

Comfort Viewing



THE REEL TALK ZINE - EDITION ONE

Editors' Note

Editing these pieces has revealed a lot to us about the different forms “comfort” can take up for different people. On the heels of exam season, we wanted to provide an outlet for people to de-stress. What better way than to ask our fellow students to reflect on what about the visual arts brings them comfort.

Upon reading you may begin to realise that comfort takes many forms. From mindless viewing habits to engaging with confrontational narratives and themes to inspiring our own artistic endeavours.

We hope you find your own sense of comfort in the pages of this zine and hope you may be inspired to investigate some of these titles as we did while editing.

Enjoy!

Isabel Smith & Isabella Fatato
(Editors and Zine Designers)

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Film



The Films I Don't Think About

By Harry Russell

When I think about the films I've watched in my life, it feels as if they can be neatly sorted into a few distinct categories: the films I've watched in the cinema, impressed by picture quality and the enveloping sound that washes over you; those I've sought out after hearing about them, investing in a copy and watching as a miniature event. Similarly, there have been those that I've been shown by friends, whose use of their own copy for viewing purposes feels like they are passing along an artefact and an interest onto me. As meaningful as these experiences are, a significant quantity of the films that I watch fall into a different category: the films that I put on purely for the sake of having something on. I don't necessarily pay much attention whilst watching, and they definitely don't stay with me after the fact; yet, they make up so much of what I watch.

These films mainly find their homes on streaming sites, instantly accessible to put on and let them sink in. They're not something I've ever considered watching before. I just see them whilst browsing and decide to watch them in a matter of seconds. Whilst there isn't exactly a unifying theme to them, I can guarantee I haven't thought about them unprompted since I watched them; and more often than not I will never watch them again. When I think back on *Tag* (dir. Jeff Tomsic, 2018) which I watched one afternoon back in 2020, I don't have particularly positive or negative memories, I just remember that it filled the time. The only reason for it to have ever come up in conversation has been as a result of confusion when trying to talk about the other, much better, *Tag* (dir. Sion Sono, 2015).

Does this make my viewing of it a waste of time? Should I have used the time to watch something else on my near endless backlog? I don't think so.

As much as these films aren't life-changing or even particularly noteworthy, there is an inherent comfort in the low-stakes investment of watching them. Some films on my watchlist I've wanted to watch for years, and getting around to viewing them feels like a mini event. To finally watch them, feels like I am taking a risk. What if after all this time they're just fine, or they don't click with me in the way I so desperately wanted them to?

Whilst for some the most comforting film can be one watched over and over again till it can be recited by rote (and believe me I certainly have some of those), for me the greatest comfort is found in a film watched once on a whim, to fill the time. In a way they're the cinematic equivalent of a ready-made-meal you eat at home: disposable, forgettable, not particularly significant. Yet, sometimes it can be joyous to watch a film just for the sake of watching it. And who knows, occasionally you may end up rewatching them anyway to seek a familiar feeling, as they take you back to that quiet morning or afternoon. That is the reason I give to explain my watching *War Dogs* (dir. Todd Phillips, 2016) and *Last Vegas* (dir. Jon Turteltaub, 2013) more times than many of my favourite films, without having a word to say about either of them.



COVID Comfort and Discomfort Through Death In Venice (1971)

By Isabel Smith

During lockdown, each film became burdened with the title of “comfort film”. Sitting down to watch anything was a brief reprieve from counting the rising case numbers and pacing the claustrophobic setting of my home. One film, though, became more than this. The film I felt represented the experience of my own queer youth in turmoil and isolation was—controversially—Death in Venice (dir. Luchino Visconti, 1971).

The film follows an aging composer, Gustav von Aschenbach (Dirk Bogarde), as he travels to Venice for health reasons. While there, he becomes obsessed with a young boy, Tadzio (Björn Andrésen), holidaying with his family. Much of the disdain towards the film comes from the portrayal of this obsession; a portrayal which would be disingenuous to view uncritically considering Andrésen’s anecdotes about his discomfort and mistreatment on set. However, viewing the film through a lens of authorial intentionality reveals a meditation on age, beauty, and death that reflects an audience whose lives were paused for so long.

Despite the cultural legacy of the film, Death in Venice presents itself in subtleties. Aschenbach never announces or even whispers his attraction or obsession. While the camera traces his gaze on Tadzio, it similarly assumes his perspective to gaze onto scenes depicting the streets of Venice and vast open skies over the ocean. The beauty of Tadzio is thus positioned to be

as great as these universal markers of beauty, distorting and perverting their very meaning. Yet, these landmarks are never placed, as Tadzio is, in juxtaposition with Aschenbach, whose older age is highlighted throughout the film. We are reminded by the circumstances of his visit that age has taken a debilitating toll on him, representing aging as unvirtuous. He paints his skin with thick makeup in a grotesque approximation of youth, making clear his obsession not inherently with Tadzio, but the cultural obsession with youth as beauty.

For me the comfort of the film comes, in part, from the tragic grappling with age and youth. The coding of Aschenbach as an older gay man through the lens of Visconti, who fit this description himself, reflects Judith Halberstam’s considerations of queer time in *Queer Temporality and Postmodern Landscapes*. With queer time acting outside of traditional markers of “the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction”, Aschenbach as a single older man can be read as failing to achieve markers of a successful life under heteropatriarchal renderings. This failure thus implies Aschenbach has markers of a life yet to be achieved and thus his aging can never be concretely signposted as with a heterosexual man of his age and condition.

For many young queer people during the pandemic, there are particular feelings of wasted youth. Without the institutions of the heteropatriarchy as ambitions, youth becomes coveted, much as it is for Aschenbach. However, on a wider scale, amidst isolation and lockdown, youth has become more fleeting than ever. With many queer people in unsafe or repressive spaces, expressions of queerness are stifled, and time becomes wasted in falsehood. As Aschenbach's colleague describes new philosophies of music as spontaneous, in comparison to his philosophies as calculated, perhaps Aschenbach's projections upon a distant youth are also grappling with closeted queerness and wasted time.

These flashbacks to his colleague emphasise his musical philosophies as outdated and we are further invited to read Aschenbach not only as an aging man but a figure of a past gone by. With the film set at the turn of the century, implying a handing over between generations and an invigorated momentum towards change, we can see Aschenbach as a relic of the previous century grappling to return to the youth he once knew. If we deem time a currency, as the film seems to suggest, the lingering of the film becomes a hoarding of time by Aschenbach who refuses to accept the imminent end of his life.

This obsession is further juxtaposed with images of death and disease which permeate the film, as holiday goers are lied to regarding a cholera epidemic sweeping the city. The beauty of Venice is complicated, as images of a city renowned for its beauty, become disrupted with dying and ill occupants, which Aschenbach ignores until disinfectant is sprayed on the streets as he followed Tadzio and his family. The film suggests here that Aschenbach, in his denial, has purposefully blinded himself to mortality and is only able to see the severity of his surroundings when beauty is directly disturbed.

The film assumes the role of a black mirror, with the dismissal and minimisation of the epidemic in stark and bleak parallel to ever rising covid cases. Watching it within the initial wave of lockdowns felt somewhat refreshing, as if addressing a taboo before the wave of covid-related



media came in droves. It created a space to contemplate ideas we had all been forced to grapple with intensely and immediately as cases grew. Death and disease were everywhere but articulations of them still felt more important than ever to engage with and truly consider.

This representation of death and disease ultimately concludes in Aschenbach's own death. Tadzio looks towards him in acknowledgement before turning and reaching towards the sun. As Aschenbach reaches to Tadzio in return, he dies of the heart attack which underlined the film as an imminent threat. His death goes unnoticed and life around him continues blindly, just as it had with the deaths of thousands of Venetians before him. All the while, Tadzio looks out upon the vast open sky and becomes seemingly entranced with its beauty, perhaps assuming Aschenbach's role in a cycle of obsession and aging.

As far as comfort films go, this has little to offer regarding optimism. Yet, it's the honesty of the film which drew me towards it time and again. Films can be confrontational and this confrontation does not have to be alienating. Death in Venice creates a space for considerations of queerness and death, making it an important and, for me, a comforting work to return to in times of pain and queer disruption.

**“... perhaps
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The Ladykillers (1955): An Unconventional Comfort Film

By Fern Conaghan

While a black comedy about a gang of criminals planning a bank robbery at an elderly widow's house and then plotting to murder her for uncovering them may not initially sound like a comfort film, I genuinely believe that Alexander Mackendrick's *The Ladykillers* (1955) fully embodies this term. The premise of a comfort film is entirely subjective – for some it may be indicative of evoking feelings of euphoria, and thus functioning as a means of escapism, while for others it may simply be lighthearted fun.

However, what I think truly contributes to this label of comfort viewing is a film's ability to provide a space of pure enjoyment for the viewer which allows it to be revisited repeatedly. Bruno Savill de Jong elaborates on this idea in his article on unconventional comfort viewings, stating that they can "possess a certain inherent satisfaction and easy viewing." Whilst I do think that it is this satisfaction which contributes to *The Ladykillers* as a successful comfort film, I also disagree about it being easy viewing; I think it is the masterfully created tension which makes the film such a joy to watch.

This Ealing Comedy follows five bank robbers (Alec Guinness, Herbert Lom, Peter Sellers, Cecil Parker and Danny Green) who rent out a room in the naive yet loveable Mrs Wilberforce's (Katie Johnson) house in order to plan their heist. Whilst the dim-lit and unnerving establishing shots of these crooks, particularly Professor Marcus (Alec Guinness) and Louis Harvey (Herbert Lom), are overtly evocative of the crime genre, the men's dealings with the eccentric yet delightful Wilberforce create a comically absurd dynamic on-screen.

Yet it is the built-up anxiety and threat of peril throughout the film that really brings everything together. The pivotal moment when the gang are carrying their cash-stuffed luggage out of the front door, only for one to burst open in front of Mrs Wilberforce, marks a detrimental shift in the film's narrative. Because she insists upon returning the money to the police – an idea which none of them relish to say the least – it is decided that they must draw lots to determine who will kill her. However, with such malicious plans come malicious consequences. With each one double-crossing the other for not wanting the blame and instead seeking to flee with all the money for themselves, the viewer is treated to the highly exciting and wonderfully comedic pay-off in the death of every last man.

As if that is not a satisfactory ending, when Mrs Wilberforce attempts to return the money to the police they do not take her seriously, and instead gently humour her by telling her to keep it. Therefore, this constant tension that has built throughout the film – from not wanting the gang to be discovered to switching allegiances by not wanting Mrs Wilberforce to be murdered – finally bursts. And what is left behind is this sweet old lady living her life like nothing ever happened, but with the sweet addition of one million pounds sterling. Thus, although being far from stress-free, this qualifies *The Ladykillers*, in my opinion, as the epitome of a comfort film.



Der Welt berühmteste
und lustigste
Kriminalgeschichte!

Alec Guinness
Peter Sellers, Cecil Parker, Herbert Lom
Danny Green und Katie Johnson in

LADYKILLERS

Regie: Alexander Mackendrick
Eine Michael Balcon Produktion der Ealing Studios
in Technicolor



Atlas Film

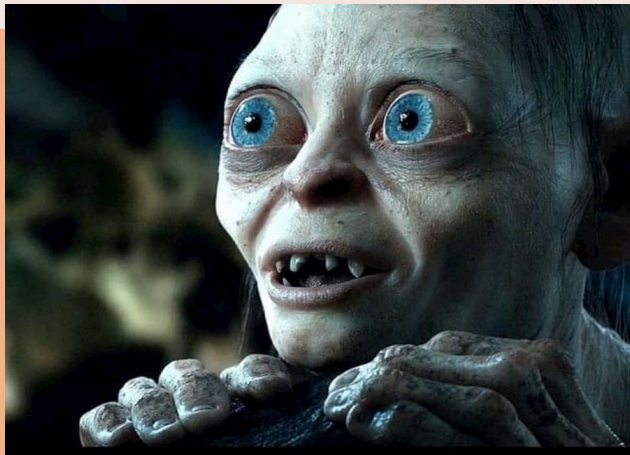
“Yet for Frodo
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A Constant Struggle with an Insurmountable Burden

By Nathaniel Cope

Perhaps what is so important about the Lord of the Rings trilogy is its significance to so many people; and in many ways represents so much more than merely the tale of a hobbit setting out to save the world. Now more than ever we can find importance and comfort in the fantastic tale of Frodo (Elijah Wood) and his companions, as his struggles are perhaps more familiar to us than they may appear. In *The Two Towers* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2002), Frodo professes hopelessly “I can’t do this, Sam”, prompting his companion to launch into one of the most heartfelt monologues of the trilogy. He speaks of stories where the endings seemed so bleak he hardly wanted to know how they ended—yet somehow everything was alright in the end as “even darkness must pass, a new day will come”. It is Sam’s (Sean Astin) optimism that pulls Frodo through to the end of his quest, and just like the stories, a new day does come. Yet for Frodo the journey he was thrust into does not end with the coming of a new day. The ring was a burden too great to shake completely; even after it is destroyed Frodo still carries it with him, resulting in a bittersweet conclusion for his character. In simple terms, the good guys won, but how happy is the ending really?

Even after Frodo casts the ring into the fires of Mordor, he is no longer who he once was. There is perhaps a greyness to the epilogue, a life half lived, a shell of a person he once was. The Fellowship are fighting against evil, yet Frodo’s fight is more complex: he also fights himself, his own mind, and his own consciousness. Frodo shoulders a burden only he can ultimately understand, and whilst he is aided by those around him and the companionship he finds in Sam, it is him who must ultimately make the decision to cast the ring into the fires of Mordor. Frodo knows what he must do but for a moment he cannot bring himself to do it. He never asked for this, never asked for his life to shift in such an irreparable way. At times he appears lost in his task; he knows what the endpoint must be, but he seems bewildered in how he must do it. He never walks alone but the struggle is a lonely one as he becomes isolated from his companions, as Sam sees the pain that Frodo goes through but can never fully empathise with the burden he must carry and the struggle he must overcome.



Frodo and Sam travel with one other companion though: they meet corrupted hobbit-like creature, Gollum (Andy Serkis), on their travels and whilst Sam despises him and mistrusts him, Frodo is empathetic. It becomes apparent that Frodo sees himself and his potential future in Gollum and that's why he must keep him so close: a reminder of what will happen if he follows this path too far. However, there is also a solidarity there that can only be found between two people who have shared the same burden. Gollum is so desperate for the ring because it's a comfort for him, it's an addiction he can't shake because to live with it is killing him but to live without it is too hard to bear. He already gave up his sanity and everything he knew to have the ring, and to go back is an impossible task. Thus, Gollum loses his identity to the ring, and it seems to Frodo and the audience that he is too far gone to reclaim. The struggle for Gollum, and for Frodo as time goes on, becomes living without the ring, as it represents a loss of control over the thing that has possessed him for so long and the hostility to those around him that this brings. Ultimately, Gollum becomes a manifestation of the worst of what the ring can do, whilst Frodo represents an overcoming of the ring's power: it is not a total overcoming, it is an ongoing struggle with what he experienced but there is an optimism amidst the bleakness of the ending in Frodo's attempt to shake the past.

When Frodo finally rids himself of the burden of his task, he is never again the hobbit we see running through the woods of The Shire in the opening of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001). Aragorn explains that he will never recover from his wound inflicted by the Ringwraith, and like this scar that will never fade, we watch as Frodo never recovers from the burden of carrying the ring. It is a task far too insurmountable, a slope far too slippery and steep to ever return from, and as we see him in the conclusion of *Return of the King* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2003) drinking with his companions back in The Shire, he seems distant; lost forever to the mountains where he battled orcs and goblins and himself. By the conclusion of the trilogy, the ring is gone but the struggle remains; perhaps we can never fully discard or outrun the past and all its hurt, no matter how hot the fire we cast it into is.





Television



HBO Max's *The Flight Attendant* (2020-), starring Kaley Cuoco in the title role, combines dark humour with a gripping murder mystery narrative to make for a compelling watch. During exam season, this show was a great relief and, frankly, provided some much-needed escapism.

The series uses a non-linear narrative to provide a growing insight into the events of one evening across eight episodes and held my attention throughout and instilling a desire to continue on and on. The use of narrative twists and the wider involvement of peripheral characters prove that nothing is what it appears to be. With the second season having landed on NOW TV on the 26th of May, I look forward to seeing what's to come for our airborne calamity-magnet.

A Recommendation of Heartstopper (2020-)

By Nikki Wilks

Revising with HBO Max's *The Flight Attendant* (2020-)

By Ross Harrison

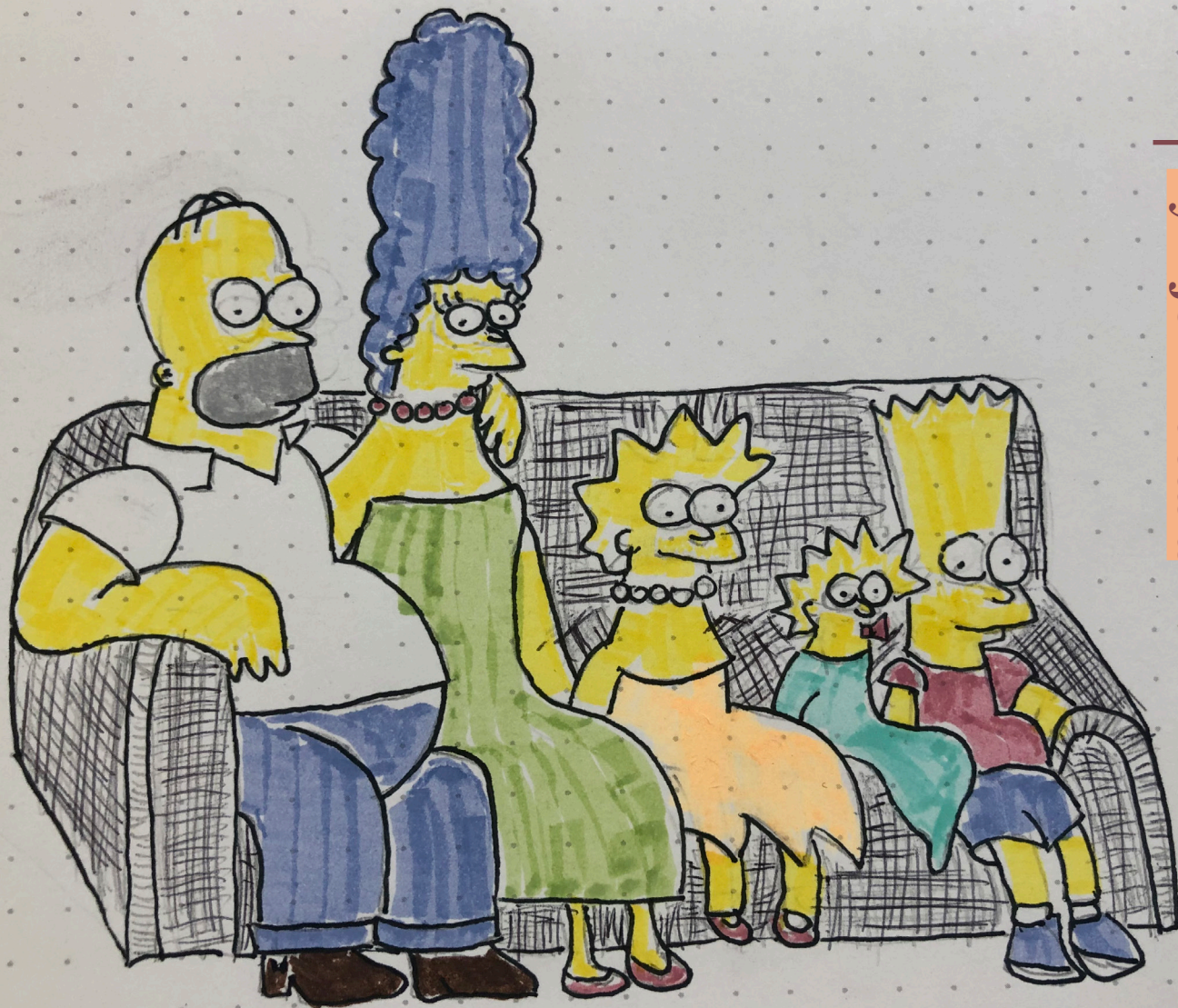
Scrolling through Twitter over the Easter break I was greeted with excitement and anticipation regarding a new series coming to Netflix: *Heartstopper* (2020-). The show follows two boys who meet at school, one openly gay and the other coming to terms with his sexuality, and the relationship that follows.

The series is composed of eight episodes, each only 25 minutes (approx.) in length. This makes it the perfect comfort watch after a day of working. The show seemed to bring with it the best parts of the first volume of the graphic novel it was based on and while adding the depth that felt like it was missing. Although at times it can feel cheesy, there is a charm to *Heartstopper* which makes it unique from any other depiction of a teen romance that I've witnessed on screen.

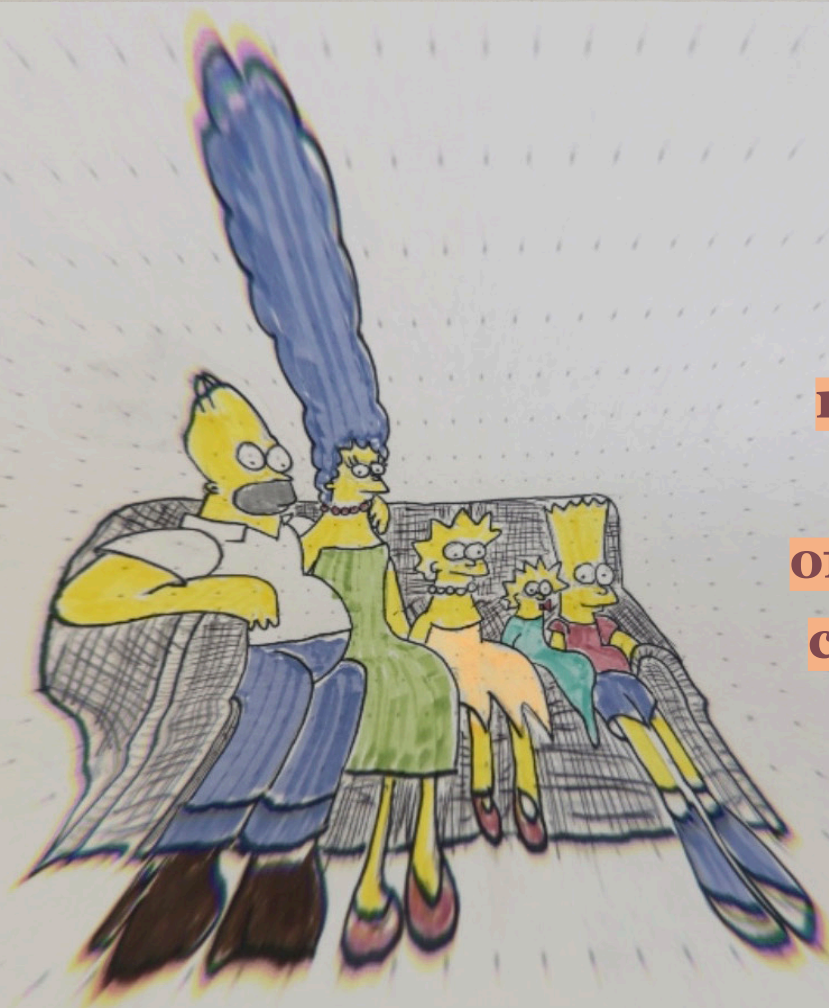
From its depiction of British youth culture to its effortless representation, *Heartstopper* is a blissfully innocent modern take on the bildungsroman. I implore everyone to watch this show, you will not be disappointed.

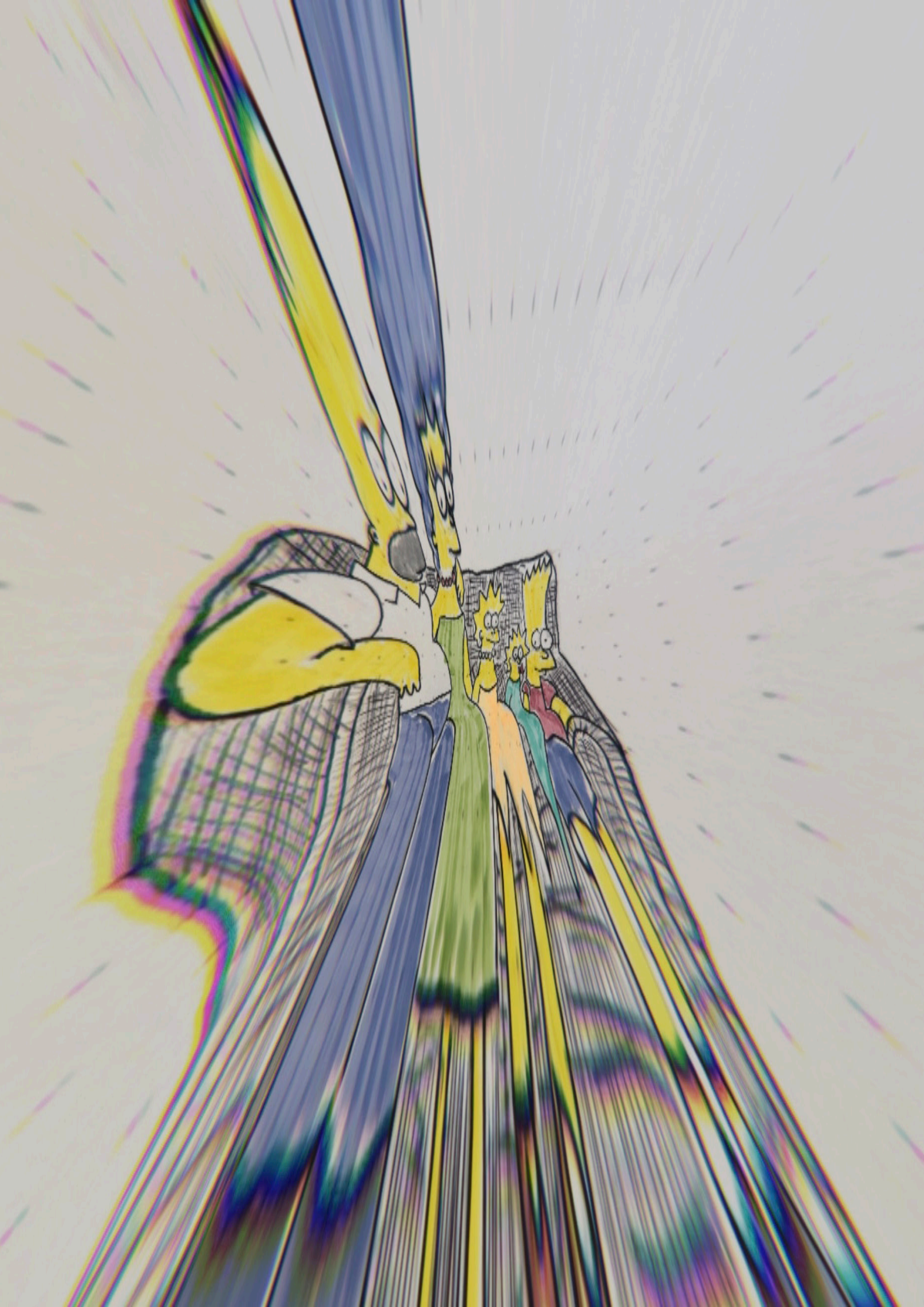
By Tijen Mustafa

Into The Simpsons



“I added a distorted effect on it because it kind of reminded me of getting sucked into a Tv which is often how I feel when comfort viewing gets out of hand”







Alternative Media



‘Three of the best, he’s made them pay, it’s a day he’ll never forget’.

The FIFA games, and the past 10 (or so) years...

By Oliver Hargreaves

From the years 2012 to 2022, a lot has changed for a lot of people. In the September of 2012, as I was born in the October of the year 2000 (three months earlier than my expected due date), I was starting secondary school. By September of 2022, I will be a University graduate.

Outside of the various changes that have occurred both personally and globally within this decade, a constant for me has been the release of EA Sports’ annual football game, FIFA.

On September 30th 2011, FIFA 12 was released into the world. As a soon to be 12 year old boy, one with a passion for football and games, this was as monumental a moment within the year as my own birthday, probably more so if I’m being honest. September for a lot of people is seen as the start of the new academic year, a time where the fun and freedom of the summer fades and the seriousness of institutionalised education becomes the primary focus of their life. FIFA fans however had something else to look forward to: the start of a new career mode, the rebuild of their ‘Ultimate Team’ and attempting to rise through the divisions on ‘Pro Clubs’, where you can make your own player and play in a fully customisable

team with yourself and your friends.

FIFA 12, for me, is the best FIFA game we have ever had. Perhaps it was just the time of my life that means I look back on the game with rose tinted, nostalgia filled glasses, but the gameplay felt smooth and easy to get to grips with. At least it did to my eleven year old self, though admittedly I was not the most scrutinous of these details back then.

Messi (OVR 94) was higher rated than Ronaldo (OVR 92) as should be the case, and the cover star for the year was a player for the team I supported, Manchester United’s Wayne Rooney. FIFA 12 was an exceptional year for the FIFA franchise, and with this game being the edition where the soon to be dominant mode of gameplay, ‘Ultimate Team’ would be well into it’s swing after being added into the game as DLC in FIFA 09 and part of the full game by FIFA 10, FIFA 12 definitely has a lot of positives going for it. Whether it’s just me being an excitable year 7 coming home from school and playing the game or otherwise, the memories of that game will live with me with great fondness for years to come...

September 29th 2016, the month when I started my perilous final year of secondary school. It is also the day of FIFA 17's release, and thankfully, I got the game on it's release date as an early birthday present. One I was eternally grateful for. There was a buzz around the school playground that day, everyone was especially eager to hear the bell at 3:30pm and rush home to their consoles.

GCSE's however, loomed large on myself and my friends. It was quite literally the biggest thing I had ever had to deal with. During a Maths class, a teacher who shall remain unnamed, in an attempt to calm the collective nerves of people entering their final year of Secondary school and the impending year of mock exams, real exams, revision sessions, coursework and all, proclaimed to the class that 'everyone has to do this, it's just your turn'. These words have stuck with me throughout life, whether it be an exam, a driving test, a job interview etc. I see these moments in my life as moments in which I am stepping up to bat, ideally when I step up to bat the fielders move back in anticipation for my impending roaring success, however my sole focus during these moments is to try my best, as this is my turn.

These moments feeling as monumental as they did, means that the downtime I had within that year felt especially relaxed, and this can be shown by the amount of enjoyment I got out of FIFA 17. Even with the GCSE's, myself and my friends (commonly and unashamedly referred to as 'the boys') began regularly playing 'Pro Clubs' most nights, until frankly absurd hours of the morning, so much so that to even think back on it makes me feel inexplicably old.

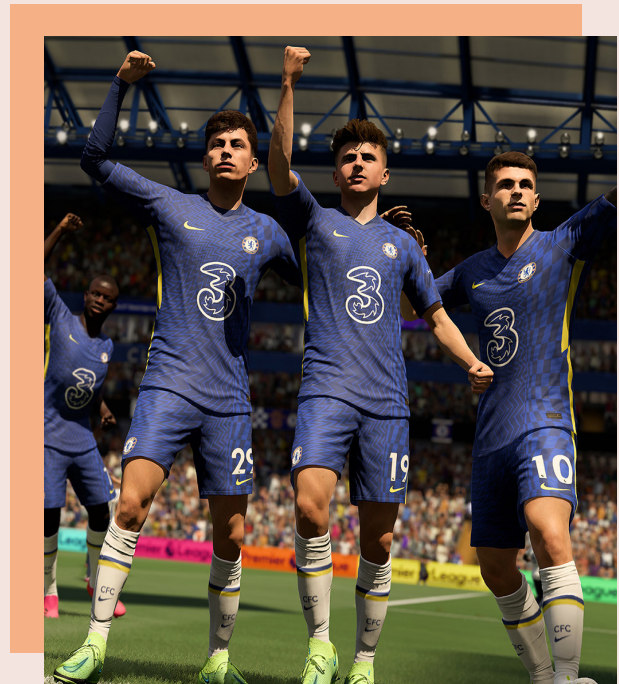
FIFA 22 is the game that helped me get through my final year of University, a game where myself and 'the boys' still manage to regularly play together even though we are all in higher education. FIFA 22 is the game that I have probably performed the best on. After years of working on the same franchise, I can certainly feel myself having improved on the game as a whole and perhaps the increase in my own ability is partially why I enjoy '22' so much. Perhaps it is the fact that a decade on from

my favourite ever FIFA, the game still manages to give me a sense of escapism, a way to talk with my friends regularly and consistent goals (if you'll excuse the pun) to aim towards.

The most comforting thing to me about the FIFA games is the consistency of them. The changes made every year to the kits and the updated transfers and player ratings, as well as the smaller gameplay specific changes are enough for me to enjoy what feels new whilst still being able to recognise the game for what it is: a fun football simulator.

With FIFA 23 being the final EA and FIFA collaborated product, before EA and FIFA go their separate ways, I am proud to say that over the years the FIFA games have gotten me through a lot in my life, and have always been a great source of comfort to me and my friends.

As Martin Tyler says after you score a hat-trick, an expression that perfectly sums up my thoughts on FIFA 12, FIFA 17 and FIFA 22, 'it's three of the best, he's made them pay, it's a day he'll never forget'. And the years I've grown up alongside the FIFA games are most definitely days I'll never forget...



Thank You to Our Contributors:

Fern Conaghan (MA for Research in Film & TV)

Nathaniel Cope (Third Year)

Oliver Hargreaves (Third Year)

Ross Harrison (First Year)

Tijen Mustafa (Second Year)

Harry Russell (Third Year)

Isabel Smith (Third Year)

Nikki Wilks (Second Year)

And a huge congratulations to our Graduates!

Thank you,

Isabel Smith & Isabella Fatato (MA in Film &TV)

(Editors and Zine Designers)



The Reel Talk Zine - Edition One
Film and Television Department