

## A World You Gave to Bug and Beast

The Mist loomed ahead as I looked through the eyes of the pale huntress, Hornet. Hidden behind a crumbling wall above the Sinner's Road on the outskirts of a ruined bug kingdom, I was enveloped in a thin haze, muted lights flickering in the background. Wistful notes from a distant organ echoed through the air, as vicious spikes and traps hung from wooden platforms, just beyond the edge of my vision. Clusters of glowing butterflies floated strewn about the room. The winding platforms and pathways seemed almost carelessly scattered, each room connected to yet another room with identical features, though arranged with just enough cohesion to keep enticing me inwards.

This was the first moment in this game that I had felt truly lost. As I wandered through the hazy landscape, a thought lingered. *Why was I even here?* I had barely two Masks of health left, my Silk had been drained by infested sewage water that still dripped from Hornet's shell. I had just been fighting through another completely new area, wandering around without having encountered a checkpoint at a Bench for at least half an hour. But after almost a week of playing through linear exploration, this was something *completely* new.

Something straight out of a supernatural thriller, something that I'd never seen in any trailers or demo clips of the game and something that my friends, who

at this point had all progressed further through the game than me, had not even encountered.

So, I went further in. And immediately there was a piercing screech as a ghostly apparition swooped in from beyond the fog at the edges of the screen, grabbed Hornet and ripped her to shreds. What the fuck.

I didn't go back into the Mist for some time. I had respawned quite far from the Sinner's Road, and the more linear path was right there before me. The lore of the mythical Citadel proclaimed that only the most Holy would be permitted entry by the Last Judge, and so I decided to head over and prove myself. I spent the rest of the afternoon dying in trial by combat against the Judge, who had decided that they disapproved of my lack of piety. Though once I had defeated the Judge and cleared the way to the Citadel, I stopped before the Grand Gate. The Mist still occupied my mind, a giant question mark that refused to leave me alone. Fine then. I buried memories pain and frustration from my last experience in that area and headed back.

I set aside my immediate instinct to scour across online forums to see whether anyone else had encountered this Mist area and decided to conduct a quick experiment myself. Making sure to grab a checkpoint along the way, a Bench inside the Sinner's Road (which I had conveniently missed last time), then I was back, but this time, armed with a compass. Noting my position on my map

(just next to the entrance to the Mist), I traversed the spaced platforms and spikes to the next room. Then the next. I checked the map again and the marker showed my position, still *right next to* the entrance.

Intrigue tightened its grasp upon my psyche as I was gripped with an impulse far stronger than the idle curiosity that had compelled me to find out if this game could compare to its predecessor. This time, I took care to give the apparitions a wide berth, so long as I kept my distance, I hoped they would remain asleep. My platforming was slow, careful and methodical. The further I progressed the more I could feel the secret hidden just beyond the fog. But there was a bit of a problem. The Mist was a randomly generated maze. My compass experiment had all but confirmed that. So there *had* to be some other way to progress, right?

This was something that had bugged me from the beginning of the game. So far, I had encountered so many dead ends, secret areas with pitiful rewards, trapped and fake Benches. For a small indie studio that was known for rewarding their players' curiosities, Team Cherry now almost seemed to be making fun of their audience, mocking their drive to explore. Was the Mist any different?

I did have one final tool to try out though. Having recently acquired Hornet's Needolin, was now equipped with the ability to play music. I thought of it as

the “secret button”, since its entire purpose was to unlock doors and reveal hidden details in rooms that were empty, but for thin strands of silk which hinted that *something* was there. Ok, then what hint did I need to use the secret button on? Not the traps or platforms. Not the apparitions. Yes, I *did* try to play them music. You can probably guess what happened there. No, I needed something unique to the Mist, but subtle enough that it might pass as a decoration or background object. Well...

I used Hornet’s secret button beside those pale butterflies which flitted the room, and they immediately took off, all drifting to one specific exit. *Wait that’s genius. That’s actually genius.* I was honestly surprised at just how quickly I had figured out the Mist, especially knowing in hindsight how much many people struggled with the puzzle. As I travelled through room after room, echoes from the organ grew in intensity and more apparitions began to materialise to obstruct my progression. I sighed internally, though at least this confirmed that I was getting closer to whatever lay hidden in the Mist. The fog soon began to thin out, as the trail of butterflies ended in a maggot ridden swamp, and a building embellished with massive organ pipes at its centre. A glowing door beckoned me inside. I climbed into the heart of the Exhaust Organ, where a frail figure made of silk and thread was waiting, seated before the keys as they played the same mournful melody that I had been hearing all throughout the Mist.

They froze as I entered the room. Organ music blared as a dramatic reprise of the Mist soundtrack began to play. With a screen-wide pillar of smoke the figure vanished from their seat and materialised into the foreground to challenge me with a worn longpin in hand, the *Phantom*.

Honestly, an incredibly difficult boss fight at the end of a gruelling track though the most secretive area in the game. And yes, you're right, this whole area was definitely an unsubtle Phantom of the Opera reference. But it was quite a good one.

It was at this exact moment that I was finally able to understand, what Team Cherry wanted this game to be. Because I didn't care, that yet another challenge stood before me, that I wasn't handed something shiny for my efforts. I had made it to the Exhaust Organ, despite every apparition and pool of infested water, despite the path to the Citadel clearly marked out on the opposite side of the map.

Past the Phantom was a second entrance into the Citadel, completely skipping past the Last Judge. Team Cherry had given me an opportunity to do something different, to make a choice and stray off the beaten path, to change the narrative set out before me. *Hollow Knight: Silksong* made me fight for every inch of progress, but by design, it was my own desire to keep going that pushed me forward. Hornet and I were no longer simply exploring the fallen

kingdom of Pharloom, we now held the power to enact change, and the choice we were given between these two paths to reach the Citadel was only the first part.

*Hollow Knight* was released on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, 2017 by small indie studio Team Cherry as their very first game after years of development and kickstarter backing. In early 2022, I saw the game mentioned on a video essay, picked it up and set out to explore the ruined bug kingdom of Hallownest. Then I promptly got lost, confused and abandoned the game. Then two years earlier I returned with a working brain and a more dedicated gaming mindset, approaching the game not on somebody else's recommendation, but because I had grown curious and wondered what I had missed after giving up so easily. What I found, after exploring past the starting area, was a beautifully hand-drawn world, built to create a pervasive atmosphere of sorrow and loss such that Team Cherry could reveal the tragic history of the universe that they had created. As I explored the world through the eyes of the Knight, the Hallownest slowly revealed how it had fallen into destruction and explored the Knight's own identity and their connection to past events. Diving further into the cavernous paths that wound below the kingdom I reached the Abyss below, where the ghastly sight of thousands of bug corpses revealed the tragic history of the Knight's conception, accompanied by words of the deceased monarch of

Hallownest: “No cost too great”. But there was a hopeful undertone to this newly acquired knowledge. The titular “Hollow Knight” was a failed attempt to contain a vengeful deity that had ravaged the lands of Hallownest, and as one of the Hollow Knight’s siblings, I had the power to finish the job, to finally destroy the deity that plagued these lands. Though even after succeeding in doing so, as the credits rolled something just felt wrong. And that feeling of “wrongness” stuck with me for a long time. Never addressed, never affecting my overall love for the narrative, but always there, nonetheless.

Almost two years after *Hollow Knight*’s release, on February 14<sup>th</sup>, Team Cherry announced a sequel, *Hollow Knight: Silksong*, and in just a few months, the studio already had a live demo of the first area within Silksong, receiving mountains of praise from Hollow Knight fans and game critics alike.

Then radio silence. For the next seven years, aside from occasional announcements confirming that the game was still in development by people tangentially connected to Team Cherry, marketing managers, reddit moderators, we heard nothing from the studio. No communication, no updates. Of course, this provided the perfect environment for endless speculation and an overwhelming tide of misinformation.

Around the time I had played the original game the Hollow Knight community was still thriving, with a number of prominent content creators, speedrunners,

streamers and modders that kept plenty of attention on the game. Though most of the hype and theorising for Silksong had died down at this point. In place of speculation, Hollow Knight fans had collectively decided to spread misinformation all over fan forums, making ironic posts where they role-played as though the game had already released or posting blatantly fabricated updates from Team Cherry. Six years into the seven year long wait, and it seemed that we had all just accepted Silksong as an elaborate abstract joke. As far as I was concerned, if there was no release date, the game wasn't real. Yet at the same time I would consistently keep up to date with each new obscure theory or minimal announcement, before dismissing them as inconsequential. For the next year the idea of Silksong loomed as a spectre, haunting the fringes of my mind, briefly surfacing whenever the YouTube channel, Daily Silksong News released a video that said anything other than "No news", or the barest whisper of the game was mentioned during at Nintendo Gamescom.

Earlier this year I casually brought up my excitement towards Silksong to my Amma. "Why do you care?" she asked me.

Apparently, she never felt hyped up for anything. To her, either a piece of media came out or it didn't, either she bought something she wanted, or she didn't, and it was never a big deal as to whether she had that thing or not. I suppose that the idea of belonging to a fandom, of micro communities built



specifically around media, even unreleased media would be strange to her, with her childhood having not coincided with the age of the internet.

But it was a bit of a perplexing question. Why did I, or anyone, care about Hollow Knight? It was a game about bugs, (mostly) politically innocuous, and yet the entire online fanbase was consistently and aggressively progressive. And why did I care so much about its sequel? Was I hoping for something just like the original? Then why not just replay original game? Though there had always been something incomplete about Hollow Knight, something wrong that I had felt instinctually on my very first playthrough. Maybe I was hoping secretly, that Silksong would somehow build upon the original game, and even fix whatever that flaw was. Quite the monumental task for a dev team of two people.

Then Team Cherry announced on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August, 2025, that the game would release in two weeks. Abruptly, out of nowhere, completely unprompted. By this point, knowledge of the game had reached far beyond the Hollow Knight community. The entire indie community lost their minds. As of this announcement, 5 million users had wish listed Silksong on Steam, the largest of any game at that time, and expectations for the game had grown beyond monstrous proportions. Even my younger sister, a complete non-gamer had heard about Silksong through one of her friends before I had ever brought

it up. With the release date announcement, I immediately hopped on voice call with my friends. We couldn't believe it. Two weeks.

The Steam store crashed on the night of Silksong's release. Two weeks and one day for me, I guess. The next day I booted up the game. A poem from the Conductor Romino about "Pharloom's Folly". Then we see Hornet, half sibling to the Knight bound in a cage of runes as she is carried towards the Citadel. A butterfly flitters nearby and lands upon the cage, as the choir of the Citadel begin to cross a bridge. Strands of silk twist across the cage and it bursts open, killing the Hornet's captors, though sending her falling to the depths of Pharloom. Then from here onwards as we climb out from the Moss Grotto from where we landed, the game left me with a singular goal. To reach the Citadel at the peak of the kingdom and discover who had sent the order to have Hornet brought to Pharloom. Immediately the online discourse began. The game was too hard, the game was too linear. Regular enemies in Pharloom hit twice as hard as those in Hallownest. The early part of Silksong felt to numerous others almost as though they were just progressing through new area after new area, without getting any closer to understanding who the Choir or the Citadel were. And I found myself agreeing with these complaints, though I never said so in public.

It was after exploring the Mist, upon reaching the Exhaust Organ that I began to realise my own folly. So many of us had been powering through the beginning of the game, overly eager for more “content” without realising that in the process we had skipped all the “content”. Silksong held a plethora of secrets for those willing to listen. There were strands of silk which sometimes snapped around enemies, as though ensnaring them, such that I began to question the agency of those choirbugs. Tablets and signposts littered about the lower levels of Pharloom, commanding the “devout” to mindlessly carry out their duties as an expression of devotion to *her*. There were the polluted backwaters of the Mist and Sinners Road, which collected all of the Citadel’s choking refuse, and the capitalist hellscape of the Underworks, where workers maintained the supporting machinery of the Citadel under slave labour conditions. Every detail, every feature of the world and environment added a new piece to the central question of the gleaming Citadel above, and every millimetre of progression had to be fought for, every secret earned. Team Cherry wasn’t giving a thing away for free. And though I didn’t know at the time, every side quest and favour that I completed, each effort I made to explore and understand Pharloom, rather than rush to the Citadel took me closer to its saving.

Once I had reached the Citadel, after defeating the Phantom, the game began to spoon feed the bigger secrets. I learnt about the higher being above the Citadel, who now having woken from a long slumber and shaken by her children, the Weavers' betrayal. And she had enslaved the bugs of Pharloom with her strings. The Citadel now lay bare, its secrets revealing a system of cruelty and oppression. Bugs across Pharloom were fed religious lies and enticed by the Weavers to join a song that would keep their mother asleep, such that they could rule Pharloom themselves. The Weavers' wealth and excess however came at a price. I explored the infested Bilewater with its melancholy piano music, its residents ambushing me with guerrilla tactics and tablets which proclaimed, "unending hatred for the Citadel". And I had already seen the costs paid by the choirbugs and underworkers below. Was this what I was fighting to save? Perhaps the higher being was right to have destroyed the weavers. Perhaps Hornet with her own Weaver heritage was complicit.

But I could not follow this line of thinking for so long. Through my exploration of Pharloom I had travelled through small towns and communities, havens of peace built amongst the chaos. These bugs were victims of the higher monarch above, and the Weavers before her. A different Hornet could have ignored their stories, their lives, as she rushed to challenge the monarch and take her place, maintaining the cycle of oppression while changing its face. But I had spent time getting to know them, Sherma the little pilgrim, Shakra the warrior

cartographer. Through every character I interacted with, Hornet's emotional relationship with this kingdom changed, she began to concoct a plan to free Pharloom for good.

Hornet calls upon the Void that lay below all things, to destroy the pale monarch. And fails horribly. Following their clash, the monarch lay dying within Pharloom's own Abyss, but at the same time threatening to destroy her kingdom along with her. But Hornet made a decision which finally helped me understand where Hollow Knight had failed. Hornet would dive below the abyss and end things once and for all. The king of Hallownest was wrong. There *was* a cost too great. Neither Hornet nor I would let things stand, would allow Pharloom to be the "cost" for the pale monarch's ending.

The first game had never given us this option. Yes, I had freed Hallownest from its own higher being, but I had not freed it *for* anyone. The Knight died in the conflict, and Hallownest had barely any survivors to pick up the pieces in its aftermath. The ending of the game is as tragic and empty as it's beginning.

At the end of Hollow Knight: Silksong, as Hornet confronts the Void given form, I remember that it was through my actions and choices that I reached this point, that I caused Hornet to grow into a hero for Pharloom, rather than its next monarch. What I do matters. And all it took was a silly game about bugs to remind me of that.