

DUNGEON MASTER

By Spencer Harvie

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DUNGEON MASTER: Spencer Harvie

Systems have operated in Spencer Harvie's practice for several years, but they are most apparent in his latest series of drawings in *Dungeon Master*. The drawings are glimpses into the fictional world of 'H' and its happenings. For all their surrealism and seemingly disparate imagery, they stem from a strict process. Harvie's methods both invoke and limit his creative control, and this exercise in fluctuating agency within an individualised system allows him to spawn a fully functioning fantasy world.

Over the last twelve months, circumstances have caused us to become increasingly reliant on systems—particularly virtual—to navigate our lives. In a world where we experience our relationships, workplaces, and socio-economic governance through screens, further blurring the real and virtual, Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality becomes even more haunting.¹ When systems that are not of our creation become essential to our daily operations, it prompts a consideration of our agency within these structures and our ability, if any, to instil them with our imagination.

Reflecting on his own participation in external systems, Harvie determined a process of making that provides him varying levels of control. Harvie adapted his system from a small procedural rule in *Dungeons & Dragons*. In a game of D&D, the Dungeon Master is responsible for the progression of the story. In a creatively demanding position, the DM has the option to roll a die to find prompts that assist in determining directions and outcomes. Being a DM himself, Harvie has fashioned a similar exercise to determine the subjects of his drawings. His source material is an Excel spreadsheet rich with data of his own choosing, everything from inanimate objects to personal memories. The spreadsheet contains twelve columns, each of which is a category with a hundred options beneath it that act as literal prompts to be extrapolated into a story. To produce the core imagery for a particular drawing, Harvie rolls a hundred-sided die for each column to find the corresponding numbered cell. The story of each picture is built as the die is rolled again and again.

Following the chance from the die roll, Harvie arranges the resulting data into a calculated story, a snapshot from the world of H. These scenes are imaginative, surreal, and distinctly literal. Harvie's drawings recall other literal translations of folklore, such as Albrecht Dürer's *Apocalypse* series (1498) and Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, in what might be described as their factual treatment of oddness. They demand a suspension of disbelief that is often essential in absorbing fantasy.

H is a grotesque, beautiful, and sublime world. Its scenes are so intricate and specific that it plausibly exists as a functioning society with its own lore, morality, and justice. The drawings are overlaid with additional imagery when necessary to weave a story that prompts us to not only view H but *read* it also. This embedded narrative function allows randomly generated jumbles of imagery to collate into something greater than the sum of their parts.

We are called back to the ‘real world’ by the drawings’ frames that willingly disclose Harvie’s system to us. The custom frames are constructed with laser-cut MDF board to mirror sections of the cells from the spreadsheet. Their data is entered, and the selected cells are shaded. The system’s functions are compulsory viewing. The inner workings of the online systems we use—social media, or otherwise—are often opaque. It is well established that most users will agree to terms of service without fully reading them. Studies have shown however, that users are more likely to read policies when how they are presented encourages them to do so: when reading them is the default option and the ability to ‘skip’ is minimised.² It is not an option to glaze over Harvie’s processes—the frames are as intricate as the drawings themselves. The ‘Terms and Conditions’ of his system cannot be ‘skipped’; Harvie requires us as viewers to know what we are taking in.

There are over a quintillion possible combinations that Harvie could generate from his system. Quintillions of potential glimpses into imaginary worlds is a fantasy in itself, but the possibility is welcome. In the long entanglement of art and systems, practitioners have always found ways to peak through the persistent structures around us. Eve Meltzer imagined the structuralist sentiments of conceptual artists who questioned how to approach the rigid systems of the world as: “we cannot escape the grid ... but the code can be recombined”.³ Total agency may be unattainable, but we will always have H.

By Grace Jeremy.

¹ Jason J. Wallin and Jennifer A. Sandlin, “Capital Immunodeficiency and the Viral Contagion of Capitalism,” *Knowledge Cultures* 8, no. 3 (2020): 20-27. See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

² See Nili Steinfeld, “‘I agree to the terms and conditions’: (How) do users read privacy policies online? An eye-tracking experiment,” *Computers in Human Behaviour* 55 (2016): 992-1000.

³ Eve Meltzer, *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 61.

Images courtesy of the artist.

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Metro Arts and the artist acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nations' cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians.



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