



# Isolation Without Despair: Hollow Knight in a Post-Pandemic Landscape

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## Abstract

Hollow Knight, a 2017 metroidvania game, is set in the fictional world of Hallownest, a ruined kingdom that was ravaged by an infection many years ago. Throughout the game, the player traverses the destroyed remnants of the kingdom and battles the infected citizens that used to live there. While initially a very isolating experience, by engaging with the environments and sparsely placed characters, the player can learn more about the history of the kingdom, rekindle abandoned communities and eventually gain the skills necessary to fight and defeat the source of the infection itself. Through its environmental design, compelling character writing and gameplay mechanics, Hollow Knight can excellently as both a parallel to a player's real-life experience with COVID-19 and a vehicle for a player to overcome the despair present in a post-pandemic society by allowing them to make a positive impact on the world of the game.

## Introduction

In an article studying the effects that gaming had on the well being of people during the pandemic, authors Matthew Barr and Alicia Copeland-Stewart found that

- 71% of their respondents saw an increase in the amount of time they spent playing video games after the start of the pandemic
- Many respondents cited positive effects from this increase
  - Increase in mental wellbeing
  - Reduced levels of stress
  - An ability to escape the real world
  - A renewed degree of agency or control
- The majority of people who increased their time playing video games during the pandemic were aged 16-34

It's very easy to draw parallels between this story and our real-life experiences during a pandemic like COVID-19

- An infection appears with no apparent cure at the time
- Briefly halted, but still continues to spread
- Characters are seen isolated and trapped throughout the world, with very few choosing to wander like the player

By allowing exploration in a world that changes dynamically in response to your actions, Hollow Knight offered players during the pandemic an alternative reality in which their experiences could be viewed more positively and their actions more impactful on the infected world.

## Analysis of the Game

In Hayot and Wesp's "Towards a Critical Aesthetic of Virtual-World Geographies," they explain how games often contrive areas intended for players to use them, despite their emptiness. Hollow Knight is built like this and creates genuine places in areas desolate by design, giving an authentic sense of isolation while still aesthetically soothing.

### City of Tears



Image from the game depicting a statue in the City of Tears which highlights the tone the area sets

- Mostly intact, which contrasts other areas
- Isolates the player with
  - Empty rooms
  - Dismal atmosphere
  - Contrast with stories
- By exploring, the player can unlock houses and speak to residents still living in the city
- Parallels the internal and external worlds of a pandemic player

### Ancient Basin

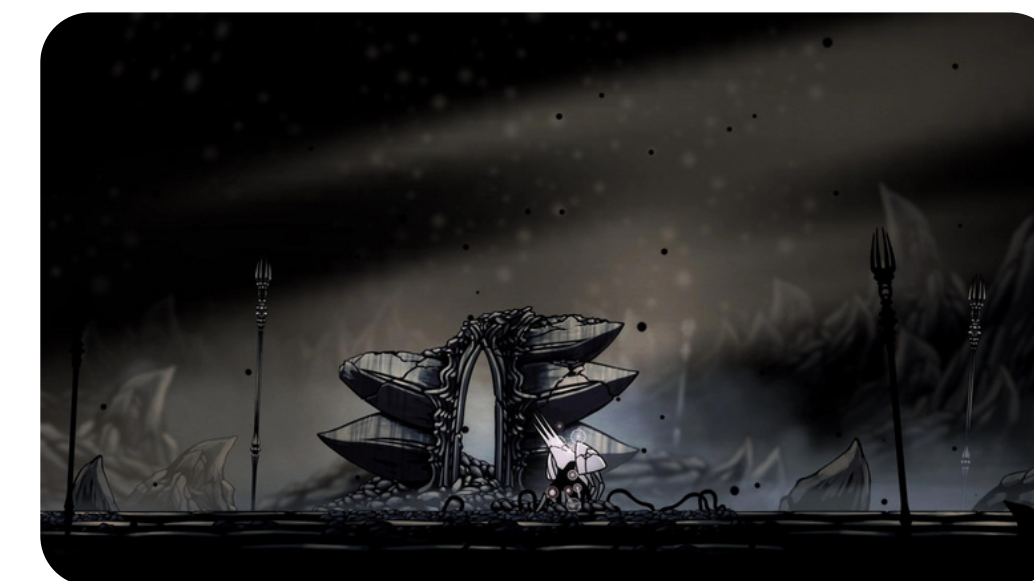


Image from the game depicting a large cavern in the Ancient Basin, displaying the empty atmosphere

- Initially very empty
  - Only passive enemies
  - Rocky terrain
  - Dusty particles
  - No background music, only ambience
- Very few friendly characters
- Encounter with the Broken Vessel
  - Lost sibling of the player character
  - Can be laid to rest

### Greenpath



Image from the game depicting a savepoint in Greenpath, showing the lively and green environment

- Exudes life and growth
  - Plant based hazards
  - Birds and crickets in the background
  - Screens are filled with passive enemies
- A major character, Hornet, is moving away from the player until her battle at the end of the area
- Creates a feeling of being lost in nature
  - still isolating

### The Pale King

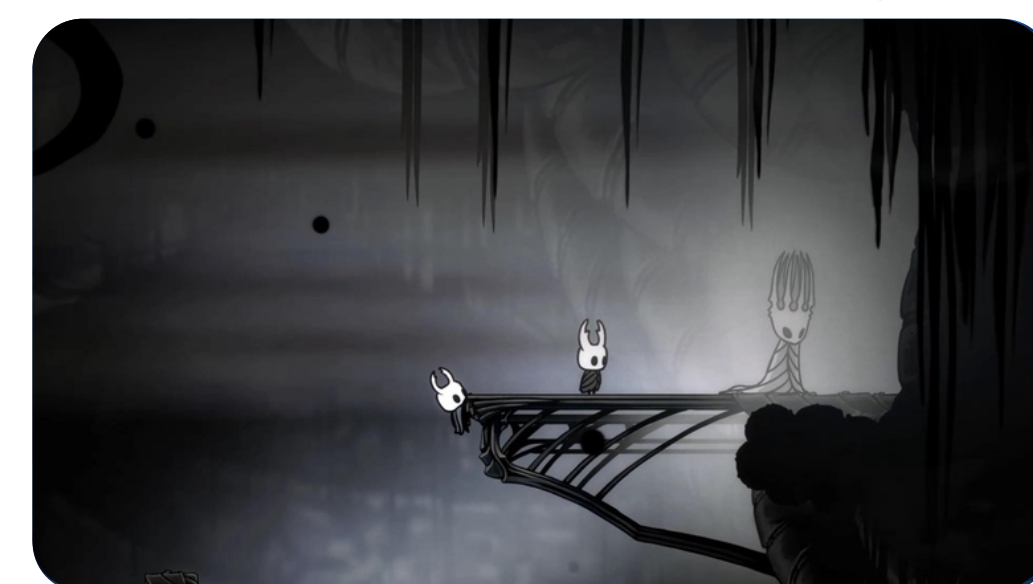


Image from the game depicting The Pale King (right) selecting a vessel to seal the infection

- Ruler who inadvertently caused the infection by angering the Radiance
- Sacrificed his children to create a vessel to contain it
  - Vanished into the dream world when his plan failed
  - "...No cost too great..."
- His responses in the wake of the infection portray both sacrifice and denial

### Monomon

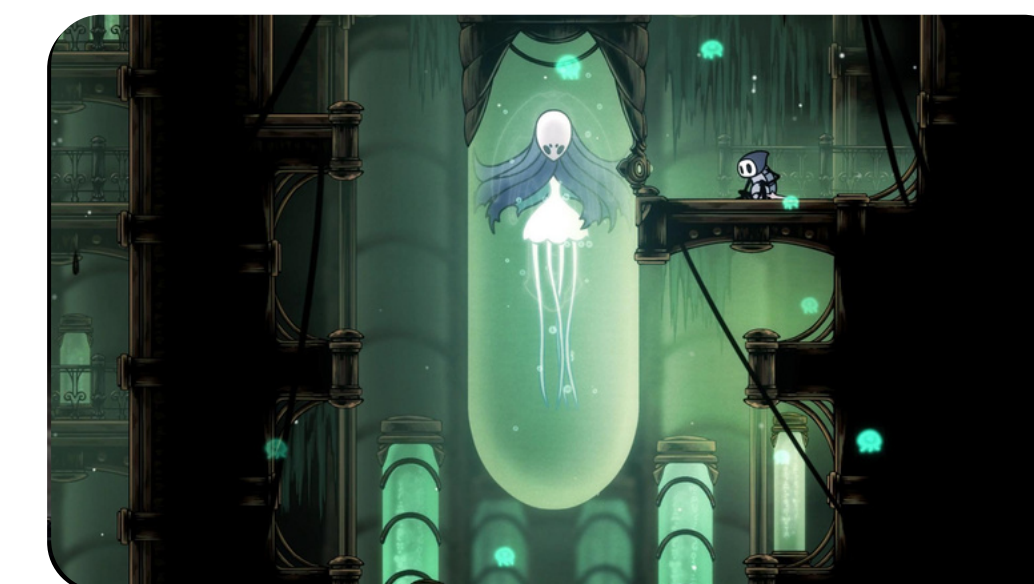


Image from the game depicting Monomon in her stasis chamber while sleeping as a Dreamer

- Scholar and teacher who helped in creating vessels
- Gave her life to become an extra seal on the infection
- Believes in your change during the game
  - "...A world forever unchanging..."
  - "...the Seals, must break..."
- Foils the Pale King and shows the importance of refusing complacency

### Mask Maker



Image from the game depicting the Mask Maker after their mask has been removed

- Gives insight to the nature of masks and identity
  - Faces allow us to focus our identity and to exist
  - Masks can provide this, but can also restrict or hide us away
- These sentiments parallel real life experiences with COVID-19 masks
  - Can depersonalize, but can also be personalized



Image from the game depicting a key quote from the Pale King

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Hollow Knight teaches the player that there is, despite the Pale King's words to the contrary, a cost too great when battling an infection within the game. It is only the combined effort of the game's protagonist, the Hollow Knight, and Hornet that come together to defeat not only the infected Hollow Knight, but also the greater threat of the Radiance that permeates their dreaming world. This game, using its varied environment design and complex characters, offers a capacity to engage with the post-pandemic society that was out of reach for most players during the worst parts of the lockdown, while giving them the resources needed to make the impact that felt impossible to achieve at the time. This research is currently still being conducted, and a larger paper with more analysis on these topics, as well as overall game design and mechanics, is the planned end point.

## References

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