# Cards

by Daniel Brockman

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*Have you ever held something so small that*
*you forgot it was the whole world?*
—Anne Carson

The first time you step out of the Shrine of Resurrection in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the game does something extraordinary. It shows you the world and then it shuts up. The camera lifts over Link's shoulder and there is Hyrule—an impossible expanse of mountains and forests and ruins stretching to the horizon in every direction—and the game puts no marker on it.

No arrow. No blinking objective. No voice in your ear telling you where to go or what to do. Just the wind in the grass and a piano note that arrives and then

leaves, and you standing at the edge of a cliff with the rest of your life in front of you.

It is the single most beautiful moment in the history of video games, and it works because it trusts you. It trusts that the view is enough. It trusts that you will walk toward whatever interests you without being told to. It trusts that the world itself, if it is made with enough care and enough love, is its own reason for existing. You don't need a quest. You need a landscape that makes you want to be inside it. And Breath of the Wild is that landscape.

Everyone has a game like this. Everyone who grew up in the last forty years, which is almost everyone now, carries somewhere inside them a world that was not real but that felt real, a world they entered through a screen and left changed by. For some people it was the first time they ran across the bridge in the opening of *Super Mario Bros. 3* and realized the whole map was a stage, literally a theater set with curtains and bolted-down platforms, a game winking at you about the fact that it was a game. For some people it was *Ocarina of Time*, walking out of the Kokiri Forest into Hyrule Field for the first time and hearing that melody swell as the camera pulled back to show you how big the world was going to be. For some people it was *Super Mario 64*,

the moment you realized you could point the camera anywhere, that three-dimensional space was now yours to explore, that the rules had changed forever. For some people it was *Grand Theft Auto III*, the shock of a world that didn't care whether you followed the story or not, a world that existed on its own terms and let you be a tourist in its chaos.

And for some people it was *Super Mario Odyssey*, which is the game that proved, decades into the medium's history, that pure joy is a viable design philosophy. Every kingdom in Odyssey is a toy box built by people who never stopped thinking about what would make you smile. The game is not difficult. It is not dark. It is not trying to impress you with its maturity. It is trying to make you happy, and it succeeds so effortlessly that you forget how hard that is to do.

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There is something different about Nintendo, and it is worth saying what it is, because it matters for everything that comes after in this document.

Nintendo is meticulous in a way that borders on derangement. Their games feel different from other games not because of graphics or processing power or any of

the things the industry typically competes on, but because of an almost pathological attention to invisible details. The most famous example is their sound design. In many Nintendo games, the sound effects are not arbitrary. They are musically composed. The coin you collect, the enemy you stomp, the block you hit—these sounds are tuned to specific notes that harmonize with the background music playing at that moment. The game is, at every instant, a piece of music that you are playing by interacting with it, and the melody shifts and breathes in response to your actions. You would never notice this unless someone told you. That is the point. The care is not performed for your admiration. The care is there because the people who made the game believe, apparently on a cellular level, that every detail matters even if no one ever sees it, and that the accumulation of ten thousand invisible correct decisions is what produces the feeling people describe when they say a game feels right.

This is the standard. This is what it looks like when someone makes something as well as it can possibly be made. And it is the standard against which everything in this document should be measured.

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Poker is the oldest game that still matters. People have been sitting across from each other with cards in their hands for centuries, trying to read each other's faces, and the game has not fundamentally changed because it does not need to. The mathematics are settled. The hand rankings are settled. What is not settled, and what can never be settled, is the human being holding the cards.

This is why poker produces characters. Not players—characters. Phil Hellmuth, who has won more World Series of Poker bracelets than anyone alive, is famous not for his skill but for his eruptions. He screams at the table. He berates other players for making calls he considers beneath him. He storms away from his chair. He has been doing this for thirty years. And the question that makes Hellmuth endlessly interesting is one that nobody has ever conclusively answered: is this real? Is the anger genuine, or is the anger the game? Is the tantrum a loss of control, or is the tantrum the most controlled thing at the table—a calculated demolition of his opponent's composure disguised as a loss of his own? It is impossible to tell, and that impossibility is the whole point of poker. The game is not about cards. The cards are a pretext for a contest between human faces.

And yet the cards themselves, as objects, carry their own ancient weight. The suits, the court cards, the joker tucked somewhere in the box—these are some of the oldest continuously used graphic designs in the world. A deck of playing cards is a medieval artifact that has survived into the present nearly unmodified. When you hold a deck, you are holding something whose visual language predates the printing press, something that has passed through more human hands than almost any other manufactured object in history. The cards are not incidental to the game. The cards are why the game persists.

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In 1941, Jorge Luis Borges published a short story called "The Lottery in Babylon." It runs to about six pages. In those six pages, it contains an entire civilization.

The story describes a city where a lottery has gradually consumed every aspect of public life. What begins as a simple game of chance—buy a ticket, win a prize—evolves, through a series of logical escalations, into a system that governs all of reality. The lottery begins to assign punishments as well as rewards. Then it begins to operate in secret. Then the intervals between drawings become irregular. Then the drawings themselves

become indistinguishable from ordinary events. Eventually the narrator can no longer tell whether the lottery exists at all, or whether the idea of the lottery has simply become another name for the texture of existence—the fact that things happen, that some of them are good and some are bad, and that no one can say with certainty whether any of it is random or designed.

It is one of the most compressed pieces of literature ever written. Borges builds an entire metaphysics inside the structure of a game, and he does it in fewer words than most people use to write an email. The lottery in Babylon is not really about a lottery. It is about the human compulsion to find systems inside chaos, and the terrifying possibility that the system and the chaos might be the same thing.

This is what the best games do. They take a small set of rules and they let those rules interact until the interactions themselves become a world. The world is not designed. The world emerges. And the player, sitting inside the world, can never be entirely sure whether what just happened was intended by the designer or whether it arose from the system on its own, which is the same uncertainty that Borges is writing about, which is the same uncertainty that makes poker what

it is, which is the same uncertainty that makes life what it is. A good game is a small Babylon.

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There is a category of game that is not quite like any other, and it is called a roguelike. The name comes from a game called *Rogue*, written in 1980 for Unix terminals, in which the player explored a randomly generated dungeon represented entirely by ASCII characters. The walls were hyphens and pipes. The player was an at-sign. The monsters were letters of the alphabet. It was ugly in the way that only terminal software can be ugly, and it was beautiful in the way that only something made by people who cared more about the system than the surface could be beautiful. Every time you played, the dungeon was different. Every time you died, you started over with nothing. There was no saving. There was no going back. The game asked you to accept impermanence as a design principle, and in return it gave you something that no carefully authored game could give you: the feeling that what just happened had never happened before and would never happen again.

*Rogue* begat *NetHack*, which is one of the most extraordinary pieces of software ever written. Developed continuously from 1987 by a rotating collective of pro-

grammers, NetHack is a game of almost inconceivable depth. You can dip a sword in a fountain and it might become enchanted or it might release a demon. You can write on the floor in the dust with your finger. You can polymorph into a dragon, eat a ring that gives you teleportation, put on a blindfold and navigate by telepathy. The game has been in development for nearly forty years and it has never been finished, because the developers keep finding new interactions to add between the thousands of systems that already exist. It is the platonic ideal of emergent complexity: a small number of rules producing an effectively infinite space of possible experiences.

This is the lineage. *Rogue*, *NetHack*, *Spelunky*, *The Binding of Isaac*, *Slay the Spire*, *Hades*—a tradition of games that look simple and contain multitudes, games that trust the player to find the depth on their own, games where the richness is not in the graphics or the story but in the system, in the way the parts combine, in the surprise of discovering that two things you thought were separate are actually connected. This is the tradition from which the next game in this document emerges, and understanding the tradition is necessary for understanding why the game matters as much as it does.

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In February 2024, a game appeared on Steam. It was made by one person, a developer who goes by the name LocalThunk. It had no marketing budget. It had no publisher at launch. It had pixel art and a soundtrack commissioned from a freelance musician found on Fiverr. It was a card game about poker hands, which is one of the least promising pitches in the history of game development. It was called Balatro.

Within weeks, it had sold millions of copies. Within months, it had won Game of the Year at the Golden Joystick Awards and been nominated at The Game Awards, where its soundtrack was performed live by an orchestra and a keytarist who, by all accounts, went absolutely insane. It became the kind of game that people play on their phones in bed and then realize it is four in the morning. It became the kind of game that people describe to their friends with a glazed, evangelical look in their eyes, struggling to explain why a game about poker hands is the most addictive thing they have ever encountered. It became, for a certain kind of person—the kind of person who has always loved games but maybe drifted away from them for a while, the kind of person who finds most modern games too long and

too loud and too full of things that are not the game—it became the game they had been waiting for without knowing they were waiting for it.

Balatro is the game James Bond would be playing on an airplane. It has the cool of a casino and the depth of a mathematical proof and the compulsion of a slot machine, and it fits in your pocket, and it never ends.

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Here is how the game works.

You are dealt a hand of cards from a standard poker deck. You play poker hands—pairs, straights, flushes, full houses—and each hand scores a number of chips multiplied by a multiplier. The goal is to reach a target score before you run out of hands to play. If you make it, you advance to the next round, which has a higher target. Between rounds you visit a shop where you can buy Jokers, which are special cards that modify how your hands score. A Joker might double your multiplier whenever you play a flush. Another might give you extra chips for every face card. Another might retrigger the first card in your hand. The Jokers combine. They stack. They interact in ways that are not immediately obvious, and discovering those interactions—realizing that this Joker plus that Joker plus this specific hand

produces a score that is not merely good but astronomically, absurdly, cosmically large—is the core pleasure of the game.

But the genius of Balatro is that it doesn't stop at Jokers. The cards themselves can be modified. A card can be given an edition: Foil, which adds a flat multiplier bonus; Holographic, which adds more; Polychrome, which multiplies the multiplier itself. A card can be enhanced: turned to Glass, which has a chance of shattering after it scores but multiplies hugely; or Steel, which scores while sitting in your hand even if you don't play it; or Gold, which gives you money at the end of the round; or Stone, which scores a fixed amount regardless of its rank. A card can be sealed: Gold, Red, Blue, or Purple, each with its own effect, applied like a wax stamp on the card's face. The combinations are multiplicative. A single card can be a Polychrome Gold-sealed Steel King of Hearts, and every one of those properties matters, and every one of those properties interacts with every Joker in your lineup.

The result is a combinatorial space so vast that it approaches the functionally infinite, generated by a ruleset so simple that you can learn it in five minutes. This is the NetHack principle: small rules, immense depth.

And it is why people play Balatro for hundreds of hours and still encounter builds they have never seen before.

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The art is where the love is most visible.

Every card in Balatro is a small painting in pixel art, and every painting is considered. The Planet cards—there is one for each poker hand—display the planets of the solar system, and each card has a row of dots at the top indicating the planet's position from the sun. Mercury has the first dot highlighted. Venus the second. Earth the third. All the way out. But the Planet X card, which represents the five-of-a-kind hand, has no dot highlighted at all, because Planet X is a rogue planet, a body that belongs to no solar system, drifting alone through interstellar space. The Ceres card, representing a dwarf planet in the asteroid belt, has its dot positioned between Mars and Jupiter, exactly where the asteroid belt sits, and the artwork shows Ceres surrounded by tumbling rocks. Eris, another dwarf planet, has its dot placed beyond Pluto. You would never notice any of this unless you looked. That is the Nintendo principle at work.

The Jokers are where the art becomes obsessive. There are one hundred and fifty of them, and each

one is a character with a name and a face and a visual joke that relates to its mechanical effect. Brainstorm, which copies the leftmost Joker in your lineup, depicts a rough sketch on a napkin—someone brainstorming a new Joker—and the two leftmost bobbles on the joker's hat and the left eye are circled, because the card cares about leftmost things. Blueprint, which copies the Joker to its right, is drawn looking to the right. Cloud 9, which earns money for nines in your deck, shows a nine made of clouds, and if you count all the clouds on the card, there are nine of them. The Scholar Joker, which gives plus four mult and twenty chips for every ace played, rewards aces because scholars ace their tests, and the numbers four and twenty together make four-twenty, and aces can be low but more importantly in this case aces can also be high. Stuntman gives you minus two hands, because real stuntmen ride motorcycles with no hands. Every single Joker card in the game, without exception, has the word "Joker" written on it somewhere, even when the lettering is hidden—the To Do List Joker spells it out through the first letter of each item on the list.

And then there is the banana.

The Gros Michel Joker, when it appears, has a chance each round of being destroyed. When it is destroyed,

the game says "Extinct," and it is replaced by the Cavendish Joker. This is not arbitrary. The Gros Michel was a real banana cultivar, the dominant commercial banana of the early twentieth century, wiped out by a fungal disease called Fusarium Wilt. When the Gros Michel went extinct, the banana industry switched to the Cavendish, which is the banana you eat today. The game encodes this piece of agricultural history into a card mechanic. And it tells you nothing about it. You either know, or you look it up, or you never find out and it doesn't matter, because the mechanic works either way. The knowledge is a gift for the curious. This is how every detail in Balatro operates.

The Hanging Chad Joker, which retriggers the first card played in a hand, is named for the paper fragments left dangling from incompletely punched ballot cards during the 2000 United States presidential election, an event that forced multiple recounts. The card retriggers because the votes had to be counted again. The Ice Cream Joker, when its charges run out, says "Melted." The Popcorn Joker says "Eaten." The Seltzer Joker says "Drank." The Spare Trousers Joker gives a bonus for two pair, because having spare trousers means you have two pairs of pants.

The Legendary Jokers—the rarest tier—do not have the word "Joker" on them at all. Instead they bear the names of real historical jesters: Triboulet, jester to the French kings; Chicot, assassin and fool; Yorick, whose skull Hamlet held; Perkeo, court dwarf of Heidelberg; Caino. They became legends in their own right. Their names earned the right to stand where the word "Joker" would have gone.

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The sound design in Balatro deserves its own paragraph because it achieves something very rare: it makes a card game feel like a physical experience. Every card you select produces a click. Every card you play produces a snap. When a hand scores, the sounds escalate in intensity as the number climbs, creating an auditory arc that mirrors the mathematical arc of the score. If the score exceeds the target for the entire ante, flames appear over the numbers, and the sound shifts to match. The feedback loop between action and sound is so tight that the game becomes rhythmic, almost musical, and after a hundred hours of play the sounds are so deeply associated with the feeling of a good run that hearing them out of context produces a Pavlovian rush.

The soundtrack itself, composed by a freelance producer named Louis F who was found on Fiverr and contacted cold by LocalThunk, has become iconic in a way that indie game soundtracks almost never do. Fans have remixed it into jazz, disco, metal, orchestral arrangements. At The Game Awards 2024, the theme was performed live by a full orchestra, and the keytarist hit the main chord progression that every player recognizes and the audience lost their minds. A melody commissioned on a freelancing platform for what was then a one-person project with no budget, performed on a stage in front of millions. This is one of those stories that sounds invented but is not.

And then there is naneinf.

If you play Balatro long enough, and your build is powerful enough, and you enter Endless Mode—which appears after you win a run and lets you keep going to see how far your build can go—you will eventually push the score past the limits of what a computer can represent. The number E308 is approximately the largest value a standard double-precision floating-point variable can hold. Beyond that, the game does not crash. It does not freeze. It displays the text "naneinf," which stands for "not a number, infinity"—a computer error message that means the value has exceeded computa-

tion. LocalThunk never anticipated that players would reach this point. When they did, he chose not to fix the error. He left it in. It became a badge of honor in the Balatro community, a destination that dedicated players aim for, an accidental landmark that was intentionally preserved because it was more beautiful as a mystery than it would have been as a patch. This is the kind of decision that separates a developer who makes games from a developer who loves them.

LocalThunk has also stated publicly that Balatro will never contain microtransactions. His reason, in his own words, is that when he plays games that have them, it makes him want to put his computer in the dishwasher. He has a community of millions of players who would happily give him more money. He will not take it. The game is the game. Nothing more will be sold inside it. Nothing will be bolted on. The integrity of the object is not negotiable.

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So here is the idea.

We are going to build the physical version of every card in Balatro. Not a novelty deck. Not a promotional item. Not a Kickstarter reward tier. We are going to build the complete set, every card in every edition

in every enhancement state, printed on real card stock with real foil and real holographic diffraction and real metallic ink, with real wax seals that you peel and press onto the cards with your own hands, stored in a hand-finished hardwood case with felt-lined compartments, accompanied by a dedicated audio device that plays nothing but the ambient sound of the game through a single beautiful speaker in a matching wooden enclosure. Ten copies. No eleventh.

This is the kind of thing that sounds insane until you look at the specifics, and then it sounds merely very expensive and entirely achievable.

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The base deck is fifty-two standard playing cards in four suits, ace through king, each rendered in Balatro's pixel art. Each of these fifty-two cards appears in five editions: Base, Foil, Holographic, Polychrome, and Negative. Each also appears in nine enhancement states: unenhanced, Bonus, Mult, Wild, Glass, Steel, Stone, Gold, and Lucky. The combinations are multiplicative. Fifty-two times five times nine yields two thousand three hundred and forty unique playing cards.

The one hundred and fifty Jokers each appear in all five editions. That is seven hundred and fifty Joker cards.

The set also includes twenty-two Tarot cards, fifteen Planet cards including Planet X, Ceres, and Eris, eighteen Spectral cards—including the Black Hole card, whose edges are visibly warped inward because there is a black hole in the center pulling at the card's own geometry—thirty-two Vouchers including the Blank, which does nothing and costs ten dollars and must be bought ten times before it unlocks the Antimatter Voucher, which gives you an extra Joker slot and which is a beautiful metaphor for faith in the face of apparent futility, and approximately thirty Boss Blind cards.

The total is approximately three thousand two hundred unique cards per set. Times ten copies. Approximately thirty-two thousand cards printed.

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The editions are the soul of this project.

Base cards are printed on three-hundred-and-thirty-gram black-core card stock with a linen finish. The black core prevents light bleed and gives the card weight and snap. The linen texture reads as quality the instant your thumb crosses it.

Foil cards receive cold foil stamping across the full face. A thin layer of metallic foil transferred under pressure, producing a uniform reflective sheen—flat, bright, catching the light as a single flash, exactly as it appears in the game.

Holographic cards receive holographic foil overlay. A different material from cold foil. Holographic foil contains microscopic diffraction gratings that split white light into spectral components, producing the rainbow shimmer of a holographic trading card. The card shifts through colors as you tilt it.

Polychrome cards receive rainbow chromatic diffraction foil, which is distinct from standard holographic foil in that the chromatic pattern is broader, more saturated, and shifts through the full visible spectrum in larger bands. This is the most expensive treatment per card and the most visually dramatic. In the game, Polychrome is the rarest and most coveted edition. In the physical set it must be the most spectacular card to hold.

Negative cards are printed on translucent or semi-transparent card stock. The artwork is printed in inverted colors so that when held up to light the card glows. A ghost card. A card from the other side.

Each edition must feel different under the fingers. When you hold a Foil card and a Holographic card with your eyes closed, you should be able to tell them apart.

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The enhancements are where the project leaves sanity behind and enters something more interesting.

In the game, a Glass card shatters. A Steel card is indestructible. A Stone card scores regardless of rank. A Gold card earns money. These are abstractions—metaphors encoded as game mechanics. The question this project asks is: what if they weren't metaphors?

The Glass cards are made of glass. Not printed on card stock with a glossy finish. Actual glass. Each Glass card is a sheet of tempered borosilicate glass, laser-etched with the card's pixel art, the same dimensions as a standard poker card but slightly thicker, cool and smooth and heavy in the hand. When you set it down on a table it makes a sound that no card has ever made. It could, if you dropped it, shatter. Just like in the game.

The Steel cards are stainless steel. Each one is a thin sheet of brushed 316L stainless, chemically etched and filled with enamel ink to reproduce the card art. They are cold to the touch. They do not bend. They weigh

more than you expect. When you tap one against a table it rings.

The Stone cards are stone. Each is a thin tile of honed slate, the card art engraved and ink-filled on its surface. Slate is dense, matte, and rough under the thumb. It has the weight and presence of something pulled from the ground, which it was. The cards sit in the hand like artifacts.

The Gold cards are gold. Not gold-colored. Not gold foil. Each Gold card is a thin sheet of brass substrate electroplated with 24-karat gold to a thickness of at least 2.5 microns, which is the standard for gold-plated jewelry and ensures the surface will not wear through under handling. The card art is etched before plating so that the pixel-art design is rendered in relief beneath the gold surface. The edges are gilded. The card, held in any light, is unmistakably and literally gold. A single Gold card costs what an entire deck of ordinary cards costs. There are fifty-two of them in each set, one for each rank and suit, and they represent not only the most expensive enhancement but also, in a quiet way, an investment. Gold is gold. It does not depreciate. A deck of gold cards is not a collectible pretending to have value. It is a quantity of precious metal shaped like a game.

The remaining enhancements use printing techniques on standard card stock. Bonus cards receive a raised UV varnish border, a subtle ridge at the edge. Mult cards get spot UV gloss over the multiplier symbol. Wild cards are printed with chameleon color-shift ink that changes hue with viewing angle. Lucky cards have a thermochromic ink element that shifts color when warmed by your hand.

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The seals are separate.

This is the single most important design decision in the project, because in the game, seals are not found on cards. They are placed. You apply the seal. The physical set must preserve this interaction.

There are four seal types: Gold, Red, Blue, and Purple. Each is produced as a physical wax seal sticker, made from actual sealing wax pressed into a mold and mounted on an adhesive backing. The mold reproduces the exact pixel-art design from the game at a size that fits the card's lower margin. The wax is dyed to match: metallic gold, deep crimson, cobalt blue, royal purple.

Each set includes two hundred seal stickers, fifty of each color, stored in a velvet-lined compartment. To seal a card, you peel a sticker and press it onto the card's

surface. It adheres. It stays. The physical act of placing it is the closest anyone will ever come to the in-game experience of sealing a card with a Spectral.

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In 1981, the Roland Corporation released the TB-303 Bass Line synthesizer. It was designed to accompany solo guitarists by simulating a bass player. It was a commercial failure. Roland discontinued it within two years. You could find them in pawn shops for fifty dollars. Nobody wanted one.

Then, in the mid-1980s, musicians in Chicago and Detroit discovered that if you fed the 303's squelchy, resonant, acid-drenched tone through distortion and let the sequencer run, it produced a sound that did not resemble a bass guitar at all. It sounded like the future. It sounded like a machine dreaming. The TB-303 became the foundation of acid house, an entire genre of music born from the creative misuse of an instrument that had failed at its intended purpose. A 303 in good condition now sells for five thousand dollars or more. It is one of the most iconic electronic instruments ever made, not because of what it was designed to do but because of what people did with it instead.

This is the instrument we are rebuilding. Not as a replica. As a reinterpretation.

The Balatro Synthesizer is a fully functional analog monosynth in the lineage of the TB-303, housed in an enclosure of American black walnut and Portuguese cork. It has a single oscillator with sawtooth and square waveforms. It has a resonant low-pass filter with cutoff and resonance knobs. It has an envelope generator, an accent circuit, and a step sequencer. It has a built-in speaker—a three-inch full-range driver behind a cork front panel, the same Portuguese cork harvested from the bark of *Quercus suber* in the Alentejo region, whose cellular structure absorbs high-frequency harshness and produces a warm, natural tone. The enclosure is walnut from the same stock as the card case, finished with the same hand-rubbed tung oil. It is sealed and lightly damped with acoustic foam. Every knob is machined from solid brass with a knurled edge. It charges via USB-C.

The interface is the interface of a synthesizer. Knobs for cutoff, resonance, envelope decay, accent. Switches for waveform selection and sequencer control. A small grid of buttons for programming step sequences. It is, in every technical respect, a real instrument capable of producing real music.

But its default mode of operation is not music. Its default mode is Balatro.

The synthesizer ships preloaded with the game's audio layers stored in flash memory: the main theme, the card-shuffling sounds, the chip-clinking sounds, the ambient hum of the table. In its default configuration, the step sequencer is programmed to loop these layers, and the knobs control the mix. Turn up the filter cutoff and the theme brightens. Turn up the resonance and the card sounds take on an acid shimmer. Pull the decay down and the chips click tighter, faster. The game's soundscape becomes a live performance that you shape in real time with your hands on brass knobs, the way a DJ shapes a track, the way an acid house producer in 1987 shaped the output of a machine that was never meant to do what it was doing.

You can spend an evening adjusting the filter sweep on the Balatro theme until it sounds like it is being played through water, or through glass, or through a dream. You can isolate the card-shuffling layer and run it through the resonant filter until it becomes a rhythmic texture that sounds nothing like cards and everything like ambient music. You can turn every layer off and flip the synthesizer into its normal mode and play it as a straight analog monosynth, programming

acid basslines from scratch, because it is one. The 303 was designed to simulate a bass player and became the foundation of a musical revolution. This synthesizer is designed to play the ambient sounds of a card game and it can also do whatever else you want it to do. The lineage is precise.

The device has no Bluetooth. No internet. No app. No firmware updates. It does not connect to anything. It is a walnut-and-cork box with brass knobs and a speaker and a soul, and it sits next to your card case, and together they are the complete physical experience of Balatro: the cards in your hands and the sound in the air and nothing between you and either of them.

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The card case is American black walnut, chosen above all other hardwoods for reasons that are both practical and aesthetic. Walnut has a deep chocolate color that darkens over years of handling, meaning the case becomes more beautiful the more it is used. Its grain is tight and straight, which prevents warping in humid climates. It is hard enough to protect what is inside but soft enough to be worked with hand tools, allowing the kind of precise joinery that machine-cut wood cannot achieve. It smells, faintly and permanently, like the

forest it came from. The wood is sourced as quarter-sawn boards to minimize seasonal movement, and each case is cut from the same billet so that the grain flows continuously across the lid and the body, reading as a single piece of wood even when open. The lid is attached with concealed brass hinges and closes with a magnetic latch embedded in the wood. No visible hardware on the exterior. The interior is lined with charcoal grey felt—not adhesive-backed craft felt but proper baize, the same material used inside jewelry boxes and instrument cases—and divided by walnut dividers in precision-routed channels.

The compartments are organized by type. Playing cards by suit, then rank, then edition, then enhancement, in a consistent order so that any specific card can be located by position alone. Jokers in a deep compartment, alphabetical. Tarot, Planet, Spectral, Voucher, and Boss Blind cards in smaller compartments along one side. Wax seals in a velvet-lined drawer at the base, sorted by color. The synthesizer sits alongside the case, a companion object in matching wood and finish.

The exterior bears no text, no logo, no branding. An unmarked walnut box. The only identifying mark is a small pixel-art Joker face—the game's icon—inlaid in maple on the underside of the lid, visible only when

the case is open. Both objects are finished with hand-rubbed tung oil from the same walnut stock, reading as a single unified artifact.

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The production divides into five streams. Card printing: a specialty printer handles the thousands of standard card-stock cards across mixed finishes—foil stamping, holographic overlay, chromatic diffraction foil, translucent stock, chameleon ink, thermochromic ink, spot UV. The candidates are Shuffled Ink in Orlando, Expert Playing Card Company in Taiwan, and Cartamundi in Belgium, who print for Wizards of the Coast and Bicycle. Material cards: separate fabricators produce the glass, steel, stone, and gold cards. The glass cards are cut and laser-etched by a borosilicate glass workshop. The steel cards are chemically etched and enamel-filled by a metal fabrication shop. The stone cards are cut from slate by a stonemasonry or lapidary studio and engraved with a CNC router. The gold cards are etched in brass and electroplated by a precious-metal finishing house. Wax seals: a manufacturer produces four custom molds and presses two thousand stickers, five hundred per color. Woodwork and audio: a furniture maker produces ten walnut cases

from quarter-sawn billets with baize-lined interiors and precision-routed compartments. Separately, a synthesizer builder—there are small workshops that specialize in analog 303 clones—assembles ten Balatro Synthesizers using discrete analog circuitry in custom walnut-and-cork enclosures with machined brass hardware and preloaded audio layers.

The gold cards alone, at roughly fifty to seventy-five dollars per card for the plating and fabrication, account for twenty-six thousand to thirty-nine thousand dollars across ten sets. The glass, steel, and stone cards add another ten thousand to twenty thousand. Standard card printing with mixed foil finishes adds eight thousand to fifteen thousand. Cases, synthesizers, seals, and assembly add fifteen thousand to twenty-five thousand. Total estimated cost for ten complete sets: sixty thousand to one hundred thousand dollars.

This number sounds enormous until you remember that more than half of it is gold, and gold does not lose its value. You are not spending eighty-five thousand dollars. You are converting roughly forty thousand of it into a precious metal that happens to be shaped like playing cards. The rest is craftsmanship, materials, and the accumulated care of a dozen specialists who are very good at what they do.

Every technique described in this document exists today. Every material is real. Every process is proven. This is not a fantasy. It is a purchase order waiting to be placed.

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There is no version of this object anywhere in the world. LocalThunk has not produced it. Playstack has not licensed it. No merch operation has attempted it. Everyone who has ever loved this game has, at some point, wished that the cards were real. That the foil was foil. That the holographic shimmer was holographic. That the wax seals were wax. That wish has gone unanswered since February 2024, when the game was released and millions of people began carrying inside them a small, specific, physically unresolvable desire to hold these cards in their hands.

We are building it.

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Imagine it is your birthday. Someone you love hands you a box. It is heavier than you expect. It is walnut, dark and smooth, with no markings on it whatsoever. You don't know what it is. You open it.

Inside, nestled in charcoal felt, are cards. Thousands of them. You pick one up and it shimmers—actual holographic foil, the rainbow sliding across its face as you tilt it, exactly the way it does on the screen except this time you can feel it, the foil has a texture, it is cooler than the cards around it. You pick up another and it is heavy—impossibly heavy for a card—and then you realize it is gold. Actual gold. You hold it up to the light and it burns. You pick up another and it is glass, smooth and cold and translucent, and you can see your thumb through it. You pick up another and it is stone, rough like a riverbed, dense like a paperweight.

You find the Jokers. All one hundred and fifty of them. Brainstorm with its circled bobbles. Blueprint looking to the right. Cloud 9 with its nine clouds. The Gros Michel banana. The Hanging Chad. Yorick and Triboulet and Chicot and Perkeo and Caino, the legendary jesters, their real names where the word Joker would have been. Every one of them in Foil, in Holographic, in Polychrome, in Negative. Seven hundred and fifty Joker cards. You could spend an hour just looking at them.

You find a velvet drawer at the bottom. Inside, arranged in four rows by color, are wax seals. Real wax. You peel one—a gold seal, warm and slightly tacky—

and press it onto a card. It sticks. It is on. You have just sealed a card, and the feeling is exactly what you imagined it would feel like every time you did it in the game, except it is real, and the seal is real, and the card is in your hand and not on a screen.

And then you notice the other box. Smaller. Same walnut, same finish. Brass knobs across the top. A grid of buttons. A cork front panel. You have no idea what it is. You turn a knob and the room fills with the Balatro theme—not from a phone speaker, not from a laptop, but from this wooden box, warm and full and close, like the game is being played in the next room. You turn another knob and the sound shifts, the filter opening, the melody brightening. You find a switch and card sounds layer underneath—shuffling, snapping, the papery whisper of a deal. You turn the resonance up and the shuffling takes on a strange, beautiful, almost musical quality. You realize you are playing an instrument. You realize the instrument is playing the sounds of a card game. You realize it is also, somehow, an analog synthesizer, a real one, in the lineage of the Roland TB-303, housed in walnut and cork with brass knobs, and it is the most beautiful and the most unnecessary and the most perfect object you have ever touched.

You sit in a room full of the sound of Balatro with three thousand two hundred of its cards spread around you, some of them shimmering, some of them gold, some of them stone, some of them glass, and you understand that someone went and built the version of this game that the game itself always wanted to be.

There are ten of these in the world. You have one of them. No one will ever make another.