

Plague as Play in *Pathologic 2*

By Nate Brimner Smith

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21985/n2-w4yq-g238>

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I have learned that plagues do strange things to the passage of time. I started playing *Pathologic 2* in late March, less than a week after I moved out of my co-op to quarantine at my partner’s apartment. Since then, I have apparently played the game for one hundred and thirty-four hours, though that doesn’t feel right. Maybe I left the game open on pause too often, because I don’t remember playing it that much. The idea that I’ve spent five cumulative days playing a video game is less troubling than the fact that I don’t actually know if that’s true; this experience is challenging to quantify meaningfully both within the game and outside of it. I know for certain that three months have passed since the beginning of quarantine, but this knowledge does not give my memories of this period any real shape or order. *Pathologic 2* ends after twelve in-fiction days, each of which is roughly two hours in length, but due to its infamous difficulty—the game’s menu describes the intended experience as “almost unbearable”—I died sixty-eight times and had to load a save more times than I could have counted if I wanted to. Twelve days, which should translate to one day, apparently took five days, spread out across three months, which felt like a moment and an eternity all at once.

Pathologic 2, released in 2019 by developer Ice-Pick Lodge, is incredibly dense, and time is one of many elements of its story. It is a game about Plague; that is, after all,

a literal translation of the original Russian title, *Mop*. You play Artemy Burakh, a military surgeon who has returned to his hometown—a remote, colonial village in the middle of an endless steppe—at the behest of his father. He arrives to discover that his father has died and that the town believes Artemy to be the murderer. He undertakes a search for his father’s actual killer, which is promptly interrupted by an outbreak of the Sand-Pest, a fantastically horrible disease which threatens to completely destroy the town unless Artemy is able to find a cure.

Players assuming Artemy’s role, particularly in the current historical moment, might expect his story to hold the potential for a sense of victory over disease. Indeed, one of the game’s endings sees Artemy mass-producing a cure and saving the people of the town. But *Pathologic 2* is no medical power fantasy. The actual experience of playing the game is one of constant frustration, loss, and irrevocable consequence. *Pathologic 2* does not invite you to “play” in the sense that one usually plays a game, systematically accomplishing a fixed set of challenges. Rather, you “play” in the sense that an actor plays a role. The game repeatedly addresses the player, directly, as an actor who is playing Artemy Burakh. It is Epic in the Brechtian sense, unsettling seemingly basic assumptions of how a player should engage with a game as a text. It calls players’ attention to its own artificiality, using the theatrical play that unfolds over the course of the game as a metaphor for gameplay in order to invite the player into a dialectical analysis of the scenario presented in relation to the player’s own society.

I won’t pretend that playing *Pathologic 2* has brought me any answers to the many urgent questions surfaced by the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on our global society. The game’s text draws as much from performance theory as it does from literary and historical accounts of historical plagues. Its resonances with the ongoing pandemic helped me to locate my experiences within a continuum of literature on the transformative power of plagues. This is the power which Artaud identified in “The Theatre and the Plague;” the power to expose and heighten the basic cruelties inherent to human interdependence. This is the game, the theatre, and the plague all

at once. Rather than transform plague life into a sensible, conquerable system, it illustrates the ways in which such systems destroy themselves under extreme pressures. The United States government's response to this pandemic, as well as those of much of its populace, has seemingly been to ignore the mounting evidence of their own fragility in the face of plague. Amidst this prominent desire for a return to normalcy, *Pathologic 2* suggests something radical in acknowledging the possibility of destruction—and, indeed, death—that Plague brings.

There are many ways to die in *Pathologic 2*: You can starve, you can succumb to thirst or exhaustion, you can overdose on antibiotic treatments, you can be murdered by bandits, and you can even die by accidentally falling from a tall staircase. Most importantly, you can contract the plague, as can the game's non-player characters (NPCs). Among the nameless "extras" that populate the town, there are twenty-five named NPCs who can die, seemingly, at any time. In my playthrough, thirteen out of these twenty-five characters were dead by the twelfth day; all but one of these deaths were preventable. I personally executed two characters, another two were executed by higher powers, and the remaining nine died of plague. It is only through interacting with these characters that the player can access the story, and once they're dead, those narrative paths are rendered permanently unavailable.

Of my sixty-eight deaths as Artemy Burakh, only one was from the plague. It is generally advisable, upon contracting the Sand-Pest, to quit the game and return to your last savepoint. In this case, I had wandered into the steppe to the south of town, far away from any of these savepoints. I came to meet one of the children in my care, a homeless girl named Murky, instead finding a teenage mystic called the Changeling, who offered me a deal: either Murky contracts the Sand-Pest, or I take on the infection myself as her caretaker. I chose the latter option.

Fortunately, venturing further into the steppe led to the discovery of a well of Living Blood, the necessary component for brewing a "Panacea"—a "true" cure for the

plague. The well lay at the heart of an abandoned tent village called Stekhen, which was previously inhabited by the new town's working class, indigenous population, the Kin. Burakh himself is a descendent of the Kin, having inherited his father's responsibility as a healer and spiritual leader. The game's various branching paths allow you to assume or reject this responsibility in a variety of ways; my personal imperative for this playthrough was to liberate the Kin and decolonize the town. Though this is a viable ending to the game, it requires that the player condemn the town's entire population to death. The cure can only be brewed from the blood of the Kin's subterranean bull god, Bos Turokh. Thus Burakh faces a grave junction in his story: Either bleed the earth-god to death to save the town, or let the town die to preserve the Kin's spiritual nexus and their lifeways. I planned to choose the latter at the outset of my playthrough, knowing that every other character would hate me for it, with one exception: a woman named Aspity, who provides hospice and political guidance to the disenfranchised Kin. She is both a mother and a protector, and the only character in the game to advocate for violent opposition to the "Powers That Be." Her views resonated with my own moral compass, particularly when situated in a world structured by class and racial hierarchies, corrupt political economics, and a growing epidemic.

Walking back through the steppe, collecting herbs along the way, my "infection" meter creeping higher and higher, I found that the plague itself had begun to speak to me in a groaning, amalgamated whisper. Among its messages: *"Men love a world of men. But life is more than men. Life is manifold, overflowing. Flowing from body to body. You call this work 'illness.'"* This was one of many moments that seemed to flirt with eco-fascist rhetoric that characterizes humanity as a plague on the planet, wherein the Sand-pest emerged as the Earth's immune response to humanity. This mode of thought is usually evoked by the mantra, "Nature is healing; we are the plague." Whereas eco-fascists use this to advocate for crypto-eugenicist "population control," *Pathologic 2* instead figures the Sand-Pest as a response to colonization and industrialization, as opposed to the mere existence of humanity.

Upon returning to the town and brewing one bottle of Panacea, I resolved to save this category of treatments for NPCs while keeping my own infection at bay with medication. I proceeded towards the town's theatre-turned-hospital to find that my "work" for the day was simply to wait there for an hour until someone else showed up. If I left, I would not be paid, but I had run out of pills and my infection had reached critical levels. An hour passed, and no one showed up. In the moment before the Plague killed me, it told me: *"Do not fear death. Life comes after it."*

I appeared in the same theatre where I had just died, now emptied of the corpses and medical equipment. The game sends you here every time you die—according to the theatre director, each death requires a new actor to take up the role of Artemy Burakh. After talking with the director, I received the expected punishment for my death; in this instance, my Thirst meter was slightly reduced. I left the theatre, appeared at my most recent savepoint, and used my Panacea.

That night, Aspity was killed by the Plague. I had forgotten she was infected. Even if I had remembered, it wouldn't have mattered—I was out of Panacea. My own survival came at the cost of the one person who could offer moral guidance in my approach to the story.

This simulated loss, generated through a combination of scripted choices and procedurally-generated gameplay events, left me with an unanticipated feeling of devastation. I took a break from the game for a few days, returning to my own daily chores, a far less active participant in my own community than my virtual avatar. Looking out through the window of my computer screen, I realized that I was not immune to the compulsion to find meaning in plague. I had been playing out a fantasy, after all; in the face of mass death, so much of which could have been prevented if our society valued interdependency and public welfare over individualism and profit, the closest thing I could find to hope was the thought that such a destructive force might push America's capitalist regime to a breaking point, perhaps allowing a more just society to emerge. But is it not repulsive to imagine the

loss of so many lives as the price for the possibility of a better world? Surely even the most dramatic social transformation cannot salve the immense grief, felt both individually and communally, at this immense, ongoing tragedy.

Funnily enough, when I did eventually condemn the town to the plague, I found that Aspity had risen from the grave to congratulate me. It was good to see her again, but it brought little comfort.