

ISSUE TWENTY

EXPLOITS

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**Violet Adele Bloch on
JOKER**

HAPPINESS IN GAMES •

DRIVE YOUR PLOW OVER the BONES of the DEAD

• gen:LOCK • MUSIC GENRES • CONTROL

IT'S COOL, BE HAPPY

by Alexis Ong

In 1994, *SimTower* introduced ten-year-old me to the idea of happiness management, setting the tone for decades of masochistic devotion to the NPCs in my care. The premise was simple: Develop and manage a multi-use skyscraper, and get a five-star rating. Above all, this meant ensuring that the elevators ran smoothly – it was critical that your tenants didn't wait in line for too long. As stress accumulated, each tiny black figure would slowly turn pink, then red, before imploding into thin air. Among all the *Sim* games, *SimTower's* take was the most bleakly hysterical. If you couldn't keep a high-rise time bomb full of people happy, they would blip out of existence from sheer rage.

The commodification of happiness isn't new news – it isn't even old news. It's been a part of human philosophy for centuries and translates well both as a game mechanic and narrative element. On a large scale, like in Sid Meier's *Civilization*, happiness is a resource that must be managed or you'll have to deal with citywide insurrection. In the much-anticipated *Paranoia: Happiness is Mandatory* (out on October 3 as an Epic exclusive) players must navigate an Orwellian world where everyone is "happy" through compliance. The original *Paranoia* tabletop RPG was one of the most well-crafted satires in gaming history, but in 2019, thanks to the mainstream success of *Black Mirror* and Instagram, performative happiness isn't quite the shocker it used to be.

And so, amid the current hellscape of world events, playing through *Ni no Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom* was like a cartoon ray of light; the emotional second instalment of the Level-5 JRPG has been a godsend for my sanity. Its protagonist, deposed royal Evan Pettiwisker Tildrum, is a child who can't believe he's getting thrown out of his own kingdom. At the beginning of the game, listening to Evan is an exercise in patience: He's determined to create a new kingdom, Evermore, where people from all backgrounds can just be happy. Sure, okay, kid.

Much has been said about how games create opportunities for escapism and release, and not enough about the depictions of happiness in said games. The last time I felt close to "happy" in a game was playing *Dark Souls*, when repeated failures pushed me onto a new plane of serene acceptance. The more I died, the more zen-like I became. And for a while, that was all I expected from many games – resignation or cynicism that comes from being overly attuned to morally ambiguous setups. The subversiveness of *Revenant Kingdom* is actually really simple: It's incredibly earnest about Evan's vision of universal happiness, and it wants you to feel empowered by it, too.