"As the secondary general of the United Nations...an organization of 147 member states, who represent almost all of the human inhabitants of the planet Earth, I send greetings on behalf of the people of our planet." etc.

On August 20th, 1977, the Voyager 2 space probe left Earth aboard a Titan III-Centaur launch vehicle, departing from Space Launch Complex 41 of Cape Canaveral, Florida. 16 days later, its twin, Voyager 1, would join its sister in their waltz through the cosmos; ferrying with them what is unquestionably the most precious treasure humanity has ever possessed. Two golden records. One carried on each, identical in every way, and containing within them...us. 115 images, both black and white and in color, displaying mathematical and physical quantities, our solar system, our DNA and our reproduction, as well as many of our more intimate qualities. What it means to be *here*. Our food, our architecture, animals, even portraits of us. Just doing little things. Shopping, eating, running, learning, smiling. Accompanying them, a collection of sounds. Waves crashing against their shores, winds howling across fields, the rolling of thunder, and the songs of birds and whales...as well as some sounds of our own. Greetings. 55 languages, beginning in Akkadian, spoken in Sumer approximately 6,000 years ago and ending in Wu Chinese; in which we say..."hello".

Then the music starts.

Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F, First Movement, Puspa Warna, performed by the Gamelan of the Paku Alaman Court of Yogyakarta, Tsuru No Sugomori performed by Goro Yamaguchi, panpipes from the Solomon Islands, wedding songs from Peru, a Night Chant of the Navajo, Barcelata's El Cascabel, Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, and Louis Armstrong's timeless Melancholy Blues.

Etched in to their face, a map back home. Our solar system triangulated by 14 neighboring pulsars, each labeled with their own pulse rate, each line representing their approximate distance from our sun. To its side, an etching of the Hydrogen atom in its two lowest states, a line through each end to illustrate that the transition from one state to the other can be used as a universal reference of time to play the record back. An instruction manual and a return to sender address.

In about 40,000 more years they'll come close to their first stars, so, we have a little time left to wait. And I've been spending a lot of mine mulling over the same question. If I were given the same privilege; to select a collection of images and sounds, to serve as both an introduction to me and a summation of my experiences and my tastes, what would I choose?

Anyways, that's what I'm gonna spend the next however long I feel talkin cool about so put on your thinkin caps and *strap in!*

I'm really smart and this is;
"Jak & Daxter - Perfect Circles"

Alright, 2002 was a pretty big year for pop culture. P Jacks just dropped the second flick in his trilogy of high fan classics and gamers everywhere were sinkin their sugar stained teeth into Warcraft III custom games, The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker, and a little diddy you might know as GTA Vice City

Put simply, it was a good year to be into cool nerd shit and it just so *happened*, momma and poppa Bread agreed! Because 2002 was the year I got a PlayStation 2 for Christmas. And my life was changed forever. I had a GameBoy Color from a few Christmases back, uh, it was Purple, like this, but the only game I had for it was Star Wars Episode 1: Racer, which I couldn't beat the second level of because I was like 3 or 4, and I wanted my big sister's Animorphs game instead anyways - the point is I hadn't really been formally introduced to video games yet. I didn't quite know what they were, what they could do, or how they could feel to play. How they could make ME feel playing them. So, with gifts unwrapped and parents profusely hugged, I hurried off to my room to set up my shiny new PS2 and the little CRT TV I was given to play it on - feeling resolute that I was the luckiest kid in the entire universe. The first game I tried to play was Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath of Cortex because its disc was blue on the back - my dad and I's favorite color. PlayStation 2 games came in both CD-ROM and DVD-5, designated by the color of the back of the disc, which I wouldn't learn until much later, had a huge impact on storage capacity and data transfer speed. CD games notoriously took more rotations to read games off of them so their load times were often significantly longer. When I tried to boot up some Crash I was met with what felt like an endless loading screen of him falling through the void, and it was so long I thought I'd broken it. My parents came in to check on how it was going and I worriedly assured them that it was great, but I wanted to try out a different game. Ratchet & Clank and ATV Offroad Fury 2 were among the others I'd unwrapped, but their cover arts felt muted and dull compared to the vibrant blues, yellows, and greens laying at the bottom of the stack, on the case of the last game I pried from its pine tree adorned paper. Jak & Daxter: The Precursor Legacy. I put the disc in the tray, nudged the little blue button...and it worked.

Jak & Daxter: The Precursor Legacy is an open world 3D platformer developed by Naughty Dog as a first party title for Sony's PlayStation 2 - following Jak and his best friend Daxter on an adventure to have Daxter turned back into a human and, unbeknownst to them, to save the whole dang world. After cookin up 3 Crash games for the PlayStation 1 and a spin-off in Crash Team Racing, video game boy-wonders Jason Rubin and Andy Gavin were lookin for Sony(?) to put a ring on it. But the company they were signed with at the time, Universal Interactive(^), still owned the rights to everyone's favorite Wumpa fruit eatin, spin kickin ssssssson of a gun so makin the switch to being a first party studio for the big S required a new mascot and a new direction. In January of 1999 Naughty Dog tasked 2 programmers with creating a skeleton for their next gen game, nicknamed Project Y, and soon after Crash Team Racing had been finished, the studio shifted focus to their flagship-to-be - what would end becoming one of the greatest adventure platformers of all time.

Cue opening.

A lot of my engagement with art often focuses on the introductions to things, to films or to series, because I feel like the first few minutes of a work is typically indicative of the care taken with the rest of it and is often the most informationally dense. In other words, it's doing most of the heavy lifting. If I watch the first 2 minutes of The Adventures of Tintin I've got 9 to 10 odds this shit is gonna slap. And I think that way of interacting with and processing art was largely informed by this game. It is the perfect intro cutscene for the delicate tone that Precursor Legacy is aiming to set. In a 2001 interview with PSX Extreme, Evan Wells, one of the game's designer's, described their ambitions for the series as follows;

"Specifically from a game design standpoint, we were trying to achieve a combination of the kind of platform gaming found in Banjo-Kazooie, the epic adventure feeling found in the Legend of Zelda, and some of the do-or-die excitement from the Crash Bandicoot series. We then wanted to incorporate Disney-quality animated cut scenes to tell the story. What we accomplished I believe will raise the bar by which future games of the genre will be judged."

And lucky for him, the Big Dogs stuck the landing.

The game opens on a closeup of dark eco, what to the viewer without context is just an indistinct mere of purples, blues, and blacks as a monologue comes in over the twinkling of windchimes and gently humming synths. It's Samos the Sage, our omniscient narrative anchor for the trilogy, doing what any good introductory video game narrator does; setting up the world in a generally ambiguous, inconclusive way, leaving us even more puzzled as to the nature of it than we were before, and placing the onus of answering these questions on the shoulders of the protagonist we're currently being lowered into the cockpit of.

Shout outs Uriel Septim VII.

Second sentence in, Samos already name-drops half the game's sub-title as a rhetorical at us so we know the precursors were a people and are ***important*** in bold italics. Third sentence, "Why did they create the vast monoliths that litter our planet?" both justifying the architectural inconsistencies throughout the game world and actively encouraging the player to explore them further. The second I get into the world I'm runnin up to every ancient lookin statue I can find, and would you look at that, it not only rewards me with moving the game forward for doing so - but each one feeds me a bit more lore to ponder over. Fourth sentence, asks how the precursors, there's that word again, harnessed eco while simultaneously explaining to us what eco is. My guy is double talkin like Tony Soprano. This shit is nuts. Let's keep goin. After waxin poetic about how hard he's searched for the answers to the questions he's just posed to us, we cut to our first shot of Jak - relaxing in a boat with Daxter, looking very much not how he does on the cover - as Samos explains the place our protagonists hold in our story, and in doing so very quickly illustrating his relationship dynamic with the boys *and* elevating his opening lines about the answers to this world's mysteries eluding him by remarking that he's one of the smartest people living in it. This is an insanely efficient use of time spent in a cutscene and yet not a moment of it falls into the all too common territory of becoming a plot conveyor belt.
Cut once more, and we've now shifted narrative perspective from the third to the first person. Daxter has already been coded as the goofy, lackadaisical sidekick on the boat, so his first words being reluctance to step onto the island they've arrived at raises a red flag that is instantly multiplied in size and intensity by the next few moments.
The once gentle music accompanying Samos' voice fades out and is abruptly replaced with grizzly horns and much harsher percussion as the yet-unnamed antagonists make their first appearance. Along with the shift in perspective, we're given a shift in tone. This is very much a world of dualities and the game wastes no time leaning into this.
Also, just like Samos, the antagonist's dialogue doubles as a primer for what to expect in the world. Their first sentence not only makes it clear that they have a vested interest in answering the same questions Samos does, but that the locals of the village possess items related to the Precursors who we've now had the importance of highlighted for us like 4 times. Maybe we should try to talk to the villagers and see if they'll give them to us. The foundation for the gameplay loop has been laid before the gameplay even starts.
Next line, their furry henchmen are told to deal harshly with anybody who strays from the village. Maybe if *we* stray from the village we can expect to face enemies like these. Maybe we'll *have* to stray from the village to get the artifacts they just mentioned.
By the way, why is Daxter a person?

Oh.

The boys hearth back to their inn, and the following exchange rounds off our introduction to the game's world and our first objectives.

Now we have a name for the place we were just at and we can see it through the window behind him. Do you think we can try to go back?
He just said Daxter fell into dark eco, that must've been what the first shot of the game was, but if Gol lives far away and he's the only person who knows enough about it to fix Daxter, who're the creeps we just saw harnessing it on Misty Island?
What if it's him? What if it's not? I mean, Samos referred to Gol singularly but there were two of them. The other remotely located sages have become dormant, what if it's because something happened to them too? If Samos is the sage of green eco and the connotation to green is life and his surrounding environment is a tropical beach characteristic of those found in the south pacific and Gol is the sage of dark eco who resides in the polar north and this is a world of dualities does this not mean we're going to meet the master of death? Did Adam Driver's character actually kill himself in Marriage Story and that's why his life miraculously resolves itself in his absence and he shows up to the party at the end in a ghost costume?
Precursor Legacy's introduction continues to pose questions to the player until its last frame and that's the mark of a truly great one. Also in case it wasn't made clear by the earlier dialogue, Keira is introduced in the bookend of the cinematic while re-summarizing the flow of the game and giving the player their first incentive to pursue it - collect Precursor artifacts called Power Cells to ride the Zoomer that the cool girl's making to get to the next area, collect artifacts called Precursor Orbs to exchange for Power Cells, explore the world to find more of both.

Now off you go.

The game cuts to black for a second before opening back up on this shot of our characters landing out of a warp gate identical to the one we had just leapt through, but the music for the zone we're about to enter, Geyser Rock, is triggered the moment the screen goes black. It's not exactly uncommonly used in video games compared to film, especially now, but Precursor Legacy's use of J-cuts - a split transition from one shot to another where the audio of the latter precedes it - feels incredibly unique. These are the only intermission screens in the entire game, and it doesn't say loading, it doesn't say anything, it's just the musical identity of wherever you're traveling to and nothing else. It's small things like this that make our emergence into the game world feel all the more natural. Anyways, the moment our feet touch the ground, we're free to move about the cabin.

And boy did Naughty Dog make it fun to move.

I still remember exactly what it felt like. The first moment I ever *really spent* in a game. Full of trepidation, because I had never interacted with anything like this before, I pushed the left stick forward and Jak began to run. The crunching of grass and sand beneath his feet as I bounded forward, a chorus of reassuring, warm hisses that I hadn't broken anything yet. The singing of birds in the distance and the crashing of a nearby waterfall as it met the ocean below glided so naturally over the music I'd been welcomed into the game by, and together with its electrifying colors, it felt like a wave of exhilaration...so delighted to have me there. You know? I ran to the beach to see the ocean, and then I just...started running. I must have ran in circles for...what felt like minutes but was actually closer to hours, I'm pretty sure, because when my parents came to check on me again I was still doing it. It's such an overwhelming feeling to be introduced to something completely new. Your first time swimming, first time driving, first time in the snow, I didn't know what the game had in store for me but to be honest I didn't really care. This was enough - on its own. I fell in love with video games right here. On this beach. And then I jumped, and I jumped again, and I punched, and I learned how to kick and to roll - each movement effortlessly flowing into the next, accompanied by addictively satisfying haptic feedback to my hands. Nearly 2 decades after its release, this is still one of the best feeling games to move around in. And a great deal of this is due to how good it *looks* to move around in. Earlier I mentioned Evan's description of what Naughty Dog wanted Jak & Daxter to be and one of the core creative inspirations mentioned is Disney. In pursuit of this, Precursor Legacy had an unprecedented *10* animators on staff and they were literally hired *from Disney*, as well as some from Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network. In the interest of replicating the classic 12 Principles the Magic Kingdom was so well known for, they hired outside of their medium to get people who were actually trained in them, and the pay off of this decision is as immediate as it is tremendous. All the principles are there. The Squash and Stretch of punches, in particular uppercuts which extend your length to like 200% at the peak of its cycle, the Anticipation of charge jumps and enemies like Hopper Lurkers, the Follow Through and Overlapping Action of spin kicking, the Arc and Slow In/Slow Out of roll jumping or flipping between the acrobatic poles strewn across its landscapes - this game is absurdly fluid and alive feeling. Every animation has conditional between frames for every other animation that can be triggered out of it and the game's limited moveset further lends itself to accomplishing this way-ahead-of-its-time level of refined movement. And, Precursor Legacy's conveyance of this gameplay, is brilliant as well. In the Lost Precursor City beneath the Ocean outside of Rock Village, for example, we're introduced to platforms that rotate around the room as we stand on them at an extremely short gap that isn't fatal if we miss. Its only punishment is making us fight a new type of enemy, a Lurker carrying another on their shoulders, which you can't defeat until you jump kick the top one off. It introduces a new dimension of platform movement in a low stakes context where you're able to fail without losing progress, followed immediately by a room where it *is* fatal and the gaps are significantly longer. We can see this again with these side-to-side platforms with pipes running down their center. The first time we see one is over a body of water that becomes periodically electrified, but the next one we encounter is over dark eco. This is a common pattern throughout the trilogy; the introduction of mechanics and following iteration upon them giving the player a chance to understand the gist of a challenge before facing it to its true extent. This is especially helpful in a genre that notoriously suffers from terrible third person cameras. Naughty Dog knew players hated the feeling of dying on a new type of platform or to a new type of enemy because the information simply wasn't given to them due to the limited visibility inherent in 3 dimensional platforming and decided to just - not do that. And to assist in this endeavor of better conveying its world to its players as a means of combating the genre's ill-famed Achilles heel, Precursor Legacy's main vehicle of communication isn't even its visuals. It's its sound. The soundtrack is comprised almost exclusively of percussive instruments - composed by Josh Mancell and produced by DEVO co-founder Mark Mothersbaugh. Beyond just being filled to the brim with absolute bangers, its score plays an essential role in engendering in its players the way the game *wants* them to process the information it provides. Something like 90% of the music in its soundtrack stays in the bottom half of the frequency range, meaning sub-bass to mids. This is where the *core* of each zone's identity lies. All instrumentation in the higher frequencies is embellishment used to separate different play conditions within each zone. Uh, here, I'll give you an example.

This is the music for the Forbidden Jungle.

And this is music for the Forbidden Jungle, when you're near the Lurker construct.

Now consider the warp gate to Geyser Rock again, the game's tutorial zone, and how this J-Cut repeats in the opposite direction when we leave it - to go back to Sandover Village. The game encourages its players to habituate focusing on a specific "area" of sound, if you will, before anything else and does so before we encounter any enemies. That way when we do, we've already ingrained paying closer attention to the range their cues reside in. Everything in the low end is crucial, everything in the high end is just ornamentation - be it hi-hat rolls or the chirping of birds. This allows Naughty Dog to have a much more diverse cast of enemies and zone-specific hazards, for instance the bomb tower near Sentinel Beach, because they can rely on their players being much more aware of their surroundings without seeing them than they could be in other 3D platformers. Eat your heart out Nintendo. The only thing Sunshine's got over this is that you can play an Italian.

Jak & Daxter: The Precursor Legacy is a technological marvel as well. It's a fantastic example of what it means to push a new console to its absolute limits, and in the process prove what it is truly capable of. The graphics engine it was built in is actually a collection of many different ones, with over 10 separate renderers running simultaneously to create its various background elements, effects, and characters - and it was written in a Common Lisp derivative programming language that Andy Gavin developed himself specifically for this game - called G.O.A.L. Game Oriented Assembly Lisp.
One of the reasons The Precursor Legacy feels so immersive and full of life is that it's an entirely open world. Like I said earlier, there are no load times. At all. The sheer scope of this doesn't become readily apparent until after we've made it about halfway through the Forbidden Jungle, when we activate the eco beam and redirect it to the Mayor's house in Sandover Village. After we make our return and receive the reward he'd promised in exchange for this, a Power Cell, one would understandably expect for this particle effect to either stop being rendered due to some in-universe justification or quietly pop out of existence after we gain some distance from it. But somehow...it does neither. It never does. 2 of the game's 5 basic background engines handle what's called smooth morphing, essentially taking assets that are comprised of, say, 32 polygons and gradually condensing them through super-fast processing down to 4 depending on your distance from them. Typically open world games suffer from what's called "texture popping", the rigid disappearance and reappearance of objects at the edge of your render distance, but this clever use of memory conservation makes it so that there never is any. Everything you do in this world, every impact made by your presence, is visible to you as you continue to move forward - because it doesn't go away when you do. And there are a number of vistas throughout the game specifically designed to flex this to its players and provide places for us to look back on our journey from. Whether it's gazing down from the Precursor tower in the Forbidden Jungle, stood atop the frigid slopes of Snowy Mountain, or admiring the world from the peak of Gol and Maia Acheron's dark eco silo after we've saved it by beating the game. To be able to simultaneously load such a dense world with no interruptions, no popping, and a preposterous number of polygons, animations, and lights in a given scene at a given time, *while processing* a consistent day and night cycle and maintaining a solid 60 frames per second, is an insane feet to have achieved - let alone at the beginning of a console's lifespan, having built your own engine, with no reference libraries to look to for help. The difficulty of Precursor Legacy's execution and the sheer absurdity of it actually working, is perhaps best described by Greg Omi, one of the game's programmers.

When asked what he hopes to achieve with Jak & Daxter, he simply replied;

*"My personal goal as an engine programmer is to make the **other** developers cry."*

Yo, also, in an interview with PLAY magazine for this game, Jason Rubin actually specifically called out Crash Bandicoot: The Wrath of Cortex for having what he called "unacceptably long load times", something Naughty Dog simply didn't allow to exist in their Crash games, and I gotta tell ya(?) nothing in my entire life has felt more vindicating than reading the co-founder of my favorite dev studio backing up a critique of a game I had when I was like 6. Thank you Jason.

Anyways, on the topic of visuals, I think it's time we talk design.
Precursor Legacy's designs for enemies, allies, and the environments they dwell within are sick as hell across the board. And, again, I think much of this is owed to how much influence the Jak games take from art outside of their own medium and reality. Just as the mountainous forest landscapes of Halo: Combat Evolved were inspired by the rain covered capes of western Washington, go Sounders, the world of Jak & Daxter: The Precursor Legacy was inspired by the misty shores of Japan. Naughty Dog was said to have collected as many photographic reference books on the country as they could get their hands on and based a great deal of their environmental design around re-interpreting its landscapes into an exaggerated, cartoon fantasy world. And the villages *themselves* were actually inspired by the French comic book Asterix et Obelix.
Oh hey(!), there's a Japanese Black Pine. Each village in Precursor Legacy carries with it a terrifically distinct identity, imbuing its architecture and surrounding environment with its respective affinity for eco.
Rock Village, home to the Blue Sage, is still one of my favorite video game settlements of all time.
Its sheer face cliffs overlooking the cove the town is settled upon, with its towering edifice at its center surrounded by cascading waterfalls and illuminated by the warm glow of torches and smoldering rock cast down from the mountain above as well as the lightning from its persistent storms come together to create a fantastically lived-in feeling respite that I can't help but become mesmerized by every time I walk through it. Its characters are fantastic as well. The Geologist carries this really intense, like, Isabella Bird, you know, sophisticated member of an Explorer's Guild kind of vibe, and her fit is like one of the coolest in the entire game. The scaling rope she wears around her shoulder and the light attached to her head are both appendages which bestow her defining traits a literal, physical form.
This is very much a cartoonist's approach to communicating a character's personality through broad, conspicuous visual attributes and most every character we come across in the game follows this same rule. Gordy and Willard are some of my favorite examples of this. When we make it through the Mountain Pass to the Volcanic Crater, home of the Red Sage, we come across a cave - at the end of which two men are trying to unearth a colossal gem. Upon speaking to them it becomes immediately clear this is a classic Intelligent Lout, Simple Softy dynamic a la Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello.

What makes them so endearing, though, is that this is expressed through the adornment of their heads. Willard's not particularly bright, so the top half of his skull is just a cage. He's a bird brain. While Gordy, though knowledgeable just like The Geologist, is given a candle instead of a light - because he's not just smart, he's hot-headed.

And although the game's many side characters are all just as brilliantly designed and full of charm as Gordy, Willard, or The Geologist, none surpass Jak & Daxter themselves.
The balance of influence Naughty Dog manages to strike between classic western animation and contemporary Japanese anime imbues Jak's design with this really distinct sense of wonder and wide-eyed adventure. His gladiatorial single-shouldered pauldron and bracer atop the boxer's wrap on his wrists and hands contrast so wonderfully against this ultramarine blue tunic and the hickory colored straps of leather which hold it together. But my favorite part of his design, and the reason, I think, that it resonates so much more with me than any other platformer mascot, of which there were many, is that his signature appurtenance by which we come to identify him - the unchanging sinew of his character around which the rest of his appearance as it changes throughout the trilogy is composed, isn't something our focus is especially drawn to - but something our focus can be drawn *through*.
His goggles. Initially, Precursor Legacy was intended to include much more racing than it ended up having, both in its gameplay and in its story's characterization of Jak, Daxter, and Keira - Samos' daughter.
And much of this is due to the fact that one of the engines Precursor Legacy was constructed with was Santa Monica Studio's Kinetica engine - developed for its namesake, Kinetica, for the PS2.
In Naughty Dog's design bible for the game, like half of the components of the three's fits are explained to be purpose-built specifically for racing - like these leather straps on their arms and legs, said to be used to secure racers to their Zoomers. Even Keira and Samos' relationship as father and daughter was initially supposed to be expounded upon by Keira going against his wishes and watching zoomer races, and it's insinuated in her design notes, that she races them in secret as well. Obviously this didn't pan out, likely due to production schedules and the team focusing on the game's core gameplay, though the Zoomer segments that do exist in Precursor Legacy feel absolutely incredible to play, but this gives the three, in particular Jak, designs more or less without context. In the story of Precursor Legacy we ended up with, Keira's A-Grav Zoomer is introduced as a 1-off prototype that exists nowhere else in the world and that she has just finished, so anything on or about these characters pre-date its existence. Which brings us back to Jak's goggles. Originally, they were - you guessed it - racing goggles, and the ui elements throughout the game were tied to them, providing an in-universe justification for our ability to track things external to Jak, like the heat level of the Zoomer. Being that our first chance to ride it isn't until a few hours into the game, though, and the mention of racing literally not existing anywhere outside of this one quest from The Gambler for Precursor Basin, that *seems* to be an older one re-tooled to a world where other Zoomers are not yet existent, hence it being a time trial so no other opponents need to exist, the player is left to draw their own conclusion as to their purpose - and this purpose is made clear the first time we hit triangle. A precursor themed vignette envelops the edges of our screen as a crosshair appears at its center, and then... nothing. We are able to do nothing with them, except stay still and look around. I mean, isn't that brilliant? Jak's signature accessory, the ballast of his ever-changing identity throughout the trilogy, is literally a rose tinted lens for us to look at the world through. I think this is at the heart of why Precursor Legacy is such an incredible game. It simultaneously demonstrates a mastery in the expression of momentum, and of impact, and of haste, then continually beckons its players to slow down and to admire where they are - to look back on how far they've come. At the end of the game, as our long journey North comes to an end, having discovered that the dark forces that had taken the sages away were in fact Gol and his sister Maia, we learn their plan to reshape the world in Dark Eco and take an elevator to the tallest peak in the entire game to face them. Stood high atop a silo of Dark Eco, the both of them piloting an ancient Precursor weapon they'd unearthed, we fight to save the world we've just spent so long adventuring through. And we can still see it. Far beyond even where we roamed.

This is a world.

And it's one that I fell in love in.

...

But nothing ever really stays the same.

At the end of Precursor Legacy, after the credits roll, we jump back into the game and into a continuation of its ending cutscene - whereupon Keira explains that the tremendous structure on the Precursor tower we're all perched atop, is actually an ancient Precursor Gateway that could be opened with a whopping 100 Power Cells. This is an entirely optional post-game incentive to continue exploring the world - and though it's a pretty compelling one as far as they go, from what I could find, most players never did it. So, we scrounge together the few remaining cells we need, proceed back to the tower, and deposit them accordingly. And then this happens.

And the credits roll again.

This is how you end a game.

Utter confusion as to what our heroes unearthed or what it could even entail for their future adventures, but reassuring that future adventures are still to come. And, just to be clever, Naughty Dog took the "*future*" part of that extremely. **literally.**

Welcome to Jak II.

Ohhhhhhhhhh this game is so SICK!

Just like its older sibling, Jak II begins with Samos' same sagely narration, but there's an immediate deviation in his tone from the beginning of Precursor Legacy. Whereas the first game is introduced to us by an unsure Samos, questioning the very nature of his world, Jak II is preceded with a confident, reassuring Samos - certain that the struggles endured by nature are done so for a reason and certain that Jak can endure the same. Which...doesn't bode particularly well for Jak. World of dualities and all. Anyways, Jak, Daxter, Samos, and Keira are in the midst of activating the artifact we unlocked with 100 power cells at the end of Precursor Legacy. It's a vehicle, and the huge Precursor Gateway they discovered with it, is its mode of travel. But as we soon find out, it doesn't traverse distance.

It traverses time.

Remember what I said about good introductions leaving you with more questions than answers? Well Jak II's has to be one of the greatest of all time.

Jak and the rest of our main cast are heaved into a dark and strange new world; displaced hundreds of years into the future by the Precursor Gateway they'd unlocked, referred to by one of our mysterious new villains as "the last Rift Gate", and wherever it is we've landed, the *Powers-That-Be* have been waiting for us. This game's world is meant to feel like the tonal antithesis to the one it's a sequel to in virtually every way, and it does a stellar job of making that disparity immediately clear. But the way it actually expresses itself to us is still very much the same. In *its* introductory intermission screen, just after this POV shot of Jak being knocked unconscious by a guard, rather than playing the musical identity of wherever we're headed to, it plays the sound we hear when we die in the game. This is the figurative death of Jak as we've come to know him, we will never see him like this again, and it communicates this to us with the same device that introduced us to his world. We cut from the scene of Jak's capture to the bleak interior of a prison 2 years further into the future - the camera careening upwards to a platform where Jak is being tortured with Dark Eco. In Precursor Legacy, Jak - like so many other protagonists of the early 2000s - was a silent lead. A blank slate for us to project our empathy onto. The only noises he uttered were during animations to accentuate the impact of a punch or the length of a jump. Not only is Jak given the ability to speak in Jak II, but the way that we learn he is - is by hearing him scream in agony. After Baron Praxis, that's this guy, and his right hand Errol leave the room, Daxter comes to his rescue and pleads with Jak to say something back to him just this once to let him know that he's okay, upon which Jak utters his very first line.

Bit of a fun fact about me, personally, I actually quoted this part - from Daxter's arrival to when he says remind me not to piss you off - to my friend when I was in like 4th grade because it's such a stark contrast to the previous game I felt like this exchange was the best way to sell someone on how cool Jak II is but, uhm, his mom heard me and got really mad at me for swearing in their home. So thanks, I guess, Naughty Dog, for that absolutely petrifying embarrassment.

Uh, what's most charming to me about this cinematic, isn't just how it resolves with Daxter saving Jak after Jak had saved Daxter in the first game's introduction, it's what Daxter *brings* to rescue him. Jak's goggles. Throughout Jak II, we see Jak struggle to let go of the anger he feels as a result of his trauma, and as the story progresses, it becomes more and more clear that Daxter, a bit ironically, is the only thing keeping Jak sane. So his approach is precluded by the manifestation of Jak's hope, that Daxter returns to him, after he'd lost it. In typical Jak & Daxter fashion this symbolism is quickly elevated to a literal, tangible expression moments later when Jak is overcome with Dark Eco and breaks himself free, then turns to Daxter as if to harm him before realizing who it is and letting the anger go. Like I said, this introduction does absolutely nothing to assuage its player's confusion; it wouldn't be a very good one if it did. In fact, in the short amount of time Baron Praxis and Errol are on screen here, I think like 4 different significant plot points are mentioned without even a smidgen of context. Naughty Dog are doin so much planting in this intro for beats that'll pay off later they might as well be playin Stardew Valley. I think this is why it begins the way it does; with words of comfort instead of stern disappointment. Jak II asks so much of its audience out of the gate, it has to spend its first moments trying to soften the blow. And it's a good thing it does, because this feeling of being unwelcome doesn't lessen with our departure from the prison. It only gets worse.

At least...for a while.

Before we leave, though, we have a bit of catching up to do. Just as Geyser Rock is the tutorial area of Precursor Legacy, Haven City Fortress is the tutorial area of Jak II. Its mission is simple: Escape. As we make our way through its labyrinth of tunnels, grates, and platforms; Daxter guiding us along the way as we relearn the game's controls, the differences of this world begin to reveal themselves more clearly. First and most notably, the cheerful soundscape that welcomed us into the first game has been upended entirely - the first piece of music we hear in the world of Jak II is a collage of ominous synths cast against a solitary bongo drum, accompanied by the sporadic half-run of a bass line and the occasional boom of a far off Japanese taiko drum - drenched in reverb. Its color palette is a spectrum of muted greys and browns, the only hint of green coming from the seemingly toxic air being pumped in from ventilation shafts dotted across the cell, and its only sources of light feeling cold and artificial. And then come the enemies. In Precursor Legacy, more or less every foe you face dies in one hit, with every boss dying in 3. The difficulty of encounters throughout the game lies solely in your ability to time your attacks without being struck or countered. The first enemy you face in Jak II, however, takes 2 - and it's another human, carrying a gun. Whatever hopes may have still lingered that this game would feel like its predecessor goes out the window with this second kick. The same goes for Jak's health. Previously, Jak could take 3 hits before going down - 4 if you were able to stack enough Green Eco or came across a vent of it in the world. Now damage has become more of a sliding scale, with a given enemy's attack being able to deal anywhere from 1 to 3 health out of a maximum threshold of 8 - but the attacks are more numerous, coming from more enemies, are harder to dodge, and mostly come from a distance. The game illustrates this relative imbalance of scaled power *out* of our favor first with the 2 hits, and then drives it home with this. An iron grate sequence. Throughout the game, specifically in structures belonging to the Krimzon Guard, there are a number these long stretches of weaving hallways with partially see-through iron grates for their floors and ceilings and, whenever you come across one, you become the sole target of a shooting gallery for a group of enemies impervious to your retaliation. Your only choice is to try your best not to get hit too many times before you make it to the end. Unlike Precursor Legacy where the tutorial area provides target dummies to prepare you for its usually 2 enemies at a time, 1 hit k.o. rhythmic style of combat, Jak II tortures you(?) then forces you to escape from a prison(^), and then shoots the hell out of you in the process. The only sense of familiarity left comes from this solitary warp gate at the end of the room we start in; dormant, and with no switch to bring it back to life. A skip and a jump later, we leap from an opening at the end of the fortress and take our first steps into the brave new world.

Mere seconds after our escape, we're thrown into another cutscene, wherein Jak immediately presses an old man for information on where he is like he's shaking him down for a cut of his restaurant or something. Uh, the existence of this cutscene by itself, regardless of what actually takes place in it, is another really early, really dramatic deviation from the previous game's structure. Instead of a loosely-bound plot that only receives narrative development once or twice per area, Jak II leans all the way in to being a cinematic, story-lead experience. And I don't think they could have conceived of a better world to set it in. Haven City is the dreary, dystopian backdrop to most of Jak II - serving as the overworld of the game with its many airlocks, warp gates, and even a transport ship to deliver us between its various areas, both beyond the city and beneath it. Its evocation of Ridley Scott's Blade Runner, in particular - in its slums and bazaars with their shattered streets and decaying homes, contrasted against and segregated from its alcoves of opulence for those loyal to their barbarous leader; cast in the same cold light by the flickering neon haze of advertisements and propaganda - is superb. Few pieces of Western media, in the last couple of decades, seem to truly understand cyberpunk as a sub-genre across mediums; instead simply co-opting its aesthetics while all but ignoring the political and sociological commentary fundamental to it, but Jak II absolutely nails it frame 1. Dotted around the city are pedestals which project the seal of Haven's ruler, Baron Praxis, as they blare endless loops of his paranoid fascist ramblings to his subjects and, sometimes, even to Jak directly.

And this disparity in living conditions and wealth extends, as it so often does, to the militaristic enforcers of Baron Praxis' regime. You remember earlier when I said the year I got Precursor Legacy was the same year Grand Theft Auto: Vice City came out? Yeah, well, this game *is* Vice City. Eh, in more ways than it's

not. It doesn't take long playing Jak II to begin spotting the dozens of similarities between *it* and RockStar's record breaking run of ultraviolence-fueled bangers. Its minimap in the bottom corner, albeit flipped, weapon selection on the top right, gameplay loop of hijacking and crashing vehicles, extreme sexual humor woven between gratuitous violence, collaborative empathy for criminals, and the same style of branching, nonlinear mission structure that GTA had become so well known for. But, one of the main things that *separates* Jak II from Grand Theft Auto - tonally - is its portrayal of authority. In Grand Theft Auto, cops are a joke. And they're rightly characterized as such. Uh, much of early visual comedy in America was at the expense of the police because, well, nobody likes them. The most notable example probably being the Keystone Kops, oh the boys are only missing one K, a troupe of hyper incompetent policemen featured throughout Mack Sennett's slapstick comedies for Keystone Film Company between 1912 and 1917. The reason Grand Theft Auto struck such a visceral chord with the disaffected American youth of the early 2000s is that, after the New Hollywood movement, spearheaded by the Movie Brats, had tapered out in the mid 70s and begun its slow death into the early 80s, much of the mainstream artistic identity of America began to pivot away from anti-establishment folkheroism and towards a culture of venerating authority figures; primarily police officers. Uh, this is often referred to as "copaganda". I won't go into too much depth about it, I recommend checking out Jack Saint's really lovely video on the subject if you wanna learn more, but - here's the gist.

Warren Beatty and Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde drops in 1967, gets nominated for 9 academy awards, wins 2, and does 70 large at the box office. It's like the third highest grossing film of the year, the people love it, and it falls dead center in an insane lineup of slappers that would come to be thought of as a watershed moment in American cinema history; we're talkin Easy Rider, The Graduate, THX 1138, Taxi Driver, Phantom of the Paradise, Apocalypse Now and Star Wars, which is just George Lucas' Apocalypse Now because he passed on directing Apocalypse Now. All simultaneously lamenting and mocking the death of the American dream and the brutality and selfishness the late capitalist empire has sewn both at home and overseas. These were the natural evolution to pioneering films like Charlie Chaplin's, wherein he'd often portray The Tramp, a poverty-stricken character who's nearly always at odds with the police and the many other shackles of American society, that got him like a 1,900 page file with the FBI on suspicion of being a Communist agent for wanting poor people to have food and be left alone by the cops. 4 years after Bonnie & Clyde, Don Siegel's Dirty Harry hits the screen with the director's *third* choice for a leading man after Steve McQueen refuses to play another cop and Paul Newman is put off by how right-wing the protagonist is. It pulls in nearly half the money Bonnie & Clyde does, gets zero nominations, is boycotted at the Academy Awards ceremony anyways for how it romanticizes police brutality and the deprivation of civilian's rights, and then Warner Bros. ignores all of that and decides to make like a *zillion* fucking ***more*** of them. At the same time you got 48 Hours 1 and 2, Lethal Weapons 1 through 4, and coinciding with this new rush of cops-are-actually-heroes-even-when they-abuse-people-they're-supposed-to protect cinema, the studios begin to rescind the power they'd given to the auteur directors for the last decade because a few of their films didn't pull a return on investment - most notably Cimino's Heaven's Gate and Coppola's One from the Heart. The long-term result, Hollywood veers off its long running bit of making fun of police officers for being weird manlets with anger problems, because they are, and police-lead films and television series start popping up like gophers on a god damn golf course. So many in fact that police unions start getting paid to consult on them, and in some cases even provide funding and equipment for more favorable portrayals - a la the military and Michael Bay's Transformers.

Hence, copaganda.

So, basically, Grand Theft Auto slaps because they all play like a Buster Keaton movie, which scratches a specific psychological itch that had been sorely underserved by popular contemporary American art outside of hip hop for like 20 years. Shooting the tires out on a cruiser and hearing the officers inside it yell something dopey in response is like an iv drip of schadenfreude to the player. So Jak II's divergence in this respect from the games it took so much inspiration from feels all the more distressing. In true cyberpunk fashion it portrays its fascist government and militarized police without any veil of irony to soften them, and instead, amplifies them - and this seeps into its gameplay in a really profound way. We talked before about expectation, with regards to the first enemy we face taking 2 hits instead of 1. Similarly, our interactions with the KG on the outside, don't reflect what you would expect from a game emulating GTA's formula in so many ways. There is no visible wanted level and the cops don't really care if you hurt civilians or steal from them. In the entire time I've spent in this game the Krimzon Guard attacked me for how I treated a person once and I literally had to shoot them to death in front of them to get a reaction. And I did it because I genuinely couldn't tell if their AI was programmed to protect them at all. At a glance, this makes for a much faster paced game. I mean, you're basically playing with the "Lock Wanted Level" cheat from San Andreas on. There are countless situations throughout the game where the ability to tear a civilian from their vehicle or run one over without hindrance or repercussion is really convenient. But it also makes the game much colder. And...it isn't subtle. Jak II deliberately puts you in situations throughout your playthrough where you will harm innocent people collaterally, full stop. And it does so in a way that forces you to reconcile with your own reaction to it and the difference between the KG protecting those they're supposed to and the KG protecting themselves. If you bump into a cop while running, or jump on them by accident, you're immediately struck with the butt of their rifle. And if you unwittingly tap one with a vehicle, the same act they cheerfully ignore when it's a civilian in front of them, the entire city becomes a warzone and they will do everything they can to kill you. There is no visible gradual escalation, you know, you don't get like a few officers and then some soldiers and artillery come in way later if you keep killing them. In Jak II, the police *are* the soldiers and the artillery is deployed the second you offend one. And this coding of Haven City as a police state, an elevated reflection of the culture its Cyberpunk heritage was borne in defiance of, is magnified by the means with which we gain access to the city. I mentioned earlier that Haven is segregated very clearly between those loyal to and those who are subjugated by Praxis' regime, and this separation is not simply left to interpretation based on the contrasting quality of life throughout the city. Naughty Dog, again, builds upon a metaphor they've introduced by giving it a corporeal analogue. Uh, Haven itself is a prison, so access to the various tiers of the city are blocked by giant, translucent barriers that require different security passes to travel through. The only way someone from the slums could reach the gardens is by infiltration. The contrast between Praxis' palace and much of Haven's districts is as striking as the Tyrell Corporation's headquarters against the slums beneath it. And, this suffocating feeling of dysphoria that the city instills, is ironically made worse by our leaving it. For the first leg of Jak II it isn't very clear where we actually are, geographically. We have no frame of reference to go by, nothing is familiar, so naturally the characters, and by extension the players, feel certain that wherever we are now is far, far away from the world we knew. That is until the end of the last mission of our first act, protecting a mysterious Sacred Site in Dead Town, an overrun ruin of Haven City now outside of its walls, where Torn sent us on our first mission.

As we round this last corner, unloading shells from our Vulcan Fury into the last Metal Head stood between us and the site we were sent to protect, Naughty Dog rips our preconception of this dark new world out from under us.

Because it isn't new at all.

Jak II's world feeling so unrepentantly bleak does have an upside, though. The characters we meet throughout the game and forge relationships with, as well as the characters we meet again, having lost them with our arrival, exude this incredibly satisfying sensation of warmth that can only exist in an environment that feels made specifically to suffocate it. The way it re-introduces Keira to us at Haven City's Mar Memorial Stadium, as a career mechanic for Zoomer racers, following through on Naughty Dog's original concept for her, is one of my favorite character arcs in the trilogy. The way they utilize dramatic irony for this introduction specifically; letting us know that it's her on the other side of the curtain we speak to her through long before Jak or Daxter do - simultaneously imbuing in its players the incredible excitement of finding her again and the melancholy of realizing that she, too, has been made colder, more cynical and unkind by the world they're in - each struggling to accept who the other has become well after it's revealed who they are, is brilliant. Torn, I think, is the best representative of this overarching development of characters throughout Jak II - its main cast beginning as a collection of misfits brought together by tenuous comradery mired in mistrust and indignation but gradually blossoming into an almost familial level of care and admiration for one another. Torn is the first supporting character we're introduced to in the game - after the old guy, his name is Kor - and his first line upon meeting Jak is "New faces make me nervous.", delivered as he's towering over him, contrasting his color scheme, and matching his exasperated glare. Earlier I said the game asks a lot of its players coming from Precursor Legacy, and this accounts for a lot of what I was referring to. In the previous game characters were either delighted to see you or prepared to deliver a harmless, goofy reason as to why they weren't;

like Gordy and Willard. But every person we come across in Jak II who's supposed to be on our side, is introduced as though they would rather do anything else besides get to know us. Torn doesn't regard Jak as a hero, and so he assigns them a menial task - simply to see if they can live through it. Take the Baron's flag from Dead Town and bring it back. As the graveness of our peril increases as we complete more quests for the Underground in their fight against Baron Praxis, so too does the respect Torn has for Jak and Daxter. And this underscores the game's prevailing argument excellently. Jak is set up to be a hero in Precursor Legacy from the jump, with the standard unassuming protagonist Hero's Journey sort of spiel, and again, because he's silent, none of the praise from the people he helps is given any sort of dissent, so the player's feelings of heroism are deliberately made to be unpreventably projected on to him. Such is the value of a silent protagonist. But in Jak II, Jak doesn't feel that in him anymore. Yet he still fights. Through his actions throughout the game, Jak doesn't just prove its many supporting characters wrong for doubting him, he ultimately proves himself wrong for doubting him. In spite of the pain he's endured, he's still capable of being the hero he's always been. And it does a wonderful job at misguiding its players away from this strikingly optimistic and gentle core until it's revealed near the game's end. Much of Jak II's writing is predicated on deceit - both of Jak and us - and it accomplishes this largely by using the truth to tell a lie. Uh, Kor is actually the leader of the Metal Heads, an ancient race that have been at war with the Precursors and the worlds they created since the dawn of time, and the true antagonist of Jak II. Throughout the game, most of his dialogue on a first pass reads like concern for the safety of the child he's a guardian of, or Jak or the Underground or Haven itself, but in retrospect is just manipulation of the Underground to undermine Baron Praxis, who's keeping the Metal Head armies at bay outside of Haven, or menacing, usually self aggrandizing pessimism for our character's hopes, like this outburst with Onin where he declares that Jak is no match for the Metal Head leader or when he remarks that the eco Baron Praxis is trying to bribe the Metal Heads with will never be enough to stop them. It isn't fear, it's arrogance. I also love the little nods from the game as to his true identity before its reveal, like, in these two cutscenes. When Jak and Daxter learn about Praxis' deal with the Metal Heads; the Metal Head leader refers to Praxis as "my dear Baron" and then, in a following cutscene when we relay this information to Torn while Kor is in the room, he nearly repeats this mannerism by referring to him as "our good Baron". This is like 10 year old me's version of Ziegler's three knocks in Eyes Wide Shut. Even moments of the game's storytelling separate from Kor's own dialogue employs this same sort of double-talking style of progressing its plot without directly revealing much of its hand. My favorite example of this is near the end of the game's second act. Throughout Jak II, we learn about the legendary founder of Haven City, Mar, from various members of its supporting cast - particularly Ashelin, Vin, and Onin and Pecker. By all accounts he was the great hero of his time, the many statues around the city having been sculpted in his likeness, the final enemy of the Metal Heads and staunch protector of the last Precursor Stone - an egg from which the last living Precursor could be born. The city's shielded walls, the grid of eco which it runs on, nearly all of the world's technological developments came from his hope to protect it - and his heirs ruled over Haven ever since, until the day Baron Praxis usurped the throne - turning a once prosperous kingdom into the neon drenched bastille we know today. Much of the game's story until its final few steps is set around stopping Baron Praxis, as he tirelessly searches for Mar's tomb and the Precursor Stone hidden within it. He plans to create an ultimate weapon from it, to end the Metal Head threat once and for all - a decision that would erase everything and everyone else from existence as well. In their race to find the stone first, the Underground reaches the tomb's outer sanctum, beyond which only the true heir of Mar can go. Kor arrives with the child, who was revealed earlier to be the heir, because of the amulet he was found wearing. The Seal of Mar. The Precursor Oracle at the entrance of the tomb greets them with "Welcome, Heir of Mar", before deciding that the child is too young to face the tests inside and closing the doors - but not before Jak runs inside in his stead, taking it upon himself to complete the Tests of Mar on the boy's behalf. Later, in the final confrontation with Kor, after he unmasks himself as the story's grand antagonist, he reveals to Jak one last thing about the child.

That it's him.

Now, back to the Tomb of Mar sequence. The Oracle who spoke at the gate never actually specified who they greeted when they said "Heir of Mar", and, again - the only response to this turn of events was Kor expressing his sincere cynicism towards Jak's chances of survival. The game literally tells you that Jak is the heir, that he and the child are the same person, and then immediately misdirects you by drawing your focus to Kor's reaction. Again, his conceitedness distorted and presented to us as concern.

I think Baron Praxis is a wonderfully developed antagonist as well.

Jak II very much presents itself as a revenge fantasy. I mean, for the first 90% of the game Praxis is built up as our primary antagonist, and the first words out of our hero's mouth - like ever - is "I'm gonna kill Praxis" so the natural assumption, as we gain more weapons and unlock more abilities throughout our adventure, is that we are going to kill Praxis. In fact, we even try to kill him. Twice. And this anticipation for our score to be settled is maintained all the way up until the moment it's not, when he dies by someone else's hands. We don't bring his life to an end, we don't even injure him in the past two fights, at least - not as far as I can tell. Kor, after revealing his true identity, while Haven finally buckles under the weight of his hordes, deals the fatal blow to the Baron - as he charges towards certain death to protect the city. His city. Naughty Dog pulls out every stop to make sure that Baron Praxis is the most hate-worthy person in this world, and they absolutely succeed in that endeavor. But then, in his dying breaths, they give him a single glint of humanity in exchange for our opportunity to be the ones who extinguish it.

Beneath this paranoia, and anger, and this far-reaching hand of totalitarianism he ruled the city with; in his mind Praxis really was pursuing the only course he thought possible to protect Haven - even if it meant ending everything to save it from its inevitable fall. He was just too broken by what he'd already lost to hold on to any semblance of hope that it could be saved any other way. This is, I think, best encapsulated by this exchange with Jak after he wins the big race against Errol at Mar Stadium. Again, on a first pass, the words of its villains register opposite of their emotional truth.

To be clear, this isn't, you know, me justifying anything Praxis - especially the people in our world who he mirrors - have done. He is a man whose hatred became so great even his own daughter accepted that he couldn't come back from the precipice he'd reached, he earned the fate he met, but...Jak II's insistence on not allowing this cycle of violence that Praxis believes to be inevitable to be perpetuated by his demise, is really remarkable. Praxis is the antithetical reflection of Jak, what the abandonment of hope would have left Jak to become. This is why their colors are juxtapositions of one another, why Praxis always refers to Jak by name, directly, like he's speaking with an equal, even at his most insulting and insidious and even though he never does with any other character. Because he *sees* himself. While everything Kor says is malice concealed as woe, everything Praxis says is woe enshrouded in malice. *His truth* is that the last hero who died...was him. Long before he met his end. But in his dying moments, his hope is rekindled that the heroes yet live. And it's in this gleam of clarity that he reveals the stone, and allows Jak and Daxter save the world a second time.

Everyone comes to face the abyss at some point in their life, but when the abyss looks back - some of us blink.

I said earlier that Precursor Legacy is one of the best feeling games to move around in, and I only said one of them because its successors are the other 2. Jak II manages to not only massively develop upon and elevate the first game's rather rudimentary plot and approach to storytelling, it even surmounts the bar Precursor Legacy set for how satisfying its world is to navigate and adventure through, and this was no small task. Jason Rubin, in the "Making Of" documentary for Jak II, said of the sequel;

"In pure Naughty Dog fashion, we didn't rest on our laurels after the original Jak. We had an engine, we got polygons on the screen, so the beauty of that is that in this game, we got to spend all of our time - the entire two years - getting better gameplay, getting more intelligent creatures, getting more stuff out there, adding to the gaming experience as opposed to just fighting to get the stuff on the screen."

And the results speak for themselves. Jak II is littered with gems, anomalies for their time both in sophistication and level of satisfaction. There is not another series on earth with a more satisfying vehicle system to master. The varying classes of Zoomers and their respective properties feel like a sequestered class selection screen unto themselves, each immediately accessible at our every whim but all demanding hours to begin to master. Soaring through the crowded corners of Haven City in its one-seater, the descendant of Keira's original A-Grav, skillfully weaving through two planes of traffic without taking a single hit or laying off the pedal is genuinely scarily addictive. Even while recording for this video, I got lost for hours just trying to piece together cinematic lines to take through the city with arbitrary rules set in my head as to how I have to navigate and what disqualifies a run. Am I allowed to shift between hover zones, if I tap a wall without damaging it do I have to restart, uh - it's my belief that the quality of a game's systems should not only be judged in their service to its story but in their value in the absence of it. And, it didn't strike me until replaying this, recently, that I developed that philosophy from here. This game is remarkably hard for what it follows up. Precursor Legacy isn't necessarily too forgiving but it is extremely consistent, and its curve of difficulty is more or less without peak or valley with the sole exception to that being The Fisherman's challenge in Forbidden Jungle.

Every game in the Jak & Daxter trilogy has at least one of these. I like to call them anger gauntlets. (?) A formidable challenge it throws at the player's feet that must be conquered to advance through the game - typically in the way of repetitious, randomized hand-eye coordination. In a series with extremely tight controls, you're almost lulled into a false sense of security that you can handle whatever objective is thrown your way and, eventually, of course, you can, otherwise no one would finish the games, but - the trick is they are an anomaly within the game's systems. The analog stick is so unresponsive in the Fisherman's challenge that you have to learn to predict and preemptively change its direction well before it actually *begins* to change direction, and this becomes sort of maddening extremely quickly. Controlling the Fisherman's net is like drafting a letter suggesting to the helmsman of a ship what direction he might want to consider steering in - tomorrow. Which, ironically, access to a boat is precisely what beating this challenge rewards. And then, the Yellow Eco shooting gallery later found in Boggy Swamp, *completely* overturns these properties and the analog stick becomes more sensitive to input than a radio telescope. But in Jak II, there aren't just 2 of these. There's like - 5.

You've got the Onin rhythm action game, where you have to match inputs to the screen before they fall away from it and in the exact amount they appear. Then the Metal Head Mash, a similar test of coordination except this time your speed is tested against not one but two spheres of input with the addition of deliberate false flags to trick you into throwing your run of what is effectively Whac-A-Mole with tasers. But it doesn't stop there. You have the Tank chase sequence, the Boulder chase sequence, the Daxter post-boulder-chase-Spider-chase sequence, the Titan suit sequences, and finally, what is widely regarded as the most difficult quest in the entire trilogy and the impetus of my favorite piece of Jak & Daxter criticism of all time; the Drill Platform rail-shooter sequence.

"Jak 2 is an exercise in bullshit game design!"

This is unquestionably the most broken 20 minutes Naughty Dog ever designed, and I don't mean that as a slight, really, either, because - I think some lack of balance is necessary for a world to successfully prolong its mystery and sense of wonder. Everyone has those stories, you know? How they couldn't beat Demyx in Kingdom Hearts 2 so they just had to imagine what laid beyond that point, continuously failing until an older sibling or a cousin beat it for them or they finally clutched out the W by the skin of their teeth. I didn't beat the Tank chase sequence in Jak II for an entire year. And I didn't beat the drill platform segment for another 6 months after that. In this respect, Jak II doubled as a digital parallel to the door frame in my grandparent's house that all the kids in the family marked their heights against over the years. I remember finally beating the game and becoming really conscious of the fact that, for the first time, you know, I got older, and my hands and my brain worked better than they used to. That's such a weird feeling to be made truly conscious of for the first time. I mean, yeah, it's ridiculously difficult in parts, deceptively so, but - the joy felt in surmounting its challenges is so much greater than it would have been had they not inspired hundreds of forum posts over 17 years complaining that you literally have to use debug mode to get past them or re-playing them in Hero Mode without circumventing the rail shooter sequence with a hoverboard glitch is literally not worth the attempts.

Speaking of the hoverboard, Naughty Dog also found it in their hearts to give us a fucking. hoverboard. This is maybe a small thing depending on who you are and how your brain works but one of my biggest disappointments with the Grand Theft Auto series has always been how, as the player, there are a lot of instances where your immersion is incidentally broken by the fact that the characters around you seem capable of doing more things than you are - specifically things you really want to be able to do as well, and this became a lot more noticeable with San Andreas and the releases following it. While they were developing San Andreas, Rockstar actually initially intended to develop a skateboarding mechanic to go along with its BMX bikes, which are just motorcycles with re-tuned weight and a jump button, up to the point where the model of the skateboard was completed and can still be found referenced in the game's files, and there are even a few remnants of references to an NPC who would be found carrying it. Unfortunately, this feature quickly met the cutting room floor, and what we're left with is a world rife with contextual suggestions that the rest of the people in it can skate whenever they feel like - but *you* can't. GTA IV actually included the skateboarder NPC cut from the previous game, but the references to the board itself stayed tucked away in the texture files for the backpack he was wearing, and GTA 5 finally brought the texture for the board into the game but relegated it to the background of a shelf in the high-end apartments that would later be replaced with a wardrobe for the Heists Update. In spite of this, every game contains at least 1 skatepark and various references to skate culture indicate that it very much does exist in this world - especially considering that the latter 3 games are all set in the fictional equivalents to the skate capitals of the country. RockStar games, though I adore them, always feel like a water park that *just* ran out of inner tubes. And, to be clear, this is not a small ask. I'm - I would be insane to genuinely criticize a studio for not being able to develop what is an incredibly difficult set of physics to replicate in a digital space in an already boundary breaking series of open world games.

I can, however, sing the praises of a studio who did.

In Jak II, everything that the world suggests you can do, you can do.
Granted, these suggestions aren't nearly as extensive as Grand Theft Auto's, but this leaves us with an incredibly satisfying system of incrementally gaining tools that allow us to navigate formerly inaccessible areas of levels that the player is actively encouraged to want to explore. It's like the antithesis of the ghost skateparks. This is something platformers actually tend to do incredibly well compared to most other genres. Introduce a path to its players yet inaccessible to them, then plant the desire to return to that point once the ability to traverse it is found. Uh, take the Magneboots in Ratchet & Clank for example. Naughty Dog recognizes this strength and leans all the way into it, introducing numerous systems of disconnected rails and stretches of deadly water with now extremely rare Precursor Orbs hovering over them throughout the areas we explore in the first half of the game's first act and then introduces us to an actual skatepark where Keira asks us to test her newest invention, the JET- Board. Mirroring our first use of the Zoomer in Precursor Legacy. I'm not going to call it the JET-Board though because we've pretty much landed on what to call these since like 1989, so when I say hoverboard, I know I'm mislabeling it. It just sounds better. Anyways, not only are we given a hoverboard to traverse the world on, but our introduction to it is a trick competition inside of a futuristic park that feels like the cyberpunk equivalent to Burnside in Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3. And the tricks feel incredible to do. This is a genuinely well ironed out moveset for something that almost no other developer besides Neversoft has been able to properly capture and the best part about it is they have absolutely no application to anything whatsoever. The only objective use case for the hoverboard throughout Jak II is utilizing its grind and momentum based movement speed to navigate a few specific areas of the world during specific quests. Everything else is entirely optional. So, Naughty Dog designs this entire auxiliary system and then conditions their players to engage with it as a game, textually, just to give us something fun and cool to do if we feel like taking a break from saving the world. And the challenge is repeatable, with different rankings. So are the gun courses we're made to complete throughout the game as we earn each Morph Gun mod. Uh, speaking of which, this is perhaps the most unique conception of third-person shooting I've ever experienced. There is no reticle, control of the camera via the right analog stick has to remain rather broad to help compensate for the aforementioned innate weakness of 3D platformers, there is no cover system, and the gun's properties have to physically reflect the nature of the eco they harness, so, what we're left with is this extremely active, movement based combat system of running and gunning which utilizes a red laser dot sight to supplement the player's aim along with minor aim assist. Well, with every mod besides the Scatter Gun, of course. The result is a significantly more engaging game to play through, overall, especially since Jak II brings so much more focus to its combat this time around. And due to the dramatic elemental contrasts between the gun mods, the player is left to develop their own style and manner of problem solving while still making sure to give each mod their unique use cases and time to shine. You can feasibly play through almost this entire game including all of its boss fights with just its Red Eco Scattergun and melee attacks, because due to the foundation of Precursor Legacy's movement system being so strong, you're tap dancin through gunfire like Fred Astair. Alternatively, you could hone your accuracy and acclimate yourself to the timing of the Blue Eco Vulcan Fury to take care of enemies from a distance. Or, as I like to do, hard main the Yellow Eco Blaster and spam the spin move Sig teaches us for every fight, always, without exception. Many seem to think that the only unfeasible-to-main weapon in the game is the last one the player unlocks, the Dark Eco Peace Maker, but - (smack teeth sigh) - I disagree. The gun is built to be most effective at the start of encounters, due to its ability to create an arc that travels between enemies within a certain proximity with no drop off in damage, and the power in each of its charged shots is devastating, resulting in a one-shot kill for most enemies, thus creating more opportunities to recoup Dark Eco ammo than number of rounds spent, so, respectfully, I'd contend that the Peace Maker isn't just a valid choice to rely on for most of Jak II, like every other gun, but that it's the best example of the versatility and freedom of choice within it. You just have to be willing to use your imagination a little.

Finally, on top of its excellent gunplay, which itself stands on the shoulders of the near-perfect movement and melee combat system it inherited, is the piece de resistance of Jak II.

Dark Jak.

Naughty Dog really said;

"We made an almost perfect game that plays nothing like anything else people have seen so let's add a goth vampire transformation button for good measure."

This shit plays like a Sasuke AMV looks. I love it. It's so good.

After being subjected to Baron Praxis' experiments for 2 years, Jak is able to harness the Dark Eco that had been channeled through him, as part of what Errol refers to in the intro as "The Dark Warrior Program", a last ditch effort to create a supreme weapon capable of ending the Metal Head threat. Not only is this cool as hell on its own, but the fact that the experiments on Jak were deemed a failure only for him to then prove them wrong by harnessing the Dark Eco and toppling both the Metal Heads and the system that tortured him to give him those abilities, has this extremely satisfying rebellious, delinquent, almost vicious quality to it. Which, I imagine, is why Jak II was sold as "Jak II - Renegade" in most of the rest of the world. And this feeling of untethered anger, you know, striking as a reflex to abuse, transfers brilliantly to the way it feels to play. Dark Jak's means of attack are relegated to these bounding, unelegant blind swipes almost reminiscent of a wounded animal - chaining together violence as he twists and lunges from enemy to enemy, as dark lightning crackles around him and electrifies his dusk grey skin and deep black horns. In lieu of weapons, resilience and speed are dramatically increased, and as we develop through the game and exchange Metal Head skull gems with the Precursor Oracle found in Haven's water slums, this side of Jak becomes more honed and he unlocks more abilities to use within it, like powerful AOE attacks and passive invincibility. Through this, Dark Jak becomes another material parallel to Jak's growth throughout the game's story - which is as much to do with saving Haven as it is to do with Jak finding his.

At the end of the game, with Metal Kor defeated, and Keira having restored the Precursor Rift Rider that the team arrived on, she inputs the coordinates back to Sandover Village and urges everyone to get ready to go home, to which Jak replies; "But we are home". Throughout Jak II's script the word "home" is only used 8 times, including this instance, almost exclusively said by its miscreant supporting characters like Sig and Mog. Criminals we've met by happenstance and allied ourselves with out of necessity, but, there's something about the game's employment of the word "home" in these contexts that gives rise to the dissociation of Sandover Village from it. The game begins each of its relationships with a distinct coldness towards Jak, as does the world, but as these characters come to know him and as Jak comes to prove himself to them, their exchanges gradually evolve at an asymmetric pace to sentiments of warmth and belonging. And, because these characters are dramatized extensions of the world and its various properties, not unlike the characters we meet in Precursor Legacy, as Jak's bond with them strengthens, so too does his tenderness for this new world. The darkness in Jak doesn't make him any less of a hero in the same way the darkness in Haven doesn't make it any less a home.

And that home is worth saving.

Anyways, Jak 3 begins with us being exiled from our home.

Jak 3 opens a year after where Jak 2 left off, in the political fallout of both antagonist factions from the previous game having their heads severed from them in its climax, writhing in the dust to be born anew. A revitalized, more aggressive cell of the Krimzon Guard led by Errol and what Metal Heads managed to survive are laying waste to Haven City for control of whatever 's left and its council thinks Jak is the one to blame. This is the most challenging game of the trilogy, narratively speaking, and its opening - clocking in at over 8 minutes in length, far exceeding Jak 2's or Precursor Legacy's - wastes absolutely no time in making this clear. Uh, I mentioned before, when discussing our introduction to Jak 2, that because the game presents us with such a dismal world - because it asks so much of its players, so quickly - it begins with a much more comforting inductive monologue from Samos than The Precursor Legacy does. In Jak 3's opening, Samos doesn't say anything at all. Rather, he does, but this time strictly diegetically. There is no sagely preamble to usher us into the world with or to prime us as to what we should expect with the duplicity of its storytelling in mind. After Jak is banished from Haven City by Count Veger, our new antagonist for much of the game, Ashelin leaves him with a beacon, assuring him that he'll be found by someone and ordering him to stay alive, illuminating just how hopeless the situation for our heroes is. As the transport pulls away, it's revealed that Daxter and Pecker, Onin's interpreter, decided to share Jak's fate and left alone in the arid sands, so far away from home and abandoned by those they risked everything to save, they slowly succumb to the unforgiving wastes as the final chapter of our long journey begins.

(clip of start menu sand but maybe don't actually interrupt narration for it just play under it)

As opposed to a prison, this time our heroes awake in a grand chamber made of stone and wood, illuminated by the warm flicker of torches and accompanied by an old, familiar sound. Percussion. Not a single, isolated drum echoing in the distance - but a rich ensemble...like the ones we used to hear in Sandover. As always, our introduction to the game's world is lead by its auricular identity, and the music of Jak 3, featuring both the *first* game's rich percussive arrangements and the *second's* haunting melodic synths and strings, resides at the crossroads between its 2 prior chapters - because Jak 3 is where these vastly opposing identities finally converge. The chamber is a throne room, belonging to Damas, the man who saved us, king of the desert city of Spargus - a society of Haven's refuse left to fend for themselves in the Wasteland; an environment so unforgiving that the people of Haven didn't believe a city within it could even exist - reflected by Jak's first words spoken to him. Damas, in turn, explains that the mercy he's extended in saving their lives has come at steep a price. They now belong to the people of Spargus, and they must prove themselves capable of serving it or be returned to the wastes as if they'd never been found.

Cue tutorial.

One of my favorite things about Jak 3 as it stands within the trilogy is how immediately perceptible its intensity is compared to the other 2. I know that's kind of an ambiguous word to use to describe video games, but, let me explain. In Precursor Legacy we're ushered into the game by Geyser Rock; a lush, peaceful island which communicates the basics of its gameplay without any actual threat or insistence. And in Jak 2, we're introduced to these same concepts in a tonally opposite, but ultimately similar environment in terms of conveyance, with no in-game pressures to complete it in a specific length of time and a designated end point that's only win condition is reaching it via platforming and the occasional encounter with a guard. Jak 3, however, briefs its players on its controls by forcing them to leap over open pits of lava in front of a cheering crowd of people we've just learned can even exist and its threshold of graduation into the overworld is at the other end of a gladiatorial death match against 20 other people fighting for the same prize as we are. Survival. And - before it even allows its players to process this already overwhelming bombardment of information - it throws us headlong into even more. The second we leave the arena, we meet another Wastelander, Kleiver - the hand of the king - and after remarking on how close we were to dying(^) just a moment ago, he gives us our first in-world quest; to ride something called a Leaper Lizard and catch kangarats throughout the city in exchange for access to one of the racing vehicles in his command to explore the wasteland in. The sensation and tone of each game can be illustrated most aptly by these post-tutorial quests found in each. In the first game, we're promised use of a vehicle in a world of few, and we venture out on foot in search of the items needed to use it, with no explicit urgency or order to accomplish this in. In Jak 2, we're told to seek out the Underground as our only path to progress further in the story, and are cut loose into the city with an empty vehicle nearby. The choice to go forward on foot or on mount is the player's to make. In Jak 3, the momentum of our entrance isn't a choice at all - and the speed the game has selected for us is *fast* as hell. The Leaper Lizard is very much a spiritual successor to the Flut Flut from the first game and, considering this is the same world and in the same approximate geographical location *as* the first game - just the distant future of it - one could reasonably assert that the Leaper Lizard is the literal, in-universe evolution *of* the Flut Flut and a convenient shorthand to express the textual and tangible evolution of the trilogy itself, and ***I'm*** going to. See that? I just did. And, the growth from one to the other is immediately perceptible. Uh, the haptic feedback in these games is something I briefly touched on earlier, but its effectiveness in Jak 3 is particularly worthy of praise and the first opportunity Naughty Dog finds to flex this is here. When we're riding the Flut Flut in Precursor Legacy, there's what I would describe as light-moderate feedback to the fingers which accentuate every step the bird takes - not dissimilar from that given by Jak's own steps, just turned up like...30 percent. Contrasted against this, the Leaper Lizard in Jak 3 not only travels at a much greater speed, but each of its steps, which there are now more of per second, registers to our hands like we're firing a god damn cannon. Spargus's rugged habitat is a much less forgiving surface than the greenery and marshes of Precursor Legacy as well and our objectives are small, moving targets that evade our approach, requiring us to land dash attacks to capture them, so the game's violent and disorienting introduction to its world is effectively translated into its gameplay in the first minute we're free to explore it. And, now that we're primed and ready for a world more urgent and with higher stakes than how we left it, I think it's time we take Kleiver up on that reward.

I would give anything to be in the room when Naughty Dog's team were discussing how they could top the system of hover cars they'd introduced and then perfected in Jak 2 and somehow arrived at what is, without question, the single most brilliant decision the studio has ever made.

"Why don't...we add...*actual* cars?"

You've got the Tough Puppy, the Sand Shark, the Dune Hopper, the Gila Stomper, the Slam Dozer a.k.a. the ***Ram Rod***, the Heat Seeker, the Dust Demon, and last but certainly not least, the Desert Screamer - a car so fast most players don't even use it because it's so gd hard to handle. Just as the Zoomers of Haven City feel like veiled talent trees which the players can select and master, so too, do the Buggies of Spargus City - and there are not only more variations of them than there are Zoomers, but the differences between them are much more dramatic. And the game does a really wonderful job of introducing the use cases for each one in a significant, cinematic way. Uh, upon our return from catching Kangarats, Kleiver wagers us a bet. If we can take the Tough Puppy into the Wasteland and win a race with it, he'll let us keep it - but if we lose, *he* gets to keep Daxter. This quest is more or less...the condensed essence of Jak 3. As opposed to easing its players into greater risk once the game progresses and after they've become well acquainted with its new mechanics, Naughty Dog immediately assigns the highest possible potential loss Jak can suffer in a given situation, right out of the gate. Literally, physically - right out of the gate. And, this extends to how quickly these mechanics are introduced to us as well. Just before we return to Kleiver, after reaching the other end of Spargus City, we run into Seem - a Precursor Monk stood next to a mysterious fallen satellite, tainted by Dark Eco. Seem lectures Jak about the darkness within him, how the hate will eventually consume him, as the satellite powers back on, briefly, just long enough for Jak to interact with it. The rhythm challenge mechanic that was introduced *half way through* Jak 2, is re-introduced in Jak 3 as its second quest ever - accompanied by extremely hostile and disheartening exposition regarding the impending doom of this world that the Dark Satellite has appeared as an omen of. The same is true for its re-introduction of the Morph Gun. We begin the game having presumably been stripped of ours by Count Veger, but we quickly gain a new one from Damas immediately after surviving the arena, once again beginning with the Scatter Gun, and we regain the Blaster moments afterwards, when we meet Kleiver. And the first *new* addition to this lineup is made only a few quests later. When Damas sends us back into the arena to earn the second piece of our amulet, the third of which will consummate our citizenship of Spargus, he gives us the Wave Concussor just before the fight starts, and with our survival of it, he gives us a new Blaster variant as well. What is, in my opinion, the greatest firearm ever conceived in the history of the medium.

The Beam Reflexor.

If I could resurrect Roger Ebert I'd force him to play Jak 3 and do rapid fire spin kicks with the Beam Reflexor until he admits video games are works of art.

It's incredible feeling, and, what I said before about any class of weapon being viable for a player to main throughout the game, is even more true of Jak 3 - having introduced 8 new entries to its roster for a total of 12 with 16 upgrades earned throughout the game in contrast to Jak 2's relatively minuscule 3. Each new mod demands more ammo, sure, but this is quickly offset by the fact that we continuously raise our maximum ammo capacity and improve the efficiency of each mod with our progression through the world. I also really love that Naughty Dog went out of their way to include a black sheep for each of the Eco Types, weapons that feel almost antithetical to the identity of the Eco they belong to as we understand it thus far. The Red Eco Plasmite RPG is a grenade launcher, the Yellow Eco Gyro Buster deploys a spinning drone that deals aoe damage in a specific location, the Blue Eco Arc Wielder channels a giant current of electricity, and the Dark Eco Mass Inverter isn't even a weapon, serving the player instead as a utility item - inverting the gravity within its radius and sending the enemies it envelops floating towards the ceiling. This theme of Dark Eco being capable of change rather than invariably inflicting harm is what the trilogy's entire ideology is built around and Naughty Dog's ability to imbue their gameplay with the ethos of their text shines through in a way in Jak 3 that it just doesn't in the others and that's because of design choices like this. Through these added Morph Gun mods, not only are the properties of Eco itself given a much more imaginative and nuanced portrayal in how they interact with the world around them, mirroring the personal journey of Jak as he seeks to find balance within himself after enduring so much at the hands of Eco, but they also make for a much more dynamic experience when engaging in the game's combat. You can still hard main one weapon for your entire playthrough, in fact this game makes that much easier to do, but Jak 3 opens up so many more possibilities for creative gameplay that it sort of organically conditions its players out of choosing to.

This is sort of like Bloodborne teaching people to interface with Souls games the correct way, except instead of a tormented knight errant in a wilting kingdom we're playing young anime Indiana Jones rolling around the world like it's an Ocarina of Time speedrun. By the way, did I mention how often this series references Indiana Jones? I'm sure that won't manifest as anything significant in the future.

Anyways, back to the third entry in our trilogy following a dauntless explorer and his eccentric sidekick seeking an artifact left by the gods of this world and defended by the last living members of an ancient order featuring his estranged father who also appeared in a fantasy movie about an unlikely alliance between warring species starring Dennis Quaid.

Speaking of combat, Jak 3 possesses one of my favorite user interfaces of all time. Its comprehensiveness while simultaneously preserving the first game's beautiful simplicity is, I think, an excellent reflection of the amount of labor and polish that went in to this final game. It is miraculously unobtrusive for the amount of information it's actually able to convey, uh, even little things like the layering of d-pad presses to switch between Morph Gun mods of each Eco type, or the re-positioning of its various elements - its health ring and eco vials in particular - closer to the edges of the screen so it obfuscates less of the game's action, each element fading naturally from the screen when not of immediate use to its player, allowing for a greater sense of immersion and awareness, in particular when exploring the world between missions, is nothing short of genius.

And, along with a more refined indicator for our health, came a lot more of it.

In Jak 3 we begin with 8 hit points, just like we had in Jak II, but with our completion of the quest "Race for Artifacts", immediately after we've beaten Kleiver's challenge near the beginning of the game, Damas allows us to keep a piece of armor we find in the desert - said to be the very regalia Mar had once worn in battles long-past. Throughout the game, there are 4 such pieces of guard to be found, that we slowly collect as we progress through its story - gaining 2 additional health with each piece, for a total of 8 when the set is complete - bringing our maximum threshold to exactly double what it was in Jak II. And, just as Jak II did with its greater capacity for pain, Jak 3 makes sure it puts every hit point gained to some darn good use. The amount of enemies Jak 3 is capable of rendering on-screen at one time, and the sheer variety of them, in a still completely open world with no load times(?) is utterly baffling to me and although its difficulty is much finer tuned than Jak II, this doesn't make its experience any less treacherous. It's often said that Jak 3 is the middle child in terms of difficulty within the Jak trilogy and though I absolutely agree, I think it deserves to be emphasized that this is not due to any explicit nerfs to the damage or health pools of the enemies we face. In fact there are way more of them who are way deadlier. Rather, it's a byproduct of Naughty Dog's team responding to the issues players struggled with the most in Jak II and dramatically improving its sequel's visibility and the responsiveness of its controls, in particular in the segments which mirror the previous game's gauntlets. Jak 3's equivalent to the Drill Platform rail shooter, a quest in its third act simply named "Defend Spargus from Attack", is an almost night and day difference in terms of how much control the player has over their success or failure in it. In spite of its stakes being multitudes higher than its predecessors and its enemies being more powerful and overwhelmingly more abundant, it *is* a marginally easier game, this is true, but it's easier for all the right reasons. This is also the first Jak game to include consideration for accessibility. It's all under the hood so players wouldn't be aware of it - deliberately so - but, continued failure in a given encounter within the game causes it to incrementally ease the challenge for its players to allow them the ability to progress even if they aren't capable of meeting the threat it initially presents, but never depriving them of the opportunity of facing the next challenge at full charge. This approach of dynamically altering its difficulty on a checkpoint-by-checkpoint basis obscured from its player's view is, maybe in retrospect not as helpful as outright offering difficulty settings, but it also allowed a more diverse set of players to surmount the same challenges as everyone else in a way that didn't facilitate condescension from other players or perceived condescension from the game itself within the context of video game culture at the time, because...how would anyone know(?), and I think, if nothing else, Naughty Dog's *intentions* with this came from a really thoughtful place worth commending. Especially considering this was made in less than a year of development time. Uh, on that note, it is genuinely absurd to me that Naughty Dog was able to create this game in under a year. Just as Precursor Legacy was a technical marvel at the beginning of the PlayStation 2's life cycle, Jak 3 was a technical marvel near the end of it. It is, to me, the platonic ideal of a sequel. Everything in it is more, you know, nothing is lost in the steps it takes forward - it only *gains* intensity, it only *gains* complexity. The Wasteland is 5 times the size of Haven City, which we still get to return to and explore the new zones of, as well, beginning with the second act of the game's story. The utilization of bump mapping for things like collisions and tire marks in the wastes especially to better illustrate a world that we're capable of making a tangible, lasting impact in is inspired. Its significantly greater attention to detail and Naughty Dog's increasingly sophisticated lighting engines as well as the improvements made to their AI, both of the enemies we fight and of the supporting cast we fight alongside, and their massively refined physics all come together to create a truly epic-in-scope adventure that feels more complete, more alive, than a lot of games do today. The vastly differing environments we encounter throughout our journey are so striking and monumental feeling that it is, for my money, the most ambitious continuous world design in the PlayStation 2's library. One moment, we're tearing through the dunes of a vast wasteland, bounding over ruins in a vehicle hundreds of feet in the air while taking out entire groups of marauding bandits with its dual mounted grenade launchers, then a moment later we're scaling a forgotten Monk temple perched upon an isolated enclave long separated from the mainland by an unrelenting sea, then we're flying a monk's abandoned glider from the temple's peak into the mouth of an active volcano at the center of the barrens, and then we crash land into a lush pre-historic rainforest within its caldera. And this is all in the span of less than 30 minutes. We raise great Precursor constructs from beneath the floors of hidden forests, we scale through a vast network of catacombs to return to the home we were exiled from, we race Count Veger to the center of the planet in a Precursor flume and then are promptly teleported to space by the shapers of the universe, we battle the cybernetic reincarnation of Errol atop a Krimzon cybernetics factory floating high above the surface, we race through the reborn streets of Haven where its slums used to reside and leap across toxic wastes as we venture through the Metal Head city where Haven's Southern Gardens and Western Bazaar once stood, we gallop through the petrous streets and markets of a far fetched desert kingdom facing the sea, and we soar through the sands and winds of the wastes it resides in to defend it against a world-ending threat on par in physical scale with Shadow of the Colossus or Breath of the Wild, but, respectfully, *way* fucking cooler and with infinitely more at risk.

And Jak 3's score rises to meet these occasions with a breathtaking conviction.

Josh Mancell's compositions effortlessly entwine the previous 2 game's musical identities into a symmetrically subduing and commanding resonance far greater than the sum of its parts. Tracks like "Calm Wasteland", "I'm Through Saving the World", and "The Heroes Emerge" hearken back to the works of Glenn Stafford for Warcraft 2, Mark Morgan for Planescape: Torment, and Michael Hoenig for Baldur's Gate. These towering, sequenced strings over roaring drum lines breathe new life into the previously illusive RPG heritage that runs deep through the veins of the trilogy. And, I think this coalescence of opposing sounds works best *in* the new areas Jak 3 introduces. Spargus is the antipode settlement of Haven in every conceivable way. In place of cold neon lights and perpetual overcast from smog, it is scorched by the sun during its days and illuminated by torch and moonlight in its evenings, and this - along with its weatherworn houses settled into the rocks and the hardy nature of its citizens - allows it to take on a more primal, more whimsical character closer to a settlement you would find along the shores of Kalimdor or the Sword Coast - equal parts tranquil and vicious. Perhaps the best use of music in the entire series can be found in this game, "Find My Son...", the piece that plays beneath Damas' passing as Jak realizes that the son he'd alluded to throughout the game was him - that Damas was the King of Haven that Praxis had usurped so many years ago and that Mar is his true name. In a minute and 46 seconds it spans the breadth of not only Jak's grief and the anger which overcomes him after this realization, but the malevolence of Veger having orchestrated and taken pleasure in such a devastating blow and Daxter's empathetic heartbreak for his friend. Like everything else in this series, it is terse and uncluttered, but ruthlessly effective in its service. Something I especially adore about the music in Jak 2 and 3 that I think Jak 3 really perfects, is, the musical idea of the augmentation of movement, as an evolution of The Precursor Legacy's musical distinction between play conditions. Uh, every time we step on the hoverboard, or get in a vehicle, the music of whichever zone we're in becomes much faster, more vigorous, to reflect the new condition of gameplay we've entered and Jak 3's score expertly conveys the contrasting speeds and levels of intensity we're able to experience our surroundings at. Not simply by virtue of having so many different modes of travel, but by giving each mode as dramatic an identity as they suggest they should have. If I'm in a death race across a perilous wasteland, narrowly avoiding murderous desert marauders a la Mad Max: Fury Road, I need the music to convince me that I am. And Jak 3's does, excellently.

Another point of this game's convergence between Precursor Legacy and 2 that I love, is the renewed focus on what brought Jak & Daxter in to our world to begin with. Platforming. Through a combination of across-the-board grander set design which more often necessitates tapping in to the duo's acrobatic side than its predecessor and a number of segments wherein the player takes control of Daxter himself, using him to navigate a deviating path before reuniting with Jak at its end to continue through the level, Jak 3 is absolutely brimming with good ol' fashioned 3D platforming and this platforming is made all the better by the many new abilities we've acquired to traverse through obstacles or even manipulate the properties of the obstacles themselves. For much of Jak 2, Daxter split his time evenly between flirting with Tess and countering Jak's many outbursts, but only twice was he given the opportunity to have an actual, physical effect on its gameplay, so, it's really refreshing that in the last game of the trilogy, it not only strikes a balance between the development given to each protagonist, but also gives Daxter a much greater role in how the players interact with its world.

For the majority of Jak 3's first act, we devote our time to carrying out various quests for Damas and Kleiver to earn our place in the city of Spargus, but, just before the act comes to its close, that all takes a very sharp turn. When their third and final test in the Arena is called for, Jak and Daxter discover that the champion they'll be forced to face - is Sig, which of course, we can't stand for. I mean, he taught us the spinny move. I would rather break the disk than cause him harm. Either way, neither is capable of killing the other because they're BFFs, which goes against the laws of No-Fun-Allowed City, and, as opposed to simply being cast out for their insolence, Damas elects to sentence the trio to an alternative penance, mostly due to Sig actually serving in Haven as a spy for the desert king this whole time, but one that still spells their almost certain doom. We're sent to the heart of a Metal Head nest deep within the wasteland, where they've horded precious Precursor artifacts, and if we should return victorious over the countless horrors harbored within, his mercy will have been earned. We survive, of course, because we're the main characters, and after getting a verbal high-five from Daddy Damas and making it back to the crib safe and sound, our communicator activates again. But this time it's not Damas, it's Ashelin. She urges Jak and Daxter to find her at an oasis at the other end of the wastes, and after fending off a Marauder ambush which follows their reunion - Ashelin makes a plea to them to come home and fight.

Something I failed to mention earlier is that on top of everything else this game does so exceptionally well, perhaps its most crucial step forward from its predecessors is the dramatically improved direction of its cinematics. The level of nuance that Naughty Dog is capable of evoking in the facial expressions of their characters through extremely complex for its time facial rigging is unbelievable and it's moments like these, where a character's dialogue counters their emotional truth and the player is informed of this not by mere context but by their own expressions, the look in their eyes, that sets Jak 3 so far apart and above the rest. Daxter might insist that this is the last time she'll see him and Jak may vow that he's through saving the world, but there's never a moment that we the player actually believe them - because these lines are preceded by hesitation and a terrible concern for their friends back in Haven that are written all over their faces.

The eyes, chico. They never lie.

Oh, speaking of delivery, this trilogy features some of the strongest voice casting in the medium. Seriously, every performance is a dead ringer for their character, and no delivery feels hammed nor underwhelming. Warren Burton as Samos Hagai is to this day one of my favorite voice performances of all time. He sends every line with this same quizzical, omniscient but concerned father figure-like timbre that is just so warm and energetic. Tara Strong *kills* it as Keira and Phil LaMarr as Sig is almost implausibly charismatic. Mike Erwin was beset with easily the most daunting task an actor can be given, bringing a voice to a character who was formerly voiceless, and convincing their audience that had already impressed their own characterization onto them that this performance was not only fitting - but natural. That this was always Jak, and the decision to speak was of no correlation to his actor's arrival to the series. I think Jak & Daxter's most standout performance across the trilogy, though, is pretty unquestionably Max Casella as Daxter. Not only does he embody the spirit of a confidant, a mischievous younger brother, and a fiercely protective partner all rolled into one, but he does so while effortlessly skating around life or death situations with an irreproachable ability to deliver a joke. By the way, you may recognize Max better as Benny Fazio from The Sopranos, and being that Daxter is given so much extra seat-time in Jak 3, we actually *do* get to play an Italian in this one! Yes! YEEESSSSSS!!!

With the Seal of Mar back in Jak's possession, we head South East to the aforementioned Monk Temple to unlock a previously sealed door, gain a new eco ability, bop around on the hoverboard for a bit, and then strap in to the front seats of the Fallen Forerunner Fun Flume on a one way trip back to the big HC. As we reach the end of the labyrinth of abandoned eco mines once used by Mar in the construction of Haven, we finally reach the airlock that will take us to the surface of the city - and stood between us, is Count Veger himself.

Eager to prove how well adjusted and completely normal he is.

Why are all the villains in this series insane but in like a sexually frustrated Frollo kind of way?

I digress, so ensues the first real boss fight in the game like ffffffive and a half hours in, and as opposed to Jak II's first fight which was against Baron Praxis in one of his mechs, Jak 3's pits us against a Precursor guardian manipulated by Veger into fighting for him. To me, this is where Jak 3's writing finds a lot of its strengths. In building upon the various ideals and metaphors extolled by its predecessors by not only offering closure for them but reflections and parallels to them - equal and opposite physical counterparts to the trilogy's text so far. The fight itself is great, by the way. I love the designs of the Precursor machinations throughout these games and playing double dutch with Mobile Suit beam swords is an especially charming aesthetic choice. Extra props for the locked perspective makin it feel like I'm pushin keys in De Other Side with my boys. Speaking of sides, Veger and Praxis are two sides of the same clamorous coin; both seek to defend their world against a seemingly insurmountable threat and both have firmly deluded themselves into believing that *they're* the main character of that world's story. Praxis is determined that the only solution to defeat the Metal Heads is the harnessing of Dark Eco and believes that all the heroes died long ago, while Veger envisions the solution to the Dark Makers, Precursors tainted by Dark Eco who travel from planet to planet destroying their creations a la The Great Evil from Fifth Element or Sargeras from World of Warcraft, take your pick, as harnessing Light Eco and concludes that *he's* the only hero left. One's a fascist militarist traumatized by war and the other is a religious zealot drunk on delusions of grandeur, but, it's precisely this visage as a pious man seeking to deliver people from harm that makes Veger so much more capable of inflicting it - even though he never does so personally, physically. His appearance just after Damas' death, quietly announcing to Jak in a frigid, hushed tone that Damas never knew he was his son, due specifically to his orchestration, and the way the camera cuts to these closer, more extreme shots of him with every reverse is genuinely, sickeningly nefarious. More vicious than any other character in this entire series. And again, he's not even the main antagonist of his game. And, just like Praxis, our opportunity to bring his life to an end, is instead taken by the very thing he'd forsook his humanity in search of. While this was strictly metaphorical in Praxis' case, the effective "end" of Veger as an antagonist in Jak 3, is a very a literal, tangible analog to it. He *actually* trades his humanity. He just... doesn't like what he gets. At its core, the Jak trilogy is an exploration in dualism. Hence the introduction of Light Eco abilities such as Light Flight, Light Healing, and Light Shield as well as the introduction of non-destructive Dark Eco abilities like Dark Invisibility to offer a balance to the animosity Jak keeps inside. Precursor Legacy is an expression of unremitting light while Jak II is an expedition through interminable darkness. And Jak 3, perhaps a bit obviously at this point, is where these two extremes find their balance. If the theme of Jak II is not letting the darkness inside of you win, then Jak 3's is accepting that it'll always be there - but light needs to be found in spite of it. I think that's why Dark Jak's form was re-designed in Jak 3, featuring more of the natural undertones of his hair and altogether removing his once-prominent black horns. And I think that's also why the Seal of the Royal House of Mar is just a reflection of the Taijitu, Yin and Yang, laid horizontally on its axis.

This is as good a time as any to mention the character design in Jak 3, which I think is fire, and remains as some of my absolute favorite work ever.

The Armor of Mar is maybe the single freshest thing in this entire franchise to me and yes I am including the Twisted Metal Kart Racer's game mode where you competitively hunt dinosaurs. Being able to track our progress through Jak 3's story visually is an ingenious way to further emphasize the player's impact on its world and its characters and I especially love how the third piece, its pauldron, lends a previously missing sense of symmetry to Jak's regalia; the fiery gold and orange of the Precursor forged plates slowly overtaking the indigo blue he'd spent the previous game all-but cloaked in; reflecting both the darkness held under his surface and the light that he becomes able to use as a bulwark against it. For that matter, all of the Wastelander designs are absolutely incredible. Kleiver is maybe the most I've ever seen a character *look* like their voice *sounds* in anything and I mean that in the best way possible. His, Damas, and Sig's staff-based morph guns and the dissevered spikes and strips of metal enveloping their bodies along with their sun-bleached leathers and torn linens fashioned into cuirasses lend the city of Spargus such an immediately singular aesthetic identity, which, along with its citizens, communicate their demeanor and their values with an exceptional efficiency. Just like the The Geologist. I also love that these three are the only other characters in the entire series who wear the boxer's wraps like Jak does, a subtle suggestion as to his lineage long before it's made clear in its text. Ashelin has one of the most striking designs of any heroine in the PlayStation 2's library and as a result is also almost single-handedly responsible for why my type is anyone who looks like they manage a Hot Topic. Seem and the Precursor Monk's designs stand alone as the most effective, deliberate otherization of a character in the trilogy, only very distantly followed by Brutter, and her design manages to achieve this while simultaneously expressing that she is better acclimated to the environment we meet her in than anyone else in it. Count Veger as a parallel to Baron Praxis masquerading as a parallel to Jak is expertly reflected in the way his clothing contrasts against his appearance. He may be draped in the same colors as Jak, even in the same arrangement, but his gaunt, drawn face and anomalously dignified posture are a dead giveaway to the sinister nature hiding beneath. And Cyber Errol is sincerely, I think, the most intimidating looking character that Naughty Dog ever designed. There's something so, for lack of a better term, inhuman about his movements and facial expressions and manner of speaking - as if he'd died in the explosion in Jak II leaving only his ire and his loathing to live on. The weaponized metal appendages which comprise 90% of his body existing as mere extensions of his conviction to bring an end to the world that made him what he's become.

And...he nearly does.

After we race Veger to the center of the planet to activate the Precursor's ancient contingency plan for if the Dark Makers should ever return, we finally come face to face with the Precursors themselves - and in doing so, learn that Daxter is one. What he believed was a curse from the Dark Eco since he'd fallen in to it in Precursor Legacy was actually a blessing from it - just like Jak's. As their last line of defense begins to harness the eco of the planet and slowly brings itself online, our dynamic duo are sent on one last quest. To board the Dark Maker ship themselves and stop Errol from awakening its ruinous cargo. After a battle against the clock through its winding corridors and treacherous depths, and me resetting that clock by dying like 13 times in a row on the same platform, Errol manages to escape with a single Dark Maker, called a Terraformer, and hurtles towards the planet's surface - determined to finish what he'd started. Errol miraculously survives, as do we, and as he rises with this terrible beast from the desert floor, we rise to meet them. After rendering it still, as we climb to the top of this vast Precursor creation, its age defying all comprehension and having been corrupted by darkness, we begin to approach its peak - and we come to face the person whose corruption it mirrors. And as we engage in our titanic clash with Errol for the fate of the planet atop its crest, picking up the cadence of this final fight and its stages - first ads, then avoid, then strike, re-up, then avoid and ads, then strike, and so on - something truly remarkable happens. We start to remember its rhythm. Because we've been here before.

Errol and the Dark Maker's plan to reshape the world in darkness is the amaranthine reflection of Gol and Maia's to do the same, and, we're stood atop what is figuratively the summit of this world - with its fate wavering on the precipice - all over again. Jak 3 takes us all this way, to fight to save the world we've just spent a trilogy adventuring through, only to bring us back to the culmination of the very first story that trilogy told. To when Jak was still unmarred by pain and believed that he could be a hero.
To Christmas day, 2002.
The day I fell in love, resolute that I was the luckiest kid in the entire universe.
With our final blow to Errol, the Terraformer explodes, and our duo emerge from the racing sands as they surge across the face of the Wasteland they call home - hope having made its return to Jak's eyes.

The light has faded from the sky...but we can still see it.

Earlier, and I mean way earlier, I said that Precursor Legacy's introduction left me determined to to run up to every ancient lookin statue I could find, and I didn't get the chance to tell you what they said.

(clip "Who awakens the Oracle? Wait, one of you has the light within.")

(clip " Beware of the dark light, for it has twisted the fate of one of you.")

(clip " Seek the pure light, for within its flame, the answers reside."

The Precursors we interact with in the first game of the trilogy, which hadn't even been guaranteed a sequel, let alone two, are just Naughty Dog calling their shots for what the next two stories would be. I've played plenty of games that have got me with solid misdirections, or clever uses of a paradox, but I've never played a trilogy of them that tells me exactly how they'll go in its first game and then sends its own protagonist back in time after growing up with us to remind us at the end that the light we used to have is still there.

At least, I haven't besides this one.

With the end of our final adventure, the Precursors honor our beloved temerarious twosome for saving their world again, and with all of his friends in attendance, Jak is invited to accompany them in their travels across the cosmos. Daxter is granted a wish, which he cashes in on finally getting pants, and through the metaphysical laws of comedy, so is Tess - being transformed into a Precursor as well so they can live happily together. The Precursors leave, and Jak reveals that he stayed behind, and after Pecker and Daxter share one last bit, with Jak and Daxter grinning through the screen; Dax delivers the last line of the trilogy.

The contention that the trilogy was created specifically to make.

"Life is good."

It's been almost 20 years since I fell in love with video games, and, everything I have in my life I directly or indirectly owe to them. My friendships, my career, my coping mechanisms. When I moved a thousand miles away from the town I grew up in, I played World of Warcraft and for a little while it didn't matter that I was homesick, because I watched Reckful 3 and started leveling a Rogue so I could be like him. When I lost my dad a friend sat and played Civilization with me for hours. Didn't talk much, because what do you say, but for a little while I wasn't me. I was Trajan, Emperor of Rome and my econ game was disgusting. Video games are sort of like home movies in that way. People that aren't here anymore, people we lost touch with, a bit of them are always inside of the things they showed us, or the things we did together. The people we used to play Halo 3 with, what they sounded like when they laughed. No matter how lonely or anxious or sad I can sometimes feel, whenever I play Jak & Daxter a wave of warmth comes back to me. Like a record full of hopeful greetings. In the words of Samos, for every age there is a time of trial. And for every time of trial, I've been able to turn to this wondrous medium that I was so lucky to be introduced to to help me get through them - and to remind me that even when it's really dark, there's still a lot of light left. And I owe this all, every second of comfort and joy that I've derived from it, to a green haired kid and his orange friend - and everyone who brought them to me.

So, thank you, everyone who worked on the Jak games at Naughty Dog.

And thank you mom and dad.

You're the best.

Usually I'd, you know, go on about how this was the trilogy that set the studio up for its future successes with Uncharted and The Last of Us, you know, it set the groundwork for the dynamic, Jak 3 had over 80 minutes of cinematics, the length of a feature film, and it deserves more reverence in the shared memory of video game culture, and so on, but - truthfully - that isn't the point.

The Voyagers kept going. And in 1990, fresh off the new year;

Voyager 1 captured this.

The Pale Blue Dot. Part of a family portrait. There's Venus. Subject of endless monologues, all from people much smarter than me, so I'll keep mine short. That's us. Every game we love, every song we know every word to...that's it. That little blue shimmer. The Voyagers are built to continue their journey for tens of thousands of more years, certainly long after you and I are gone, and - I think...I think it's easy to perceive of what they carry with them as...tombstones, almost. You know; "This is who we were. Should you come across this, remember us." Something like that. But...I prefer to think of them as gateways. Not just to what our hearts sounded like, but what works of art dwelled within them.

I don't know.

If the cosmos ever beckon for a disc from which they could reverse engineer all of my tastes, my faults, my joys, my losses, and most importantly my loves, I would send them Jak & Daxter.

This video was supposed to come out on New Years, buuuuut...I was busy.

Running by the ocean, trying to make perfect circles.

Have a good night.