

## If Shadowrun: Dragonfall is 'grimdark,' where does that leave us?

Opinion

10 months ago

by [Eron Rauch](#)

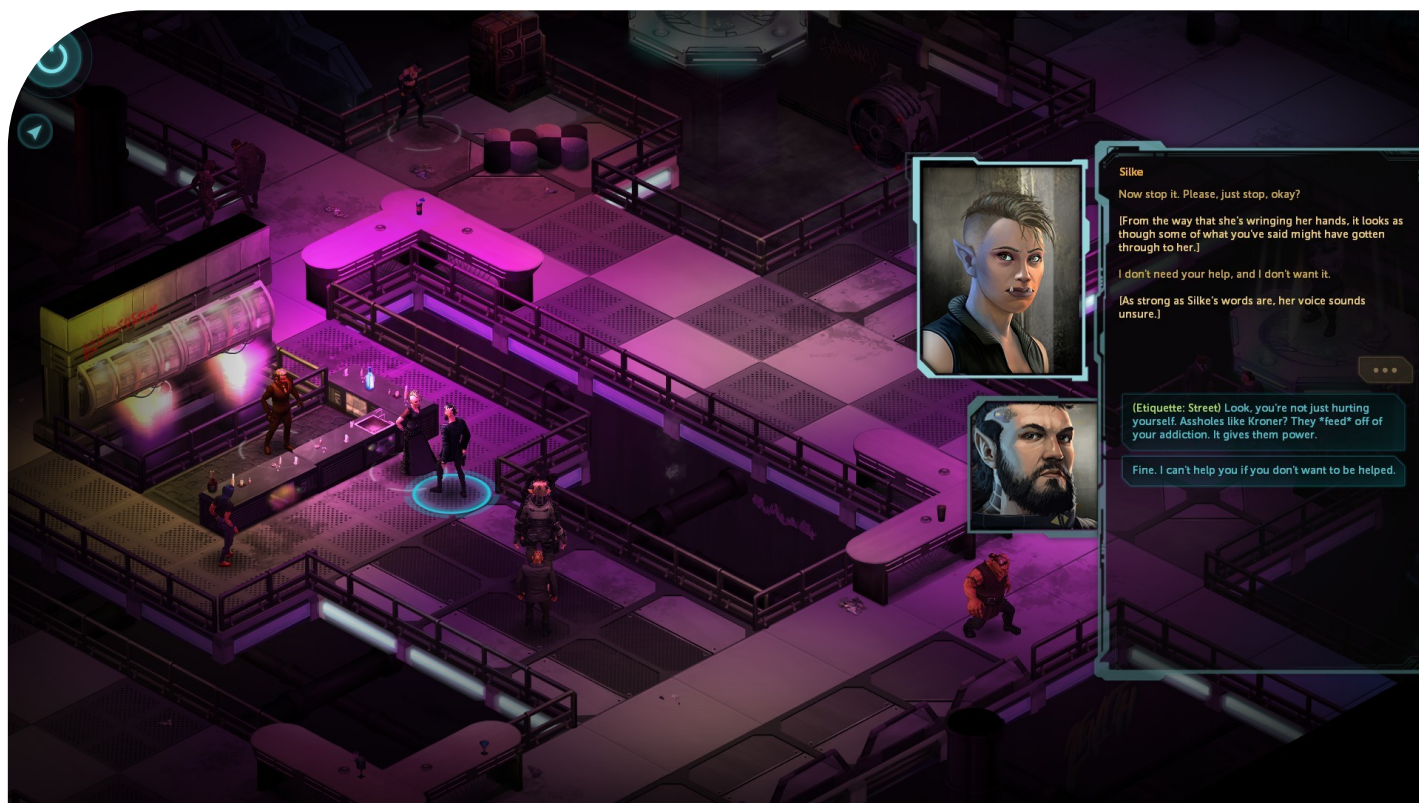
Once the domain of wannabe-edgy SFF writers, these days 'grimdark' seems to apply to nearly anything with a serious tone.



I didn't expect to feel close to these characters: A former cult member haunted by their past complicity in horrible abuses; an aging punk singer stuck in the rut of hard-drinking and busting small-time skinheads; a military grunt who doesn't trust anyone after their commanding officer got killed on their watch; a jilted self-taught hacker whose propensity for being better at fast talking than fast-typing means he owes loans he can never repay.

So it was that in Los Angeles—the city where *Snow Crash* is set, as fires burned in the hills catching the orange streetlights' glow in the night air over Silicon Beach—I rambled about how unexpectedly rich and personally moving I found the setting and characters of *Shadowrun: Dragonfall*.

Continuing along talking about the characters' anarchist squat, I mentioned how it reminded me of my former warehouse space where I landed with a bunch of other misfits during a confusing part of my life. Someone chimed in with banal dismissal, "But that's all just typical grimdark shit."



*Shadowrun: Dragonfall* (2014) regularly draws on heavy subject matter like struggling with addiction.

Like that, with that invocation of a single genre tag, it was as if all of those experiences were turned to something less, banished to a shunned genre shelf tucked behind a black curtain and a Sharpie'd "18+" sign. Mayhem for mayhem's sake. The immature's caricature of maturity. Not a place where *real* conversation about art and life happened.

With that branding of grimdark, I didn't get a chance to share my next thought, which probably would have been even more unsettling. Shockingly (even to myself), I was at the edge of openly discussing something I usually keep hidden. This was time of year that Facebook Memories usually spams me with reminders of the horrific car accident that left my girlfriend comatose with a lingering brain injury. *Dragonfalls'* deeply, humanly, wounded characters struck a chord because they were not shown as recovering a past glory, or mastering life, by collecting enough magic-McGuffin points. Instead, limping through the shadows together, the characters showed a glimmer of reconciliation, an uncertain but possible future.

## The immature's caricature of maturity. Not a place where *real* conversation about art and life happened.

I don't even remember the first time I heard the word "grimdark." It was probably in reference to some decadent dark fantasy novel (\*cough\* *Kushiel's Dart* \*cough\*) or brutally gory space-marine death metal album cover (Bolt Thrower, you know I'm looking at you). With the rise of *Game of Thrones* and the revival of tabletop gaming, especially *Warhammer 40K*, in the last few years, it feels like the use of this sub-genre label is exponentially proliferating amongst geeks and videogame fans.

For those of you who aren't familiar with the term, "grimdark" has historically been a nebulous and catchall term for a narrow fantastical spectrum relishing in overly and explicitly violent, sadistically sexually exploitive, occult-worshiping, techno-surgical fetishizing, and/or politically nihilist mutations of fantasy and science fiction. At its most stereotypical, grimdark works are filled with pages of evil shadow elves doing bong hits of human blood, reanimated orc-abominations wielding chainsaw swords, and cyber-demons eating people in lingering detail, in a world that is never going to have a happy ending.





*Game of Thrones* regularly garners criticism for its treatment of race and women. Does calling it 'realistic' really absolve it of these issues?

When someone says something is grimdark now, however, they typically mean something is unrealistically, unrelentingly dark, to the point it has become quasi-pornographic. Of late, the term has been most prominently bandied in the discussions about whether or not *Game of Thrones*, with its constant mutilations, incessant sexual violence, wholesale oppression of people of color, macabre magical systems, and ruthless political machinations, crosses the line from brutally realistic into grimdark.

This conversation is hardly academic: what is at stake is nothing less than the artistic and cultural legitimacy of the show. Is it a tough-but-deep look into the ways power and myth corrupt people, or is it a streaming-video fap-fest for emotionally-stunted, women-hating, white-savior indulging man-children? (Yes, I'm going to leave that hanging and not even try to answer that question. Maybe ask your coworkers as a way to derail your next boring work meeting?)

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**The label grimdark has weight and meaning. It determines whether something is allowed into mainstream cultural conversation or exiled to the profane nether-regions never to be referred to in polite adult company.**

Whichever side you fall on with regards to *GoT*, the important takeaway is that application of the label grimdark has weight and meaning. It determines whether something is allowed into mainstream cultural conversation or exiled to the profane nether-regions never to be referred to in polite adult company.

One of the most troubling but subtle aspects of the overuse of the grimdark label within fan and internet culture is the increasingly broad range of things that seem to fall within its supposed purview. Aside from the characters, which I've described, *Dragonfall* ostensibly fit the bill because of the whole rich texture of the game's world, mostly set in a small, makeshift anarchist village in the midst of a fractured, militarized state. When it's all said and done, that one word dismissed so much:

Unemployment? Grimdark.

Living amidst crumbling infrastructure? Grimdark.

Religious fanaticism? Grimdark.

Racist violence? Grimdark.

Sexual abuse of women by people in power? Grimdark.

Extra-judicial killings by police and military? Grimdark.

Guilt and shame at deep personal failures? Grimdark.

Coming to terms with the consequences of your cramped-up history? Grimdark.

Grimdark's kudzu-expansion doesn't stop at the edges of my save file. Over the last few years, in both daily life and media, I've heard videogame fans use the term for things as varied as: historical slavery, genetic engineering, sexual deviance, toxic pollution, sex work, crappy schools, disease, corporate raiding, global warming, urban overcrowding, mental illness, famine, and food insecurity.

We are experiencing some serious grimdark-creep.

But why? What do all these things have in common? What is the result of this attempt to push aside these topics?



*Shadowrun: Dragonfall*

When I stop and look across the increasingly vast areas of human life that fandom is so quick to label "grimdark," I recognize something unsettlingly familiar. I see a list of all the things that the authority figures in my white, suburban, Evangelical upbringing taught us that only happen to sinful people, to people not of the (read: our) church, to people different than us; things that, even if they are happening all around, "normal" people just don't talk about.

Growing up in this world, one couldn't talk about drugs or addiction, even though there were AA meetings in the basement; you couldn't talk about homelessness or poverty, even though people were sleeping in the trees at the edge of the property; you couldn't talk about the lingering history of racism, even though there were white churches and non-white churches in town that never met together. Heaven forbid (literally) you brought up things like global warming, mental illness, or the right of women to



be leaders in the church... You just didn't do that because, I don't know, if you even admitted one of these things out loud, it would appear from the aether to haunt you like Beetlejuice. Naming it, let alone seeing it, showed that you were guilty and, moreover, that you didn't belong.

Given that some of the most vocal sections of videogame fandom are an arrangement of that same background—suburban, aspiring-to-affluent, white, and mostly male (regardless of religious preference)—it isn't shocking when you look through the list, you can see a similar attempt to hide away anything that challenges their tightly-wound definition of "normal." Grimdark-creep is an artistic flavor of abstinence-only sex ed so beloved by those people from my childhood. Grimdark-creep is just another form of willful forgetting.

This notion from my childhood, of actively unseeing, un-naming, anything that challenged our suburban worldview, reminded me of a quotation that has been churning in my mind lately. At the same time I was playing *Dragonfall*, I was finally getting a chance to read the lauded *Between The World And Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates (perhaps best known amongst fandom for writing the new version of the *Black Panther* comic series), and in that book he plainly states:

"Forgetting is habit, is yet another necessary component of the Dream. They have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs. They have forgotten, because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live down here with us, down here in the world. I am convinced that the Dreamers, at least the Dreamers of today, would rather live white than free. In the Dream they are Buck Rogers, Prince Aragorn, an ethnic race of Skywalkers. **To awaken them is to reveal that they are an entire empire of humans, and like all empires of humans, they are built on the destruction of the body. It is to stain their nobility, to make them vulnerable, fallible, breakable humans.**"

All the things being so hastily hidden away by videogame fandom's grimdark-creep are things that are happening all around us in the world. They are happening to our neighbors, our fellow citizens, our friends and family. They are happening to *us*. Labeling more and more things as grimdark is only futile denial of being "down here in the world."

The dream of "Git Gud," of being a truly dedicated fan, tells you that if you work hard enough you can be invulnerable, infallible, unbreakable, and super-human. Any suggestion of vulnerability or imperfection is considered unfathomably, unrealistically bleak. Real gamers, real men, are always confident, never doubt themselves, aren't responsible for anyone else, and always succeed if they just work hard enough, right?

In a [recent interview with Krista Tippet](#), Pulitzer Prize-winning author and [super-nerd](#) Junot Díaz lamented exactly the way that these histories of racism and macho behaviors merge to create assumptions amongst men that any sign of doubt is a weakness; that any challenge can be met with violence; and that dominance is the only "realistic" view of how society works. But sadly, these rigid assumptions—used to protect us from the grimdark—instead blind us from the fullness of life. Instead of exiling unpleasant things from us, this stoicism severs us from meaningful relationships with other people.

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## **"When you look at the rules of traditional masculinity, it's all about creating an inhuman." - Junot Díaz**

Díaz reminded the audience that "certain kinds of... masculinity enshrines and, in some ways, super-valorizes the ideal of the invulnerable male subject. I mean that's a big part of what we would call hegemonic masculinity — that one is not vulnerable, that one is not penetrated, that one has a narrative where intimacy is not necessary. And when you look at the strictures, when you look at the rules of traditional masculinity, it's all about creating an inhuman."

All these places of weakness, failure, bad luck, self-doubt, historical oppression, or even personal uncertainty, have come to be seen as things that happen to "others:" women, people of color, LGBTQ communities, criminals, city-dwellers, the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the weak, the broken, the losers, the huddled masses. "Over there, maybe; to *them* probably," we say, "but not here, and definitely not in videogames, our rigidly defended micro-homeland-white-picket-castle."

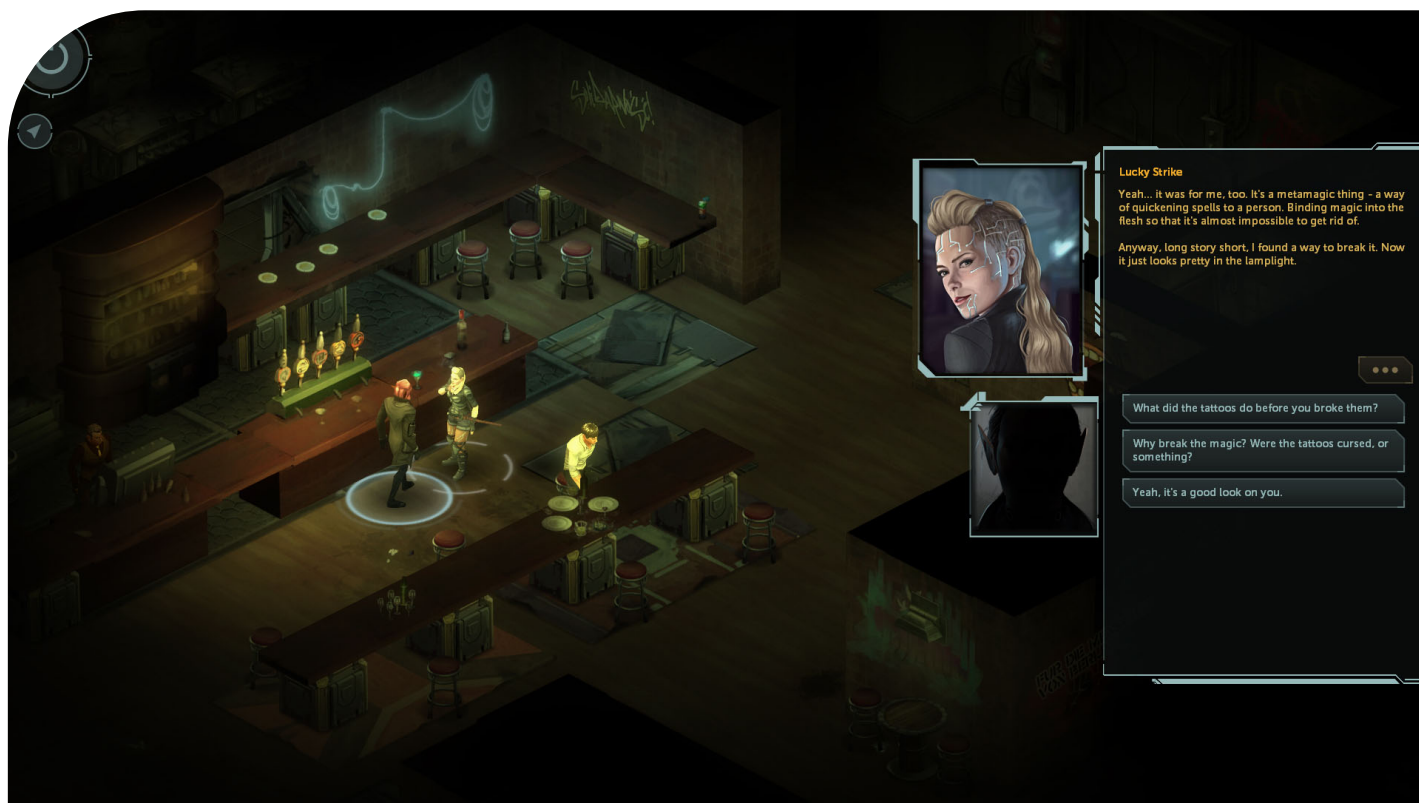


*Lord of the Rings: Shadow of War* (2017) fails to improve on Tolkien's racist allegory with the orcs and instead doubles down with some mind-control slavery.

This sort of attitude, this masculine, stoic, middle-class, white 'burbs' fear of the unknown, is where I come from. And it's so easy to slip back into this defensive crouch, living life primarily through avoidance of pain. After hiding, after preemptively withdrawing, after the silence and belligerent instance of control, what of the good things are left? The more we try to build a wall to protect ourselves, to protect videogames, from all that shadowland out there, the more it is also cutting itself off from our deep communal well of knowledge and experience, our celebrations and our wisdom, our rituals and the wonder of each other.

Now, there is a bevy of media that seems to relish the label of grimdark even as it claims to be a realistic alternative to parochial suburbia. A quick glance at the shelves will show that videogaming is full of wildly popular titles that tout their supposed dedication to gritty, gory, militaristic "realism." In these games, you inevitably play as some grizzled, weapon-wielding, *Dirty Harry* dad-type (in various paper doll costumes from cowboys to samurai to space marines) who sees the world in a bleakly monolithic way. This common, but curiously specific attempt to pass off nu-metal nihilism as realism takes its perhaps most-beloved form in the cult-classic *Fight Club*, where, as political provocateur and film-nerd Mark Fisher [has discussed](#), the only honest response to the ridiculousness of modern life is portrayed as "destroy something beautiful."

When you look at the increasing attempts to use "grimdark" to cordon off anything unpleasant on the suburban side, and the fetishizing of violent individualism as the sole "truth" below the illusion of the tract houses, you start to see something insidious: They are but two sides of the same coin. They even agree on the same image of "normal"—of the Dream—despite their superficially opposite reactions to it. The fear of the grimdark and the nihilistic embrace of it work together to monopolize our imaginations, and ultimately to train us to avoid vulnerability, to distrust each other, and to hide from the fullness of human life.



Technology in *Shadowrun* is not always great or useful.

Suffering, loss, and weirdly invasive technology are part of *Dragonfall*, but there are also moments of wonder, humor, catharsis, joy, and even growth. This combination of grief and renewal was what struck me as being so profound, so much like what I've seen in my own life. These characters' emotional struggles were so potent to me because I was invited to see the depths, weaknesses, and insights into their lives in a damaged, confusing, and possibly redemptive world.

Art (and yes, this includes videogames) has always been one of the main ways that I've been able to, even if temporarily, step past this tendency to avoid naming these unpleasant things as part of my life, and to instead a place to try to reconnect with the fullness of the world, with the unknowable wonder and sorrow of other people. The most powerful and long-lasting works of art are about building a space to explore the difficulty, the inscrutability of life, not to seek out easy answers. In fact, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, an artist whose works have by his own admission fallen on both side of the line between earnest and grimdark, [has recently said](#): "The experience of grappling with the thing is what makes it interesting, not the immediate gratification of going, 'Oh, that's what it means.'"

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I bring to art all the big questions, all the tiniest questions, the deeply personal questions, the fears, that send me searching. It's not like I am looking for answers. Indeed, good art rarely has direct answers. But I am looking for a place that can hold that complexity, the inevitable contradictions, the mysterious depth, of my questions. I come looking for neither for easy platitudes, nor for the art to pretend these things simply don't exist.

Defying grimdark-creep is why, on the sixth anniversary of my girlfriend's terrible accident, where I was in the car behind and had to see her wrecked body, had to help her through physical rehab to walk again (and still have days of real physical and emotional difficulty) I reach into my record collection for EMA's *Exile in the Outer Ring* and Jilk's *Joy in the End*, my bookshelf for Teju

Cole's *Known and Strange Things* and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Buried Giant*, the museum for Larry Sultan's *Coming Home* and Rachel Rossin's "Lossy".

And, yes, despite my impulse to seclude myself, I reach for games like *Banner Saga 2*, *Kentucky Route Zero*, and *Shadowrun: Dragonfall*. Here, within these works I can at least momentary attempts to reclaim the wholeness of beauty and trauma and boredom, and everything else in my life, grimdark-creep's warning klaxons be damned.

The shadow parts of our lives are just as much an important part of us as the daylight.

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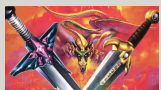
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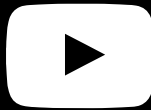
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