lead the expedition had tragically drowned after his being selected; an omen to which no heed was paid.

The Crocker Land Expedition set sail from the Brooklyn Navy Yard on July 2, 1913. "In June 1906, Commander Peary, from the summit of Cape Thomas Hubbard… reported seeing land glimmering in the northwest, approximately 130 miles away across the Polar Sea," announced MacMillan to the press before departure. "That is Crocker Land. I am certain that strange animals will be found there, and I hope to discover a new race of men."

Crocker Land did not exist.

It was all bullshit. There was no land where Peary described, nor did Peary record seeing any land in his diary at the time. It's believed today that Peary's "discovery" of Crocker Land was an appeal to the vanity of the man who bankrolled the expedition, George Crocker, the well-to-do son of a millionaire banker and railroad baron. All Crocker Land ever was, perhaps, one more squeeze on the teat of young Moneybags Crocker.

“You probably shouldn’t go on that expedition,” is what Peary should have told Donald MacMillan, but he said nothing. He let him go ahead and commit the next two years of his life to defending Peary’s honour in the Arctic. MacMillan sailed away in ignorant bliss, confidence unshaken, until, two weeks in, the ship struck rocks and ran aground on the Labrador Coast. MacMillan blamed that on the captain, whom he had seen the previous night drinking scotch in his underwear. Perhaps it is in that crude sign that we observe at last the hand of evil Torngak.

Eventually it would come out that Robert Peary probably never even went to the North Pole at all. He had made camp about five miles from where he thought the Pole to be, and decided abruptly that he would carry on alone, without anyone capable of making independent navigational observations. He returned shortly after, claiming to have travelled twice as fast as he had been to that point, saying, in effect: “Yeah, I found it; didn’t really take me very long, either.” Peary never submitted any of his notes for independent review, and today, his claim to the Pole is generally discredited.

MacMillan arranged a replacement vessel in good time, and the expedition made camp at Etah, Greenland: the northernmost settlement in the world. Things were good, for a while. The expedition spent a couple months building their headquarters, planning their route to Crocker Land and placing supply caches along the way. They built good relationships with the local Inuit, sharing food and supplies, and recruiting some (and some of their dogs) to the expedition as guides.

The march to Crocker Land began in February of 1914. MacMillan sent advance parties, and embarked on the route himself with Minik Wallace, an Inuit translator and guide, on the 13th. I understand the portent, MacMillan thought at the time, but I don’t care. Crossing Alexandra Fiord, MacMillan and Wallace passed two dead dogs lying on the trail. That’s probably not a good sign, though.

When MacMillan and Wallace caught up with the advance parties, they found many of the older Inuit had contracted the mumps, and the dogs weak and malnourished. They had come to a stop at an immense glacier, and the Inuit argued the dogs would all die if they attempted to climb it now. Instead, they recommended turning back to Etah and trying again in a couple months. MacMillan consented, thoroughly pissy about their work ethic.

“I decided to retreat to Etah,” MacMillan wrote, “and there eliminate the sick, the chicken-hearted, and the older and, consequently, the more influential Eskimos, who were apparently very much concerned over the fact that their dogs might die and thus compel them to walk a few hundred miles. In a discussion of this nature the younger men of the party always listen respectfully to the opinion of their elders and do as they advise. Young Eskimos for a long and dangerous trip are much to be preferred, as they are fond of adventure and willing to take a chance, while the older men wish to make certain of getting home.”

Young Eskimos like Minik Wallace. Minik was a curiosity, who, like MacMillan, had lived in the thrall of Robert Peary. Minik met Peary in 1897 when he was seven, living amongst the Inughuit in northern Greenland. Peary had been working with the Inughuit on his expedition, and invited some to return to New York with him. Minik, his father, and four others accompanied Peary to visit America, where Peary unexpectedly gifted them to the American Museum of Natural History. “What’s this shit?” thought both the Museum and the Inughuit, presumably.

The Museum took custody of the Inughuit, studied them and put them on display. Soon, the adult Inughuit died of tuberculosis, including Minik’s father Qisuk. At Minik’s request, the Museum organised a traditional Inughuit burial for his father. What Minik did not know was that the Museum actually buried a coffin full of rocks. The Museum kept Qisuk’s body for themselves, and put his skeleton on exhibit—in the building where Minik lived, now as the adopted son of the Museum curator. Minik didn’t find out about any of this for years, until some American children told him after reading it in a pamphlet. When Minik tried to return his father’s bones to Greenland, the Museum director pretended not to have them. At which point Minik, quite understandably, decided to get the fuck out of the United States.

Peary's steamer, Roosevelt

It was March 1914 when the Expedition set out again on its 1200-mile journey to Crocker Land, with the temperature far below freezing. MacMillan, joined by Minik, Fitzhugh Green, Walter Ekblaw, and six more Inuit, successfully climbed the impassive Beistadt Glacier that had previously stalled their progress. It occurred to Minik then that another of the Inuit in the group had left his hot young wife back in Etah, so he abruptly quit the expedition and ran home, followed shortly thereafter by the husband. MacMillan was unenthused. Ekblaw, not long after, caught frostbite in his toes, and MacMillan held onto him, working him like the dogs until they had crossed to Ellesmere Island and absolutely had to send him home.

Seven hundred miles of “rolling blue ice” lay ahead to the northwest. It was only then that MacMillan thought their work had truly begun. “We were going into the unknown,” he wrote, “toward that point where land had been put down with a question mark.”

Into the unknown, then. On the night of April tenth, MacMillan scaled an ice ridge under the light of a full moon, and watched the ice float across the dark, writhing channels of the Polar Sea. After crossing the sea, the expedition made camp and Fitzhugh Green attempted a radio-echo sounding; lowering wire into a hole in the ice to measure its thickness. Green unspooled five hundred fathoms of wire into the hole without finding its bottom—then a thousand fathoms, then two thousand. Green and MacMillian glanced at each other and gave up.

Two weeks later, at last: Green ran into the igloo in the morning, yelling, “We have it!” MacMillan and the two Inuit—Piugaattoq and Ituuqasu—chased Green to a vantage point. And there she was, upon the crest of the horizon in all of its anticipated majesty:

Crocker Land. “Great heavens!” MacMillan remembered thinking. “What a land! Hills, valleys, snowcapped peaks extending through at least one hundred and twenty degrees of the horizon.”

MacMillan and Green stood in awe, then begun to plan their assent. Piugaattoq shook his head. “That’s just mist,” he said. A mirage. MacMillan and Green didn’t think so. Ituuqasu just shrugged. Let’s check it out anyway, MacMillan decided.

“As we proceeded,” wrote MacMillan, “the landscape gradually changed its appearance and varied in extent with the swinging around of the sun; finally at night it disappeared altogether…. You can imagine how earnestly we scanned every foot of that horizon—not a thing in sight, not even our almost constant traveling companion, the mirage. We were convinced that we were in pursuit of a will-o’-the-wisp, ever receding, ever changing, ever beckoning.”

MacMillan accepted the truth: the object of his quest was a mirage, a lie written across the horizon. These kinds of mirages were named fata morgana, after the Italian name for Morgan le Fay, the Arthurian sorceress and shape-shifter. The Sicilians had thought that these mirages, these appearances of false land, were Morgan’s witchcraft, intended to lure sailors to their deaths. So maybe Crocker Land was witchcraft, a hex born of a sordid, arcane tryst between Morgan or Torngak, or Morgan wreaking her own retribution against the last descendants of the men who wronged her thousands of years ago. Or maybe it was mere optical illusion, light rays bending in thermal inversion through layers of air in an atmospheric duct. There was a lot to unpack here, for sure.

The next morning, MacMillan turned the expedition back, and, almost immediately, got lost.

This he blamed on Ituuqasu, who had lost the trail back to Etah and didn’t feel the need to bring it up until MacMillan asked him directly. After a few weeks, the foursome made it to an igloo, low on supplies. MacMillan sent Green, Piugaattoq and some dogs southwest to survey the coastline, and once the group had split up, MacMillan and Ituuqasu found themselves caught in a snowstorm and a collapsing igloo, preyed upon by wolves.

Six days passed before Fitzhugh Green returned—alone. MacMillan left the igloo to meet Green’s sledge, carried by about half the dogs he had left with. “This is all there is left of your southern division,” Green said matter-of-factly. “Piugaattoq is dead; my dogs were buried.”

Green told MacMillan the story. Caught in the same snowstorm, Piugaattoq and Green took refuge in a hastily-constructed igloo. When the storm eased, Green emerged to find his dogs buried under fifteen feet of snow. Piugaattoq’s dogs were okay, and so on the return journey to MacMillan, Piugattoq travelled by fast, sleek dogsled while Green struggled to keep up on foot. Which pissed Green off, and after a while Green grabbed a rifle off of the sled and ordered Piugaattoq to keep behind him. Piugaattoq did, but

when Green looked away for a moment, the Inuit raced away at full speed. “I shot once in the air,” wrote Green in his diary. “He did not stop. I then killed him with a shot through the shoulder and another through the head.”

That was the story he told MacMillan, anyway. There were rumours, entertained by those who found Green’s account insufficiently salacious, that Green had been sleeping with Piugaattoq’s wife Aleqasina—whom Robert Peary had taken as a mistress years ago when she was fourteen.

MacMillan took all of this in, and came to a decision on what the official story would be. “Green,” as MacMillan wrote in his diary, “inexperienced in the handling of Eskimos, and failing to understand their motives and temperament, had felt it necessary to shoot his companion.” But this was not the story he would share with Aleqasina or Piugaattoq’s five children. MacMillan would tell them, and all the Inuit, that Piugaattoq had just died from one of those normal everyday hazards one encounters in the Arctic, nothing to do with him or Green or anybody, and so… shit happens. They left Piugaattoq in the ice.

On the way back to Etah, one of the dogs gave birth. MacMillan carried the puppy inside of his shirt to keep it warm. It crawled in circles around MacMillan’s body about forty times, eventually disappearing through a hole in his clothes, never to be seen again.

The remains of the expedition arrived back in Etah in the spring to deliver the catalogue of bad news. MacMillan told his colleagues Ekblaw and Tanquary the truth about Piugaattog, but forbade either of them from discussing it. Ekblaw could not have been less impressed with MacMillan (who had once been described in magazines as a “Christian gentleman”). “I’ll never again go under the leadership of a ‘Christian gentleman’,” Ekblaw wrote that October, “and if ever anybody calls me that it will mean a fight.”

MacMillan owned up to the non-existence of Crocker Land, at least, and its implications for the competing North Pole claims of Robert Peary and Frederick Cook. On Christmas Eve 1914, he and Tanquary left by sledge for Upernavik, five hundred miles south from Etah, where they could send word to America of the exhibition’s failure and request a rescue ship.

The second journey was weirder than the first. En route to Upernavik, MacMillan and Tanquary danced with Inuit girls to a squeaky Victrola, officiated a wedding, feasted on fetid seal and raw polar bear, debated socialism, met a boy raised by dogs, and encountered a mother whose starving children had almost destroyed her breast with their teeth, who had slit the tips of her fingers so her children might sup on her blood. Conditions worsened. The dogs, facing starvation, turned on the expedition in a pack fifty-strong; MacMillan fended them off with a whip. It was not long until MacMillan was forced to eat the dogs—and feed their meat to the living dogs—just to survive.

It was almost March. MacMillan had had enough. He tasked Tanquary with carrying the message the remaining miles to Upernavik. MacMillan returned to Etah, the closest thing available to home.

The message, if it got through, would reveal their mission to have been folly. The one thing the Crocker Land Expedition accomplished was the exact opposite of its goal: it had verified Frederick Cook's claim to the North Pole and would hand him the prize Peary had sought for decades. It had been a year and a half, Piugaattog had been murdered, they'd fed dogs to dogs, the American hero Robert Peary had been exposed as a fraud, a hundred thousand dollars had been wasted on this ill-informed expedition, and when Tanquary returned from Upernavik he was so cold that when he removed his boots, he took his toes along with them. Could all of that have actually been for nothing?

At this moment it would probably have brought Donald MacMillan no solace to know that Frederick Cook had also lied about going to the North Pole. There was never any solid evidence that Cook's expedition reached the Pole at all, much less a full year before Peary did (or rather, did not.) What's more, what Cook presented as his route to the Pole was extremely similar to the route taken by the characters in an obscure Jules Verne novel, The English at the North Pole, in which the English don't even go to the fucking North Pole but go insane and leap into a volcano—which sounds about right.

Tanquary's message at Upernavik did get through. The American Museum of Natural History immediately send a ship to the rescue: a three-masted schooner named the George H. Cluett, captained by the esteemed American whaler George Comer. The Cluett sailed forth to the Arctic as quickly as possible, promptly becoming stuck in an iceberg and remaining trapped there for two years; just another chump in the ice.