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Why I Made Subcutanean

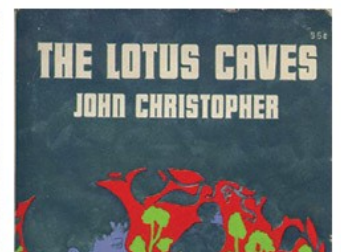
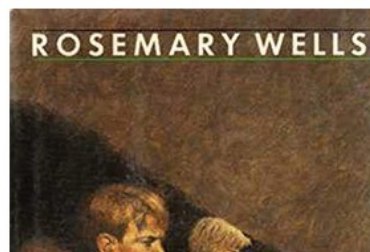
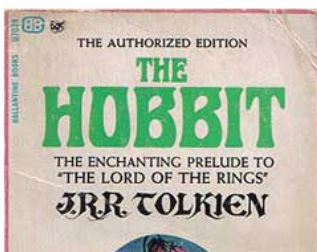


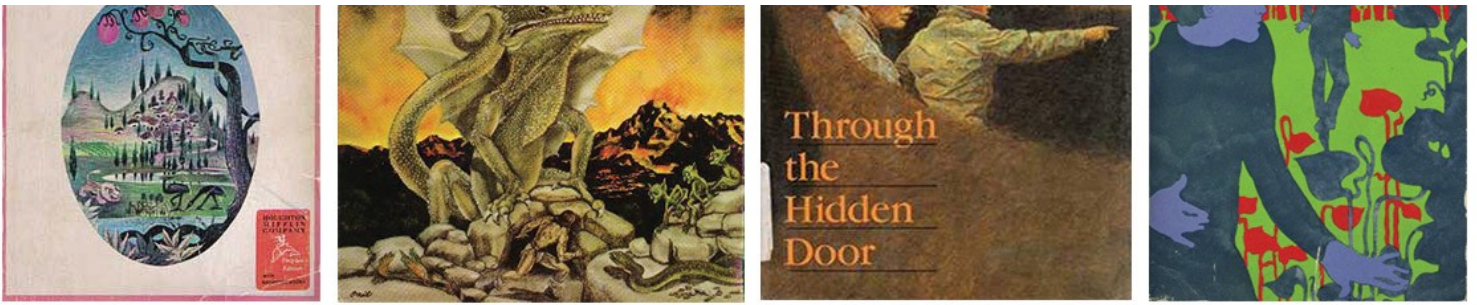
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The *Subcutanean* campaign goes live on Indiegogo tomorrow, October 29th. In this moment before the ride begins, I wanted to reflect on why I made it.

I've always loved underground places. One of the first books I read for myself at an early age was *The Hobbit*, and I remember the journey down to Goblin-town gripping me with an unforgettable mixture of fear and fascination. When I first played *Adventure* on my grandpa's Apple II, the notion of getting to go explore an underground world myself was incredibly alluring. (This experience would, as anyone who knows me can attest, have no impact on my later life.) One of the first short stories I wrote at age nine or ten was about a kid named Aaron who discovers a cave in his backyard that stretches underneath the entire world, populated in its deepest passages by strange creatures probably cribbed from *Fraggle Rock*. I devoured YA books like John Christopher's *The Lotus Caves* and Rosemary Wells' *Through the Hidden Door* that took their teenaged protagonists not to places far away, but far beneath. A childhood trip to Utah's Timpanogos Cave was magical; as an adult, caving is one of my favorite non-digital hobbies. Looking back, I'm not sure if one of these experiences sparked the others, or if the underground has just always had a hold on me.

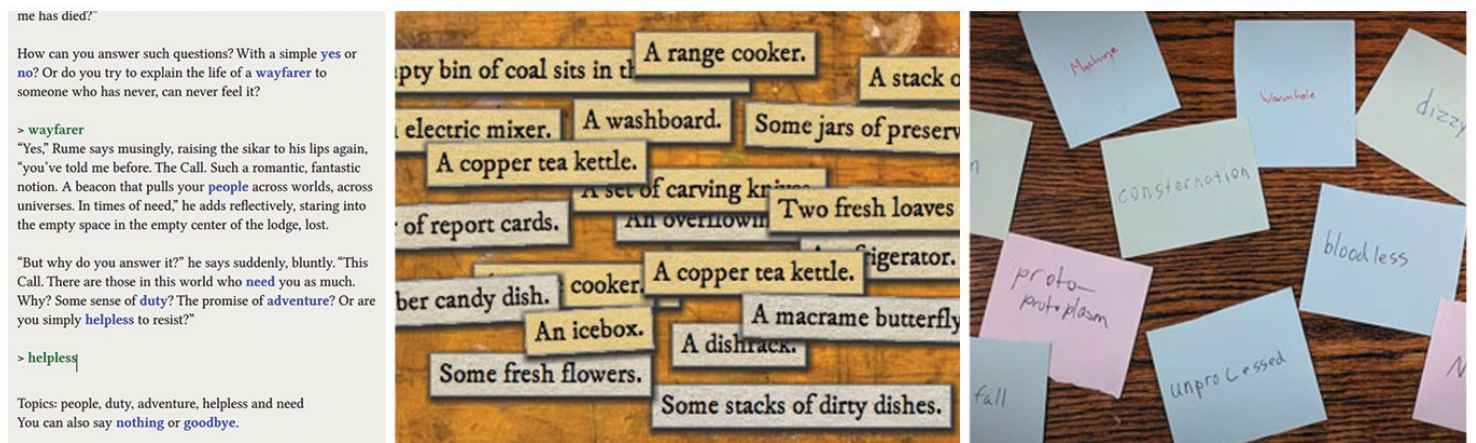




Some of my childhood underground obsessions.

Subcutanean is my third major project dealing with endless underground places, after *Ice-Bound* and *Downcrawl*, so maybe this is the point when I retroactively start calling this my Underground Trilogy? You could also consider it part of a conceptual trilogy of minimalist procedural text experiments: this one starts with *18 Cadence* (where the reader can rearrange pieces of the story, but not change them) and also includes *Archives of the Sky* (where players are challenged to assemble a coherent plot out of nothing but evocative words and pieces of dramatic structure). Looking at *Subcutanean* from a game design perspective is a bit perverse: it removes player interactivity entirely, giving you an entirely prerendered novel as output. But it certainly follows up on my past use of procedural text, from the variable landscapes and characterizations in *Blue Lacuna* up through my more recent work on Character Engine at Spirit AI.

Each of these projects, including this latest one, have taught me important lessons I can bring back to my game design work. Exploring the limits of generation, interactivity, and agency — both on the ends of extreme complexity and extreme simplicity — has given me useful perspectives on new ways these elements might be used in more traditional interactive stories.



If procedural text is the brush and underground space is the backdrop, though, what am I actually painting?

As a work of fiction, *Subcutanean* is fantastical, but also deeply personal, inspired by my own somewhat messy coming out process at the end of the '90s in a very conservative state. While I was lucky enough to have supportive friends and family, it took me a long time to realize how pervasively the dominant culture of that time and place had affected my own self-image. I was confident with friends but cripplingly shy with strangers; there weren't any role models in popular culture for me to look up to; and I didn't have other gay friends to help me navigate crushes, toxic friendships, or relationships. I made a lot of mistakes in the process of figuring it out on my own. I'd naively thought coming out would be the end of my struggles to love and understand myself, but of course it was only the beginning.

The awkward and sometimes painful fight for self-assurance, as well as how not to hurt and be hurt by the people you love, is a huge theme throughout the book. The particulars are very fictionalized, and as I wrote the characters they naturally developed into their own people with their own stories and traumas, different in many ways from my own. But there's a lot of emotional truths behind them.

To be honest, I'm more afraid to release this project than anything I've ever created. I'm worried it won't resonate: for straight people, or for queer people who grew up in more accepting places or decades than my protagonist and I. I'm worried the multiple versions are a kind of hedging, or hiding, burying my truths in a fragmented underground labyrinth so no one can ever claim to have found them all. When I click the launch button tomorrow, excitement will be tinged with vulnerability. Opening a door lets things pass through both ways.

And yet it also feels like a story I needed to tell. And telling it many ways at once makes each reader's relationship to the text even more unique: something they have to figure out for themselves. You'll have to accept the fact that this story might have gone in different ways for different people, and decide whether you're going to accept that or worry about what else might have happened. Your opinions about the story will be valid,

regardless of which version you have. You're the one who took that text and brought it to life.

can't come through. You know why you can't.

"I can live with pain," he said, reaching out for me; but I must have looked shocked, because his expression changed to placating alarm. "No, it's okay. The pain doesn't matter. It'd be worth it. You're worth it."

"I'm not." I shook my head, angry, never more certain of any-

my knees, it thudded.

"I can live with pain," I said, stepping toward him; but he recoiled, and I couldn't bear to see him do that, wanted more than anything to make him understand: "No, it's okay. The pain doesn't matter. It'd be worth it. You're worth it."

"I'm not." He shook his head, folding his arms to stop his

Two different renderings of a scene in *Subcutaneous*.

People have naturally reached towards *House of Leaves* when looking for something to compare *Subcutaneous* to (they both involve secret basements much bigger than they should be), but to me *The Shining* is a more apt comparison: in the way a place can become menacing because of the person inside it, and in the way it turns a familiar struggle (Jack's alcoholism and the way it hurts his family) into an epic and terrifying battle on a supernatural stage. Michael Golding's *A Poet of the Invisible World* gives a boy in ancient Persia an extra pair of ears as an external metaphor for his sexuality: they make him an outcast, but also let him hear new and different things. That resonates with me, too. I could reach for other comparisons: Stephen Graham Jones' *Mongrels*, about coming of age in a family of werewolves, or Patrick Ness's *Release* where the ghost of a murdered girl teaches a gay teen a lesson he needs to hear: both are beautiful books well worth reading. I've also joked that the book is *A Separate Peace* meets *Dante's Inferno*, but was advised by an agent that this wasn't an especially commercial comp.

Maybe that's okay. It's not an especially commercial book.

. . .

Caves are strange places to explore. Unlike expeditions on the surface with miles of vistas all around, you can't see most caves all at once. Though you might map them, build mental models of their vastness, you can only experience them in tiny pieces: like books, one passage at a time. A tunnel might dead-end around the next corner, or it might carry on for miles, branching endlessly. The only way to find out is to walk, crawl, or wriggle on through them, pulling yourself forward past smooth slopes and painful edges, making progress in tiny and tactile moments.

Passing through cave tunnels has been likened to passing through birth canals, and their endless subterranean passages have also symbolized routes to the land of the dead. To me they seem much better analogs for the process of figuring out how to live, a few feet of earth at a time.

Subcutaneous goes live for pre-orders Tuesday October 29th: you can sign up right now to be notified. You can also follow the project on Twitter, Facebook, or Goodreads, or check out my previous design posts.

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