

Plot is Dumb, Character is Cool: Writing for DLC

Anthony Burch

GDC 2015 Narrative Summit

Sup

- I was a writer at Gearbox Software (I'm currently at RocketJump)
- I was lead writer of Borderlands 2 and its DLC
- Did writing on Borderlands the Pre-Sequel
- I can do 20 pushups before I start crying



DEATH TO THE THREE-ACT STRUCTURE!



**TOWARD A UNIQUE STRUCTURE FOR GAME
NARRATIVES**

Tom Abernathy
Narrative Lead
Riot Games
@tomabernathy

Richard Rouse III
Design Lead
Microsoft Game Studios
@richardrouseiii

Plot vs Character

- Players **remember** character more than plot

Plot vs Character

- Players **remember** character more than plot
- Players **like** character more than plot

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Plot vs Character

- Players **remember** character more than plot
- Players **like** character more than plot
- Focusing on character over plot in DLC can make you **more money**

(It's also more fun and creatively satisfying, but don't tell the suits that. Just mention the money thing.)





DLC

ULTIMATE VAULT HUNTER BORDERLANDS 2 UPGRADE PACK TWO: DIGISTRUCT PEAK CHALLENGE



BORDERLANDS 2

SEASON PASS



INCLUDES
FOUR
CAMPAIGN
ADD-ONS
PLUS LEVEL
CAP INCREASE!

Stuff Fans Want from DLC

- Expand the story!
- Expand the universe!
- Answer big questions about lore!

Stuff That's Stupidly Hard to Do in DLC

- Expand the story!
- Expand the universe!
- Answer big questions about lore!

Big Plot Stuff Is Hard Because:

- Requires lots of new art
- Requires new gameplay
- Gotta make big decisions about your universe really quickly
- What if you wanna save this stuff for a full sequel?

Big Important Plot DLCs are not
generally feasible



The Plot:

- Find an ancient treasure!
- Defeat a mystical leviathan!
- Sand pirates!
- Betrayals!

Forum Reactions

- “Eh, not bad”
- “Just feels like a side story”



[See the trailer](#)

81

Metascore

Generally favorable reviews
based on [13 Critics](#)

[What's this?](#)

Summary: In Captain Scarlett and her Pirate's Booty, up to four players cooperatively enter the hostile sand dunes and wastelands of Pirate Bay in search of ancient treasures. The add-on content campaign features new characters, including the eccentric and eager Shade; locations such as the town of... [Expand ▾](#)

7.7

User Score

Generally favorable reviews
based on [45 Ratings](#)

Your Score



Developer: Gearbox Software

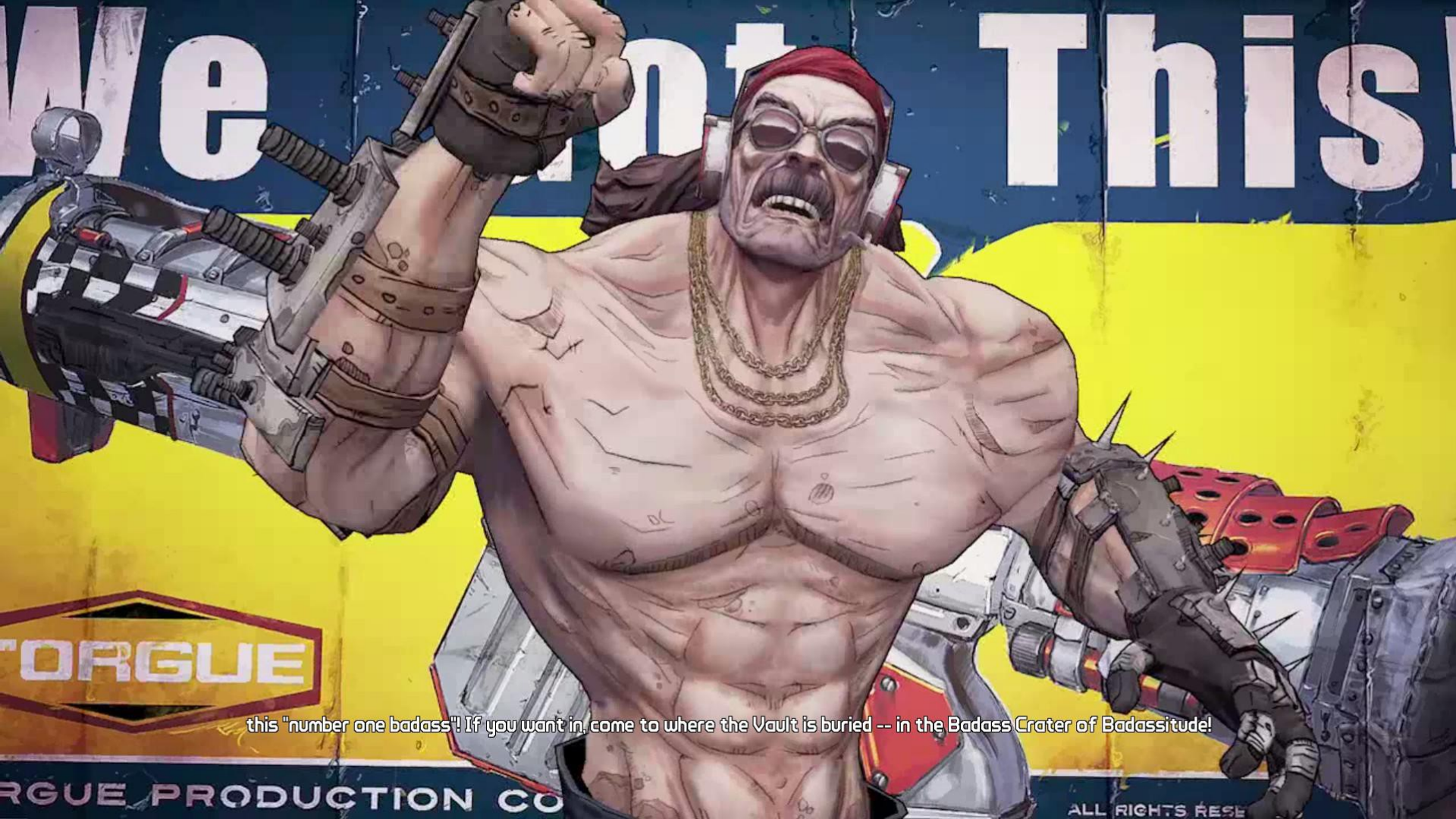
Genre(s): Sci-Fi

Cheats: [On GameFAQs](#)

Rating: M

[More Details and Credits »](#)

We Not This!



TORGUE

this "number one badass"! If you want in, come to where the Vault is buried -- in the Badass Crater of Badassitude!

TORGUE PRODUCTION CO

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Lore Nuggets!

- Vaults can be deciphered!
- Sometimes they spawn actual loot!
- Vaults open in different ways!

Forum Reactions

- People seemed to dig it
- Nobody mentioned the lore stuff, though...



[See the trailer](#)

83

Metascore

Generally favorable reviews
based on [10 Critics](#)

[What's this?](#)

Summary: Come into Mr. Torgue's Campaign of Carnage and see if you have what it takes to become champion of this brand new storyline in Borderlands 2. Fight for the Big Loot against some of the baddest baddies in Pandora, including hordes of Biker Bandits. Also, take special quests from Tiny Tina,... [Expand ▾](#)

8.2

User Score

Generally favorable reviews
based on [46 Ratings](#)

Your Score



0

Developer: Gearbox Software

Genre(s): Sci-Fi

Cheats: [On GameFAQs](#)

Rating: M

[More Details and Credits »](#)



MORE Lore Nuggets!

- The sort-of resurrection of Handsome Jack!
- Cloning!
- An evil Hyperion scientist!
- Claptrap nearly makes a friend!



[See the trailer](#)

72

Metascore

Mixed or average reviews
based on [10 Critics](#)

[What's this?](#)

Summary: In Sir Hammerlock's Big Game Hunt players enter an uncharted territory deep in the swamps of Pandora where a very large Hyperion ship has crashed. The wreckage is believed to have stockpiles of loot. But watch yourself because mutated creatures, and armies of savages also had their interest... [Expand ▼](#)

6.1

User Score

Mixed or average reviews
based on [35 Ratings](#)

Your Score



Developer: Gearbox Software

Genre(s): Sci-Fi

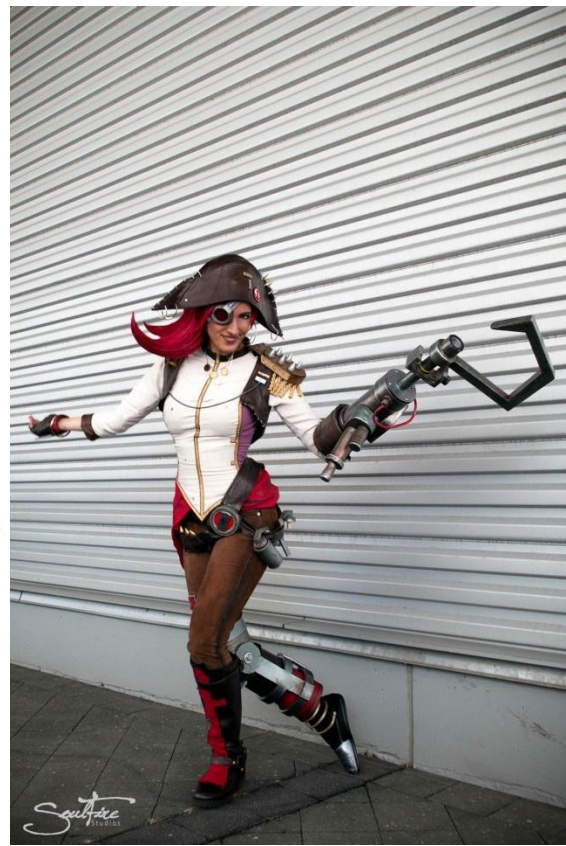
Cheats: [On GameFAQs](#)

Rating: M

[More Details and Credits »](#)







What if we doubled down on
character?



TINY TINA'S
ASSAULT ON
DRAGON KEEP



Dwarven Allies
Head to dwarven mines: ☐

30 Skeleton



4923

2325

LV 32 Veteran

3 / 3

27 / 249



The Plot:

- Tina, Brick, Lilith and Mordecai play a game of Bunkers & Badasses.

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- That's it

The Plot:

- Tina, Brick, Lilith and Mordecai play a game of Bunkers & Badasses.
- That's it
- (Also, interpersonal conflict about reality vs fantasy in regards to accepting death)

No:

- Big enemy to defeat

No:

- Big enemy to defeat
- Advances in overall world lore

No:

- Big enemy to defeat
- Advances in overall world lore
- Plot questions answered

No:

- Big enemy to defeat
- Advances in overall world lore
- Plot questions answered
- Danger for any character at any time whatsoever

THIS WAS SCARY

“FAKE GEEK GUY”

(fake geek guy clip)

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTSq4SfjTbo>

NOT epic, NOT important

THEY LIKED IT



daxnfitzy1234 1 year ago • LINKED COMMENT

When Tina hugged the statue I cried a little



Hermit King 1 year ago in reply to daxnfitzy1234

Only a little? I was crying like a baby at that point.



TBHxK1NG 1 year ago

Cried at the end



Sean Schafer 1 year ago in reply to Jonlaw98

Just want to point out you missed a Legendary Grenade mod. Can be seen at 11:35.

as the Queen

BUTTSTALLION



No “epic” plot, but it had character
arcs and stuff

Borderlands 2: Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon Keep Xbox 360

2K Games | Release Date: Jun 25, 2013 | Also On: [PC](#), [PlayStation 3](#)

 Tweet

3

Summary

Critic Reviews

User Reviews

Details & Credits

Trailers & Videos



[See the trailer](#)

86

Metascore

Generally favorable reviews
based on [17 Critics](#)

[What's this?](#)

Summary: Wizards and Crumpets, oh my! Join vault hunters, old and new, in Tiny Tina's epic quest of revenge and redemption. Tiny Tina's Assault on Dragon Keep, the biggest add-on content in Borderlands history, features a game within a game, as Tiny Tina takes on the role of Bunker Master in a game... [Expand ▾](#)

8.3

User Score

Generally favorable reviews
based on [96 Ratings](#)

Your Score



0

Developer: Gearbox Software

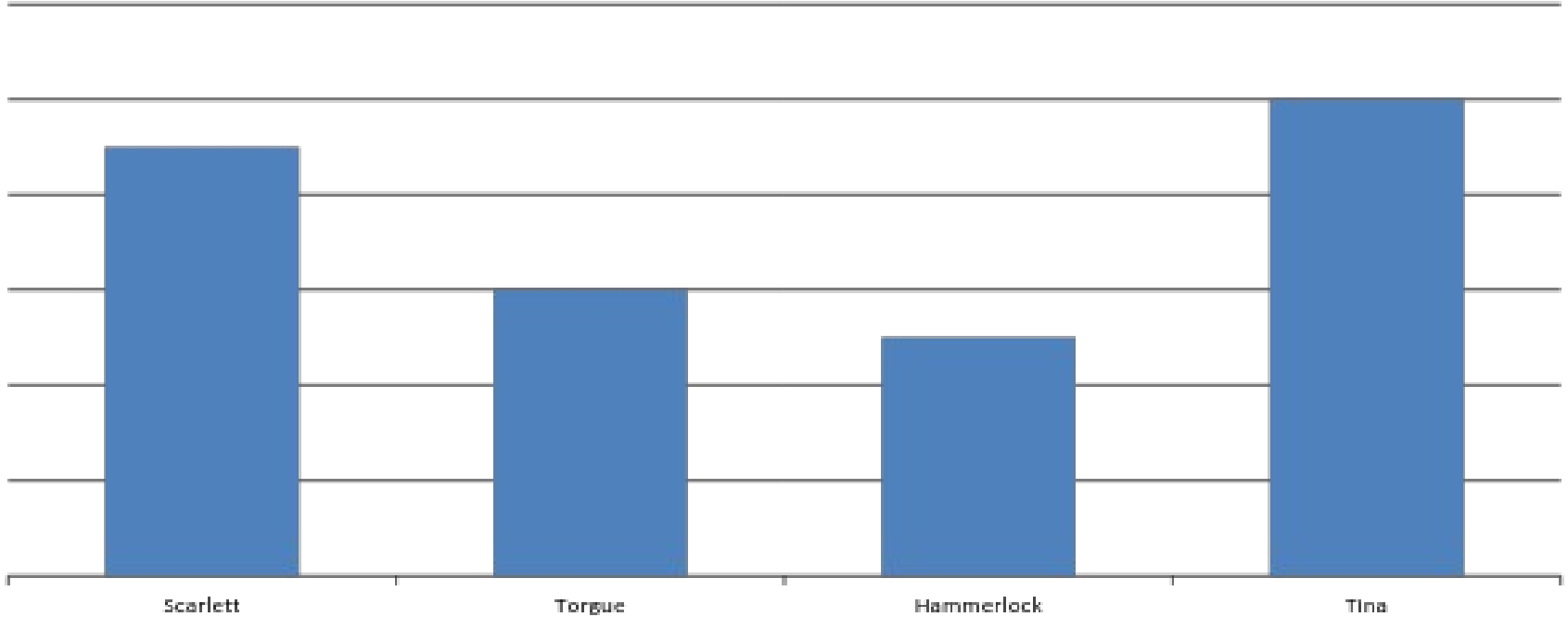
Genre(s): Sci-Fi

Cheats: [On GameFAQs](#)

Rating: M

[More Details and Credits »](#)

Comparative Sales



THIS IS SO STUPID





THE THINKER
KNOWS





MASS EFFECT 3



“Once the fight was over, the real fun began: planning, hosting, and enjoying a party. The action satisfied, but the chance to rekindle old romances, gain closure, and let Shepard’s hair down with the crew he had built was too good to pass up.” – gamerant.com

IN OTHER WORDS

- Yeah, cool, secret experiments and murder

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- Yeah, cool, secret experiments and murder
- ***When do I get to decide what kind of music will play at my house party***

IN OTHER WORDS

- Yeah, cool, secret experiments and murder
- ***When do I get to decide what kind of music will play at my house party***
- Do I get to invite anyone?

IN OTHER WORDS

- Yeah, cool, secret experiments and murder
- ***When do I get to decide what kind of music will play at my house party***
- Do I get to invite anyone?
- Can I NOT invite some people?



- FUCK you Miranda



- FUCK you Miranda
- You're PRETENTIOUS



The Party

- SUPER well-written
- Focuses on CHARACTERS we love
- It's DIFFERENT

Generally, AAA games don't try small-scale character stuff





Salvador
15 Titan



Salvador



424

+ 500

LV 15 Veteran

3 / 3

15 / 265



Sir Hammerlock vs The Son of Crawmerax

- Small
- Ultimately irrelevant (in a good way)
- Character-focused

DLC is Less Restricting than Proper Games

- Epic, Important stuff goes in main game

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DLC is Less Restricting than Proper Games

- Epic, Important stuff goes in main game
- DLC audience already likes your stuff
- You can be weirder and kookier
- Kooky stuff is super fun to create

34 Prince Jeffrey



Winter is a Bloody Business
Defeat Jeffrey: ☐



194139

+ 147234

LV 61 Legendary Berserker

4 / 8

175 / 410



Winter is a Bloody Business
TURN IN!

I say, did you hear the lewd rumors about lady Everly? Apparently, she touched a foreign diplomat directly on his wing-wong.

194139

147234

LV 61 Legendary Berserker

4 / 8

289 / 400

This was really silly...

This was really silly...

...but it didn't require drastically more
assets than something "serious"...

This was really silly...

...but it didn't require drastically more assets than something "serious"...

...and it still gave the player a reason to shoot stuff

Shooter Gameplay!

Shooter Gameplay!

- Kill a thing

Shooter Gameplay!

- Kill a thing
- Defend a thing

Shooter Gameplay!

- Kill a thing
- Defend a thing
- Press “use” on a thing

Shooter Story!

- Why do I care about killing a thing
- Why do I care about defending a thing
- Why do I care about pressing “use” on a thing

TURN ON THE
GENERATOR

Mechanical Justifications

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- Energy shield needs power to defend from a mortar attack

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- Must power electric fences to keep baddies out

Mechanical Justifications

- Energy shield needs power to defend from a mortar attack
- Must power electric fences to keep baddies out
- A powered door on the critical path will only open once power is on

Character Justifications

Character Justifications

- A soldier wants to listen to their fav radio show because the DJ sounds like her dead ex-husband

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Character Justifications

- A soldier wants to listen to their fav radio show because the DJ sounds like her dead ex-husband
- The other rebels think this facility lost; turning the lights on will create hope
- Your badass friend is scared of the dark

Turn On The Generator Because Character Reasons

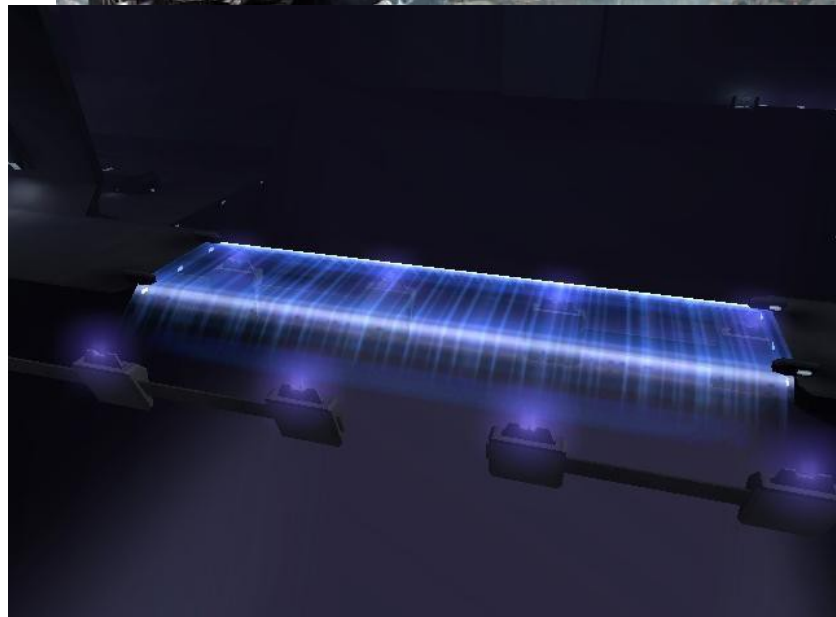
- Not necessarily better, but equally functional

Turn On The Generator Because Character Reasons

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- Gives you more to work with as a writer

Turn On The Generator Because Character Reasons

- Not necessarily better, but equally functional
- Gives you more to work with as a writer
- Can surprise player





This is not an
all-or-nothing proposition.

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all-or-nothing proposition.

Character can spice anything up.

Mechanical Justifications

- Energy shield needs power to defend from a mortar attack
- Must power electric fences to keep baddies out
- A powered door on the critical path will only open once power is on

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- Energy shield needs power to defend from a mortar attack
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Dave




N

The Overlooked: Medicine Man
Repair dispensary: ☐

Goddamnit, some jackhole broke the clock tower! How the HELL am I supposed to know what time it is, now?!



846



1604



LV 20 Front Line Engineer

5 / 6

9 / 391

[OVERLOOK VIDEO]

TURN ON THE
GENERATOR



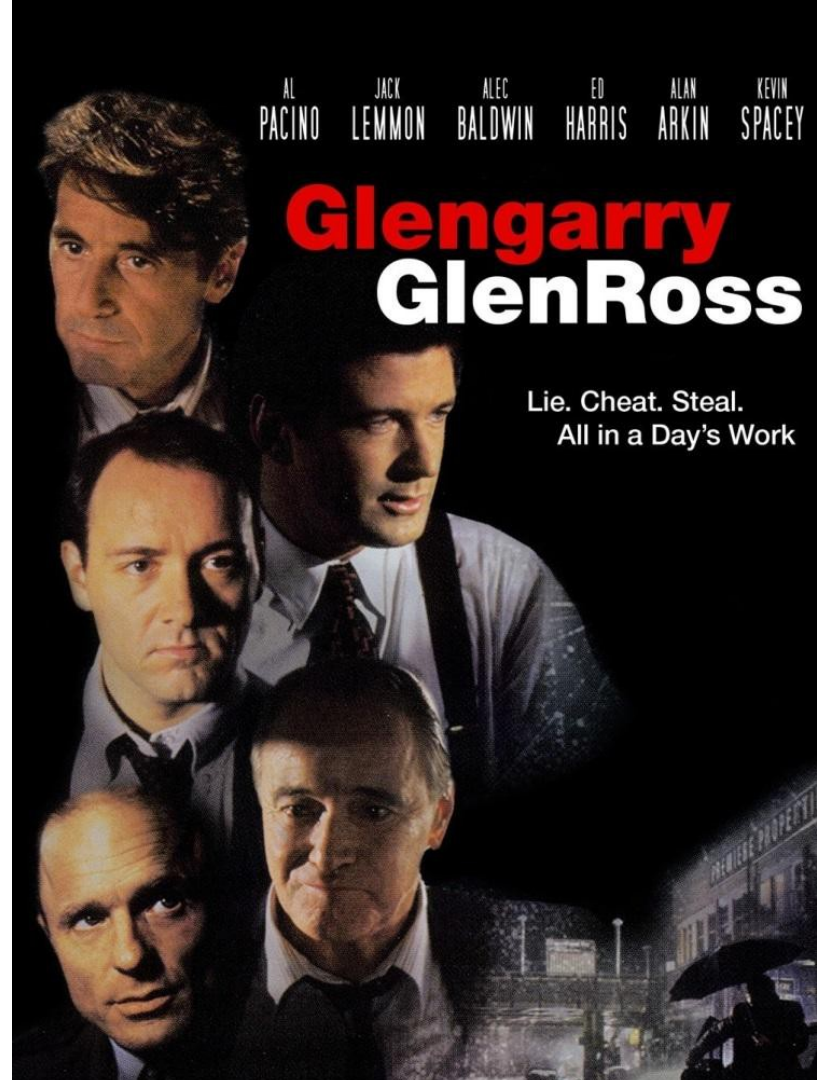
TINY TINA

Playtime's Over



IN CONCLUSION





That's all I got

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Portrait by Matt Cummings @eiffelart

