

Just Because

Games are fun, until they aren't. It took me a long time to figure out why some games stop being fun. The games themselves don't change, well, some games might, especially complex or abstract games, but the reason most games stop being fun is because the way you play them changes.

Take tic-tac-toe for example, that was so fun, until I learned the system to force both players into a box. What was once an exciting competition became a boring series of limited permutations and forced actions.

That's when I graduated to checkers, and then chess. Complexity, permutations, and causal chains pushed out of reach. Soon it's not a game about playing a game, it's a game about learning a game, learning to play the game in order to learn the game strategies, in order to learn the meta strategies, etc... Work disguised as a game.

Don't get me wrong I love to study and learn with a burning passion, but I also love to play. I fell into the trap myself. Take role playing games, I absolutely adored them to the point of obsessive addiction, but that mystery and exploration always turned into searching for game breaking strategies, chasing metas, and grinding. I became an expert at turning fun into work.

I take responsibility for my own actions. It's tempting to blame the game companies, accuse them of designing games that encourage and lure players into this kind of behavior. The inevitable reality is, unfortunately, that we did it to ourselves. Game makers only extended our behaviors to their inevitable conclusion.

But I'm not here to complain about the gaming industry, when truth be told there are so many great games still made. Moreover these things are not new to my generation, the era of my childhood was not special nor ideal, except in the fact that it was my childhood, keyword 'my'. I changed, I ruined games for myself, well, all except for one.

There is one game I still play whenever the board is laid out before me, this one game is still just as fun and magical as it ever was. No matter how complex my understanding grows or how intelligent my strategic planning becomes, this game is just as enchanting, vibrant and unpolluted as it has always been.

It's not a game you buy, nor a game with any rule book, I call it Mother Nature. The game is simple yet infinitely complex, out in the wilderness, usually a forest, I just pick a spot and that becomes the board. I study the topography, the soil and rocks, the vegetation and the insects,

everything. My favorite boards have flowing water. Once you have soaked it in and feel you're truly connected with the board, then the game begins.

You are now Mother Nature, an artist of the highest order, and this patch is your canvas. Your palate is its elements, you paint and modify it, bend the destiny of this micro-world. I suppose you could try to be benevolent or malicious, a creator or a destroyer. I prefer to let it speak to me, not to forcefully mold it into my vision but instead help it become something.

Even the tiniest of changes can domino into significance, conversely sometimes the deepest cuts can be nullified into irrelevance by time. A diverted trickle of water can carve a different path dragging dirt and life far from where it would have been, yet the deepest excavations in beach sand can have virtually no effect, washed smooth by waves that homogenize everything into the same inescapable destiny.

Everyone has heard of the butterfly effect, I like to call this duality 'The Butterfly-BeachSand Spectrum'. A butterfly's wings could cause or prevent a history altering storm, forever echoing in time. A thousand people could run along a beach only to have their footprints erased, sure, technically sand patterns have been moved around, but the intended idea is clear. The game mother nature is about becoming one with a patch of nature and letting your hands be its butterfly wings.

When I have the time and opportunity to wiggle my way into a dark corner of nature, a spot unlikely to be crawled into, stopped at or visited, that's when I play. Far away from civilization are the obvious spots but sometimes you can find them in small towns, city spaces, or abandoned lots. Imagining the spot won't be disturbed by others allowing your effects to persist and ripple long term is ideal. I've lost interest in pretty much all other games, but my obsession with playing Mother Nature only grew over the years.

It's often said that gamers play for escapism and are addicted to receiving a sense of accomplishment that they can't find in reality. When I hear that my instinct is to instantly refute, argue that my addiction to playing Mother Nature is completely different, I play mother nature to hone my skills of manipulating causality, it teaches me to predict in plan, it refines an ability to study complexity and intuit trends. But then again, perhaps I doth protest too much, it's not like I have become successful in any of my endeavors.

Yet here I am again, tunneling through some thick brush just because I caught a glimpse of a hollow cavity hidden inside. I just can't resist the allure of a chance to play on a pristine board with potential to butterfly.

A few scratches but almost there, it looks like it's going to be much larger than I thought.

Okay... Here we go, light at the end of the tunnel, just tuck under this bit... It's larger than it looked... Oh!... Ummm...

The clearing is the size of a large bedroom, roundish with a large indent, like a pill capsule bent into a u-shape. I have just crawled through the middle dent with a massive blind spot behind me on my right. As my head twists, scanning, I discover the nook behind me concealed a makeshift tarp and bedding, lying there is what looks like a homeless person.

Caught off guard I'm frozen in place, a deer in the headlights, I can't help staring. Please don't tell me I just found a... visible breathing, good... thank heavens. I should probably just leave quietly.

Eyelids flash open, we are suddenly making eye contact.

"Sorry" I mutter awkwardly.

A stunned look of awe is laser focused on me, not fear or anger, more than simple surprise or distress. The only word that comes to mind is starstruck. This is making me uncomfortable, I break eye contact.

The slow cautious movement of knees rising up like mountain peaks is what I focus on, avoiding looking at the face of the person cautiously curling up vertically. Standing tall over someone folding into a protective huddled position feels wrong, I step back and squat down.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you" I say, now trying to force myself to make eye contact again "I'll just go".

"N... No!" an instant reply of the single word begins, a short hesitation mid-word, then a decisive and urgent follow through "Stay! Ha! I can talk to you, I can actually talk to you! It's been so long... "

"Sure, we can talk" I sit down, the selfish and uncomfortable voices inside give way to the ones that speak empathy and kindness, my instinct to excuse myself and leave is subdued.

I remove my backpack and sit down. Opening my bag I pull out some trail mix, bottles of water, and chocolate, not that sugary garbage chocolate, the good stuff.

Handing over a bottle of water I ask "What's your name?"

I don't know if I have ever actually seen such an exaggerated expression of surprise and apprehension, eyes cranked open to the limit, pupils visually dilated, I swear doubled in size, eyes starting to dart around scanning the environment.

"M... mm... Moss. My name is Moss" a response filled with stutter.

“Nice to meet you Moss, my name is Bles.” I can feel my response and body language still betraying my attempts to conceal the awkwardness of being in a social situation that is outside of my comfort zone.

I take a handful of nuts and pass the bag to Moss who is already sucking down the water, the chugging of water stops abruptly as the trail mix is accepted and begins getting shoveled into mouth.

I resist the urge to speak again, the silence lingers uncomfortably, for me anyways, but I think a moment of peace to eat is the right move.

I take a big piece of chocolate and offer some. Moss grabs some and takes a massive bite. “Oh it's a bit bitter.” I warn “Not everyone enjoys it, so...”

“It's delicious!” words rush hastily through a mouth full of nuts and chocolate.

Most people cringe at even a small bite. This isn't what normal people think chocolate is, this is pure unsweetened cocoa mass. I suppose if you are hungry enough it doesn't matter. “I'm glad it's not too bitter for you, not many people like it. In fact, almost no one does, hehe”.

Moss slows down, chews a bit, and savors a moment. “It's lovely. Very acrid, the sour notes overwhelm the bitterness making it seem almost sweet... Single origin? Where from?”

I'm startled. That's a refined palette which I almost never encounter. There is no shortage of wine lovers in this world, so many fancy themselves connoisseurs, but with chocolate it's so rare to find someone who doesn't cringe at pure cocoa unadulterated by sweeteners. I required quite some time to build up a pallet that could appreciate its notes and profiles myself.

This is not just some drifter, or at least not always. It dawns on me now, that's pretty much always the case isn't it, every homeless drifter probably has an origin story which most people would call a ‘normal life’.

”Yes, it's from Thailand. Wow! Impressive...” I cut myself off, the next words were going to express my surprise at such a refined appreciation from... well, from someone like this. Instead I gather my thoughts and approach it gentler and less direct “How did you end up in this neck of the woods?”

Those eyes lock onto mine and chewing stops for just a moment, then Moss goes right back to eating while saying “Horrible mistake, I'm not supposed to be here. I don't even know why I'm able to stay, but somehow I found refuge here in this patch of woods.”

“Oh this spot is pretty ideal for... not being disturbed. Close to the city but far off the beaten path.” A bit of a hiccup there but I'm getting into a smooth yet considerate conversational flow

now “You shouldn't be bothered here, but are still close enough to walk into town with plenty of time to get stuff done and get back in a single day.”

“Not what I mean.” Not bothering to look up at me just responding very matter of fact “This place is... special somehow.”

Intrigued, I ask “Really, how so? I love this place too, it's so peaceful and alive.”

This question acquired another pause and eye contact “This.. place... it is... Umm...” Eyes darting around revealing a search for the right words, then suddenly eye contact “It doesn't hurt me. It lets me stay.”

I can't decide if Moss is metaphorically referring to people and society or if this is a sign of some mental confusion or disorder, instincts to change the topic are overridden by my curiosity “Hurt you? what do you mean? Is there something I can do to help? ”

Moss pauses and squirms ever so slightly, looks at the ground muttering “You wouldn't believe me. I can't tell you, you'll think I'm crazy and besides I probably can't do it. I probably can't tell you even if I wanted to.”

Seeing such a timid fragility I'm overtaken with empathy, looking at Moss I let the feeling wash over me, my mind races searching for what to say, a flurry of possible responses tossed out as unsuitable until the right one hits me “Tell me a story. tell me a story about someone like you in a situation like this. I love stories, it doesn't have to be true. Parts can be true parts can be fiction, it doesn't matter.”

Moss is taken back, head literally jerking backwards and brows furrow, confusion with a hint of disgust, like the idea is absurd, then the expression melts “Yeah, okay... just a story about someone like me...”

“Yeah” I reply, then for some reason the image of someone reading a book about woodland creatures to a child pops into my mind. I want to make it more comfortable but I still hope to satisfy my curiosity, there must be a way to make sure it's not just all pure fiction... I got it! “But tell it in the first person, I love immersive narratives!” that should do it.

“Huh?... oh... okay” Moss starts fidgeting with a twig “So... so I... I used to be a physicist.” Moss pauses and looks around, nervous as if expecting something. A couple seconds of nervous bracing for something that never comes then Moss settles “So yeah... I used to be a physicist, but everything went wrong when I... I... lck...” Moss starts choking on words, that's the only way to describe it. The word seems stuck, a deep guttural choking sound is all that comes out.

“Drink some water.” I pick up an open bottle of water and pass it, Moss takes it but doesn't drink.

"I can't... I can't... you see! I just can't say it. I told you I wouldn't be able to tell you about it." Moss says, panic mixed with 'I told you so'.

"It's okay, no worries. Some things are hard to talk about." I feel like I'm learning to channel all those empathetic interactions I have seen and heard "Talk about anything else you like, it doesn't have to be that." These just feel like the right things to say, the empathy and desire to comfort are overwhelming. Am I talking like a therapist? I have only seen them in media but I think I'm emulating those therapist characters "You were a physicist. you must have loved science and studied very hard in school" maybe it's easier to talk about life before whatever disaster led to this.

"Not really. School was kind of boring, but I did always love science." Moss seems to relax, I think it's best if I lead for now, maybe the ball will start rolling by itself later "For me science makes problems in the puzzles, I love games. What about you? What made you fall in love with science?"

"Answers. Reasons. That's what I loved learning, the whys of everything." The pace of Moss's speech starts picking up, hints of passion gleaming through, then a slightly more somber tone sets in "It's funny, the magic of wondering why and discovering answers somehow turned into something else..." trailing off, face drooping into remorse or sadness, I sense a feeling of loss.

Instinct tells me it's best to pull us out of this nosedive "Interesting that you say it was the whys, for me it was the hows. I think I was always jumping from one thing to the next, often accused of no consistency or follow through, but never without something to do or chase." I can see Moss's expression lift, this is helping, a positive distraction. Maybe I can pass the ball back if I do it gently and carefully "What was your favorite field?"

"Psychology. it sounds weird for a physicist, I know." I give an intentional quizzical expression in response, hoping to pull out some elaboration, it works "Why did they do that? was my favorite question. I annoyed adults to death with recursive whys about people's motivations. I didn't originally care about kinetics or electromagnetism, no interest in gravity or light, all I wanted to understand is why people did the things they did."

"Wow, I've never met anyone in the hard sciences with that origin story." Surprise written across my face, completely authentic surprise "What caused you to switch to physics?" genuine curiosity fills me with anticipation.

"I didn't switch. As I learned and grew I was always after that same answer, all roads lead to Rome. I started shifting focus from why others acted the way they did to why I do what I do. It's easy to shrug off other people's behavior as induced behavior, but not so easy with yourself." Moss is really starting to roll now, less forced and more natural. "Eventually I ended up down the rabbit hole of trying to pin down causal chains in the mind, tracking physical chain reactions. Answers were always A leads to B, or increases the probability of B, but my thirst was never

quenched. For some reason the because never satisfied my why. I was obsessed. I decided that the only way to find what I searched for was to eliminate because.”

Moss paused, not long enough to imply a stop but this provoked so much interest in me that I just had to interject “Eliminate because? That sounds a bit strange, I don't think I have ever heard someone say that before. You mean isolate variables right?”

“I meant what I said.” Moss plants those words calmly with a dominant tone, It feels almost like a slap in the face but without the aggressive tones. That sting lingers briefly then comes the elaboration, reminiscent of a prof lecturing first years “I refused to accept that my actions were all reactive, I loathe determinism as an explanation, but I couldn't accept invoking magic either. Ironically I didn't so much choose my path, it was the natural result of refusing determinism yet insisting it must be understandable. I had to eliminate because, causality was noise and I was sure if I could tune it out then I could see the truth, pure motivation and choice.” The passion in Moss's voice now shows signs of stress hinting at an over excitement and frustration.

I feel I should probably pull back on the reins, not sure if this is going to become too intense and stress Moss too much. I know I should pull back, but I can't, this is just too interesting. I need to hear more, I need to see how much further this can go before it gets ridiculous. This narrative is walking towards a ledge, It feels so profound and logical, but it's about to cross the edge and tumble into the absurd... right? “How would that even be possible? sensory deprivation?” I inquire.

“Oh I tried all sorts of isolation methods, but measurements all indicated that no matter how much stimulus I removed the remaining stimulus just supplemented the subtracted components. You can isolate all you want but if there is still the tiniest noise getting through then it gets amplified by feedback loops. Sure it seems more random, but it's like the initial state of complex systems, the complex feedback loops may make the result less intuitive but it's still deterministic.”

I nod in agreement, my immersion and anticipation leak through, like a child listening to a story, showing they have understood and wait with bated breath for the next page.

“For years I searched, seeking ways to disconnect systems from... ummm... well, I was trying to disconnect a physical system from the physical world. As you can imagine I had to embed my personal obsession within a premise that could get funding and resources. Quantum system isolation was perfect, resources were dumped on me to invent novel ways to isolate physical systems. I didn't actually work with the quantum systems myself, I was essentially an interference shielding engineer.

I'm captivated. Another pause, a nod, then Moss continues “I was able to formulate and test all kinds of hypotheses with other people's money as long as I packaged up and delivered the byproducts.” Another pause, I nod again but it doesn't work this time. This time it's a full stop, eyes darting like someone scanning for threats. Should I change the subject? No... it's best to

help Moss work through this, just be supportive and gentle, right? Am I just thinking that because I so desperately want to hear more? "It's okay, take a moment, there's no hurry, collect your thoughts." I say that trying to fake patience.

"Well it was just like that, my life, until the.. accident.. the mistake..." Moss is really taking time to get this out, slow speech and long pauses "...I built a sy.. Sk... SskkkkSskkkk..." Guttural choking sounds again "I found a way to k... cu.. Kkka.." more choking, Moss keeps getting stuck on words, almost as if they literally get stuck on their way out.

"Relax. Drink some water. it's okay." I say carefully and selfishly, not indicating to stop attempting to continue the story. It's a false compassion, I want the next piece of the story... even if it hurts Moss?... Am I a bad person?

"By using a ack.... AccckkkAccckkk.." Moss stops and tenses up in frustration "Forget it! it's no use! I can't tell you, it's impossible!"

Probably scared to say, bound by legal restrictions I imagine. The choking is somehow connected to fear of repercussions I bet. "It's okay, I get it. I work under strict restrictive legal agreements too, just skip over the details that are off limits."

"Argh! You don't get it!" Moss bursts with impulsive aggravation "Time won't let me tell you!... wait..." All of a sudden the anger in Moss's voice is gone, replaced in a flash with astonishment "I'm allowed to talk about time?... I can speak in generalizations?... what? Haha!... This is the past! Hahaha! I went back in time!" Moss is excited, laughing ecstatically, it would perhaps normally be described as elation, but given the context of what is being said I can't help but perceive it as maniacal laughter. The boundary between celebration and lunacy here is the notion of time travel, I'm speechless, how do I address this?

"I couldn't disconnect complex physical systems from physical and spatial interactions, so I found a way to disconnect temporally. Ha!... First just a minor phase-like shift, then more. Not forward, that didn't work, things always just snapped back in sync with everything else immediately, but being slightly behind would linger a while, just long enough. So if I pushed errr.. errkkk.... Fine!!!" Interrupted again by choking, Moss looks up to the sky as if addressing a deity "Only generalizations. But why? Because Bles here won't believe me without details? I'm only allowed to come off as crazy? " Moss now looks at me "...Or maybe you could act on the details?" I feel very uncomfortable, 'be careful what you wish' for now echoing in my mind'.

I pushed for this, now what? Obviously I don't want to confront, so play along? Is that smart or will it just exaggerate the situation? The description was actually about being just a bit out of phase, whatever that means, maybe the delusion isn't too extreme, or maybe it's more of a metaphor. "So you pushed yourself a little bit behind, or out of phase, or whatever. Experimenting on yourself is a bit reckless isn't it?"

“I couldn't resist. The behavior of the mice lost its correlation with stimulus almost completely, they still acted like mice, nothing abnormal. The correlation returned quickly when they snapped back, I was sure it was safe. I was so sure...” A listful depressed tone and expression showered down over Moss “There was no way I could have known...”

With moss now appearing less maniacal it feels safer to follow up “What happened? What went wrong? Regardless of what happened, it could have been worse, at least you're alive right?”

Looking up from the ground Moss's eyes meet mine, like sad puppy dog eyes “It hurt... It hurt so bad... Not the first couple times. First it felt strange, everything looked the same but different, the world looked just as tangible but felt surreal. I couldn't resist. I pushed further and further, eventually that last time I didn't snap back.” Arms wrapped around folded legs, an upright seated position, Moss starts squirming ever so slightly.

“I remember thinking about the sensation I was having, disconnected from reality, and then I began visualizing how to tell people, how to write about it, then the air got.. heavy. The air became thicker like glue. Trying to move in some directions it was thicker and other directions easier. I fought, but it was like... imagine a fly submerged in honey. Then it started to flow, even standing still was like fighting currents, pushed and pulled. When a huge rush of force slammed me against the desk I just knew I needed to get out of the building. I really can't fully describe it in an analogy, the closest thing would be trying to fight your way through a crowd, shoulder to shoulder, pushing and shoving, except it's not a crowd of people, it's the air itself.”

Pausing to look at me it feels like Moss is seeing if I'm following, maybe to check if I might be judging sanity in disbelief. Honestly only moments ago I was thinking this is lunacy but not anymore, well... now I'm on the fence. The words and sentences are unbelievable individually, but the story and storyteller are so compelling “So you got out?... obviously you did. You're here.” My disbelief is suspended and responses just flow accepting the story premise.

“Yeah. standing out in the open street felt safer, but the air kept getting thicker and the current stronger. Then...” Head tucking between knees, arms wrapping around legs, and hands grasping shins, and upright seated fetal position, Moss starts squirming “...Then the air started to freeze. As some heavy currents swept by, they felt like streams filled with sharp ice crystals, they slashed spots on my body but the pain from each strike radiated through my whole body.” Moss quivers a bit “Imagine being whipped, like in your leg, but the pain radiates as a feeling of paper cuts all over your body, over and over. It hurt so bad!...” A few pitiful trembling sobs, Moss tucks into a tighter fetal position.

The pain in Moss's body language and description resonates. I don't feel pain myself but I do feel an empathetic suffering of pity, like witnessing a child or animal being abused and tortured. It's then that I noticed Moss isn't just dirty, there are marks, subtle, not scars, they look like birthmarks or aged burns. My throat contracts, feels coarse and dry, my eyes well up and lips press together tightly “Are those marks...?” I point at a mark on moss' arm.

Moss's right hand covers up the spot, I can't tell if it's self-consciousness about the blemish or just touching it in memory of the event that caused it. "Yeah." A delayed soft and timid response. "They don't seem to heal completely, each one is from a time skip. Every time they slashed me the world shattered. Time of day, parked cars, garbage can, everything glitched and changed. The pain was intense. It took several times before I noticed that the delay between skips was erratic, but that landing in daytime always skipped again very quickly, however night landings sometimes lingered a while. It was those longer night landings when I moved. The current pushed and pulled me away, I tried to follow the edge of the road. I became starkly aware of what was happening when a building disappeared and became an undeveloped lot."

Glancing at me Moss takes a moment, to gauge my reaction I think. Stuck somewhere between disbelief and immersion, I think my state of mind is obvious and clearly written across my face.

"My biggest fear, after realizing what was happening, was to land embedded in something, or with something embedded in me. The worst was sometimes the earth jumped up beneath me, but I popped up with it, it felt like when you are walking down stairs thinking there is one more step but there isn't, and your hips get shoved into your stomach, but a million times worse" I nod and grunt to show I know that feeling. "Eventually, as I approached this area, the currents started to soften. Skips slowed and the whole torturous process gradually stopped. The thick flowing air forces guided me into this brush, gentler as I got closer. I've been here for about a couple months now." Moss stops, a tone that says we have reached the end of the story.

I'm now turned into the child flooded with follow-up questions about my bedtime story, overwhelmed with pestering demands for answers "Are you stuck here? Can you leave? Why here?"

"It's comfortable in this area, this patch about a couple hundred meters in any direction. When I test the limits I always find the air gets thicker as I venture outwards, and when I venture too far out the air gets dense and gusts of heavy wind start shoving me. I'm not about to risk skipping again, that's a painful experience I never want to feel again in my life. I don't know exactly why this place is special, but I have found special spots that are the softest, so I try to stay as close to them as possible. The soft spots are my new home I guess." Moss looks visibly relieved when talking about these so-called soft spots.

"Soft spots" I ask. I must know more.

"Yeah. Some places are hard, others soft. In hard places the air gets thick, other things get heavier too... I mean massive... it's not weight it's like mass. A thing, a leaf for example, can be normal, but sometimes it's like it's got extra mass, at least that's how it feels to me. A pebble could feel as immovable as a boulder. I hypothesize that I'm feeling causal mass." Moss says that last bit and starts drinking water, calm as can be, comparable to a monk who just dropped a meaning of life revelation, then calmly sips tea like it's all run of the mill stuff.

“Causal Mass?” I ask, Moss glances at me for a moment, nods, and eats more nuts, leaving me to simmer. I Ponder... determinism as mass?... So a pebble that changes the future if moved feels like a boulder if Moss pushes on it... why can't I feel it? Because this is my time. Moss isn't supposed to be here! “You're not supposed to be here! You said it earlier!” I exclaim.

“You get it.” Moss smirks ever so slightly “if I try to leave these soft spots, try to go back, causality, time, the universe, whatever it is, well... It shows me that the future isn't mine to change. Time fights back if you challenge it. Before I even get to the edge of these woods, well, I realize that sharp and soft are not antonyms. Do you have any idea how sharp plants are?” Moss looks at me with a serious expression to emphasize the point. I shrug even though it's clearly rhetorical “A blade of grass really is a blade when it doesn't bend or break, leaf edges can be serrated knives. Look!” Moss points to some thin fresh scars that look like razor cuts “Sometimes I can't tell which things have high causal mass until it's too late. If I'm lucky I feel heavy air in time to back off, high causal mass usually has heavy air around it.”

My mind is racing to just digest and absorb this conceptual onslaught, I just barely pull together an empathetic response “So you're trapped by invisible razor wire. I think I grasp what you are saying. Some places, soft spots you call them, are more pliable than others, so they somehow don't affect the future as much, footprints in beachsand.” I realize this is my personal analogy. “I mean they are like footprints on a beach, the waves wash everything flat so they don't really have a lasting effect, the waves homogenize everything so nothing has lasting effects.”

Moss smiles “That was my first assumption, but I'm not so sure anymore. I started noticing these anomalies at almost every single soft spot I have found. Little... I don't know what to call them... little shrines, or altars... maybe remnants from occult rituals. The scientist in me hates it, but there they are, each one different.” Moss gestures towards a patch on the ground, “This one has a few rocks intentionally stacked in a clearly unnatural way, the earth is also disturbed, a hole was dug and covered. I feel crazy saying this but they are like sacred ground to me, my islands of peace and safety. I search them out and live near them, being very careful not to disturb them, of course.”

Looking at the spot it suddenly strikes me, I know this spot, I've been here before. I came in from the other side last time and played Mother Nature here already. An airy single chuckle comes out of my mouth “Ha...Those soft spots, they are where I played Mother Nature. ” I say “That was me.”

Moss is dumbfounded, looking me over head to toe, scanning me as if we just met. “You... What? Mother Nature...? What!?”

“It's a game I play. I pick an isolated spot and gently sculpt nature, trying to help it become whatever it tells me it wants to be. That doesn't mean it literally talks to me, I just kind of meditate on the spot, take it in, and do whatever comes naturally. That spot there...” I point at the spot “...I buried some leaves, twigs, and berries that I collected from the surrounding area, I just felt like they should decompose underground I guess. I suppose I was feeding the

subsurface biome that time, I tried to do it carefully and put all the bits of earth back at the same depth they came from.”

Moss looks at me, ever so slightly open mouthed, stunned and silent.

“I've been coming here for years, playing my game all over.” I say, a surge of pride wells up for reasons not entirely clear yet, but it's strong, I'm proud, so proud. “I bet those soft spots are all spots where I played. When I play I am trying to create butterfly effects, chain reactions that persist, but I'm very gentle about it. I'm not trying to control it, just just help it be what it wants to be. I can feel myself grinning ear to ear, I have become a proud child proclaiming look what I did.

“Just... just a second.... give me a sec...” Moss mutters, obviously trying to collect thoughts into coherent ideas. A few moments of silence with Moss's face twitching and contorting “So I cut myself from the natural time flow. Time and causality push and shove me, toss me around in spacetime like a rag doll. I'm lucky enough to be driven to these soft spots... and you're telling me you created them?” Moss looks at me with a combination of severity and disbelief. I nod and shrug slightly, trying to suppress a beaming grin of self-satisfaction.

“You created them by just playing in the dirt?” Slightly aggressive sarcasm in that question, but it doesn't get to me, I'm high on the feeling of winning. Like winning a game, acknowledgment that my plays were good, that I played so well that I achieved an unexpectedly amazing victory.

“Well, it's not so simple. It's something I have been playing all my life. You see, creating significant butterfly effects without trying to take control is much harder than it sounds.” I've tried to explain my game before but the listener usually just feigned interest, or at best found it slightly novel and amusing, but today someone is actually interested and cares “It's mostly about a kind of meditation, I try to just listen and feel, allowing my actions to flow naturally.”

“You let yourself become completely reactive?” asks Moss.

“I wouldn't say that. Reactive doesn't feel like the right word at all. Not reactive, just... just not controlling. Let go... if anything is in control it's that patch of nature, I try to let it decide.”

After a long delay of thought Moss says “I have been twisting logic and reasoning, finally enough to form a sense of understanding about what happened to me, or at least a superficially seemingly reasonable hypothesis. Extra causal mass stops me from changing things, it knocks me through time when I'm in the way, hit by causality and determinism like a truck windshield smashing an insect, this I kind of get. But why on earth does your silly little game make these soft spots?” Moss's tone is somewhere between annoyed and infuriated, posture thrusting forward towards me.

I retract my chin, shrug my shoulders, and show an intentionally timid look, hoping to calm an aggravated soul. Shrugging my shoulders higher I just say “I dunno.” First Moss’s eyes soften, then the rest of the body follows suit.

That aggravation from a moment ago has given way, completely replaced by an air of helplessness. “Nothing works, I’m just stuck here. Every idea a dead end, every experiment a failure. I’m sick of living like this but I can’t go back... I’ve tried everything, but nothing works...”

“Have you tried not trying?” I ask carefully.

“What?” A mildly aggravated tone but more confused than anything else.

“When you try to leave, what are you thinking? What are you planning to do?” I ask as gently as I can.

Moss pauses in reflection, then answers “Well, I guess the first thing would be to find people, to them I would appear like a common drifter, so I’m going to need to convince them I’m not. Maybe prove I’m from the future or find a way to use my knowledge to... Although... I’ve never been able to even approach other people since I got here. Getting near people always results in being smacked with waves of heavy air, pushing me away, even cars on the nearby road carry a shockwave of heavy air that can knock me back and send me tumbling. But I do fantasize about getting into town and finding someone to talk to, like you, and somehow getting my life back. I just want to get my life back... a life... any life. I could be useful. I could be so valuable. The things I know... I could...” Moss is starting to sound a bit erratic now, like someone arguing with the universe about their merit versus their predicament, complaining of injustice.

“Maybe if you stop trying and just go with the flow.” I’m about to be critical of something that seems to be a core ideal for Moss, I want to determine if the mood is receptive. Moss looks a bit quizzical, I can’t be sure if it’s wise, but I honestly believe it’s the most helpful possible approach. “You got into all this by trying to break free from the natural flow, or determinism as you call it, and now you’re only safe havens are places where I kind of did the opposite.” Moss looks interested with a hint of disgust, like there is a reflex to spit out this bitter idea, at least it’s not anger, might as well follow through “These are places where I essentially handed over my free will, I let nature take the wheel, maybe that’s what you need to do. Here nature has been given more power, not had its agency taken away.”

Moss looks conflicted, clearly what I said resounded deep within, at the same time there is an impulse to reject it, a look best described as the intellectual version of an urge to regurgitate but not yet clear if the vomit reflex will actually trigger. Through that superficial battle of logic and reasoning I spy pain. Once I notice it, it is plain as day, there is emotional distress beneath internal rational debate. The surface is trying to make sense and formulate justified reasoning, below it a child drenched in tears. I know immediately what I am meant to do.

I stand up, walk over to Moss and reach forward with an open palm. “Take my hand”

Moss peers up at me, that critical suspicious look melted into puppy dog eyes in an instant. Moss looks at my hand "...I can't... What's the point? I can't leave." Tone of voice trailing down and out, but head doesn't drop, sad eyes still locked onto mine. I don't think there is anything in life more profoundly moving than such a sight of starving hunger for hope draped and bleak despair.

"Don't overthink it. Don't try. Don't you see? It started with you trying to force and control, it can end if you let go." I say thrusting my hand closer. "Don't plan or worry, just come with me, trust me." A sense of purpose is welling up inside me, I don't know if Moss will take my hand but I know that offering it is exactly what I was meant to do.

Moss reaches out, hesitating several times, then says "What if it happens again?" cringing at the thought.

"We'll take it slow, One step at a time." I answer calmly, my hand right up inches away from Moss's. "Somehow I know I'm right, you just need to relax and come with me. Go with the flow, there is a place for you, a life waiting for you. You don't have to create or forge it, it's there for you to find." These words resonate in my chest and tingle as I say them.

.....

Moss took my hand. It took a few tries, there were some panic attacks and several cuts and bruises, but after several attempts we eventually made it out. There were a few moments of agitation when, I swear, I actually saw the heavy air pushing Moss, and some leaves and branches that really did refuse to move until Moss calmed down.

A bit of a shut-in at first, we eventually worked through the anxiety and, step by step, Moss rejoined the world.

Moss found a new life, not as a physicist. A few odd jobs then settling at the zoo. Moss says that it's the combination of times and places bustling with people and others of quiet isolation, but I suspect it's also the animals. The duality of seeing them living freely, yet restricted to a place where they aren't really meant to be.

Me... helping Moss I realized that my craving to create butterfly effects was my calling, I just hadn't yet found the true meta strategy. Creating a chain reaction that resonates and grows, like a butterfly causing a storm, is fine, but causing a storm of butterflies, now that's another level. I teach and write, mentor, artist and muse, I've never been happier.

Here Comes Moss now for our monthly lunch, a bit late as usual.

"Late as always." I smirk while sipping my drink.

“That’s impossible, I’m always early!” A playful smile. Moss uses that all the time, every chance. As far as I know I’m the only one who gets it, not even Moss’s family knows, they just think it’s a silly response to deny being late.

“I ordered for you, same as last time.” Moss nods. Moss is probably the most laid-back person you could ever meet. I doubt it’s necessary anymore, I’m sure taking some control and agency would be fine, but letting go was such a critical and profound change that I think it’s unlikely to fade. “How’s the family?”

“Great! The little ones are such a handful. They are in the asking ‘why everything’ phase now, driving me crazy, I love it!” I love hearing about those kids, Moss lets me spoil them whenever I visit.

“I have something for you.” I pull a book out of my bag. “it’s my first children’s book.” I hand it over. Moss takes it gawking at the cover. It’s a hand-drawn cartoon bumblebee on a flower titled ‘Why do bees Buzz?’. “A friend of mine did the illustration.” Moss is still staring with an astonished look. “Oh, come on! That’s getting excessive now. It just feels patronizing when you exaggerate. This isn’t even my first book.”

Moss looks up at me with a just-saw-a-ghost expression and says “Just because.”

Now I’m surprised, speechless.

“Just because... B - E - E cause” Moss mutters.

—Summary of book contents—

There is a young little bumble bee named Bitty Bee

Bitty Bee asks Busy Bee why everyone runs around doing things in such a hurry.
Busy Bee answers “Just because”

Bitty Bee asks Bossy Bee why they go around telling everyone what to do.
Bossy Bee answers “Just because”

Bitty Bee asks Buzzy Bee why bees buzz around from flower to flower.
Buzzy Bee answers “Just because”

Bitty Bee is frustrated and goes off alone.

Bitty Bee meets a butterfly who asks what is wrong. Bitty Bee explains how grown-ups won’t explain anything and only say “Just because”

The butterfly explains that grown-ups are just bad explainers.

Busy Bees **cause** work to get done
Bossy Bees **cause** everyone know what they need to do
Buzzy Bees **cause** flowers to grow and honey to get home

When they say just because what they mean is just “Bee Cause’.

They are saying it's their reason, it's their purpose.

It is the Bee's Cause.

—End of book—

“How did you know that? The book isn't published yet, this is one of my advanced copies.” Did Moss know my illustrator friend perhaps? Maybe, I don't remember introducing them.

“I remember it from when I was a kid... This... this is inspired by me? ...it is, isn't it?” that Seen-a-ghost look still fixated on the book cover.

It takes me a short moment to answer “Yes... so... you are saying...”

Moss gently puts the book on the table, jaw-dropped rounded open mouth is slowly pulled up and outwards by the corners “Ha, I have been obsessing for years, wondering what kind of time travel it was. You know all those different kinds from stories and movies. It's a causal loop! I guess I didn't change anything... Ha!” smacks the table open palmed.

I try to digest all of this “So... then it's a good book I guess. I mean, at least it's still being read in the future.” I grin proudly. “My publisher will be happy haha. They gave me a huge retainer to write more like it.” Moss just grunts and acknowledges what I said, still staring at the book “Guess what I did with the retainer?” Moss doesn't budge or respond “I bought that plot of land where we met.”

Hearing that Moss looks up “That's great. Getting into real estate, I'm sure you'll do well.”

“Ha! You don't know the half of it. I bought it for sentimental reasons, the seller was price gouging, but I just went for it. I figured this windfall wouldn't have happened without that place.” I pause and smile at Moss, I get a smile in return.

“A couple days after buying it I get contacted by a developer. Turns out they are planning a development and the original owner of that lot was holding out. The seller was asking too much and the developer was playing hardball. That's why the seller was price gouging, and now the

developer figures I bought it to bend them over a barrel for profit. They offered me a huge buyout.”

Moss smirks “Karma seems to like you.”

“Oh I turned them down. I said I love that spot too much, I could never let it get bulldozed. They tried a few times, I even got to meet their CEO, in the end they accepted that I'm never going to sell and are going with another location on the west side of town.” I finish with a triumphant breaking smile.

That seen–a-ghost look is back ”Combiz Corp?” comes out of Moss’s jaw dropped mouth.

“Yeah. How do you know?” Twice now, I'm suspicious this is a game, someone must have told Moss all these things, a mutual friend or something.

“That's the plaza I was in. It's supposed to be there! Not on the other side of town!” Moss is dumbfounded again.

We are both silent, I don't know how long, then I speak, even though I don't really know what to say “So...”

“So... Ha! Of course!” Moss looks struck by a punchline, looking up as if addressing a deity “Of course... I obsess over the mechanics, was it predetermined, a causal loop, or did I change time, can the future affect the past. I finally get an answer, of course the answer is ‘both’. The only answer I get is a non-answer. What else could I expect? You.... You... Hahaha!”

We laughed a lot that day.

Moss remains my greatest muse in my writing.

Some stories are meant to be told

Some weren't

and some stories...

Some stories want to be told so badly they find a way to be written early.

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