Sim City

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By Erica Rivera

Content notes: Discussions of parental abuse and gender dysphoria; brief references to apartheid, settler colonialism, and torture; and a depiction of an earthquake.

My dad's a historian, he thinks I don't know what that means but I do. It means he spends time with things that are old. I'm thirteen; I'm not old enough to have a history, so he doesn't spend much time with me.

That's okay.

I have my games.

"Cozy games" is the name of the genre on Steam. I don't think they're all that cozy. I think that's something that makes adults feel cozy, calling things by the wrong name. I think the word they use for this is "euphemism." It sounds like a philosophy, or a religion.

I think for them it is.

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When I turned thirteen, my parents got me a projector. They came in, stepped on and all over my stuff, took everything on one wall down, and put up a white sheet. They hung the projector over my bed on the opposite wall. I can sit or lay on my bed while I play. Sometimes they come into my room and watch. When they do they smile.

My dad says when he was my age all the games just revolved around shooting. My dad is a historian but a historian of cities. He knows everything that ever happened in our city, he knows everything that ever happened in most cities. He put me to bed when I was a little kid with stories about how London was built, how Hong Kong came to be. He told me about Jamestown, New Amsterdam, La Nouvelle-Orléans, about Seoul, about Sydney, about apartheid in South Africa. About Johanessburg, how "burg" means "fortified city" in Afrikaans. My dad is a historian of cities, but that means he only knows the history of cities. He doesn't know much about what they were before. He doesn't know much about what they could be.

He knows enough to teach, I guess. To get tenure at the university.

But he doesn't know everything.

He doesn't know the history of video games, for example. He doesn't know that when he was my age, all the games didn't just revolve around shooting. There were cozy games back then too, they just didn't call them that. I feel like everything is always in the process of being given a new name.

Even if the thing being named already had one. Even if the thing being named doesn't want it.

I know my parents wouldn't have gotten me the projector if I didn't code. Sometimes what they watch me play on the projector are games I've designed myself, which is when they smile the biggest. The projector makes it easy for them to keep an eye on what I'm playing. On my progress.

My mom works in video games, but she's not a developer. She's in HR, she hires the people who make the things people play, the things that people play on. Once I saw her tear up, watching me play a game I made that wasn't even that good. She said afterwards she was proud of me. She knows exactly how much I'll make someday if I keep this up.

My dad doesn't make much money, I know he wants more. I know he wishes he made what my mom makes. I know because they fight about money when they think I'm not listening, they say exactly how they feel when they think it's only them that can hear it. At school there's something called "Divorce Club." Well, that's what I call it, I think the teachers call it something else. Once a week a couple kids from each grade eat lunch together in a small office that doesn't get used for anything else and they're all the kids whose parents are divorced.

That's why I call it "Divorce Club." I like to call things what they are.

The kids, when they go into the office, they look sad. When they come out, they look even sadder. I watched a movie on Netflix called *Marriage Story*. I think they should have called it Divorce Story. You can tell a lot about adults by what they choose to call things: I think adults think marriage is pretty much the same thing as divorce. My parents are going to get divorced someday, or if they don't, they'll wish they had. I don't want them to get divorced, I don't want to eat lunch in that room. Those kids go in and I think they're supposed to leave feeling less alone. The reviews of the games I used to play promised me the same thing. A heartbreaking story that'll make you feel less alone. Gameplay so real it'll make you more empathetic. A world so well-developed it's like you're in the story, like you're one of the characters, living out the cutscenes that are supposed to make you feel shock and surprise.

Maybe it's because my mom hires the people who make this stuff, but I always know there are other people involved in the development of a game. People somewhere on the other side of the screen. I never feel that immersive feeling you're supposed to feel. The twists aren't shocking or surprising. It's like, "Oh, okay. That's what they paid someone to make me think, to make me feel." It doesn't make me feel less alone. It usually does the opposite.

That's why I like making my own games, and then playing them myself. At

least then I know the person on the other side is me.

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My dad's looking for what the entertainment industry calls a smash hit. He doesn't get that he's in that industry too. His audience is the people he works with, the people who work at other universities. If he understood this, he would've had a smash hit a long time ago. If he had, he wouldn't have asked me to help him with his work.

"Asked" is a euphemism.

Really, he demands.

I'm his daughter, I don't feel like I have a choice in the matter. If my family was a company and I'd been hired as "Lead Daughter," I'd be getting paid to follow orders. Instead, I have to do whatever he says, with no rewards or rights. I always have to do whatever they say. That's what makes them the adults.

When I was 10, I started stealing clothes from my dad. Tweed jackets, patterned ties. Big leathery shoes, itchy socks between them and my skin. It was uncomfortable but also not. I looked in the mirror and something was right. In the mirror, I looked like I was drowning. Those were the only times I didn't feel like I was drowning.

After they caught me, they fought. I know what they said, I know what they think. I know they were relieved when I discovered video games. "Discovered." Another euphemism. My mom's cache of consoles and discs, decades of work samples laid out in the living room when I came home from school one day.

In video games, you're always a guy. In the cache they leave for me to find, there's no *Tomb Raider*, no *Portal*, no *Perfect Dark*. No *Mirror's Edge*, no *Beyond Good and Evil*. I'm grateful. Sometimes you settle for virtual reality

when reality reality isn't enough.

My dad asks me to design him interactive models of the cities he writes about. He says everyone at work is buzzing over the "digital humanities." He thinks incorporating virtual reality into his writing will take his work "to the next level."

I understand immediately. He wants access to more of his gameworld. He wants an upgrade to his stats — he wants to unlock new missions, new kinds of gameplay. He's bored, his storyline has stagnated. I get it. I know what that's like.

He's finally got, for the first time, what expert gamers possess: good timing.

I'm good enough now at programming reality.

I know how to give us both exactly what we want.

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I tell my dad to build a scale model of the city out of whatever he can find. I tell him I'll digitize it, so I can give him what he wants.

At night, he starts gluing thick pieces of card-stock into careful patterns. They form a rough layout of the city. He carves styrofoam into hills, paints strips of gray cutting across and through the city to represent streets. He marks every spot where he wants me to put an interactive module with a large X in black Sharpie. With a thick purple highlighter, he loosely traces the routes he wants players to walk on.

At the end, little bits of scrap paper and styrofoam make an awkward halo around the table our city sits on. He calls it his "city on a hill" — the hill of our hardly used ping-pong table in the middle of our two-car garage. The little buildings cast skinny shadows across the gray streets and purple player-paths, over the black pipe cleaners and transparent wire that represent

power lines. Onto the green rectangles of sponge-tops that represent grass, the cut-up yellow sponge-bottoms that are supposed to be bodies of water.

When I check in on him, he gives me a big hug and says that this is what his research was missing. This level of detail, of depth. He says that it's what all research is missing. "Why aren't people doing more of this," he asks me rhetorically, with a fat smirk on his face, and I think the answer is no one can do what I can do.

Or maybe that no one would ask their kid to do what it is I'm doing.

I don't respond, I just smile. He's grateful now, but because he doesn't know everything. Sometimes I think he doesn't know anything. "Adult," I think is a euphemism too.

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When you design games yourself, you learn a lot more about what technology is capable of. It doesn't take long before you realize how limited most people's imaginations are. How limited adults' imaginations are.

Almost all games, for example, use the same gravity as Earth. If they change the gravity, it's because the characters are on the moon, on Saturn, somewhere in space.

Almost all games star characters that are human or animal, who move through their worlds like humans and animals do.

Almost all games treat time as linear.

Almost all games tell a story.

That's why I like my cozy games. *Animal Crossing*. *Stardew Valley*. *The Sims*. They have a lot of the same characteristics as other games, follow a lot of the same unimaginative rules. But the world belongs to you. You're in control

of nearly everything. In my head, the most fantastical things play out between the figures in my simulator — plotless stories you'd never find in any buyable game. In the stories I make up for myself, the person I am is male. Inside my head, the person I am I name myself.

When I start making games, I make a quick switch: if I press A and B on my controller simultaneously, the screen will shift over to a cozy game.

That's what my parents see when they walk by my room, that's what makes them smile.

The games I switch away from, I don't want them to see.

I don't want them to know what the technology's capable of.

I don't want them to know what I'm capable of.

All kids want is a little privacy — to decide for ourselves who we're going to be, without adults taking it so personally.

All we want is the right to choose our own fucking names.

*_***_*_*_

What I design for my dad is a test.

I schedule it for when I'm at school and my mom's away at work. In the garage at home alone, he bumps the table with his crappy model on it. He's so obsessed with what he's doing, his heart nearly stops. The buildings in his model teeter dramatically; the tallest almost lifts off of its foundation, comes close to hitting the row of buildings beside it. If it had, his downtown would have been ruined. A little shake and his fragile city almost shatters into pieces.

He's trying to readjust everything, when suddenly —

The earth shakes.

He throws himself over the ping-pong table, grabs onto every edge with his arms while still floating just far enough above it so he doesn't crush the skyline with his torso. He keeps everything and himself as still as he can while the earth finishes its shake. He's protecting his creation by pure instinct, staring down over it like a god — trying to prevent its destruction by something far holier than him, for what I bet feels like an eternity.

Really, it's just a few seconds.

My mom calls him and tells him she'd been in a meeting, that she's fine, that she helped her coworkers keep calm. He texts me that everything's going to be okay, that he can come pick me up early from school if I want.

I just text back, "*i'm in the middle of a test,*" and I know he knows I'm fine.

Of course I'm fine.

I programmed the earthquake myself.

My dad looks back at his model one last time to check for any serious damage, but what he notices instead is the news anchor on the TV in the garage. The news anchor is talking about the earthquake. The news anchor is saying its magnitude was 5.2, that its epicenter had been right in the middle of our city. The news anchor is saying it's unprecedented, that there isn't even an active fault line anywhere near us. The news anchor is saying state seismologists are stumped. The news anchor says more but my dad doesn't hear what they're saying because in the background of the broadcast is one of the museums on Museum Row, and though the news anchor doesn't mention it, my dad notices that there's a loose, thick purple line painted onto the asphalt behind the anchor, starting somewhere off the left side of the screen and trailing off on the right.

Right on the line, directly in front of the museum, is a large black X stretching

across most of the width of the road.

The news anchor isn't talking about it, and my dad looks at his model trying to stabilize reality. No, there it is. His large X right in front of the museum. A *small* X, compared to the one on the road in front of the real museum, just a few feet away from where the news anchor's standing.

C'mon, dad.

Figure it out.

The news anchor starts interviewing a day trader who works in the city's big, shiny central skyscraper. The day trader says it felt like the entire building had been lifted off of its foundation.

My dad's hand instinctively covers his mouth. Then he reaches for a Sharpie.

It takes about five seconds after he draws a neat circle around the X for the news anchor to appear back on the screen. The news anchor is talking excitedly and then asks the cameraperson to zoom in on the asphalt behind them. The X in front of the art museum that had been on live TV moments ago now has a thick round O surrounding it. The news anchor is saying it appeared suddenly, right in front of their eyes. The news anchor is saying it's one of over forty X's that have mysteriously appeared across the city over the last week, usually accompanied by a thick purple line, and always on a sidewalk or street. The news anchor is saying that citizens speculate it's the work of a guerrilla artist making some kind of political statement, but online sleuths have yet to determine meaningful links between the purple routes or the black X's, which tend to be in front of significant historical landmarks, but not always. The news anchor is saying that the black circle had appeared right in front of their eyes: "Like magic, Joan, like magic, I swear, Joan, it's one of the strangest and most exciting stories I think we've ever seen, one of the strangest and most exciting mysteries that we may never solve. Back to you, Joan."

My dad takes a loud, deep breath, then crumples to the floor and has a panic attack.

Just like he did in my simulation.

Good.

That means everything, so far, has gone according to plan.

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Once upon a time, Washington, D.C. had competition.

On December 19, 1815, the Town Council of Dover, Delaware — current population, 100,000, then-population, a tenth that — formally submitted a request to the fledgling federal government, in an attempt to usurp the title of nation's capital from a city they called in their request "a hastily devised debacle, in no way representative of the greatness of the American project."

Their reasoning, they said, was not extreme.

They pointed out that Dover was the birthplace of both the country's first president, George Washington, as well as its first treasury secretary, Benjamin Franklin.

Dover, they said, had the highest employment and literacy rates of any other capital city on the coast.

Dover, they reminded federal officials, was the site of the First Colonial Library, the predecessor to the National Archives ("a mediocre imitation of our exemplary model," they wrote). It stored many important historical documents, including—they claimed—the *original* Declaration of Independence, a copy that had only John Hancock's signature on it, misspelled because he'd been so nervous, and then put aside "but not expunged, in great thanks to the esteemable fore-sight of our great

Librarians."

These and many other qualities of the tiny colonial town they said made Dover the "true and rightful Capital of the United States."

Their petition failed, mostly because the federal officials charged with handling it — those from the Department of the Interior, known then as the Federal Bureau of Internal Affairs — were aware that everything in the petition was completely fabricated. Though Dover's Town Council had published their petition in their then-most widely circulating newspaper, *The Dover Disciple*, and printed it in pamphlet form to distribute freely across other capital cities, not a single stated "fact" in their petition was grounded in reality (apart from the fact that many New England elites, including elected officials, did indeed desperately want the political and thus economic capital of the country to be a city like Dover, one they felt was far more central to their own political — and thus economic — networks).

George Washington was born, of course, miles south of D.C. at the Mount Vernon estate in northern Virginia, and Benjamin Franklin a few hours east of Dover in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Dover did not have particularly high employment and literacy rates, not among American capital cities, nor when compared to similarly sized cities around the world.

The "First Colonial Library" did not exist.

And there was only one "original" copy of the Declaration of Independence, on display at the Thomas H. Jefferson Memorial in the true "rightful Capital" of the United States of America: Washington, in the District of Columbia.

Representatives of the bureau knew all of this because then, as now, their cadre was largely made up of historians, urban planners, and other over-educated academic types, whose entire raison d'être is to know these kinds

of things. I know this because *I* am a historian, an over-educated academic type, because *my* entire raison d'être is to know these kinds of things.

The working title of my research on this forgotten history was "Fake News and the American Project: Geopolitical Fraud and Capital City Contestation in Early 18th-Century New England," which I thought was clever and catchy (and alliterative!) enough to merit publication *somewhere*. But it's so challenging to get papers accepted these days — especially in an academic journal that matters. I wasn't going to pay to have my research published, like the sea of silly adjuncts streaming out the door before the school year was even over, off and onto some other school's so-called "tenure track." I wasn't going to inflate my work's importance either, making some backroom deal with an editor at this or that academic institution, skipping the arduous but time-tested process of formal submission and peer review.

My work was about fraud and fraudulence. What kind of person would I have been to commit fraud in order to get it published?

The idea for a fix came from my daughter. She's 13, she likes to play video games, although hers look astoundingly different from the ones I played growing up. Her games are filled with cute, collectable creatures and lush, colorful landscapes; her games are reactive and interactive, everything at her control; her games let her customize as much as she wants, however she wants. Her games give her total control over time and space.

She's a programmer too. She learned to code as part of an after-school program we enrolled her in at age 10, when we realized she needed a distraction from whatever was going on in her head. We all know how kids are: able to be drawn into anything unless properly guided.

When she was 12, she made her first game that incorporated history: a working simulation of our neighborhood, in which little digital versions of me and her mother and our neighbors ambled aimlessly around a highly oversimplified representation of the three-block radius around our home,

and though you couldn't do much beyond navigate around the little digital neighborhood and every so often run into 2-D pop-ups sporting historical facts about our town (complete with a source for each fact, cited neatly in MLA format), when she showed it to me, I almost fainted with pride.

It was that game that gave me the idea.

You see, the digital humanities are very *in* right now, very appealing. Very *lucrative*. Very prestigious. I was certain no one could see written research like mine, contextualized by an appendix of meticulously crafted digital representations of Dover, Delaware, and not think:

"This needs to be published. *Now*."

And if those representations were *interactive?*

I could see my name in print already, on the cover of *Urban Studies* or *Politics and Geography*—or even *The Journal of American History*, I could only hope — in tiny little letters under a slightly bigger (and certainly bold) printing of my clever, catchy (alliterative!) title. Would they print the title and subtitle on the cover in full, or would they cut it down to the first six words alone? Would I need to condense it? Should I combine the title and subtitle now, so they wouldn't have to ask me to cut it down later? My mind was racing, and I hadn't even started designing the model. I hadn't even asked my daughter if she'd help me.

But I knew that she would.

Why wouldn't she? We'd given her everything. We'd given her everything she could ever ask for.

Surely she knew that someday we'd collect.

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Being inside my dad's head wasn't strange, it just confirmed everything I already knew.

I already knew he cared about his work more than anything else, that it took up most of his thoughts. I already knew what his work was about. I already knew how he felt about me. If I learned anything, it's that I guess I do have a history: that I've been a baby, a little kid, a 5th-grader learning how to code, a 7th-grader learning to make my own virtual realities. I guess only histories that draw people's attention get his attention. Everybody wants a smash hit. Everybody wants to make it big.

I develop the quick switch soon after starting to code because it doesn't take me long, tinkering with my creations, to figure out that you can use computers replicate reality in its entirety. If you type the right lines of code in the right order, if you design the gameworld like a god designs a universe, you can forecast exactly how any situation will play out. You can live inside the head of someone you know, for instance. You can play a real live person like they're a character in a virtual story. I play as my mom, I play as my dad; I play as my teachers and my friends; I even play as myself, which is super weird and trippy so I only do it once. There're no video games in the world like mine, no designer alive who can do what I do, or else I'm pretty sure we'd all know about it. (I call them my little "empathy machines," but I worry that means I'm getting older, if I'm getting into the habit of naming things with words that don't actually match.)

If my mom got her hands on my tech, I know she'd sell it to the highest bidder.

And if my dad got his hands on it — well, the simulation tells me everything I need to know.

In almost every scenario, there's only one ending, even when it plays out different ways. I build the model for my dad; he gets exactly what he wants, and then he wants more. Through thousands of different playthroughs, I try

thousands of different ways to give him what he wants without revealing what I can do. Always, he finds out.

I'm his kid. He has all the power.

When he realizes what's possible, he takes over.

He takes over *everything*.

The most useful thing about virtual realities is that they don't have to be virtual, if you push the tech far enough. They can be made real. If you type the right lines in the right order, the *exact* right order — you can make reality play out exactly how you want it to. The model in the garage, the earthquake my dad thinks he causes with his model: *I* made that happen. I coded it into my simulation.

"Simulation," a euphemism.

It's not *simulating* anything; if anything, reality's simulating *it*.

In the real simulations I run — and at this point, I'm saying things like "real simulations," so I feel like everything's getting tangled up with itself — my dad doesn't take long to learn how I do what I do. He doesn't use it to fix or improve the cities he takes control of; he doesn't even use it to learn more about them, or how they work. He uses it to *rule* them — like they're kingdoms and he's their king. He's studied cities so closely, he knows exactly how to make them run in one direction: his. In every simulation I run, it's only a matter of time before he becomes a god. Before he becomes *the* God.

The simulations cut out after that.

Hardware has its limits.

I design the test in the garage because he's my dad. I want him to prove me wrong, to break the cycle, to surprise me.

Instead, when I get home the day of the earthquake, all he wants is for me to teach him how to code. When he comes up to my room, he grips my arm so hard while he talks to me it leaves a bright red mark in the shape of his hand.

At least this isn't surprising.

At least I've prepared myself for what to do next.

*_***_*_*_

```
set LOOP_PARAMETERS = [
                        duration: ∞,
                        gameworld: reality_subset(CITIES),
                        time_period: random(between: 10000BCE,
1000BCE)
                                                                ]
object DAD = [
                        location: garage,
                        age: 43,
                        gender: male
                                                    ]
object ME = [
                        location: my_room,
                        age: 13,
                        gender: indeterminate
```

]

object DAD_COPY = duplicate(object: DAD)

remove(target: DAD_COPY.consciousness, from: DAD_COPY)

object MY_CONSCIOUSNESS_COPY = duplicate(object: ME.consciousness)

insert(target: DAD_COPY, insertion: MY_CONSCIOUSNESS_COPY)

begin loop(with: LOOP_PARAMETERS, repeat_interval: +00:00:00:15) {

dematerialize(

object: DAD,

pain_setting: MAX

)

→ set DAD_CONSTITUENT_PARTS

redistribute DAD_CONSTITUENT_PARTS

→ random(from: gameworld)

rematerialize(

set: DAD_CONSTITUENT_PARTS → DAD,

pain_setting: MAX

)

}

> print(“The deed is done.”)

*_***_*_*_

“I want a divorce,” I tell my mom, and she doesn’t even cry. I give her the kind of hug where I’m holding her entire body; she fits easily in my newly elongated arms, firm with strength and confidence. I tell her I’ll be the one to move out. I tell her we can share custody of me (technically, a copy of me, who I’ll let be whoever the hell she wants to be). Then I pack up all my things and leave, just like men do in the movies.

I drive like crap to a motel where no one does a double-take when I give them my ID and a credit card. I go to a grocery store and buy a six-pack of beer that I throw away after I take my first sip from one of the cans. Nothing adults do is actually any fun.

At the end of the night, I lie down on the crappy mattress and reality catches up with me all at once. I realize I never have to go to school again. I guess that’s nice. I also realize I have no idea where or when my father is.

He’s had forty years to figure out how to be a man. He’ll sort himself out.

Now it’s finally my turn.

Erica “ERN” Rivera (she/they) is a performance writer, editor, and collage artist. She is the author of *The Ecology of Art, Strike!*, a collection of essays that will be published by tRaum Books in 2025. Her work appears in *en*gendered*, *JAKE*, *manywor(l)ds*, *Sophon Lit*, *Isele Magazine*, *beestung*, *Under the Sun*, Osmosis Press, and *The Emerson Review*, and is forthcoming from *The Offing*, *GARLAND*, and *Broken Antler Magazine*. For fun, she likes to watch TV and pretend all the characters are trans.

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