

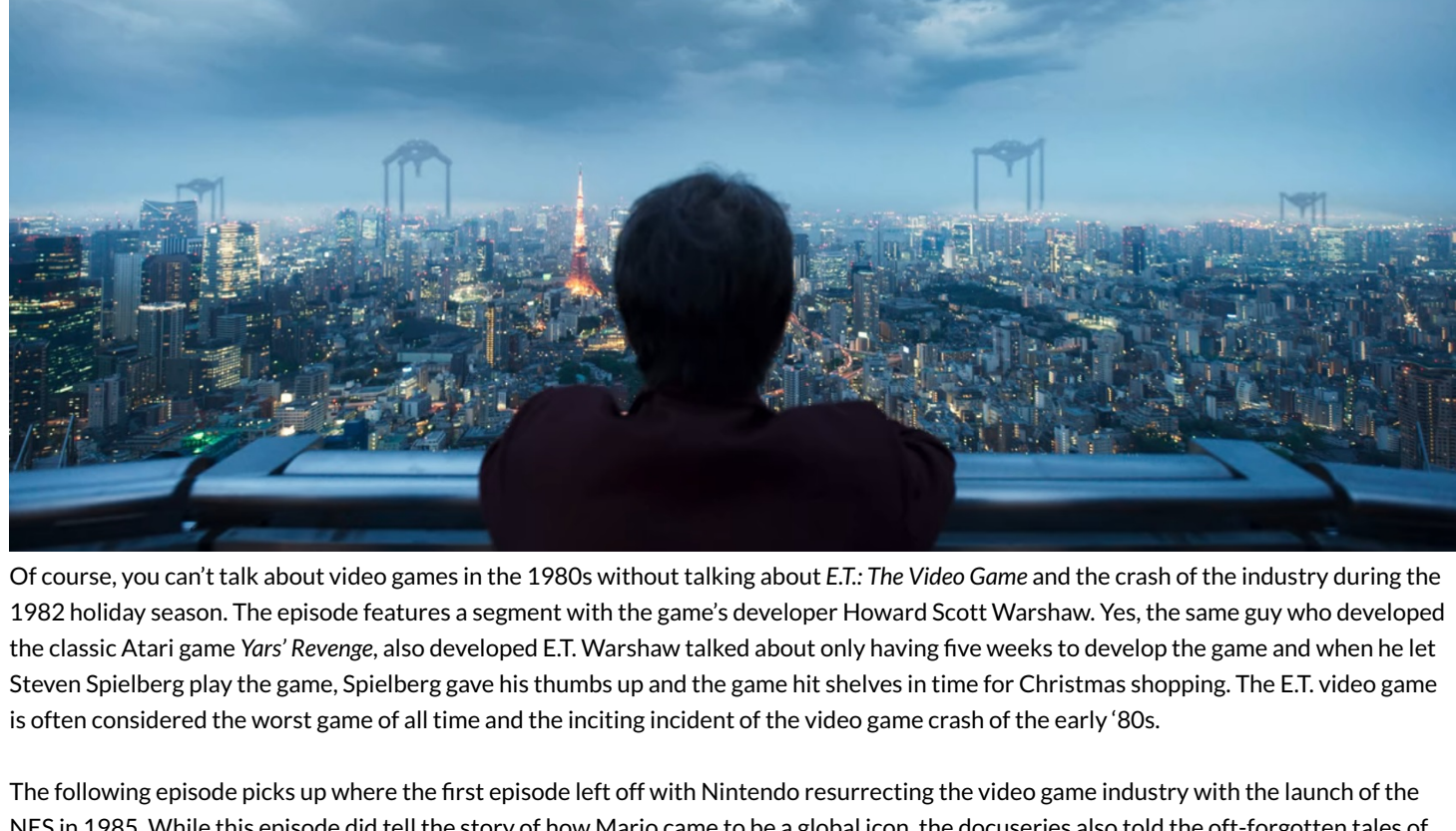
## REVIEW: NETFLIX'S HIGH SCORE IS A DOCUSERIES OVERFLOWING WITH GAMING NOSTALGIA

NEWS / NEWS | Aug 13, 2020 | by Dublin Salazar-Morero (author/dublin.salazar-morero)

Creating a docuseries about the history of video games and the industry is a daunting task. Multiple seasons of the history of Nintendo or Sega alone would seem to barely cover all the stories around these companies, but a total history of video games seems insurmountable.

Netflix's new docuseries, *High Score*, attempts to tackle that feat but in a unique and very curated way. The six-episode series lands on Netflix on August 19 and covers the beginning of consumer interaction with gaming and the beginning of esports to the present day but also reveals other untold stories from video game history that have impacted the industry and game development more than people have realized.

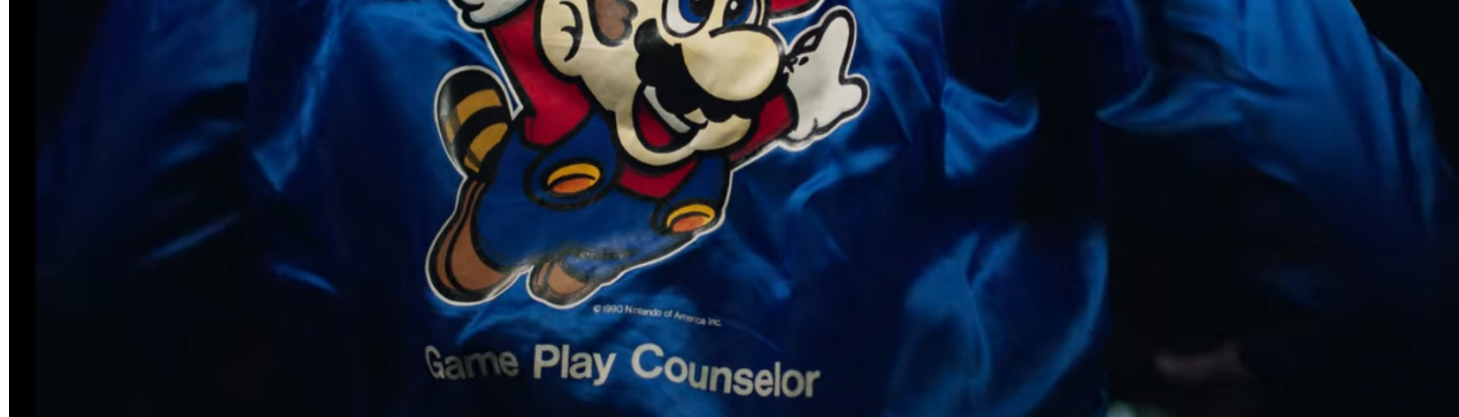
The first episode begins with a look at the impact of *Space Invaders* and *Pac-Man* and the rise of video game arcades in the '80s, to the genesis of home consoles. Concurrently the episode tells the story of Becky Heineman and how she won the *Space Invaders* national championship in 1980 when she was a teenager, giving birth to video game competitions. Interviews with *Space Invaders* creator Tomohiro Nishikado and *Pac-Man* creator Toru Iwatani reveal their inspirations for their games (H.G. Wells' *War of Worlds* and...eating pizza, respectively), along with the story of a couple of college kids hacking *Pac-Man*, to create what would become *Ms. Pac-Man*.



Of course, you can't talk about video games in the 1980s without talking about *E.T.* The *Video Game* and the crash of the industry during the 1982 holiday season. The episode features a segment with the game's developer Howard Scott Warshaw. Yes, the same guy who developed the classic Atari game *Yars' Revenge*, also developed *E.T. Warshaw* talked about only having five weeks to develop the game and when he let Steven Spielberg play the game, Spielberg gave him thumbs up and the game hit shelves in time for Christmas shopping. The *E.T.* video game is often considered the worst game of all time and the inciting incident of the video game crash of the early '80s.

The following episode picks up where the first episode left off with Nintendo resurrecting the video game industry with the launch of the NES in 1985. While this episode did tell the story of how Mario came to be a global icon, the docuseries also told the oft-forgotten tales of the Nintendo Gameplay Counselor, the launch of *Nintendo Power Magazine*, and the 1990 *Nintendo World Championship*.

That's what I enjoyed the most about docuseries. They could have gone in a number of different directions to talk about Nintendo's impact on gaming during this era, but focusing on some of the forgotten products and people was refreshing. This is how each episode is organized throughout the entire series. An overarching well-known video game history lesson is given, along with an esports related event from the time and then is peppered with untold stories from the era.

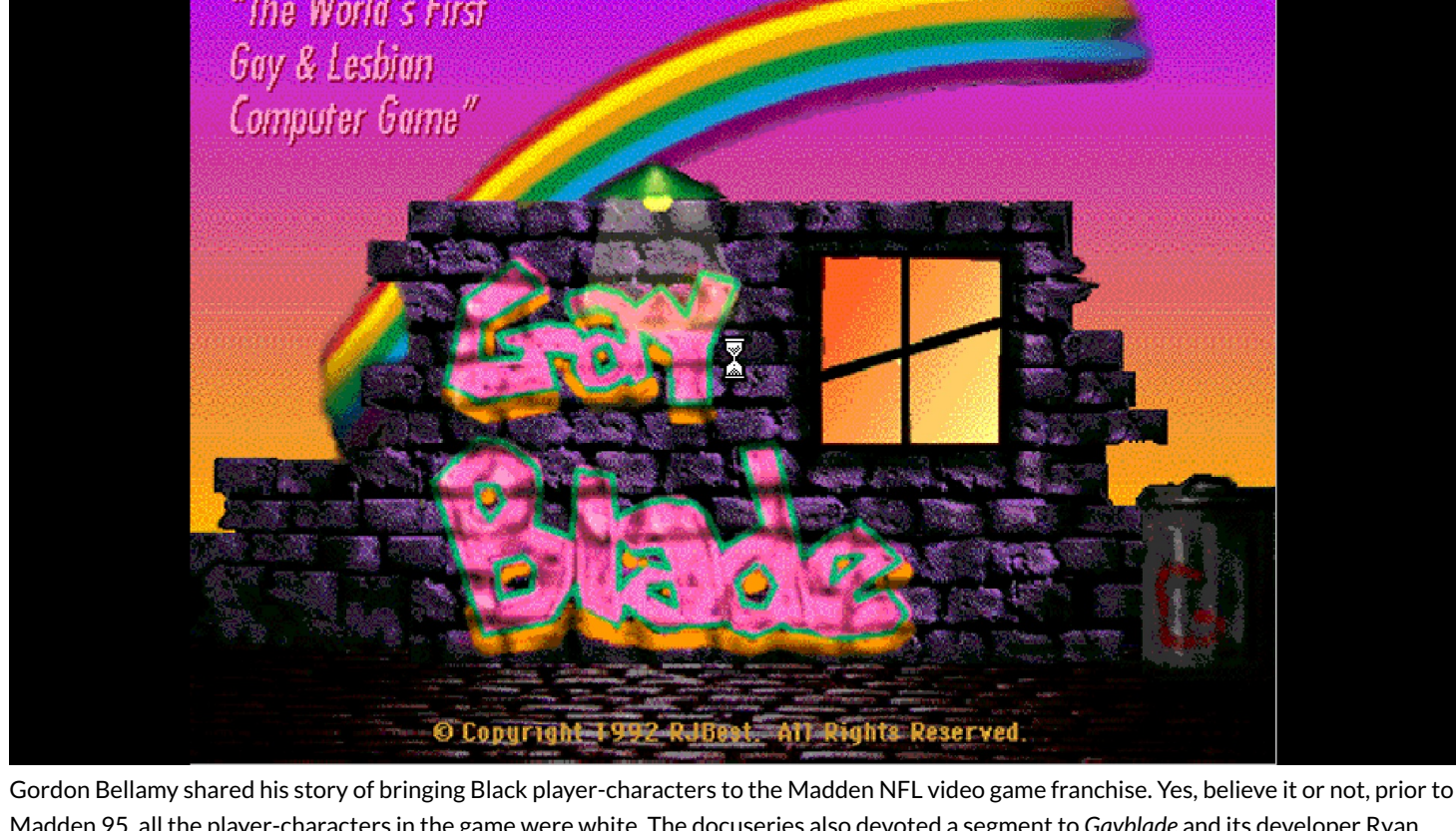


However, having the people who are being interviewed reenact the things they did in their youth - pretend like they're competing in a tournament again, daydreaming about video game code, or wearing a mullet wig as a Nintendo Gameplay Counselor - came off kind of silly and corny. The archive footage from the era, old game play footage, and the animated 16-bit b-roll were sufficient to carry the stories forward. There's no need for the skits. Watching Naoto Oshima draw *Sonic the Hedgehog* for the camera was pretty cool though.

The rest of the episodes tell the stories of Sega entering the industry, how the role-playing video game was born, the invention of the fighting video game, and when video games finally went three dimensional with *Wolfenstein 3D*, *DOOM*, and *Star Fox*. Each episode focuses on specific games, competitions, the people and their stories that impacted the era.

It was fun looking back at how parents lost their minds when *Mortal Kombat* was released and congressional hearings were held about the game. The hearings led to the creation of the ESRB which rates every video game sold to the public. Sega's story about how they instigated a console war with Nintendo was also great to relive and the interesting tidbits about how they came up with *Sonic the Hedgehog*. *Sonic* was pretty close to being a rabbit or a panda bear.

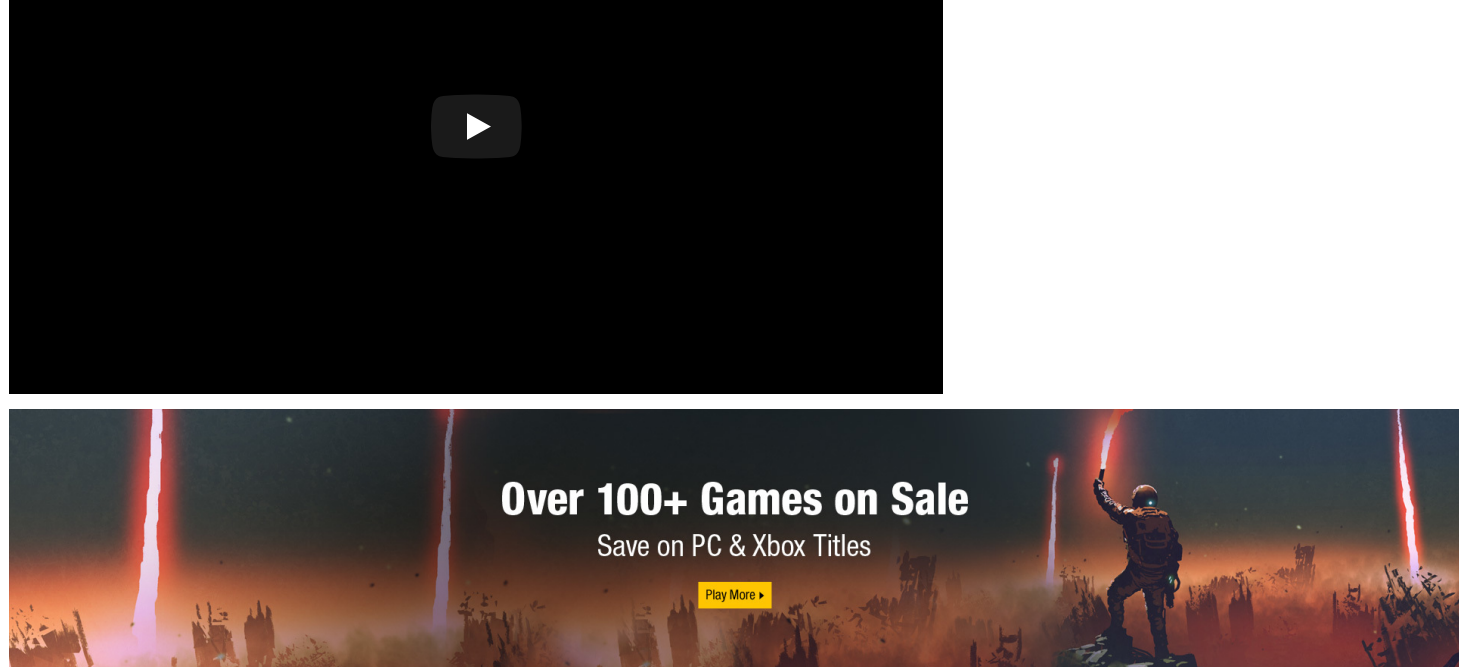
Another great aspect of the docuseries is the highlighting of contributions from people of color and members of the LGBTQ community. The children of Jerry Lawson, the Black inventor of the cartridge-based video game console, told their father's story of being a computer engineer and developing the Channel F video game console.



Gordon Bellamy shared his story of bringing Black player-characters to the Madden NFL video game franchise. Yes, believe it or not, prior to Madden 95, all the player-characters in the game were white. The docuseries also devoted a segment to *Gayblade* and its developer Ryan Best. *Gayblade* was a 1992 RPG that followed the journey of LGBTQ characters in their effort to take down homophobic right-wing enemies.

The series ends in the mid-'90s era of gaming, at the height of Super Nintendo and Sega CD. A second season could explore not only Nintendo 64 and Sega Saturn, but Sony's introduction into the industry with PlayStation. Then later on the downfall of Sega as a console maker and Microsoft throwing their hat into the gaming ring with Xbox. It's definitely worth cheering for a second season.

If anything, Netflix's *High Score* demonstrates how much history there is to learn about the rise of video games and how it has impacted our culture and society. The absence of gaming icons like Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of *Mario* and *Zelda*, and Ed Boon, co-creator of *Mortal Kombat*, was a bit of a disappointment, considering entire episodes are devoted to the games they created. Although they are mentioned, we don't get to hear from them. There are also some small history tidbits the producers of the series chose to "skip" or not mention in the series (Sega's *Game Gear*, for example), but every story or detail cannot be told in six 40-minute episodes. Here's hoping for season two.



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skywalk2 · 7 months ago  
I mean what would history be if we didn't all remember the classic, Gayblade, amirite?

Calebrin · 7 months ago  
Prior to 1995, Madden was not licensed by the NFL, player's association, so the likeness of no players appeared in the game at all. There was a single set of sprites used for all players that differed only by numbers. Depending on the platform you were using, you might not have been even able to read those numbers. The little visible skin on the players was a sort of vague tan color.

I don't think people quite appreciate how simplistic the graphics of mass market games in 1993 or 1994 actually were.

As soon as they got the licensing for the player likenesses from the NFL, player's association, it became necessary to try to actually make those simplistic sprites look like someone. It wasn't a political decision.

skywalk2 · Calebrin · 7 months ago  
But political makes a better story, so...

Mr Burns · 7 months ago  
sounds awesome - would love some PC game content as well

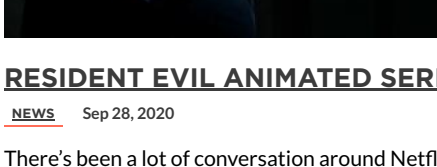
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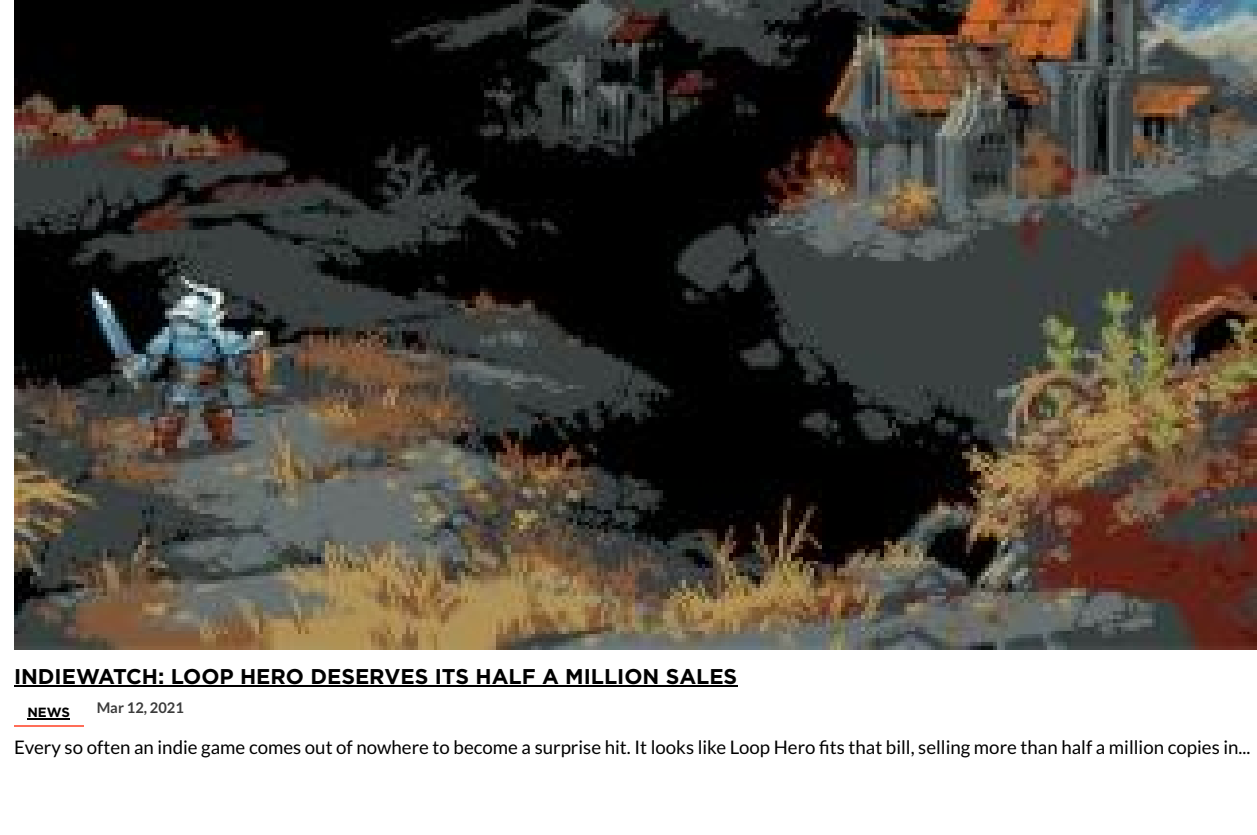
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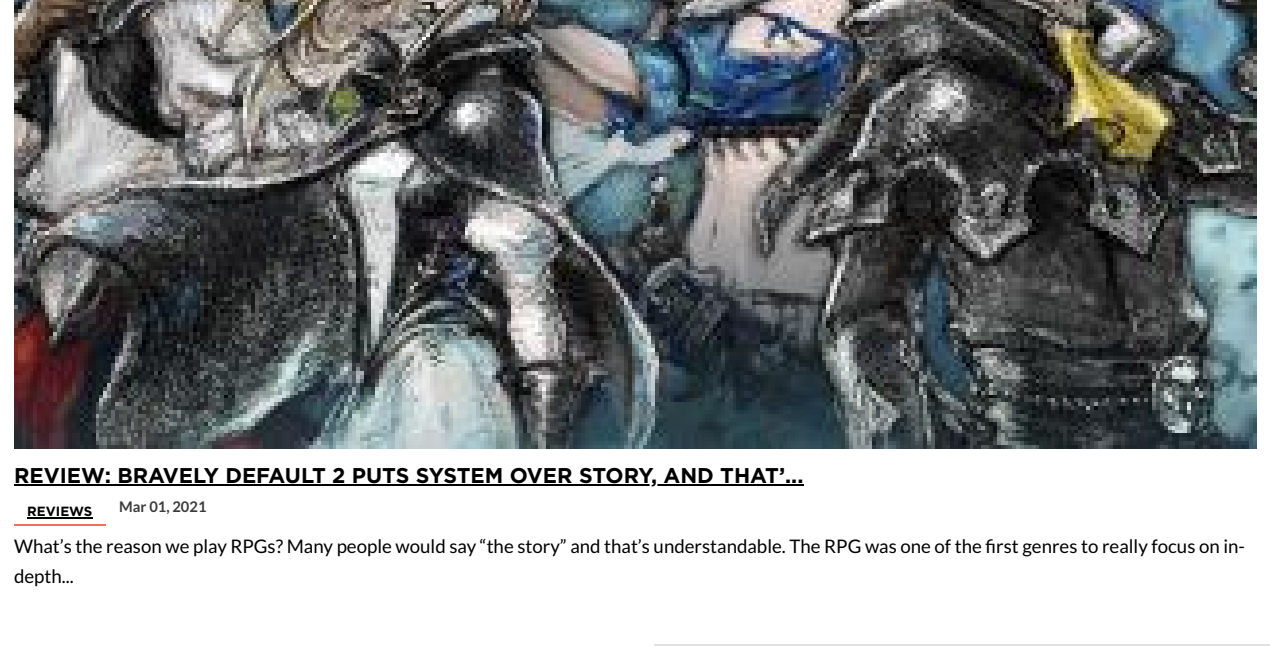
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