THE COMFORT FOOD OF KNOWLEDGE

by Chris Compendio

The lore of the prolonged *Saw* films is a tangled fascination, with each movie built on a foundation of inane plot twists. This fictional universe is convoluted in an artful and comprehensive manner that few media franchises dare to even dream of. Films call back to obscure details three films ago, films take place within the timeframes of other films, and so on. And while I find myself scouring Wikipedia for hours and absorbing every *Saw*-related detail there is, I have never seen a full minute from any of these films. The knowledge is enough.

It isn't just *Saw* – I could say the same thing about *Metal Gear*, *Mass Effect*, *Star Trek* and other expanded universes. Simply knowing the intricacies of these worlds, from minute plot developments to particular character traits activates something in the brain, providing a strange sense of satisfaction. Self-spoiling a wealth of content becomes an inexplicable source of dopamine.

These armchair quests for knowledge that burn up several nights eventually round back to universes that I am intimately familiar with. Every few months or so, usually unprompted, I would go back to the *Kingdom Hearts* fandom wiki, going through all of the character and game pages, sifting through trivia and chronological plot summaries. It is as if I am taking stock, turning facts into tangible objects, making sure that everything is in the right place and that each tidbit is in sync with my own personal knowledge of something.

Wikipedia has a "humorous essay" that touches upon this phenomenon, which they style as "Wikipediholism." Even with the humorous slant, there is still a hint of truth to the concept. This essay focuses more on the editors than the readers, with these "Wikipediholics" hounding the "Recent Changes" of any given article to ensure the integrity of the information. While editing Wikipedia pages isn't meant to be a full-time role, these editors are subservient to accuracy and thus will engage in semantic stab fights in the "Talk" pages. Take the *Star Trek Into Darkness* debacle over whether the "I" in "Into" is capitalized or not, well-documented in an xkcd comic.

And speaking of xkcd, the webcomic also had its finger on the pulse with a similar phenomenon regarding the website TV Tropes, with a comic titled "Tab

Explosion." Like Wikipedia, TV Tropes, which essentially compiles well-known and informally classified and named tropes of every piece of popular media out there, is what xkcd and other like-minded folks online would call a "browser narcotic." Seemingly endless browsing sessions will result in numerous tabs, as one curious avenue leads to another by link-clicking. Through a series of tangentially-related topics, one may start off reading about the extended history of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's production and end up reading the play-by-play of the Vietnam War.

Knowing trivial information inside and out is gratifying, and recalling known particulars is oddly comforting. It could be analogous to scrolling through the pages of every item on your bookshelf, reveling in ev ery little detail. Instead of philosophy or medicine, however, you're reading about each character named "Snake" in *Metal Gear*. For some, it is a low-key addiction to curiosity, an obsession to prevent boredom and satisfy obsessive-compulsive tendencies. For others, it is a method of arming oneself with knowledge and living vicariously in a period where there is too much content to digest. But regardless of who is scrolling through Wikipedia in the dark at half past midnight, chances are that they are seeking solace. 🎺