

Five Nights at Freddy's. Dir. Emma Tammi. Screenplay by Scott Cawthon, Seth Cuddeback, and Emma Tammi. Perf. Josh Hutcherson, Matthew Lillard, Piper Rubio. Universal Pictures, 2023.

Five Nights at Freddy's, or *FNAF*, may be full of animatronic nostalgia and nightmares, but there is more behind the film adaptation than it seems. The film stems from Scott Cawthon's 2014 video game series about the abandoned Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria and the unspeakable horrors that occurred there (Universal Pictures). As someone who went into this film with a limited knowledge of the lore and completely unaware of the cult following, I expected to be scared – and I was thanks to the Balloon Boy jump scares – but I did not expect to sympathize with the murderous animatronics: Freddy, Chica, Foxy, and Bonnie.

Calling back to the earlier *FNAF* video games, the film demonstrates the importance of imagery and how people use pictures to communicate, sometimes in ways words cannot. This takeaway comes from the character Dr. Lillian, who states:

You know, pictures hold tremendous power for children. Before we learn to speak, images are the most important tool we have for understanding the world around us. What's real, what matters to us most. These are things children learn to communicate almost exclusively through pictures. This film is full of imagery, all of which is most evidently used to drive the plot forward (Miyamoto). So, with this review, I focus on the role imagery has in how *Five Nights at Freddy's* visually tells the story of Mike Schmidt (Josh Hutcherson) saving his sister, Abby (Piper Rubio), from William Afton's (Matthew Lillard) Pizzeria of Peril.

Imagery is used in the film's title sequence to provide a backstory into the events leading up to where the narrative begins. The title sequence mirrors the 8-bit video game format to explain exactly how the characters got to the present story (Wolf). A man dons a yellow rabbit suit and takes the five children, one-by-one, offscreen. This seems unimportant to the unfamiliar viewer until the end of the film when it is revealed that the yellow rabbit kidnapped and killed the children, stuffing their bodies inside the animatronics.

The title sequence also foreshadows the story by lingering on a child's drawing depicting five children holding hands with a yellow rabbit. However, this drawing covers up another drawing, thus foreshadowing that something within the

story is not as it seems. By the end, viewers know this to be true when the yellow rabbit turns out to be William Afton, the man who murdered the children. The foreshadowing of William being the yellow rabbit is also represented with yellow hues. When viewers first meet William, even though the film introduces him by another name, he is wearing a yellow shirt (Lee). More foreshadowing occurs when Matthew Lillard's name flashes on screen just as the man in the yellow rabbit suit dons the rabbit head in the video game-esque title sequence.

Children's drawings play a huge role in the plot as a Chekov's gun of sorts (Perelman). Abby spends much of the film drawing pictures that initially seem unimportant, but they ultimately allow Abby to communicate with the ghost children possessing the animatronics and to save the day. The ghost children consider the yellow rabbit their friend because of the drawings on the wall. Viewers are shown these drawings at the beginning of the film and Mike, figuring out what happened, tells Abby, "The drawings. The yellow rabbit hurt your friends. Show them what really happened." Abby then removes the false drawing and replaces it with the truth, a drawing that shows the yellow rabbit killing the ghost children. Abby's drawing sparks their memory of what really happened to them, making them turn on the yellow rabbit.

While the drawings are mainly used to move the plot forward, their double function as a device to communicate with the ghost children helps to remind viewers that these characters have endured trauma. Those who experience trauma sometimes cannot use words to express themselves and have difficulty understanding what is said to them ("How Trauma Can Affect Communication"). This idea plays out in the film; early on, Abby, who had to grow up without her parents, was unable to articulate her love for Mike via words. Yet, as Dr. Lillian points out, Abby can draw how much he means to her. As such, it is not unreasonable to see the ghost children as likewise unable to verbally communicate or make sense of their feelings.

Overall, I enjoyed watching the film even though it is catered more toward the loyal fanbase. Despite not knowing a lot about FNAF going into this film, I still thought it told an interesting story that has compelled me to learn more about the video games and the lore behind them.

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Godzilla Minus One. Dir. Takashi Yamazaki. Screenplay by Takashi Yamazaki. Perf. Ryunosuke Kamiki, Minami Hamabe, and Sakura Andô. Toho Studios, 2023.

Godzilla Minus One, released in 2023, was written and directed by Takashi Yamazaki, who also oversaw the special effects. It stars Ryunosuke Kamiki, Minami Hamabe, Yuki Yamada, Munetaka Aoki, Hidetaka Yoshioka, Sakura Ando and Kuranosuke Sasaki. The film is produced by Toho, the studio that produced the very first *Godzilla* film in 1954 as well as some of Japan’s most famous cinematic masterpieces, including *Seven Samurai* from 1954 and *Ran* from 1985 (Rawle 48). *Minus One* is the 33rd *Godzilla* film produced by the company and the fifth from Toho in the Reiwa era, which includes *Shin Godzilla* (2016) and three anime *Godzilla* films. *Minus One* is a standalone prequel that rides on the previous success of *Shin*, which, while receiving mixed reviews outside of Japan despite positive reviews within the country, made \$78 million against its production budget of \$15 million, making it one of the most successful *Godzilla* films ever made (Rawle 234). *Minus One*, which has received generally better reviews outside Japan (Hamedy), is set to outpace *Shin*, already making

around \$100 million from a similar production budget. I start here to foreground an important point: *Minus One* has been commercially successful, speaking to the continuing power of the Godzilla character and its ability to adapt to contemporary audiences.

Godzilla Minus One tells the story of Godzilla's emergence and first attack on postwar Japan through the eyes of Kōichi Shikishima (Kamiki), an ex-kamikaze pilot who failed to go through with his suicide mission during the war. Near the end of the war, Shikishima witnesses Godzilla, named after a local legend, attack a garrison on Odo Island. Only Shikishima and one other spectator survive the assault. Later, while navigating the crumbling economy and infrastructure of war-ravaged Japan, a nuclear-bomb-mutated Godzilla attacks several warships on its way to the mainland. Tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union mean that the Japanese are on their own, and only Shikishima and a group of Japanese navy veterans are left to protect Japan from Godzilla.

The film folds several complex themes into its narrative. At its center is the trauma and the survivor's guilt Shikishima feels due to not completing his mission and outliving his parents, who were killed in the bombing of Tokyo. Shikishima's inner torment mirrors the trauma of the nation as it rebuilds after the war. Related themes include reckoning with the treatment of the public and the soldiers by the imperial government in their handling of the war as well as government ineffectiveness in its aftermath. Shikishima, trying to find meaning after his own experiences in the war, navigates a Japan destroyed: rubble, hunger, poverty, and suffering are rampant in the Japan he returns to. In this film, the Japanese empire's desire to become a world power, at any cost, is one of the true villains, the effects of which echo down through the generations. At the same time, the film narrates the growing tensions between the world's new, postwar superpowers: the U.S. and Russia.

Ultimately, the Japanese people are caught between all four of these monsters – the traumas left from the imperial government's handling of the end of the war, the U.S., Russia, and Godzilla. Already we begin to see how *Minus One*, continuing from *Shin*, differentiates itself from the American versions of Godzilla depicted in recent MonsterVerse films like *Godzilla* (2014), *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019), and *Godzilla vs. Kong* (2021). In those films, which all hinge on more typical instances of action movie sequences and which heavily imbed American conspiracy culture into their narratives, Godzilla is portrayed as a sympathetic character who works to protect earth and humanity from various

threats. This reframing of the monster strips it of its original, metaphorical power, in which Godzilla represents anxieties surrounding the violent transition to modernity that World War II continued from the colonial period, by putting the monster to work for humans, thus reproducing the hubris the development of Godzilla was originally meant to criticize. This hubris was tackled in the form of nuclear arms in the first Godzilla film; *Shin* added nuclear power and governmental inefficiency to the list of threats the kaiju represents, and *Minus One* adds superpower politics and fascist histories to the mix.

There is one aesthetic choice from the filmmakers I want to emphasize, as I think it represents, cogently, this return to form. *Minus One* reinscribes the environment by denaturalizing its depiction of Godzilla, who becomes increasingly less “natural,” particularly in its movements, as the film continues. The first Godzilla film is commonly read as having a heavy emphasis on environmental concerns, particularly as they intersect with nuclear anxieties. When the U.S. made its first Godzilla film in 1998, viewers saw a new style of monster, clearly inspired by *Jurassic Park* (1992). Here, Godzilla moves and acts like an animal. Later, as we get to the MonsterVerse, Godzilla begins to take on motivations and becomes tied to the geologic deep time history of the earth, and the narratives take on a stronger emphasis on conspiracy theories. In other words, as Godzilla is naturalized, the narratives in which he exists move toward more specifically U.S. political themes.

In *Minus One*, however, we see a Godzilla that, at first reveal, moves something like the T-rex from *Jurassic Park* but that, as the film progresses, becomes stiffer, more upright, and less recognizable as an animal. This evolution reaches its apotheosis at the film’s climax, as it is revealed in Godzilla’s demise that he is no longer fully operating under the biological constraints of death. This move towards an unnatural Godzilla highlights the environmental degradations that come with the new, nuclear modernity being awakened in the world as the U.S. and Russia square off under the political rules of mutually assured destruction.

In the end, *Godzilla Minus One* continues a trend started by *Shin Godzilla*: a welcome return to form, a retaking of a Japanese icon by a Japanese filmmaker seeking to reinscribe substance into the spectacle of the kaiju film genre. *Minus One* makes it clear that the potential for the genre to address contemporary anxieties has not been exhausted and that the visual metaphor of the giant monster still carries weight. Perhaps even more weight, as issues like climate change

“[exceed] our framings of the world and [press] chaos, complexity, and nonlinearity upon us” (Bould 14) and put to the fore “the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene” (Trexler 14).

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Legacy of Yu. Garphill Games, 2023.

Today’s board games are diverse in mechanisms and presentation, richly imagined and appealing to a wide audience. They provide an escape, for an hour or two (or more), into locations, times, and professions far removed from one’s contemporary experience. *Legacy of Yu* tasks players with assuming the role of the legendary Yu the Great, the first emperor of the Xia dynasty of ancient China. The instruction book establishes the setting as follows:

During the reign of Emperor Yao, the people of ancient China were constantly plagued by deadly floods along the Yellow River. Eager to put an end to the devastation, Yao selected Gun, one of his officials, to devise a plan. After nine years of failed attempts using dams and dikes, Gun’s

employment came to a questionable end. After his passing, Yu inherited his father's work. Learning from Gun's failures, Yu set out to construct a series of canals to direct the surging river into nearby fields and smaller waterways.

Yu is a mythical figure dating back to 2,200 B.C., and he succeeded in controlling the river after 13 long years of work. Yu is revered as a principled, morally upright individual who provided a model for future emperors. Because no contemporaneous records exist of Yu, the story has many variations. The following sources provide different sketches of this person: Augustyn, 2023; Colville, 2020; National Geographic Society, 2023; Travel China Guide, 2023.

Like many great board games, history is simply a jumping off point into another world. Developed by Shem Phillips of New Zealand-based Garphill Games, *Legacy of Yu* is a single-player legacy game. Legacy games, popularized by *Risk Legacy* (2011), are board games in which the game itself changes with each playthrough: new mechanisms might be added between games, a story might be developed, and even the board itself might permanently change. As a single-player experience, *Legacy of Yu* takes about one hour to play through, with the goal of constructing enough canals along the river before barbarians overwhelm the player characters. Players can lose by failing to build enough canals before an ever-moving flood washes them away, or by taking too much damage from attacking barbarians. Win or lose, the campaign continues until the player has either lost seven times or won seven times. The campaign, then, might last a minimum of seven games (seven straight wins or seven straight losses) up to a maximum of 13 games (e.g., six losses and seven wins).

As a single-player experience, the player is tasked with managing resources, recruiting townsfolk, fighting barbarians, constructing buildings, and building canal segments. The game board is relatively small, depicting a river along with farms, outposts, and huts. The top of the board is lined with townsfolk and barbarian cards. As the game progresses, ever more barbarian cards are added in each round, providing an escalating challenge to the player. The player, meanwhile, recruits townsfolk cards into a draw deck. Each round begins with a harvest, gaining various supplies and workers, while also drawing townsfolk cards. When cards are played, they yield more supplies, workers, or fighters, which can then be used to construct buildings, build canals, or fight barbarians. Game pieces include a mix of wooden and punchboard pieces, along with a range of cards.

The first few playthroughs, I found the mechanisms a bit overwhelming because there are so many possible things to do each round before the barbarians regroup or the flood advances. It is entirely possible I missed a few actions or even played the game incorrectly at times. By the third game, and after yet another reading of the rule book, I finally grasped the flow of the game.

To make this a legacy game, there is also a story deck and story book. Sometimes, cards are marked with a numbered, golden turtle in the corner. When that card is played, the reader is called to open the story book to the appropriate entry. Written like journal entries by Benedict Hewetson in the voice of Yu, these story segments provide color to the game's proceedings. For example, there is a mini storyline that plays out across three games regarding missing food from the camp's provision stores; at the conclusion of the story, it is revealed that a monkey has stolen the food, who then becomes a permanent addition to the townsfolk deck. Other storylines revolve around conflicts with the barbarians: periodically, new groups of barbarians are added to the barbarian deck, often more difficult to defeat than the standard barbarian. These extra cards come from the story deck. Old cards are retired into the history pile, never to be used again for the remainder of the campaign. None of these changes, thankfully, are permanent; the campaign is fully resettable.

At the conclusion of each game, whether the player has won or lost, they will read another entry from the story book. Here, Yu writes to his wife, Tushanshi, recounting his successes and failures. If the player is defeated by barbarians, they will read one entry, and if they are defeated by the flood, another. Victory and Defeat cards randomize the order these story segments are read, adding interest and variety to the game. The campaign is self-balancing, becoming easier or harder depending on the conclusion of each game. If a player loses, they start the next game with additional bonuses, like extra resources or protections from the barbarians. If the player wins, new barbarians are often added to the deck, along with other features like a fortress, which protects the barbarians and makes them even harder to defeat, or the canal gets harder to construct. It is a beautiful system that makes each playthrough fresh and unique.

As a longtime board gamer, I was drawn to this game for one big reason: I am currently in a stage of life where playing board games with other people is nigh impossible. I have a two-year-old daughter and another baby on the way, making my free time extremely limited. My wife and I are so exhausted by the end of the day that we only have a little time to ourselves after putting our daughter to bed.

While I one day look forward to gaming with my children, that will be a few years away. A single player legacy game, then, provided an accessible way for me to get back into board gaming, to escape to another world for 16 or 17 hours over the course of six weeks. The art and graphic design (by Sam Phillips) are exquisite, transporting me to a world of adventure. The storybook entries, coupled with the varied card designs for the townsfolk and barbarians, helped me imagine what it may have been like to live at this time, performing this work. I do not know enough about ancient China to judge the accuracy of this game's portrayal of Yu or the work of controlling the Yellow River. Perhaps nobody can say with certainty who he was or what he did. While the game features no magic or monsters, it's a fantasy portrayal through and through.

This game was genuinely difficult. I lost in my first three playthroughs. Each time I lost, I started the next game with more and more benefits. After a string of five wins in a row, I thought the game was getting too easy, so I voluntarily discarded my extra bonuses. Then I promptly lost the ninth game. I started the 10th game with another bonus, which was short-lived, as the barbarians were becoming harder and harder to defeat. I lost games 11 and 12 quite quickly, which was a little embarrassing as I thought I had a handle on this game's mechanisms by this point. This led me to the 13th game, the final game of the campaign: I would either lose my seventh game, or win my seventh game, triggering the final journal entry in the story book. This final game was close, but a series of fortuitous card draws kept me abreast of the barbarians and flood, ending in a final victory. The last diary entry was the longest yet, providing a fitting end to Yu's 13-year task of taming the Yellow River. It was then that I learned that if I finished the campaign with three or less defeats, it would trigger another story segment, perhaps an even greater victory. Alas, I did not earn that, so I refrained from peaking in the book. The instructions claim that the player will only have seen 40-60% of the hidden content at the conclusion of a campaign, providing incentive to play the campaign again.

For now, I will loan the game to my brother, then return to it in three to four years once the mechanisms, strategies, and story have begun to fade and I can see the game with fresh eyes again. Perhaps in a decade, I will introduce the game to my kids, and we will live this story again.

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Reservation Dogs. Created by Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi. FX Productions, 2021-2023. Hulu.

Reservation Dogs is a critically acclaimed, groundbreaking Indigenous television series – the first to be produced by a full Indigenous crew. From the moment TV screens were graced with streaming privileges, *Reservation Dogs* has been an intentionally executed story. For example, the pilot episode of the series, "F*ckin' Rez Dogs," aired on International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, August 9, 2021. The series, which consists of three seasons and 28 episodes, wrapped up with its finale funeral episode "Dig" in September 2023. For the first time in Fourth World cinema, a mainstream Indigenous-led television series has shown audiences the humor and heartbreak that constitutes generational storytelling with a tenor of humility and pride. *Reservation Dogs* is a comedy television series that uses popular culture as a vehicle for storytelling, allowing viewers to be taken on an otherwise difficult journey with gentle direction. The show is an entrance point for academics considering how to understand the intersection of Indigenous storytelling, mainstream media, and popular culture.

Showrunners Sterlin Harjo and Taika Waititi are well known in the entertainment industry. Harjo is a citizen of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma,

USA; Waititi, a New Zealander, identifies with his Maori and Jewish ancestry. Both men are prolific filmmakers and industry professionals.

The series' main cast follows Elora (Devery Jacobs), Bear (D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai), Cheese (Lane Factor), and Willie Jack (Paulina Alexis), as they search for ways to connect with their friend Daniel, whose suicide changed their world overnight. These five are the Reservation Dog gang, the youngest generation of the braided story of an Oklahoma reservation's memories whose petty crime is all in pursuit of traveling to Daniel's dream destination of California, which the remaining four achieve at the end of the second season. In the third season, the gang is mentored by their older generational family members and friends on the reservation, which prepares them for navigating life as Indigenous Americans. The rural backdrop of Okmulgee, Oklahoma is an homage to Harjo's childhood living on an Oklahoma Reservation. The supporting cast includes three break-out Indian Country stars, the twin rappers Mose and Mekko, and Nathan Apodaca of "Dreams" TikTok fame.

The series is an act of resistance against misinformation, mediated stereotypes, and injustice, which have long caused harm to Indigenous communities. A recurring fixture of the series, Bear's spirit guide is a subverted Hollywood Indian stereotype character. "Spirit" (Dallas Goldtooth) died at the Battle of Little Bighorn, though he did not die from fighting. His warrior attire consists of an 1800s buckskin and beaded visage, complete with twin turkey feathers fixed into his long flowing hair. Spirit appears to Bear throughout the storyline to provide meditations on life with succinct and snappy self-awareness like "Hey, listen up, little fucker. I'm trying to give you some ancestor teachings here" ("Mabel"). Harjo notes that "If I asked most people in the world to draw a Native American, that's what they would draw. They would draw an Indian that was dressed in buckskins from the 1800s. They wouldn't draw me. They wouldn't draw any of the characters on the show. So, it was almost like giving people some familiar territory and then turning it on its head" (qtd. in Gross). Yet Spirit is not the only character who takes the audience into familiar territory, only to subvert expectations.

The third episode of Season 3, "Deer Lady," masterfully tells the story of the boarding school experience through the fictional setting of St. Nicholas Training School. This episode converses with horror genre conventions, appealing to the sensibilities set in precedent by television horror genre series like *American Horror Story* and 1970s films (Schneider), with specific camera angles and

effects, language and sound effects, and the gory “Deer Lady” character (Kaniehtiio Horn). This episode responds to recent years’ global news coverage of mass graves discovered at Indian Boarding Schools in the U.S. and Canada. Children were sent to one of the 523 active schools during the 19th and 20th century in America. According to an interview with *Variety* magazine writer Michael Schneider, Harjo wanted to take an opportunity to tell the truth of the boarding school experience in a matter-of-fact way:

I just wanted to make something that represented that experience, to show people what the reality was. To show people how it must have felt, to show people what it felt like sitting in those cafeterias and having people yell at you for speaking your language. We all have family that went through this. All of our uncles, all of our grandmas and grandpas. These stories were told to us in a very matter of fact way and that’s how I wanted to tell this story. Instead of reading it in a history book, I wanted to put it in this way so you could understand what it might feel like... reminding people that these were young kids that were abused and sometimes killed (qtd. in Schneider).

Furthermore, *Reservation Dogs* is an entry into the open conversation of the state of popular culture at the beginning of the 20s. The title of the series is a nod to Quentin Tarantino’s *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), which Harjo and Waititi came up with together. In an interview with NPR, Harjo continues “And then it was, well, if we’re going to have this show where these kids are living through and constantly referencing pop culture, like we have to tip our hat to the master of that” (qtd. in Gross). The references to popular culture are numerous and give the audience a sense of Indigenous American popular culture through the inclusion of social media influencers such as in the Season 2, Episode 6 installment “Decolonativization.” The characters are also thoughtfully curated with popular culture references in mind. Cheese’s impressive t-shirt collection, for example, includes everything from *Naruto* (2002-2007), a Japanese anime series popular in the early 2000s, to the American rock band Rage Against the Machine (Zuckerman).

While the series concluded on a satisfying note, the *Reservation Dogs*-verse is still open and rife with possibilities. Here is a television series that invites viewers in through the lens of comedy to understand and explore the contemporary experiences of Indigenous Americans. Positioned as part of mainstream popular

culture, *Reservation Dogs* is a generative series with many angles to approach for study, education, outreach, and enjoyment.

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