

THE PAST IS YOURS

on hacking your lived experience

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One of my favorite genres of media belongs to video games circa the age of the original Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). I remember the classic *Super Mario Bros. 3*, of course, with its warp zones and tanooki suits, and also *Double Dragon II: The Revenge*, in particular the double illusion level right before the final boss. But my favorite game for the NES, no contest, is without a shred of doubt: *IRONSWORD: Wizards and Warriors II*.

The mechanics for this game are not just brutal; they actively troll the Mario fans. In Mario, you jump on something to kill it, but bum rushing it will result in lost health. In Ironsword, they flip the mechanic: if the protagonist Kuros jumps on something, he loses health, but if he bum rushes it, the sword he's wielding will impale whatever is in his way. So you have to actively flip your entire intuition of 80s game mechanics just to get past the first level. There's also this minigame in the tavern called "bonus chance" which is basically the reason I don't gamble.

But let's back up a bit. I had a blast playing this game because it was what I had access to. My friends in grade school thought I was a total weirdo; they were all about the latest GameCube and Xbox 360 and Playstation 2 games. These were consoles I had zero access to at home, since my parents didn't believe in spending money on "overpriced game systems." My mom had a perfectly good NES from the 90s which she played with her friends, shouldn't that have been enough?

Well, yes and no. The thing about video games at that age is that they were a *social activity*. You were known as the kid who dominated at Mario Kart because your friends would come over to your house and play and your mastery of Rainbow Road or whatever gained notoriety because (1) you grinded however many hours practicing on your own, and then (2) you unleashed pure technique in a performance that in the moment could not be distinguished from an *aristeia* of good fortune. So me showing up to a friend's house saying that I had no idea how to play Super Mario 64 because I was still enjoying the hell out of SMB3 was just odd, and few friends understood it. Why couldn't I just be normal and have the normal game systems everyone else had? And why couldn't I appreciate how awesome they were at Halo or Call of Duty? What a weirdo I must have seemed!

But I haven't thought about that aspect of that era of my life, well, for the longest time up until writing this essay. I just remember the fun times with Kuros and how the music to Icefire Mountain is the same music to the end credits of *IRONSWORD*, a decision I interpreted as the gamemakers gently suggesting to grade schoolers a powerful metaphor about what actually constitutes victory.

Why?

Anthropologist Rachel Weil, also known as *partytimehexcelent*, has this excellent angle on what she calls "No Bad Memories." Essentially she argues that the past is a messy place and that the burden is on us to balance reconciliation of the past with rebellion against it. After all, if we take the past as given by whatever deity/framework we bow to, then we are but its subjects, and that can be a very passive way of going through life, especially when we only have one.

There's this idea, somewhat vaguely from Stoic philosophy, that while the future is unpredictable and the present fleeting, the past is this repository of data from which we can draw from arbitrarily. But...

The past is always defined by the present.

— Charles Freeman, *Egypt, Greece and Rome*

The past may be a dataset, but I would emphasize, that dataset is itself *yours*.

This idea can be used to *kintsugi* anything from an annoying recurring character in one's past to crippling trauma. In fact, I'd argue traumatic memories are the ones one has the most permission and rationale to amend, since they usually manifest as *thought-stopping concepts*. Once your brain hits a traumatic memory, it can stop a train of thought in its tracks, or even derail it into morbid rumination.

There's an important counterclaim to address, though. If we just amend the past in our head with abandon, we can end up deluded about who we are in the present, having distorted what has formed us to a point of no return. I'd say this is a real danger, but that real danger is an unavoidable aspect of working with any tool that confers real power, especially one's mind.

The way to keep yourself from shooting yourself in the foot here is to keep a clear distinction of *record* vs *recall*: the indisputable account that you would give before a jury, and your interpretive layer of what those events actually mean to you. Pragmatically, emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain aspects of the past should be fair game, but deleting and inserting events is where you start to enter hazardous territory.

But here's where it gets subtle: our imaginations are themselves part of what we remember. We don't have access to an objective view of the past, for no such thing exists. Every event is viewed through the lens of some observer or detector, and each observer and detector comes with its own peculiarities and idiosyncrasies.

So, while it's probably not a good idea to just erase certain events from memory entirely, *how one tells the story of what happened* is and ought to be fully within one's radius of control.

Another aspect of this, not really a counterclaim but an orthogonal viewpoint, is that pain can be a teacher, you know, in the constructive microtrauma sense. I have often remarked that when it comes to victory and chess, that "winning is blessed, but losing is church."

Even though one might be initially tempted to write in peaches and cream for every life event experienced, that just turns the gestalt into that final dilemma from *The Good Place* where no one can remember anything. But this time it's not because the time window has been stretched *ad infinitum*, but because one has inflicted a sort of heat death on one's record where everything is positive and therefore nothing is positive.

So... contrast is good, and a curated palette of values and hues is also good. The rest I leave to you.

After all — the past is yours.