As most of the planet digs into the harsh world of Elden Ring (our review's on page 97), I've been thinking how well games can function as toys. Sure, challenge and goals can be important, but so too is the freedom to just enjoy playing with the mechanics that a game presents to you. It's the same aimless pleasure you get from, say, seeing how long you can evade the police in a GTA title, or forgetting about quests and seeing what's on the other side of a hill in Elden Ring.

Some games function so well as toys that they don't need much challenge at all. Take 2018's Donut County, for example. You control a hole in the ground which you can move beneath objects to make them drop into an abyss below. As you clear objects, the hole's diameter grows, allowing you to engulf and remove larger objects. It's technically a puzzler, but the puzzles are so easy to solve, you'll likely do so on your first attempt. Later stages offer new ideas and problems, but they function more as sight gags or fun additions than difficulty barriers to leap over. Far from a flaw, it's what makes Donut County such a wonderful diversion: the enjoyment comes not from bashing your head against a tough problem, but in the satisfaction of interacting with its quirky mechanics and equally odd story, which takes in raccoons, mobile apps, and an evil corporate kingpin.

To sum up: challenge is important in game design, except for when it isn't. Also: play Donut County. It's lovely.

Enjoy the new issue!

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