

# the gamer's quarter





# Table Of Contents

**4 - 11 Four Games**

From Russia to New York via Games

**12 - 13 Persona visits E3**

Impressionistic Impressions of E3

**14 - 32 Seiklus**

An Interview with Clysm

**33 - 37 Nerves of Steel in Battalion Hell**

On Steel Battalion

**38 - 41 New Advice Journalism**

Keep Your Fonzie Offa My Gonzo

**43 - 43 Persona visits E3 Part 2**

Impressionistic Impressions of E3

**44 - 49 The Creation of a New Style, Giant Fish and the Fight for Survival**

A Darius Retrospective

**50 - 52 Oh What a Difference an Eyebrow Can Make**

An Interview With Ryoichi Hasegawa

**53 - 54 Light at the End of the Tunnel**

On Cave Story - Doukutsu Monogatari

**55 - 57 Important Failures in Videogame History**

The Pre-History of Video Gaming

**58 - 61 Persona visits E3 Part 3**

Impressionistic Impressions of E3

**62 - 71 Pongism - Theory and Practice**

A Study of the Distilled Essence of the Video Game

**72 - 78 Prince of Hearts**

Ico & Prince of Persia: Point/Counter Point

**78 - 81 We All Live In a Pokémon World**

On Pokemon Gold/Silver/Crystal

**82 - 85 It's a Gamer's World Out There**

A Different Perspective

**86 Persona visits E3 Part 4**

Impressionistic Impressions of E3

**87 - 92 In Which I Discover That The King of Fighters is Really Pretty Great**

In a Way That Mortal Kombat Isn't, I Mean.

**93 - 102 Untold Tales of The Arcade:**

**Mission Secret**

A Look Into Old and Obscure Arcade Games

**103 - 107 Logging Out of a Matrix Called Halo 2**

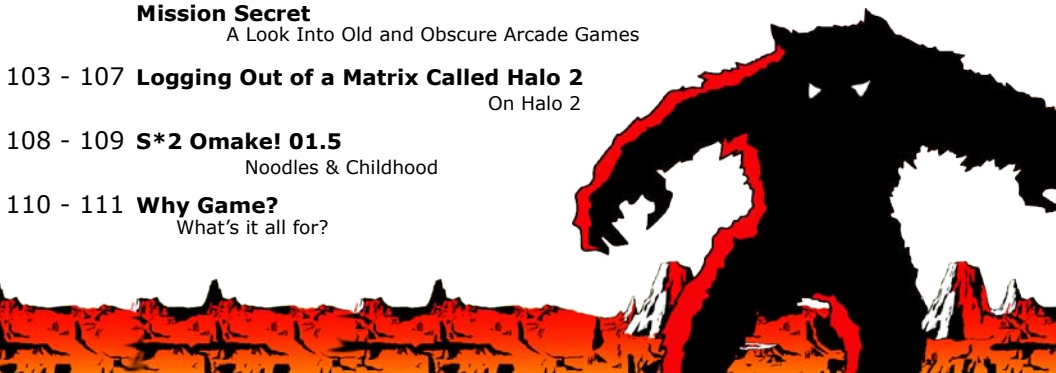
On Halo 2

**108 - 109 S\*2 Omake! 01.5**

Noodles & Childhood

**110 - 111 Why Game?**

What's it all for?





## Editor's Desk - June 15th, 2005

It's interesting how some things can actually work out better than you planned them. I remember just a little under a year ago when this whole thing was nothing more than a grain of an idea floating around in my mind that I thought would never make its way out into the world and here we are editing the final few words of Issue 2. We have brought in some fresh faces since the last issue, as you'll notice when comparing the two issues' staff pages, and hopefully we will continue to grow. This would still be just an idea if it weren't for them, and I've found that working together we make an excellent team.

Shortly after the last issue hit, so did the popularity of "New Games Journalism," and we were able to ride it in to a fair amount of publicity and site hits. We weren't really sure what "New Games Journalism" was exactly so we had M. O'Connor, resident journalist (he has a Journalism degree even!), take a look into the issue for us in his *New Advice Journalism* article. It may seem a little strange to have his article in a game magazine, but we decided it was worth publishing simply to raise the awareness of what it is we are doing and how it all relates to journalism.

Let me forget about the magazine for a while and actually get to the point of this editorial. Recently I found a game that has a lot in common with our magazine. It's really unique, a little hard to find, and doesn't get talked about nearly enough. That game is Konami's *Ninja Five-O* for the Game Boy Advance, and it's something else. I had seen it mentioned a few times online, but no one ever seemed to gush enough about it. Well that's what I'm here to do.

While formatting and editing this magazine, I have been taking periodic *Ninja Five-O* breaks. I usually only have enough time to run through a stage - or, to be more precise - attempt to run through a stage. The challenge present in this game brings me back to a time in elementary school when my friends and I

would get together and try to find the optimal way to navigate the stages of games like *Bionic Commando* and *Ninja Gaiden*. Luckily, taking a note from staff writer Jeremy Penner, I have learned to live with video game deaths.

Thank you Konami for taking the chance to publish a game that contains no legacy of title behind it, and packing some really excellent, although slightly recycled, game elements into it. *Ninja Five-O* shows us that taking chances can be a really good thing. Very soon, a group of dedicated gamers in the US will take a major chance by putting out a brand new game on Sega's long retired Genesis system. That title is *Beggar prince*, which is being translated into English nine years after its original unofficial Taiwanese release. A project like that takes a lot of work but hopefully gamers will put forth the effort to seek it out and find themselves richly rewarded.

Finally, I also wanted to take out a little time here and comment on a loss. The Insert Credit forums went down recently due to a "stupid bug." This will be the 3<sup>rd</sup> time since becoming a forum regular there that this has happened, and each time great collections of ideas and information are lost. I know that myself and a good number of our staff has often found inspiration at Insert Credit and we would like to encourage everyone to stop by and show support for all the hard work that Brandon and his staff do there.

Until next Quarter...

-Regards

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## From Russia to New York via Games

Sergei Servianov

I blame my irresistible love of Japanese swords on *Ninja Gaiden*.

At the age of five, it was the second game I had played on my NES, right after *Super Mario Bros*. Even at that age, I considered my NES's American origins to be an advantage (I was most probably the only boy in Russia to own one) and a curse, as games were quite hard to locate. I was mostly limited to relatives' infrequent trips to the US as the only source of new games. But the surprised looks on my friends' faces, when they saw that oversized box, swallowing long gray cartridges like an oven, made up for it. Besides, I preferred to play games at my friends', on their rip-off Famicoms, as the controller was much more comfortable.

The one exception, though, was *Ninja Gaiden*. That was a game I played alone, and only alone. The shine of Ryu's dragon sword, I was the only one privy to its power that split men, dogs and birds into four identical sparks.

I never finished it, nor did I know enough English for the denouement to make sense to me even if I had. I usually tried to infer the situation based on the images, so I didn't understand why the two ninjas fought in the beginning or what those two statuettes were, or why the hell Ryu ended up shifting locales

so suddenly, or why Irene shot him, etc. That I didn't like watching the cutscenes didn't help much in my comprehension of the story's subtleties. I usually skipped them.

I couldn't help it; they were creepy. I was scared of a lot of things as a child, but those cutscenes topped the list. I attribute my fear to the eerie music, unclear graphics and my lack of understanding what the characters were. I thought Jacquo was a pile of black intestines with a face sticking out. I liked the game nonetheless, and kept reminding my uncle to buy me the sequel as a New Year's gift on his next trip to America (I had read about it in *Game Land* magazine). He did. I was twelve.

I put the original aside and went into the sequel. The graphics struck me as a much more complete version of the aesthetic that the first game was going for. The foreground was given more depth; the redundant elements of the backgrounds were subdued while the important ones were highlighted (the blue skyscrapers in the first stage, as an example). The way the characters were drawn in the cutscenes was sharper and gloomier. In the original, Ryu looked almost ridiculous, with the skin of his face showing through that raccoon mask slit. In *Ninja Gaiden 2*, his cheeks had sunk, he was gaunt, yet muscular, his eyes were narrowed and shaded: he looked threatening and heroic. My heart jumped when I saw Jacquo move into the light near the end, sneering with a face that



the wind, looking towards a castle shining white fire. A long, snaky road leads up to it. For that moment, Ryu and I were synched together. It was the first moment that I was conscious of a game affecting me in a way that I couldn't articulate. For years that instant defined games for me. I felt shock, pathos, and a mild pity from knowing that games and the adventures they promised and promoted weren't real. I was grateful, nonetheless, for such moments.

\*\*\*

looked like *Vampire Hunter D's* gone over with a flamethrower. This style, sustained by the much more disquieting soundtrack and relatively intelligent story, yielded a great cast of villains. Both Ashtar and Jacquo were cruel and playful towards their inferiors in an alien and convincing way, like a cross between a medieval lord and a concentration camp administrator. I have yet to encounter a game that made demons so disturbing and so gallant.

The music was exactly the best elements of the original's soundtrack amplified and matured. What's more, with a few exceptions (the glacier stage for one), it fit every area in both theme and order. When you enter the Tower of Lahja after the thunder stage, admit it, the tower theme's high repetitiveness relieves you of the black uneasiness of the stage before. The watery hell's snowy music being replaced by "Unlimited Moment" is another fine example of theme shifting.

The best synthesize of music and image occurs after Ryu defeats Ashtar and goes through a cave, the end of which triggers a cutscene.

At that moment Ryu looks straight into you with surprised eyes, and mumbles "There."

The music in the background, called "Caste Demotic," was nothing short of thirty seconds of pure sublime; even today I remember every slow, synthesized chord. The screen pans upward and we see Ryu, hanging from a ledge, a piece of purple cloth on his neck fluttering in

My uncle was a drunken, hilarious man, whose work had him fly many times to the United States. He knew my fondness for games; at times he even played a round of *Darius* with me.

I was a fourteen-year old boy with a summer full of nothing approaching. So I asked him to buy me the only game I couldn't buy in the kiosks of Kuznetskii Most: *Lunar: Silver Star Story* for the PSX. The pirates had bypassed it for some reason. I had seen a picture of the Working Designs boxed edition in an issue of



*Game Land*, which I bought every month from the listless Arab that ran a press stand in front of the general store where I played *Contra: Hard Corps* for the first time. *Lunar* looked glorious, at the time I had just been introduced to anime by my dwarfish, nearsighted friend Mikhail, who had new episodes of *Sailor Moon*, *Gundam Wing* and *O080* every week (god knows where he got them), so the box appealed to my newly-acquired aesthetic.

I waited for his return. In the meantime, I drunk myself silly for the first time, smoked my first cigarette (it made me feel horrible enough to swear of them for a few years), and played Famicom games (*Duck Tales 2*, *Kirby*) with my neighbor Ion while eating chocolate cereal that was hard as walnut shells, even when soaked in milk.

When my uncle returned, I made sure to act excited to see him and not the game, though we tacitly realized that neither of us gave much a damn about each other's lives. He was a wise one, my uncle, even if he did wear sandal shoes and beat his German Shepherd when drunk.

The *Lunar* box was the most beautiful game



related thing I had ever seen. The Goddess Athena, The Magic Emperor, ball of evil energy in fist, and Alex, in splendid relief no less, stared at me, while the comforting weight of the box excited my hands with its tangibility. I turned it over and saw the entire cast, the Silver Star in the background; they looked nothing less than noble.

I went to my bed, took the manual out, and lay there reading it. How great it was: hard black leather, thick, rich paper, and a light crimson page marker. If there was ever a manual that defined its ideal form, a la Plato, this was it. Every page had something wonderful, concept art good enough to hang on your wall, insightful interviews with the creators. I still remember Keisuke Shigematsu, the scenario writer, saying "a good 70 to 80 percent of a scene's emotional effect can be attributed to the music," that statement rung true back then and continues to do so now. From the packaging alone this game spoke of a magnificent world worthy of Jack Vance.

I bore into the game with a burning vigor. I beat it in two weeks and was dumbfounded by how dignified, otherworldly and legendary it was. It sticks out in my mind now like a pleasant dream: a collection of conversation fragments, pieces of music and undefined feelings. The love between Alex and Luna filled me with longing. I had yet to kiss a girl. I was upset that I had not yet experienced what Alex and Luna felt. Even at that hopeful age, though, I doubted that such love existed, but it was still beautiful to behold;



an ideal that went beyond this vile world. I spent the next week in melancholy reverie, singing "in your dreams magic is real" and "into the starlit night to foolish dreamers turn their gaze," while looking at the moon forlornly, imagining Lunar's characters there, waiting for me. At times I wished the moon would turn to dust, such a large object reminding me of my disappointment and longing every night didn't improve my fickle temperament.

It wasn't one of my finer moments, though I recall it now with a smile.

\*\*\*

It was a dry New Year's Eve. I was smoking a flat, filterless cigarette on the balcony of our seventh floor apartment, more for the fine red box that they came in than the miserable taste. The box had a black and white drawing of Stalin's face, dwarfing a soldier holding a Soviet flag, a document on the side saying "By Order of the Supreme Commander: 'Not One Step Back!'"

It excited me to have such a powerful man in my pocket.

I watched - rather, heard - as streetlamps were not deemed necessary in the Yasenovo region of Moscow - groups of laughing, drunk adolescents go by in the darkness below. I threw my cigarette out and walked back to my room to sulk about the things that sixteen year olds sulk about. When this proved tiresome, I crawled to the living room and turned the computer on. My father, mother and sister were away, so I wouldn't be disturbed; I had told them that I didn't want to go anywhere for New Year's.

Instead of the *kogal* sites, it was the red star icon of *Close Combat III* that seduced me that night, called simply "Russian Front" in its Russian bootleg edition. I had purchased it six



months ago from a kiosk on Kuznetskii Most, while waiting for my newly acquired Ukrainian girlfriend to show up with her friend. Despite having pressed my lips awkwardly to hers for a few minutes at an overcrowded dance, I was still nervous about seeing her.

Six months later, girlfriendless and lonely, I was still playing *Close Combat III*. I clicked through the menu and found the Russians' most desperate battle, a fictional German assault on the Kremlin. I was in the mood for something hopeless. Examining the map I made note of the two breaches in wall. I placed the T-34 tanks first; one behind the Czar cannon, two behind cathedrals and put the infantry units along the breached wall and inside the cathedrals to act as spotters and ambush infantry if they moved in close. I wasn't going to risk placing the tanks in the open, the briefing had told me the Germans had rocket cars and victory hinged on me having enough tanks to hold theirs.

*Close Combat III* was my nerd's revenge. Alone and dejected, I found comfort in imaginary acts of violence, while avoiding the faintest chance of them happening to me in reality. One of my favorite things in the game were the screams dying soldiers emitted. There were five or six variations, ranging from quick surprised yelps to long, painful wails. I felt joy whenever my AT gun, hidden in a burnt-out building, fired through the thin side armor of a Panther, roasting half the crew inside, while the other half was killed by my riflemen as they tried to flee or when my sniper, sneaking through the snow, would kill a recon squad.







"We fought on the shores of the Volga  
To the Volga headed our enemies' divisions  
But our soldiers stood fast  
And immortal Stalingrad withstood!"

I took about half an hour; the AI was notoriously slow in attacking. I merely waited for them in a sad silence, then killed them while hardly losing any men. This I did in a sadder silence.

I noted the medals that my troops received; my avatar had gotten none. That always infuriated me, though, as most things were, it was my own fault. I rarely put my avatar in danger, safely depositing him far behind the lines.

That strikes me as the perfect image: a boy too scared to put an imaginary representation of him into danger.

I looked at clock: 12:06.

\*\*\*

*Final Fantasy VIII* stirred depths that were hitherto untouched by all but the hardest emotional experiences.

I was nineteen, in New York, living with my parents and attending a university that will remain nameless. I hadn't played a game in three years, and had pretty much given up on them. They had stopped exciting me.

Then, in a process unnecessary to describe here, I acquired a free Playstation 2. I didn't know what to do with it. I remembered watching the intro for *Final Fantasy VIII* at Kuznetskii Most a few months before, playing on a small TV next to the kiosk operator, while waiting for Ion, but I quickly put aside my impressedness for other matters.

I bought it for twenty dollars on the E-bay.



Those gurgling scream; I worshipped them.  
Say anything you want about the *Close Combat* series; at least it got the screams right.

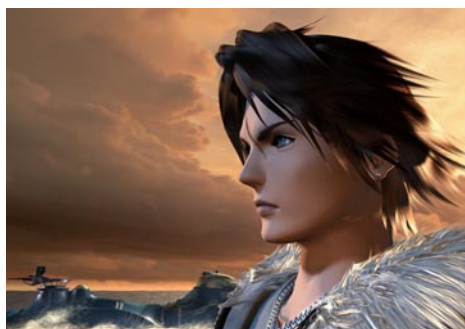
Please don't reel back, as if you've suddenly been pulled into a J. G. Ballard novel. The British Imperial Army made its career out of sex-starved losers like myself, with their unstated promises of murder and rape in jungles, sands and wherever. My cowardly love of violence may not be pleasant, but it's true for most of us. It's probably true for you, since this *is* a videogame magazine. Hell, the only thing my kind has to look forward too is jerking off to the girls they see everyday at school.

Before starting the mission, I left the computer room to pick up an ashtray from the kitchen. On my way back I stopped at my parents' room and took my father's duckbill visor cap from closet. The red star had developed a gray layer of dust. He had worn this cap as a sentry of our glorious Red Empire on its very vanguard, the Berlin Wall. Holding the cap, I saw him as he was in his photographs, thin mustache, arrogant smile, standing straight, binoculars in hand, staring through the dark night at the lights of Western Sector of Berlin.

I put it on, cocking it to the side, lit my cigarette and went back to play mission. I sang an old war song that brightened my mood a bit.

"Don't forget those terrible years.  
When the waters of the Volga boiled  
When the Earth sank in mad fire  
When there was no night and no day

I had played other games in the series and loved them. *Final Fantasy IV*, the first RPG I ever glimpsed, introduced me to such wonderful English words as mage, paladin, dragoon and airship. Those words carried warmth from then on, and even now I still recall *Final Fantasy IV*'s prepubescent romance whenever I come across them. *Final Fantasy VI*'s mid-game world destruction, amplified by the hopeless "World of Ruin" theme, struck me as the essence of sentiment. Aeris's death speaks for itself. To me, the Final Fantasy series was no less than the forefront of a renewed romanticism in art. And videogames seemed like the perfect medium for this movement, having been untarnished by realism and academic coddling. Somehow, out of a few *D&D* books and other Western borrowings, along with the romantic fascism of a Leiji Matsumoto series, Square and other famous JRPG creators gave mythic base to all whose bodies keep producing ethereal dreams of adventure far into ages when it's unbecoming and impractical. They created a place where my frustrated, sentimental yearning, forged over the years with a samurai's intensity in response to a universe that kept shocking me with its utter banality and indifference, could go.



So I had high expectations for *Final Fantasy VIII*. Though I doubted it would have the same intoxicating effect as the earlier games. I had grown more refined and exacting in my tastes. The games were childish caprices, I said to myself, ignoring the protests of the boy who had replayed *FFIV*'s moon flight thousands of times in his head. The boy had won, despite my self-conscious desire to mock every cliché I encountered. There were many of them, but they stopped mattering after Squall received his scar and Quistis appeared. I no longer cared. As Aleksandr Pushkin said, "A beautiful lie is better than ten thousand truths."

Just walking around Balamb Garden was enough to cast Ice on my critical faculties. It was a school that contrasted so greatly with my vile university that I needed to believe, even for a few moments, that it existed. The tranquility, the architecture, the students, and their uniforms overpowered me.

I loved Squall as well. We shared many traits (or at least I liked to think so). We were whiny, lonely misanthropes. We both had girls pursuing us (in my case "used to" would be more accurate, which always made me recall Moscow with renewed sighs), though I doubt I'd have been able to stand against Quistis, as glasses have always attracted me. The sick sexual game he played with her raised his appeal in my eyes. Remember when they come back after the Seed trial, and Quistis begins going through the motions of the "let's talk about our pasts and dreams" conversation that no JRPG can live without and Squall says that he doesn't care and leaves? Brilliant! He mocked







a trope so worn out it must be undead by now, and did it while establishing his own confident personality.

Invariably, that Squall had to die and be recast as the nerd who found love. Normally, I derided such things, but *then* I wasn't in a normal situation. I had been playing *FFVIII* non-stop for three days. My one connection to the world was my window, which either blinded me with sunlight or reassured me with the stillness of night. I looked through it whenever I went to pour myself another cup of green tea or jettison urine.

When Squall carried Rinoa on his back at the end of disc 2, I went into a sleep that ended five hours later. Finishing *FFVIII* became nothing less than a matter of life and death. I booted up the next disc. It was here that my already tottering mental balance collapsed and threw me into an intensity that I hadn't known in a long time. It was that scene where the party divides into two groups, one staying behind in the futuristic city, while the other goes to the moon station that did it.

That moon station launch made me feel a powerful sorrow. Most likely because it triggered a whole amount of associations from my childhood, many of them related to *FF*, a joyful period (especially when looked through the eyes of a miserable young man). From then on, it was pure melancholy till the Ragnarok scene. That scene pushed the game into *Blade Runner* territory, a category of art so intense that researchers in the 23rd century will look back bewildered at how the primitive men of our age could produce such magnificence.

I recall not a single line of insipid, high school-level, dialogue from it. It didn't matter. Recall Mr. Shigematsu's words; the music was what drove the emotion. It had my hands trembling to the point of losing grip over the controller. When Faye Wong sung, "Let me come to you/close as I want to be" my sight became blurry with tears. I grabbed my cigarettes from the top the PS2 logo, lit one, and cried. Faye Wong's voice, Nobuo Uematsu's music, the literally cosmic aspects of their love, the sheer romance of it made an impression that will stay with me forever. In its intensity it rivaled the feelings I had when I saw the Moscow House of the Soviets building shelled by government tanks in '93.

I hated my university, my situation and the strange city that I had found myself in. But most of all, I hated Square for showing me such a profound love. A love that seemed childish and ideal, like all first loves are. Yet, it was more than that, it was nothing less than a grenade tossed into the world's vile core, screaming "look at what I've created in the fictional world, can your world produce anything as great?"

The answer was silence.



I noticed sunrays on my wall; it was five in the morning. I let out a sob or two and went to sleep, having burned an unsightly hole into my mattress after missing the ashtray with what was most likely my third cigarette.

It displeases me greatly to have such a juvenile game serve as the example to which all other art must aspire. It smells of philistinism of the lowest sort. If I didn't have absolute confidence in my unerring taste, I would've most likely electrocuted myself via PS2 in bathtub. Unconsciously, Square has stumbled into something mythic that speaks to a part of me that I don't want to think about much less discuss.

To wit, *FFVIII* is something great, a game that should strongly affect everyone that plays it.

Of course, plenty of critics have gone on about its lame combat and magic system, "jerk" protagonist, overall staleness and otherwise absurd storyline. They're not completely wrong, but ...well, Ray Bradbury has a great line for them.

*"They have not seen the stars."*



PERSONA  
visits  
E3!

with  
Adlerock! ?

And  
108!  
↪

of  
Insert  
Credit!

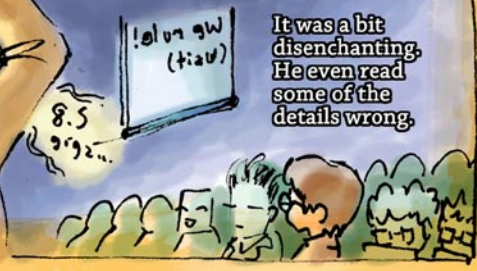


My adventure technically began one day before the actual convention: Tuesday, May 17.

Nintendo was having a press conference to announce whatever it was they had in store for the world and I was there.



...but then I noticed he was just reading everything off a giant teleprompter near the back.



It was a bit disenchanted. He even read some of the details wrong.



After waiting an hour or so, I finally made it in. I ended up sitting between some hot shot Washington Post reporter and two tech-saavy guys from etoychest.org. It was an odd combination.



The show began with Reggie Fils-Aimé, Executive VP of Marketing and Sales, coming out and making the crowd cheer.



*The jargon,  
The flashiness,  
The free hand-outs...*

Overall, the whole affair left a bad taste in my mouth which only developed into further disgust as the days continued.

After reassuring the audience and himself that Nintendo was doing well financially, he introduced a DJ to show off Elektroplankton and a girl from G4 to play with Nintendogs. They were trying to be "hip," I guess.



After the show, Nintendo people handed out press kits with trailers for the new Zelda on DS cartridges and sent us off.



It also didn't help that I got a parking ticket for briefly parking in front of a hotel.



# seiklus

## An Interview with Clysm

Andrew Toups

*Seiklus* is an independently developed freeware side scrolling adventure game that was released around two years ago with very little fanfare or promotion of any kind. Since its release, tales of its greatness have spread solely by word of mouth and links to its download have been published by such big-name web sites as 1-Up.com, Insert Credit, and Home of the Underdogs, making it one of the most popular freeware titles available. Some have made comparisons to *Ico*, while others have called it a cross between *Myst* and the original *Legend of Zelda*. If you haven't yet tracked it down, hopefully this interview will convince you to give it a try. We think you'll find that as a game, *Seiklus* is sparse in terms of design but rich in both atmosphere and emotion. *Seiklus* can be downloaded from Clysm's website, [www.autofish.net](http://www.autofish.net).

**Seiklus' creator Clysm lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Andrew Toups tracked him down to discuss *Seiklus*, independent games, and the state of the industry.**

**TOUPS:** Alright so, just to sort of prevent me from embarrassing myself, I know you had this on your website but, um, how exactly do you pronounce *Seiklus* (SAY-CLUES)? Or am I saying

it wrong?

**CLYSM:** Yeah, that's good enough.

**TOUPS:** Yeah?

**CLYSM:** Yeah, *Seiklus*.

**TOUPS:** *Seiklus*.

**CLYSM:** The consonants are slightly different but that's how it goes.

**TOUPS:** Right, so – let me look at my notes – what kind of stuff have you been playing recently in terms of video games?

**CLYSM:** The last two games I played were *Paper Mario 2* and *Silent Hill 4*.

**TOUPS:** That's quite a combination there.

**CLYSM:** Yes. Yeah, they're very similar.

**TOUPS:** [Laughs] In a way. But what do you think of them? Particularly *Silent Hill 4* since I obviously have a strong interest in that.

**CLYSM:** Yeah, I was actually really interested in *Silent Hill 4*. I hadn't really considered playing the *Silent Hill* series before because I don't really care about horror movies or that sort of thing in general.

**TOUPS:** Right, right.

**CLYSM:** But my brother-in-law gave me a Konami demo disc with a bunch of junk on it and one of them was a demo of *Silent Hill 4* that froze a short way in.

**TOUPS:** Yeah. [Laughs]

**CLYSM:** But from that I could tell it was the sort of thing that might interest me so I tracked down a copy.

**TOUPS:** Have you finished it yet, or are you still in the middle of it?

**CLYSM:** Yeah, I finished it two days ago.

**TOUPS:** Okay, so do you have anything to say about it?

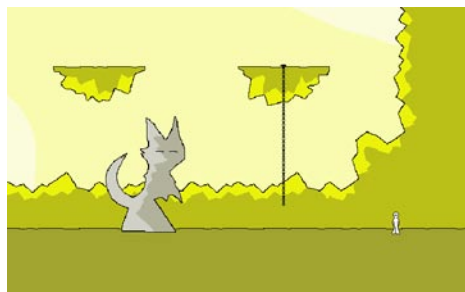
**CLYSM:** Well, it made me order the first and second games in the series.

[Both laugh]

**TOUPS:** Well, I guess that's a good thing.

**CLYSM:** So I guess it was pretty positive. I liked how it could affect me. It actually gave me scary dreams, and games don't normally do that.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, that was definitely the first game I've played that's really given me, well one of the first games that's actually given me nightmares and waking dreams about stuff



that's happened in games.

**CLYSM:** It's kind of odd really, because I played *Fatal Frame* and that was a much scarier game while playing it, but it never carried over into life.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, I mean *The Room*, you know, it takes place in an apartment.

**CLYSM:** Yeah.

**TOUPS:** And everyone's lived in apartments like that at some point, and I don't know, it's pretty easy to get sucked into the world there.

**CLYSM:** Right.

**TOUPS:** Okay, so I guess I should talk to you about the actual game at some point. I'm kind of interested in it because I read on your website that you were learning Game Maker as you made the game.

**CLYSM:** Right.

**TOUPS:** And for reference, Game Maker is a program created by . . . what's the guy's name? Mark Overmars?

**CLYSM:** Mark Overmars. He's a professor in the Netherlands.

**TOUPS:** And it's sort of a broader version of RPGMaker or FighterMaker that you can use to make videogames.

So, I mean, playing it, it's a very polished game. And I just wondered how much of the process of having to learn Game Maker affected things as you went along on the project and designed things.

**CLYSM:** Well, the program has two different sort of levels. One of them is the drag-and-drop icon system where you can just fill in a couple numbers--how fast something should

move or whatever, and, of course, I started out doing that because I followed a little platformer tutorial just to get the very basics...

**TOUPS:** Yeah.

**CLYSM:** But as I went along I ended up redoing some of the areas in the game at least three or four times from start to finish because I learned more about how to do it more efficiently and make them better and eventually went to pretty much straight code and got rid of the icons.

**TOUPS:** So, which area would you say had the most drastic revisions or gave you the most trouble as you kept learning things, and what kind of changes did you make?

**CLYSM:** Probably the underground cave toward the beginning. I redid that several times.



**TOUPS:** Is that the area with like the different teleportations?

**CLYSM:** Exactly, with the monsters that suck you down.

**TOUPS:** Actually I'm glad you brought that up because that was something I was going to ask you about later. That's definitely one of the more interesting levels; just because, like conceptually, you're just walking around and there's no clear indication of how things work and you just have to sort of figure things out

yourself. I don't know, I just thought that was one of the neater areas. What exactly inspired you to make it work that way?

**CLYSM:** Well, the monsters themselves were probably inspired by *Out of This World* even though I wasn't thinking about it at the time.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, I definitely see that, like in the animation for them.

**CLYSM:** Yeah, because there is stuff like that in *Out of This World*. But I don't know, for other parts of the game I have direct inspiration I can name, but for that one I don't know, it was just kind of pretty vague.

**TOUPS:** Was it just one of those things where you're like "Hey, teleportation. I can do this in GameMaker." and then you sort of...

**CLYSM:** Well, now that you mention that. A lot of things in that game I did just to see if I could. That's one of the reasons I really, really like Game Maker. Because I'd have this idea - like, I have no idea how to program. I have no idea how I could possibly do this, but with this one exception I was able to do every one of my ideas in Game Maker and I was always surprised that it was so powerful. Even though I, myself, being a non-programmer and all, could still do it.

**TOUPS:** Yeah. So, since you brought up this question of influences...well, I don't want to get ahead of myself. What I'm getting at is how clear of an idea did you have when you started, and how much did that change as you learned more about what the program could do?

**CLYSM:** Well, it started out—the game—as sort of a showcase of my artwork and then it sort of became another version of an old game I started making a long time ago using a program called MegaZeux, which is a spinoff of ZZT, if you've heard of that.



**TOUPS:** That might be getting a little too obscure for me, I'm afraid.

**CLYSM:** ZYT is the first thing ever done by Tim Sweeney, who did *Unreal*. That's what he's known for now, but [ZYT] was the first project that made him money. He went on to do *Jill of the Jungle* and a bunch of other junk but [ZYT] was a little ASCII based game. All you were was a little character—the happy face one—and you went around in this little text-based world, and it had an editor built in.

**TOUPS:** So it started as something you were doing with that. So that game was something you weren't really finished with, or were you just playing around with it?

**CLYSM:** Actually, I never finished it, but I did post some pictures from it on my Web site [[www.autofish.net](http://www.autofish.net)].

**TOUPS:** Oh really? I'll have to check that out.

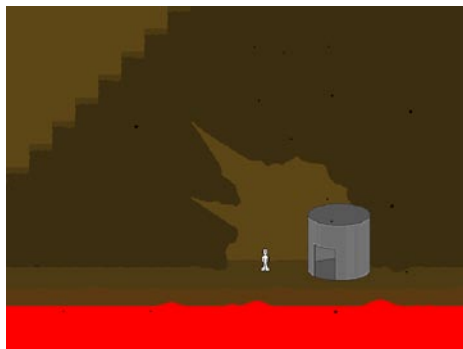
**CLYSM:** Yeah, I think the only thing that really, concretely carried over from that is the piano.

**TOUPS:** So I guess the actual concept for that was... How different was that from what *Seiklus* actually wound up being?

**CLYSM:** That one was going to be a lot more linear — not linear, it was still going to be exploration, but it was going to have actual dialogue and other characters, which was something I was abandoned in *Seiklus* — *Seiklus* was going to have that too, but I got rid of it all.

**TOUPS:** Why did you abandon it?

**CLYSM:** I don't know. Partly because it's easier. Some day I want to do an all-out adventure, with dialogue and everything. But that would be an enormous project for one person to do. So one of the reasons was that it was easier; plus, it just suited my art style, so...



**TOUPS:** Well, I definitely feel like it sort of lets the situations and environments speak for themselves. I don't know, it's such a simple game, and in some ways it allows whatever is there to come out a lot more strongly.

**CLYSM:** Yeah. Most of all, the feeling I wanted to bring out was just sort of, finding something new; just being interested in stuff you find. Not necessarily making it challenging or anything.

**TOUPS:** Well, I definitely think it succeeded at that.

So you brought up influences, earlier. At least, in terms of the actual design of the game, what games did you have in mind, or what games were you playing at the time, or that you played in the past were influencing you as were making it.

**CLYSM:** Probably the largest ones would be... I guess *Out of This World*... But as far as gameplay goes, *Metroid* and *Below the Root* more than anything else.

**TOUPS:** *Below the Root*...

**CLYSM:** That's a Commodore 64 game — well, it released on several platforms, but I played it on the Commodore.

**TOUPS:** I think that's a little before my time. I've actually been in the slow process of catching up on old consoles that I've missed.

**CLYSM:** Well, it's actually a pretty obscure game, even for people who did play the Commodore games, but it's about the deepest adventure title I'd seen at the time.

**TOUPS:** Tell me a little bit about it.

**CLYSM:** Well, it's based on a series of children's books by Zilpha Keatley Snyder called the "Green Sky Trilogy", which are actually--even though they're written for kids, I just read them a few years ago, and they're pretty interesting. There are these little kids with telepathic powers; they can talk to animals and things like that. But in the game, you're in this giant tree, sort of like *Faxanadu*, if you've seen that, but not really like it... But you can glide. Between trees. You have these little sort of wings. And you just sort of explore. It doesn't really tell you where to go. You pick up objects, and you use them in different places, and...

So lay-out wise, I guess it's kind of a precursor to *Metroid* in some ways.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, I could see that.

**CLYSM:** I guess it's probably contemporary with *Metroid*, but I'm not sure exactly.

**TOUPS:** I always get my timeline backwards. I mean, I just bought a Genesis, so I've got a ways to go in my uh, reeducation.

It's interesting that it's based on a children's book. You don't see things like that too often...

**CLYSM:** Well, what's really interesting is that the author of the children's books had a big part in the game. In fact, it was sort of the fourth book in trilogy; it continues the story from where the third book left off.

**TOUPS:** Yeah! That's... actually, really interesting.

**CLYSM:** Yeah, it's kind of unique that way.

**TOUPS:** All right, let's move on. Now, something I've sort of observed about the "indie game movement," if I can call it that, the majority of the games that people seem to make, particularly within the community of Game Maker, and even open source type stuff, are a lot of puzzle games and strategy games and things that sort of tend towards abstraction. And a game like *Seiklus*, where it's... more adventure-oriented? You don't really see things like that too often. Why do you think that is?

**CLYSM:** Well... For one thing, most of the independent developers are just working on their own. And when you think, *what kind of project can I undertake and not abandon halfway through*, you start thinking, *these little one-screen games, I can handle that*. I guess that might be part of it.

**TOUPS:** Yeah. You want to keep it as simple as you can.

**CLYSM:** And of course, I had that in mind, even, with my *Seiklus* game; that's one reason why everything is so simple. I can draw this animal or something in ten minutes, and throw it in the game, and it's ready. Rather than try to do detailed graphics or even, Super Nintendo-level, for that matter.

**TOUPS:** And again, I mean, I think in this case, it winds up being one of the game's greatest strengths. The visual style's so... It's simple, but it's stark.





**CLYSM:** Yeah, in several areas, I would spend like three hours trying to draw a certain thing, and I realized I was just trying to draw with this detail, and you know. For one thing, it wasn't going to fit the game, but the other thing was, it just wasn't my art style, that's why I couldn't do it.

**TOUPS:** What did you use, by the way, for the art?

**CLYSM:** Paint Shop Pro is pretty much is the only program I use for any kind of art or design. Sort of like a cheaper version of Photoshop.

**TOUPS:** I still stick with Paint, myself.

[Both laugh]

**CLYSM:** Well, actually, if you use Paint, Game Maker itself has a better built-in program than Paint.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, I discovered that when I was trying to use it to make sprites. It is pretty nice.

**CLYSM:** But doing it outside of those programs is a lot easier, I find.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, especially for those huge, sweeping areas there, I imagine it would be a bit nicer.

So how do you feel about the reaction *Seiklus* has gotten? I know you've linked to a

few reviews and mentions of it on the Internet; and I know at least a few people don't seem to "get it." How does it all make you feel, having such a wide reaction and everything?

**CLYSM:** Well, when I make any game, I make a game that I'd like to see made by someone else; like partly as just an effort to inspire other people to make little games. I know a lot of people who are really talented, or who have some ambition, but they don't do anything, because they just think they can't, or... I don't know, whatever reason.

**TOUPS:** Have you ever been truly surprised by someone's reaction to how the game made them feel, or how they interpreted it?

**CLYSM:** Well, a pretty big compliment I've gotten more than once, is that people have said that it's reminds them of *Ico*, or one guy said that it's the best game he's played since *Ico*, and that's pretty much my favorite modern game, pretty much, so...

**TOUPS:** Well, yeah! I mean, you know among many of my friends online, *Ico* is uh, pretty... well-worshipped. [Laughs]

**CLYSM:** But because I made the game... the sort of person who thinks like me, if anyone would like it, I knew it wasn't going to completely fall flat. You know, I didn't really think about the reaction that much. Some of the biggest surprises were seeing it show up on things like [Home of the] Underdogs, just out of nowhere.

**TOUPS:** Have you played *Cave Story*[1]?

**CLYSM:** I downloaded it immediately upon release, and I downloaded the English patch immediately, but I just haven't played it yet.

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[1] An independent Japanese game called *Doukutsu* that was so popular in its native form that an English Patch was created changing the name to *Cave Story*. Check out the *Cave Story* article elsewhere in this issue.

Partly because I'm trying not to let myself play games. Because I want to make games I want to limit my game playing.

**TOUPS:** I bring it up because it's kind of a parallel to *Seiklus* in a lot of ways; being developed by one guy, and it's kind of an adventure title...

**CLYSM:** I've heard that from a couple of people, that in some ways it's similar to my game, which is interesting. Although I did like Pixel's *Ika-chan* game a lot.

**TOUPS:** Yeah I've got that downloaded but I haven't started it yet, for kind of the same reasons as yourself.

**CLYSM:** That's a hard one, because there's no translation. It's just a trial and error item search.

**TOUPS:** Pixel's kind of insane. He apparently programmed the whole thing from the ground up, and it took like five years to complete...

**CLYSM:** Yeah. I've wondered what his motivation is. I mean, he's just doing all this stuff for free...

**TOUPS:** He had a really brief post on an internet forum, where he said something to the effect of "Pixel doesn't care about profit, so he wastes five years and makes a game." I guess that doesn't really give much insight. As far as I can tell he just wanted to make a game, and, you know, combined with the sort of crazy Japanese work ethic...

**CLYSM:** That's probably the perfect mentality, I think: "who cares if it makes money?" Because then you're gonna make what you want to make instead of what you think people might like.

**TOUPS:** I'm gonna take a moment to recommend it, because it's...

**CLYSM:** Well, it's lined up as my next thing to play, along with a couple of other things.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, I know how it is. I have a sort of queue that keeps getting longer and longer, and there are already a bunch of games that I've started but haven't finished.

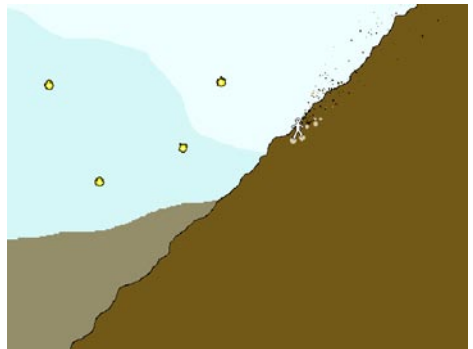
So, whenever you finished *Seiklus*, how well do you feel that it achieved what you wanted it to achieve in the first place? Do you feel that it's successful on a personal level?

**CLYSM:** By the end, I could've added some more, in fact I had several large areas that I was considering adding, but I was kind of tired of it. [Laughs] I worked on it so much, constantly, and I was just ready to release it, and I had never released anything. I found this great program where I could make games, but I couldn't release anything till I finished my first game, and for some reason I decided to make a really big one.

There are still a few lingering bugs that people have pointed out that I need to get around to fixing eventually, but as far as artistic vision, it's pretty much what I wanted it to be.

**TOUPS:** I mean whenever you – and I'm assuming you've done this – whenever you sit down and play it, after having finished coding everything and all that, just giving it a full play through, does it feel like the game you originally wanted it to be?

**CLYSM:** You know, I really haven't done that.



[Laugh]. I got a couple of testers that I knew would be thorough, cause I didn't feel like playing it anymore.

**TOUPS:** I can't blame you.

I guess I'll bring this up as a sort of preface, because obviously I think that it's totally successful in that I feel like, at least in terms of how you wanted to express the idea of not so much feeling like you have a goal, but just appreciating the act of discovery. And you know I feel like it's successful. But I guess that, given that it's such a simple game, and how little there is to it... Not that I mean that in bad way, just that, you know, there's no life bar, all you do is walk left, jump, collect these spirit things, and the game never even tells you, "go here" or "do this." I guess some people on the web have complained that you don't know where you're supposed to go next and stuff, but ignoring that for a moment (I tend to think those people are fools), how do you think it winds up being as successful as it is? How does it do so much with so little? If you could single out one thing in the design? Cause I don't know. When I first played through, for instance, I wound up leaving a bunch of those little orbs on the other end of the map, and I felt like if it was another game, upon realizing that I'd have to go all the way back and get them, I would've just been frustrated and quit; whereas with this game, it didn't really demotivate me at all. So why do you think something like that works the way it does? ...If that's a question that you can even answer.

**CLYSM:** Well... Um, I don't know. That is hard to answer. If it works for someone, that's probably personal for them. Who knows? If they like it... I've heard very different reasons for people liking it. I've heard of people doing speed runs through it, which completely surprised me.

**TOUPS:** Well, people will speed run anything, I've discovered.

**CLYSM:** That's bizarre. But even the collectables were to some degree an afterthought. I just kind of had to put something in there so that it was a game, I thought.

**TOUPS:** Yeah. I think in a way, they serve their purpose. Whenever I first started playing it, I started collecting these things, and I didn't even realize at the time that you could press space bar to bring up a map and a counter, and there's no indication that you're supposed to collect these things, or even what these things are; I sort of thought, "What if I'm not supposed to be collecting these things? What if that's causing something bad somewhere?" And I don't know, I mean, I thought that that was neat, that it could create that kind of doubt; and eventually, as I found that door, I realized what they were for. At first, there's just this thick air of mysteriousness. It captured my imagination, I guess.



**CLYSM:** An interesting thing along those lines: when I put in puzzles or hard to reach things... Some of the things that I thought would be just nothing, that people would breeze through became the hardest things that people would email me all the time about. And the things that I intended to be like, the real puzzles, no one even mentioned. It was just like nothing.

**TOUPS:** Can you give me some specific examples? I remember being stumped on the cave area, for some reason. I just couldn't find my way out of it. [Laughs] Even though it's not even that difficult, I would just continually get lost in it, and I wound up falling down into the water and going up through the creature several times before I figured it out. What sort of things wound up being more difficult than you imagined?

**CLYSM:** That area, for one. I actually put hints, and in fact, in a revision of the game before it really went public, I added even stronger hints, but they still weren't enough...

**TOUPS:** Well I eventually realized that every time you saw a moth that meant that there was some kind of hidden *something* that you could walk through a wall or walk through something or climb up something. And I thought that was a nice touch. Was that one of those hints you added?

**CLYSM:** That was because, without it, they would just be impossible to find, unless you were one of those crazy people who runs up against every little wall. People had that kind of patience in the NES days, I guess...

**TOUPS:** Yeah. It's the "game-tester" type, I guess.

**CLYSM:** But specifically, in that part where you get pulled underground by those creatures, there's fossils that point the way to go, the safe road, to not be pulled down. But no one ever,

to my knowledge, found that on their own. [Laughs]

**TOUPS:** Oh really? Like... in the background?

**CLYSM:** Yeah, just embedded in the walls. There's these bones that point the way.



**TOUPS:** I never noticed that.

**CLYSM:** Well, no one did. [Laughs] That's one of my examples of one that I thought would be...

**TOUPS:** It's a shame. It seems like a good idea, now that you mention it. But I guess not.

**CLYSM:** And then I had no idea how hard the piano puzzle would be for people.

**TOUPS:** I would imagine that was sort of the biggest one.

**CLYSM:** Yeah, everyone gets stuck there.

**TOUPS:** But I got that one on my own eventually. I'm kind of proud of myself for that.

**CLYSM:** I'm trying to think of another way to address that, because it's bad for colorblind people, and I got lots of complaints from them!

**TOUPS:** How many colorblind people did you have playing this?

**CLYSM:** Quite a few! Maybe that's just an indicator of how many people, period, played it. But I got a lot of emails that were just like "I had trouble with this because I'm colorblind", or "Just tell me the answer, I know the clue, but I just don't know these colors, so tell me what it is."

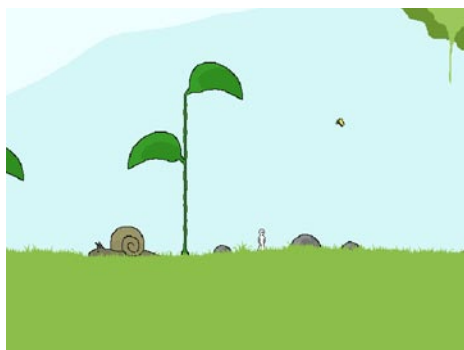
**TOUPS:** Wow. You know, I actually found this web site once that lets you convert things to what they look like for colorblind people [2]. It is interesting, though. That's actually a topic that's come up for me in the past, you know, about colorblind gamers. How do you deal with that? Because a lot of games are really color coded. And one of my best friends, who is a pretty heavy gamer, is colorblind, and I don't know how he deals with it. He somehow manages to, but it never fails to amaze me.

Anyway, to what degree did it exceed your expectations? Did you really do any promotion when you released it, or did it just spread by word of mouth? To what degree did the response to game take you off guard?

**CLYSM:** Well, the only thing I did immediately was post it to the Game Maker internal message board, which I think no one really looks at aside from people who use Game Maker, and I guess word spread a little from that. Plus if there are people who visit my site randomly, some of those found it, I suppose. The place I actually went out of my way to post was the Underdogs message board. I just said "Here's a game I made, see what you think," because from the discussions I saw it seemed like somebody there might be the type who'd appreciate it.

**TOUPS:** Well it seems like the right sort of place for that sort of thing.

**CLYSM:** And I did get a really positive response from there. Other than that, I think the only other place I submitted it was Game Hippo;



that's a little freeware game place – well, not little – but anyway, they posted it maybe about a year and a half later, or two years later.

**TOUPS:** Wow. Do you think that was just a delayed response to your original submission, or because it had already made waves in other circles?

**CLYSM:** I have no idea. So in other words, I didn't really heavily promote it. I didn't submit it to... Well, I don't even know where I would've submitted it.

**TOUPS:** So do you have an idea of how many people have downloaded it from your site?

**CLYSM:** I really have no idea. For one thing, I initially posted it on a friend of mine's server which he runs; because I thought it would kill my site if it got popular. And he gave me some numbers at first, but I just lost track. I have no idea.

**TOUPS:** So there's no way of telling, even.

**CLYSM:** No. I can't even estimate. Underdogs hosts it on their site independently, and I know a lot of people have found it through that, and they don't... I mean I guess I could ask them for a number.

**TOUPS:** Well, I know I've told everyone I know about it - who'd listen.

[2] The Color Blind Converter website URL is [www.vicheck.com](http://www.vicheck.com)



**CLYSM:** I know it's been a lot of people who've played it. Just judging from the emails I get compared to how many people bother to send an e-mail about something on the Internet, it's been a lot of emails. I get at least several a week, even now.

**TOUPS:** I wanted to ask you about the music in *Seiklus*. Tell me about how you came across the music in the first place, cause it's all music written by chiptune composers, and some of them I think are covers of Commodore 64 songs...?

**CLYSM:** Yeah. I tried not to include ones that were that well known, but one of them I did include in the Volcano was very well known because I thought it fit so well.

**TOUPS:** Well, not well known to me, but...

**CLYSM:** Well, yeah. As far as chiptunes go, that's something I've listened to my whole life, ever since I discovered them. Pretty much the Commodore 64 introduced me to those. The funny thing is, up until the day I released my game, I had yanked all the music out and put it back in at least three times. Like totally removed it from the code, and put it back in, because I hated the idea of using someone else's work in my game. But I knew that if I put my own music in, it would take me forever. I mean it would've been another year before I would've released the game. I knew my own motivation, and I'm very rusty on music. I haven't done that in forever.

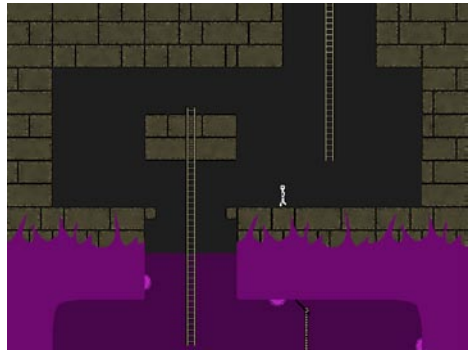
**TOUPS:** Well I did think you did a very good job choosing.

**CLYSM:** ... But I did choose them very carefully, out of an enormous collection of .mods. I have a lot of those.

**TOUPS:** I'm wondering what inspired you for each particular level, like, for instance, the

grassland area, or the most interesting one, in my mind, was the little dungeon place. It's just this sort of low bass hum holding on one note for like minutes and then it's a very sort of sparse and minimalistic thing. Tell me about that song and who wrote it and why you chose it.

**CLYSM:** I can't name the composer off-hand, but I do have it in the game's credits. It's from *Driller*. The way I chose that, and all the songs, basically, I listened to a lot of music as I created the levels, and the one that seemed to go with the style, how things looked, was the one I settled on. The one I went back and forth the most on was the cave, again, where the guys pull you under. I had a lot of different songs cycling through for that one.



**TOUPS:** What was the main other contender for that? I don't know if you can remember what it's called...

**CLYSM:** You know, I don't remember which song it was. It was similar in some ways. It was still upbeat.

**TOUPS:** We talked a little about your influences, but speaking in terms of creating games as an artistic or creative endeavor, what sort of things inspire you?

**CLYSM:** Well, I forgot to mention what was probably my biggest influence, which is David

Crane, who did *Pitfall* and *A Boy and His Blob*. Specifically *A Boy and His Blob*.

**TOUPS:** I played the NES version of that...

**CLYSM:** That's actually the only version that there is. But if you look at screenshots of it...

**TOUPS:** Yeah, I can see that. I remember playing it when I was very young, and I was very, very confused by it.

**CLYSM:** That's one of my favorite games, cause... That's partly where I got the thing about not knowing what to do, cause it didn't explain anything.

**TOUPS:** Right, yeah. It's a strength of the game. I kind of wish more games were designed that way. As opposed to like, *Zelda*, these days, where you'll pick up a heart and it's like "This is a heart! It refills one of your heart meters!"

**CLYSM:** Yeah. I'm not nearly as excited about the upcoming return to realism as some people.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, I'm not either. I mean, I don't know

**CLYSM:** I did like *Wind Waker*, though. In fact, *Wind Waker* was one of those few games that I let myself play while making *Seiklus*, and it influenced me in terms of particle effects. I thought I'd just mention that.



**TOUPS:** Really? I can see that, actually, now that you mention it... The... waterfall? Is there also a waterfall somewhere? I remember there being this big lava fall in the mountain area and these really nice particle effects there.

**CLYSM:** Yeah. Some of the stuff blowing around was inspired by the volcano part in *Wind Waker*, with the particles changing with the wind and stuff.

**TOUPS:** While we're on that topic, what inspired the many little bizarre touches, like going up into the tree and being carried off by the bird? That totally took me off guard. Was that just on a whim, or what?

**CLYSM:** Pretty much. I wanted to have a few things in the game that just completely surprised you. In fact there's at least one sort of hidden thing that I think very few people have actually seen.

**TOUPS:** You mean the room with the snake in it?

**CLYSM:** No, that's one that anyone who gets to the 100% ending has to see. But there are a few other things in the game that are just... I would've hidden them even better if I realized that people would find them at all. Cause I wanted them to be things that only a very, very few people would even see.

**TOUPS:** So will you tell me about them, or do you want me to try and find them out myself?

**CLYSM:** Well, I'll tell you about one. It'll spoil it, but I guess anyone who's reading this has played the game or they wouldn't care about what I say anyway. In the volcano, there's a little hill that you walk by, and it's just a hill. There's a timer on that, and if you walk by at a certain time... something happens!

**TOUPS:** Wow. Well, I'll have to check it out.

**CLYSM:** It's near the waterfall.

**TOUPS:** Well, I remember the mountain. I know where it is.

**CLYSM:** Yeah, there's also something that happens in the title screen if you wait long enough.

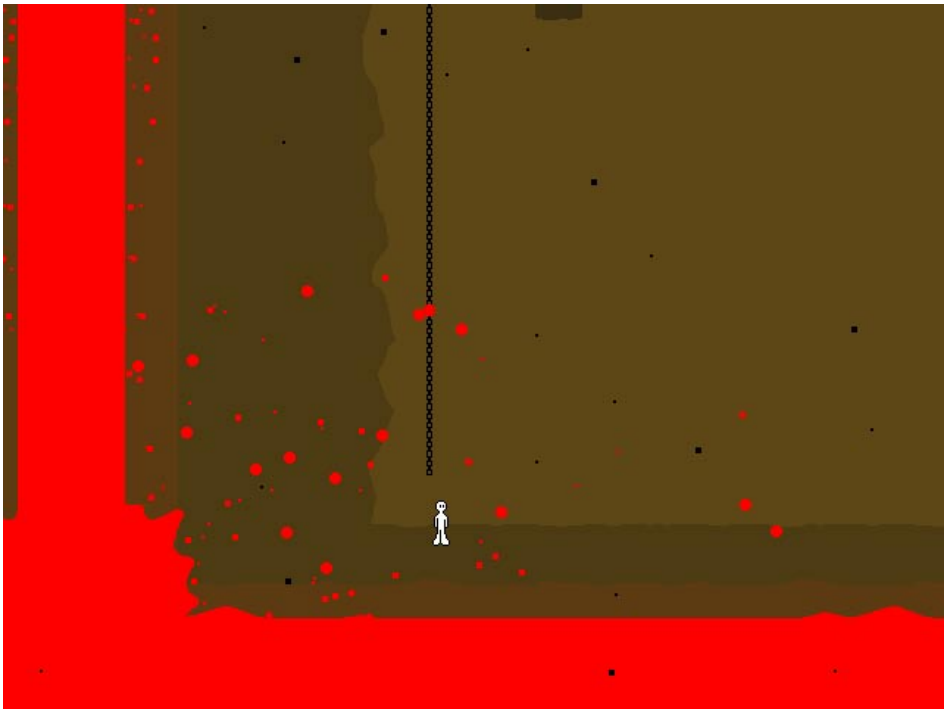
**TOUPS:** I think I saw that. I remember leaving the title screen on cause I like the music in that part so much. I mean, I like all the music selections, but that one in particular.

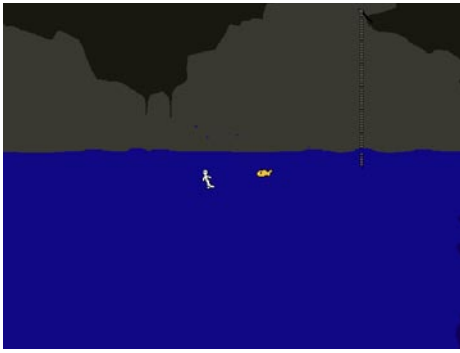
**CLYSM:** That particular composer, Radix, I like his work a lot. He also wrote the grasslands song.

**TOUPS:** I want to ask you about the ending, though. Like, the first ending. I'm not sure if you consider that the "real" ending or not, but... That might, in my mind, be the part about the game that I like the most. You start the game

with just these abstract characters, a guy and girl, you know, they could be boyfriend and girlfriend, husband and wife, or even brother and sister, and they're just sitting there, and then a meteor hits them, right? It knocks you off, and the game starts. And so after you do everything else, you come back, and it takes you a second to realize that it's the same people from the title screen, and you come up to her, and you hug, and that's it! You start playing the game again. And I don't know, it just sort of completes that circular motion that's already sort of established as a theme in how you have to explore, and everything sort of comes together at that point, in a simple understated way. And I just compare to how videogames usually have long, prerendered cutscenes for endings, but this is just... such a small thing, but I thought it was really satisfying. Was that something that you had an idea for from the beginning?

**CLYSM:** Yes. From the beginning I knew he





was going to go back to where he started. And there was going to be a little more to it, back when I was considering putting other characters in it; but I decided pretty early on to remove all that.

**TOUPS:** So why did you include the woman?

**CLYSM:** I don't know... I guess so it wouldn't be quite so lonely. There's nobody else in it! I mean, even *A Boy and His Blob* has at least one other character! [Laughs]

**TOUPS:** This is maybe a more personal question. So you can answer it with whatever amount of detail that you want. I noticed on your Web site that you're a religious person, and in fact, the name *Seiklus* comes from, uh -

**CLYSM:** - The Estonian language -

**TOUPS:** - yeah, from when you were doing missionary work there.

**CLYSM:** That's why I learned the language. [Chuckles]

**TOUPS:** So aside from the name, to what degree has your faith and your religion influenced the way you make games. I mean, I can't see anything preachy about it, and that's not really what I'm asking you, but...

**CLYSM:** Well, yeah. It's so integral to my values that I can't really separate it, but I do

certainly consider morality a lot, if nothing else. I guess something maybe silly that I consider is whether something I make is going to waste someone's time, and that if 100 people play it, I'm wasting that much time for 100 people. And I also don't want to make a game, or any kind of artwork that I think is going to influence someone to do something that I think isn't good!

**TOUPS:** Well I can't see that in *Seiklus*, and in the demo of *Vellella* you posted too, that things are very... I don't know, just focused on being peaceful.

**CLYSM:** Yeah, I'm not trying to get across some specific thing, just that general values can't avoid being in there somewhere.

**TOUPS:** What do you think of the way religion is used in games? You know, a lot of RPG's will have these...

**CLYSM:** The evil church?

**TOUPS:** Yeah, like this, institution that strongly resembles the Catholic Church, and the last boss is some kind of God-like figure, and you can obviously read whatever you want into Japanese culture that makes their RPG's that way. And you can read stuff like that in American games in different ways, in these vampire games and stuff, there's always a strong presence of religion one way or another, or in Castlevania games also. Does that affect you in any sort of serious way?

**CLYSM:** You mean when I play games?

**TOUPS:** Or just when you think about them...

**CLYSM:** Well, I think it's pretty inevitable, cause I mean, when someone wants a creature to be incredibly powerful, I mean, the first thing they turn to is, what do people believe is incredibly popular? A demon or a god, or whatever. And

of course, everything else is a part of the culture of the person making the game is coming from, and their target audience, it's always gonna be there. I think it's kind of funny how there's always like, evil churches, but I don't really care. It doesn't bother me or anything.

**TOUPS:** Yeah. I can describe myself as a lapsed, or occasional Catholic, and I'm inclined to feel the same way. It all feels like beating a dead horse at this point.

I'm drifting a bit from the topic of *Seiklus* but it's something that's been interesting me for awhile, so I'll just throw it out at you: there's a sudden proliferation of new consoles and new hardware, and I've been getting this general feeling that there's no purpose for the next wave of hardware at this point -- that we're just going through the motions. Have you had any thoughts about the next generation of consoles?

**CLYSM:** I really haven't thought about them at all. But I have been thinking about something similar to that recently. I played *Silent Hill 4* recently like I mentioned. I also ordered a copy of *Silent Hill 1*, and I haven't played it yet but I tested it out just to see if it worked. And the contrast between the graphics... It's just like, wow. I don't mind either one, I like both graphical styles, but it made me realize, look at this jump we've had.

**TOUPS:** Really, even between *Silent Hill 1* and 2. It's pretty ridiculous. But go on.

**CLYSM:** Yeah, there's lots of things like that, even if you just look within a particular game series. One's not better than the other; in fact some of my favorite games are really old.

**TOUPS:** In fact, I tend to think that, aesthetically speaking, looking at like *Legend of Zelda*, or going even further to the Commodore 64, where things were really simple, a lot of the games are still successful visually; the art designers knew what they were doing with what



they had.

**CLYSM:** Actually there's a trend recently that I like, I guess Nintendo's big on it, between *Paper Mario* and *Wind Waker*, where things are really simple but really, really stylized. Even though it's simple you couldn't have done it on older systems. And there's that wolf game from Capcom that looks like it's brush stroked.

**TOUPS:** Yeah. *Okami*.

**CLYSM:** I like seeing stuff like that. Things don't always have to be real-looking. They make them in the style that they want to use.

**TOUPS:** So I guess the question is, and I'm editorializing here, so bear with me: how much more will new technology really help things? We already have some pretty realistic games. And we can start pouring more and more into the hardware and the results you get just aren't as significant. We'll never have another jump like we did from the PS1 to the PS2.

**CLYSM:** Well I wouldn't be saying anything new if I mentioned the cost of games that rises with everything else - or of producing them.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, that's another issue too. Games are getting shorter, just because getting all the art done takes so many resources.

**CLYSM:** And that contributes to the culture of sequels we have right now... I mean, some of

them are very good, but...

**TOUPS:** No I totally understand what you mean. Even *Silent Hill 3* reuses some environments from part two. It's not necessarily laziness, just one of those things.

**CLYSM:** I don't always mind it, when someone rehashes something like that, but there's just so much of it. And I like originality.

**TOUPS:** Apparently the games for the next consoles will cost between \$60-\$70, and I can barely afford them now as it is.

**CLYSM:** So we're going back to Super Nintendo levels?

**TOUPS:** I can't believe that period ever existed.

**CLYSM:** I remember there were very few people who could play *Chrono Trigger* when it was new.

**TOUPS:** Well, yeah, that game still cost \$60 like three years after it came out. And I remember some wrestling game that was like \$120, and the price never really went down. I'm sure you could find it for like \$2 now, though. But still, those were um... heady times.

**CLYSM:** One interesting thing that that draws out is that independents can't compete with that, so they will go to the basics and ask, "what can I do?" and that's actually a good aspect of what this is doing to people's minds. You just can't even try to be in their league, so don't bother. Just make what you want to make.

**TOUPS:** And I guess this all kind of comes back to you, in that what the industry really needs is more technological power or impressive special effects, or what have you, but I think it will become like the same thing that's happening in the world of film and music, where you have this sort of "indie" scene or whatever. You have what things are happening there and

a few years later they start influencing and revitalizing what happens in the mainstream, and it keeps things fresh. What the industry is really starving for, not to get literary -- though I guess you were in that criticism class with me, right? Was it Wordsworth who said something about how it's the poet's job to be constantly revitalizing the language...

**CLYSM:** It could've been.

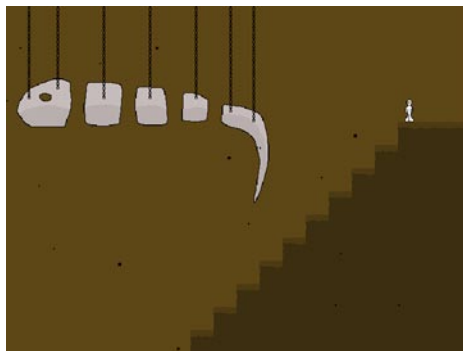
**TOUPS:** But you remember that, right? It's the same sort of relationship there. I kind of feel like a big reason videogames are so stagnant right now is because that element is kind of lacking. Seeing a full-scale game like *Seiklus* is so rare.

On that note, we can close things off here. If you can give some essential piece of advice to someone, I guess like myself, who is working on an independent game, what would it be?

**CLYSM:** Well, one of the things that I always try to keep in mind when I start getting lazy with level design or whatever, is just to make sure that the end product is something that I want to play. That it isn't a clone of something. There's no point in making those because it will never be as good as the original. Just be creative about it.

I mean. I could say something like "start small," but I don't think that's true, cause I didn't start small. [Laughs]

**TOUPS:** And yeah, everyone will approach



something like this in a different way.

Sometimes you surprise yourself.

Oh! There's one more question I had for you. It's kind of rudimentary, but I forgot. Can you tell me about some of the other projects your working on? What was the flying game called?

**CLYSM:** *Veilella*.

**TOUPS:** Right. What's the inspiration behind the name there?

**CLYSM:** Well most of the games of course I give Estonian names that relate to the game, but that's an exception, cause I'm working on the game with Darthlupi, who is another Game Maker creator whose work I really like. A funny thing about him is we met at the same time because each of us sent the other an email about how much we liked the others' game, so maybe we should work together!

**TOUPS:** Nice. [Laughs]

**CLYSM:** But the name, it's actually a scientific name for an organism that's similar to a jellyfish.

**TOUPS:** I think I know what you're talking about.

**CLYSM:** It's sort of a little tiny flying jellyfish.

**TOUPS:** I know you don't want to give away too



much about it, but you mentioned that when you released the demo you had to remove a lot of things. Can you tell me a few things that you took away from the demo that we might be seeing?

**CLYSM:** Well, the game is pretty close to completion really, and it's sort of been sitting on the shelf for a while. We want to make sure it's as good as possible before release.

**TOUPS:** Well, it may be that by the time this issue is released it will be completed.

**CLYSM:** Well, right now we're both doing other things so who knows. But it's going to be a sort of mix of fast parts and slow parts. There'll be some exploration where there are no enemies and stuff like that and there'll be some other parts where you're actually in danger.

**TOUPS:** So there'll be enemies.

**CLYSM:** There will obstacles in the game. There will be things that can hurt you.

**TOUPS:** What was the inspiration for it? What it reminds me of, and it might be a weird thing to say cause I've never actually played it, but it reminds me of *NIGHTS* for Sega Saturn.

**CLYSM:** That's one of the first things I heard when I told somebody about it, but I'd never heard of *NIGHTS* so I had to look it up.. Subsequently I saw it at my brother-in-law's house and I said "okay, I see why someone would say that." But I haven't played it much.

But as for how this game came about, I mentioned *Below the Root* earlier. I didn't get the flying part of *Below the Root* into *Seiklus*, and I was talking to Darthlupi about it on instant messenger, and he said "oh, watch this," and right then and there he just wrote a demo, and it was just this perfect engine.

**TOUPS:** Yeah, and the way it works is really



fantastic.

**CLYSM:** He's a smart engine guy.

**TOUPS:** And that's using Game Maker as well, right?

**CLYSM:** Yeah.

**TOUPS:** That's pretty amazing that you can do something like that. I doubt Mark Overmars even had anything like that in mind when he made it. I'm definitely looking forward to that.

**CLYSM:** Well, I can't say that that will come out first as far as my projects go.

**TOUPS:** So you mentioned earlier online about some kind of scrolling shooter you were making?

**CLYSM:** I call it a space shooter because you're a ship, and it kind of resembles one. It's really more like *Fantasy Zone* or *Choplifter* than a scrolling shooter.

**TOUPS:** I'm trying to remember what *Choplifter's* like...

**CLYSM:** It's an old Sega game where you're blowing up these little hostage things, and you save them, and there's boats.

**TOUPS:** It has an isometric perspective?

**CLYSM:** You're thinking of *Thunder Blade* or something like that. *Choplifter* is straight 2D. You're just a helicopter. The reason I mention it is that the screen doesn't scroll; you push it. There will also be vertical dimensions. It's going to be an exploration game. I can't away from that.

**TOUPS:** So is it going to have any shooter mechanics at all?

**CLYSM:** Yeah. You do shoot things, but it



won't be a standard shooter by any means. There are so many perfect ones there's no way I'd bother trying to compete with those.

**TOUPS:** I'm glad you mentioned it, actually, because that's always something I've thought about doing. I've always loved the controls of shooters, but they're always scrolling, and you have these interesting environments scrolling by, and you can't do anything with them. I've always wanted to do a game like that, but I guess now that you're doing it I can sleep a little more easily.

**CLYSM:** Yeah, I've always wanted to do a shooter, but I haven't because there are so many good ones. How can I contribute to that genre that's so...polished?

**TOUPS:** I mean. After *Ikaruga*, I kind of even wonder, how much more can be said...

**CLYSM:** Did *R-Type Final* come out after that?

**TOUPS:** I think so. I haven't played that one yet.

**CLYSM:** I'm a big *R-Type* fan.

**TOUPS:** Have you played *Gradius V*?

**CLYSM:** Of course! I like that one, too. I haven't beaten it yet. I think I'm on the last level! I think.

**TOUPS:** I know this is becoming the never-

ending interview, but: why do you think you keep going back to the exploration mode of gameplay? And do you think you could see yourself doing anything different in the future?

**CLYSM:** Certainly I could... And I've done a few other small projects that took me like three days; little life simulators and things like that. I guess I just really like exploration games.

**TOUPS:** What is it about those types of games that draws you to them? I guess this sort of relates to what you were saying about discovery.

**CLYSM:** Well, the key word, probably, is *discovery*. I mean, finding something and, like, wow, look what this artist did. And video games are a unique medium that you can do that in. Just the idea of coming across something and just having it be special somehow.

**TOUPS:** I've always made this connection with architecture; on some basic level, architecture has to be functional, but, with a lot of monuments specifically, it also has that same element of discovery. Games can take that thread, that sort of thing, that thread, and go crazy with it.

**CLYSM:** I like having those things in the game that don't matter to the game, they're just their for the sake of being there. Things you can physically do in the game that don't impact your goal...

**TOUPS:** Like being able to bounce off the treasure chest.

**CLYSM:** Well, that was stolen from *Castlevania*.

**TOUPS:** Oh, that's *Castlevania IV*, right?

**CLYSM:** Actually, the reason you bounce on the chests is because I couldn't make it so you'd land on them. It turned out to be good anyway.

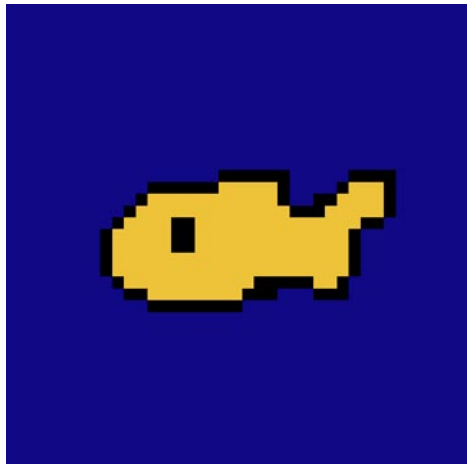
**TOUPS:** Good solution. I definitely spent a lot of time just bouncing around.

**CLYSM:** A lot of things in the game were because of my limitations.

**TOUPS:** Well it's definitely all the more enriching experience for it.

Ok, well I think that covers everything I wanted to ask you. Thanks for your time. Good luck with all your future efforts.

**CLYSM:** No Problem.





## NERVES OF STEEL IN BATTALION HELL

### **Steel Battalion - XB**

John Szczepaniak

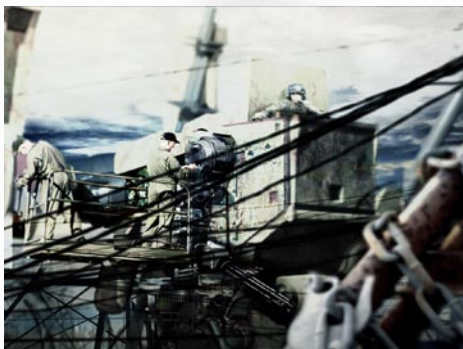
War has a permanent place in the history of gaming. It's been packaged, de-fanged and handed to the player who is starved for exhilaration, excitement and enjoyment. War games have seldom gone beyond those three e-s. This poses a problem, since war by its very nature is seldom any of these things. War is brutally frightening and viscerally unpleasant. It is also final, since dead soldiers do not come back to life, a sharp contrast to war in videogames.

The role of creating fear in players has normally been left to the survival horror genre, where if successful, has made people reluctant at times to play such games. But fear has rarely been successfully used in war games. *Steel Battalion* challenges the status-quo and also the future of games design by emotionally manipulating the player in a way that has never been done before. It lets you taste gaming pleasure before threatening to dash it against the rocks if you don't fight for it. It is without doubt one of the most revolutionary, genre defining landmark titles in the history of gaming. Not because of its high priced controller but because of its unique saving mechanism. While many have been quick to gloss over this factor, some even dismissing it as "annoying at best", the fact remains that it has been used in such a

way as to be completely terrifying. Like no other game before it, not even the finest of the survival horror genre, *SB* is capable of inducing extreme amounts of raw, almost mind destroying, fear. Its ability to create terror makes it the most "real" war simulator of our time.

Unlike any other war game, even simulations such as *Full Spectrum Warrior*, *SB* has more accurately recreated those unpleasant feelings one has when indulging in media that portrays conflict. It's the closest media alternative to war available, even if it puts the player in a multi-story walking war machine, because you fear your own demise. Other media portrayals of real and fictional wars have relied on a passive viewer associating with the imagery displayed on their own terms, but they are always kept isolated from events by the fact that they are still only viewing things, not experiencing them. They can easily justify things in their own mind whilst sitting in a warm and comfortable room, at no point affected in any way by events. In *SB*, by giving a person the kind of interaction only available in the medium of games, suddenly the imagery of war not only has a direct affect on them, but their avatar affects the conflict. There is genuine causality in every action or failed attempt.

If you die in *SB*, your avatar dies for real. Your save game is erased and your post-mortem stats are recorded. There is no reprieve and no



second chance.

Games have admittedly used death in emotional ways before. Which gaming veteran hasn't shed a tear over losing Jops half way through Cannon Fodder only for his grave stone to haunt them until the end of the game? But never before have those who create games taken the liberty of punishing the player for dying by erasing all evidence of their hard work. The only way to avoid death is to hit 'eject' in time once the klaxon sounds. That klaxon sound will end up burned into the sub-conscious of all *SB* players, causing a 'Pavlov's Dog' type reaction where the adrenaline hikes and the eyes widen and whiten as your hand instinctively lunges for the only button that can save you. As a result, the farther one progresses and the more hours one clocks up, the more fearful the possibility of death becomes. Restarting the first five missions on the easiest difficulty is painful enough, but being forced to begin anew after completing your 100th mission, having clocked over 50 hours in campaign mode, is simply too much. Losing and dying no longer become options in open warfare once a certain point is reached. It is here that *SB* pulls you into its trenches and won't let you leave.

Even if you do not die, and manage to hit the eject button before the Vertical Tank (VT) explodes in a shower of flames, there is still the risk of relegation. Every player earns supply points with which to buy further VTs, lose a VT out in the field and you have buy a new one. Waste too many supply points and you will be unable to purchase anymore,

thereby left unable to fight and relegated out of the war. For the player this is death in all but name, and should be equally feared.

This long lasting experience begins slowly and with a lighthearted tone to it: the excitement of assembly, your initial training mission and the laughs that ensue after toppling a VT for the first time. This innocence slowly gives way, revealing a more jaded and shell-shocked *SB* gamer. After a few hours, the player has mastered the controls and the cockpit starts to feel cramped as every button and gear is mapped to memory. There is no solace, no place to hide in the mission and there is no pause button, the VT becomes a second skin and every cannon shot is felt. Soon after, common sense prevails and 'Soy Sauce' becomes the official song of war being played for every mission.

My first and only relegation happened on my initial play through. I took too many risks, made too many mistakes and mission nine ended up claiming all my VTs, all my supply points and eventually my military rank. Every player has at some point experienced such a major loss, and if they have not, then they should. The experience is akin to being hit in the stomach by something at high impact. Blood rushes to the face, the mind clouds over, one begins feeling dizzy and speech becomes incoherent. All the blood, sweat and tears to come this far were in vain, and everything is lost in the blinking of an eye. This birth by fire marks the beginning of the true *SB* pilot, since before you were like a child lost in a dream, unaware of the real danger of the situation. From that point you vow never to be humiliated again, to never rush in where angels fear to tread and to never face the



wrong end of a Vitzh's gun. You know the true horror of folly in combat, and whilst begrudgingly starting from the beginning, are ever wary of the Hai Shi Dao frontline.

After about ten hours, the player develops what VT veterans call the thousand-yard stare. Their eyes glaze over once the cockpit hatch closes, and the radio crackles to life as they give running commentary of events halted only by loud screams of "We got HOSTILES! Enemy VT comin' over the damn wire!" Their brows twitch with every Railgun blast and their hands shake with the roar of machine guns. Reloading the cannons becomes an instinct and one learns to love chaff as if it were fresh underwear. Even so, the fear has not yet peaked and early missions are approached with a macho bravado.

After twenty hours, the player refuses to leave the house and can be seen wearing the same sweat stained jungle camouflage vest for weeks on end, while crude raggedy bandanas made from the sleeves of old T-shirts push back their spiked and greasy hair. By now the brow twitching and glazed look is uncontrollable, following a heart stopping incident that nearly saw them annihilated by encroaching enemy reinforcements, and every comprehensible sentence they say is followed by the words "out in the field, man."

The player begins to take precautions: tinned food and bottled water are stored close to 'the equipment console' since it's never known when leave will be given in order to have a proper meal with one's family again. Experienced pilots have also admitted to keeping a portable latrine close to hand to relieve themselves of the large amounts of water drunk to combat the dreaded tension felt whilst playing.

After thirty hours of playing this so called "game," an armchair and controls on a table is no longer good enough. The pilot builds himself a proper cockpit to sit in, using old cardboard boxes and tape. The TV is no longer used for such petty things as watching television, and is thereafter referred to as a VT combat monitor.

Logos are painted on the side of the makeshift room-filling-cockpit, and the words 'no fear' and 'VT killer' are scrawled on its sides. The pilot also demands that everyone refer to them by rank only. By now, slight trepidation has festered into full stomach based dread, the kind that stops people from reloading their guns on night missions for fear of the noise alerting nearby enemy placements.

By fifty hours, all pilots should have passed the point of no return. The in-game boom-box has been replaced by a real life cassette player that pumps out 'Flight of the Valkyrie' at full blast for 90 minutes before the tape needs to change sides. Many develop a small ritual performed before every mission start up: all buttons and switches are individually checked, a small mantra is chanted and the eject button casing is removed. It is at this point in the campaign that pilots no longer want to participate, not because the thrill of combat isn't enjoyable, but because the risk of defeat is too great. Some crack and refuse to do anything other than training ops or free mission mode. For everyone else, they have by now unlocked all the VT models and even rescued Corporal Arnold, thereby removing the weight limits on VTs. They deserve to be called 'masters' for their proven high level of battle skill. Which is ironic, since despite this high level of skill, many begin refusing to enter higher level missions without at least three Railgun attachments and a full compliment of re-supply choppers.

In their sleep players have nightmares about Jaralacc ambushes and downed choppers.







They no longer use or trust the radar, since later levels have radar invisible enemies, instead relying on gut instinct. They even resist the temptation to boot the game up; often it only brings flashbacks of past battles. Suddenly, as clear as day, fleets of enemy attack choppers can be seen swooping in, reminding them of that dreaded mission twelve where they were once stranded, guns jammed and out of ammo as their buddies were cut up by enemy fire. Memories like that can create twitch players where any movement results in machine guns being fired almost randomly, who knows where those rocket carrying 'freedom-fighters' might be hiding in the trees. In those cases, such as mission five, the flame thrower becomes your best friend.

Some reviewers have criticized the game for being too pre-scripted, too linear and having poor AI. That, after completing the first set of the missions the others becomes repetitive. They are missing the point.

*SB* works on an entirely different mental and emotional level. The fear is palpable as you progress through the game thanks to the saving feature. It was this, and not the controller, that makes the game so chillingly realistic, indeed it was a stroke of genius to implement this feature. Without the fear of death, the possibility of the save game being erased, *SB* would have been one tenth the game it is now. It is because of this reason that *SB* could only have worked as well as it does being pre-scripted, as opposed to non-linear with adaptive enemy positioning and AI.

The game would have been rendered unplayable if the missions had any form of randomization in them. On later missions, which are tough enough anyway, the possibility of encountering a rogue Behemoth or hidden

Jaralacc would have been simply too terrifying for all but the most battle hardened gamer. There is a point in gaming where realism must be left behind, where the limits cannot be pushed further and the game would lose all elements of enjoyment. While *SB* puts us in as real a situation as possible, that genuinely makes us fearful of our own demise, to go any further would be to cross the boundary. Imagine if the attack chopper convoy from mission twelve suddenly swooped in whilst trying to destroy the battleship because it had called for reinforcements. Or if light enemy VTs could be sent in via an aerial drop at a moments notice. Already frayed nerves would snap under such unpredictable tension. Even with enemy layouts memorized some players have trouble focusing, since at the back of their mind they think 'what if I don't make it back after this mission?' Mission nine (the one I was relegated on), has a slight degree of randomized elements, with the position of the enemy occasionally changing and even higher level mechs showing up randomly. This can frustrate, since enemies are not where one expects them to be, the mission becomes frantic as you run around wildly taking damage trying to find them, only to be taken out by a Behemoth that has suddenly appeared, or a Regal Dress those who didn't show up on radar.

As for arguments pertaining to the poor enemy AI, they are nonsense. Even an idiot with a gun is to be avoided, and so it's the same in *SB*. They may walk into fire, turn on the spot and miss 9 times out of 10, but when they do hit you, if you are not fast enough reaching for eject you will die. The danger of these seemingly incompetent foes is heightened greatly because their efficiency is directly connected to your permanent existence in this virtual world. This in



turn fundamentally changes the way you approach and perceive them. They are no longer mindless targets in a digital reality, but reach the status of genuine threats even in spite of their seeming stupidity.

As well as fear, *SB* also works on other emotional levels. The mission where the player must hunt down and execute VT platoon deserters is particularly poignant. After a fierce mountain campaign, the commander informs you that some of the men couldn't take the pressure anymore and went AWOL with the platoon's VTs and recent armor and weapon upgrades. They were tracked to a local village, which they'd raid for supplies. These people were once in your platoon, your comrades. Soldiers just like you, tired of the fighting and the pressures of war. They wanted out, but as the commander showed, the only way out of the platoon was in a body bag. This again sets *SB* apart from other war games again, since in all my years I can't recollect any war games where you had to kill those on your own side while destroying the evidence. I have to admit that this mission left a bad taste in my mouth and it made me feel uneasy about future missions. It just didn't feel right having to do those things. But that is war: sometimes you are given orders that you do not want yet must carry out because those higher up in rank say so.

For all these things, *SB* must be commended. Few other games have come close to generating such strong and overpowering emotions, quite literally grabbing you by the nether regions and hooking you in. The emotional response is so strong that it fundamentally affects the way you approach and play the game. Imagine how much more immersive and horrifying the *Biohazard* or *Silent Hill* series would be if your save was deleted

after being eaten. Or if in *Medal of Honor* games, dying meant restarting the whole campaign. Tim Rogers, in an article, revealed how Kojima contemplated using such a design element in *Metal Gear Solid 3*, where death meant the erasing of save data, but was persuaded against it by the rest of his team. Knowing this, it raises the question of just how one would approach *MGS3*, interpreting and reacting to its environment and in-game mechanics.

For modern players, who have become obsessed with perfect game stats and the ultimate save file, *Steel Battalion* is a revolutionary wake up call that shakes the foundations of established game design. It has taken the very thing players hold so dearly and put it at risk, and then made them fight bitterly for it. In a way, it harkens back to the days before battery-backup, where 'Game Over' meant starting again.

Modern titles allow the player to save and die an unlimited amount of times before completing the game, where a simple medical kit can heal even the most severe of wounds. While in *Final Fantasy* a 'Phoenix Down' is enough to re-animate most fallen allies. Die in these games and you lose nothing, except maybe the few minutes it took you to reach that section. In such examples there is no cause and effect, there is no penalization for carelessness. In *Steel Battalion* it is the opposite. Something is lost when you die, something you regard as precious and hold dear to your self: the in-game persona of who you are, that you have spent so much time developing.

No other game has been able to so accurately recreate the folly and stupidity that is human conflict, or more importantly the unpleasant emotions that go with it.





## New Advice Journalism

### Keep Your Fonzie Offa My Gonzo

M. O'Connor

The most fascinating thing about the frothy eruption both for and against "New Games Journalism" is the attachment commentators have to the term "journalism" as a measure of worth. As anyone who has ever worked a beat and asked intrusive questions of the victims of crime, accident and tragedy knows, there's very little glamour to be found in the field, and the cycle of misery and corruption never ends.

And maybe that's the hook - it appears to confer an extra layer of legitimacy upon a field of publications that has little to do with journalism as it is practiced or preached.

The fundamental flaw in the concept of "entertainment journalism" as a whole - and applied to games in particular - in the context of a profession defined by "serving the public trust" is the absolute lack of a public trust to serve. No one is going to suffer any material losses - aside from investors - with the success or failure of any entertainment industry outing. Art will go on, just as eating and sleeping will.

Acknowledging this does not mean having no love for the form - I write this waiting to dive back into *Morrowind* - but rather taking a few moments to look outside the terribly insular and juvenile world of those who use games as a form of identity.

What is the public trust - in the case of

games - being defended from? Is the public trust the fan who is going to spend 10USD on a hint book, 50USD on a game or 300USD on a PSP? Is this a matter of critical importance? Is it a matter of civil importance? Is it even slightly important to anyone outside the narrow group of potential buyers?

There is a place and a time for entertainment writing for news outlets, as it covers topics of general interest, helps sell advertising and creates an oasis for audience members tired of gore, business statistics and the circular shouting match of political coverage. Books, film, games, art and fashion are all of public interest, and deeply vital to human culture. But let's not kid ourselves. We do not, for example, refer to advice columns as "advice journalism" - making Dan Savage "New Advice Journalism" and Dear Abby "Old Advice Journalism" in the process.

The journalism end of the entertainment industry is already covered in depth by the business press. Music and film reviewers are often critical both towards the artist as well as the industry, but they rarely focus on the nuts and bolts of how it affects the public at large. The business desks of major media outlets cover incidents of corruption, collusion and collapse - in other words, they already handle the overlap into public concern that is the primary focus of journalism and what makes it distinct from "writing about stuff." Reporters

and editors can focus on the nuts and bolts of the financial world without getting caught up in the emotions a game player feels towards certain companies. They also have the benefit of formal training in a craft undergoing a rapid expansion - and showing far too many signs of not understanding the basics of gathering facts, information analysis and verification.

I write this as someone with a BA in journalism who has since left the faith of Mencken<sup>1</sup> (if only in body), but has worked for a major newspaper, run an independent university weekly and written more than a little "entertainment journalism" for niche publications. I do not believe for a moment that mainstream journalism, whether print, television or electronic, is anywhere near fault-free. Dozens of recent scandals have yet again demonstrated this well beyond reasonable doubt. Rewriting press releases (or not changing them at all) is another sad - yet common - trait shared by media reporting in all fields.

All further evidence as to why tacking "journalism" onto a subject should not automatically confer legitimacy.

Unlike the doomsayers of the corporate consolidation of media like Noam Chomsky and Ben Bagdikian<sup>2</sup>, I see a great proliferation of media in a growing number of hands - the emergence of the blog feedback loop in the mainstream news cycle, the explosion of satellite radio and examples of self-publishing (like *The Gamer's Quarter*) are but a few examples. Niche outlets delivered electronically are tremendously useful for providing specialized information to specialized audiences, and work

well in the case of various entertainment forms, especially games.

However, very little of it is journalism in any real sense, and instead relies upon the term to provide legitimacy, like a child trying to act wise beyond their years.

"Service journalism" is not to be confused with "public service journalism" - one gets a Pulitzer and the other gets made fun of in *Gawker*. Calling something service journalism is a nice way of terming something a fluff piece; those stories about the "everyday problems" and "hot new trends" your audience faces. Product placement segments like the ones you see on morning television shows - the perky-faced ghetto of household cleaners and whatever's hot in the gadget market - work by the same market rules and public relations techniques a games publication does, but aren't limited to one advertising field.

I'm a public relations professional in an unrelated industry, and I must admit the idea of having a legion of incredibly enthusiastic but unpaid supporters is terribly enticing. The temptation to abuse must be an awful burden, leavened only by the vigor with which fans exercise their devotion. More to the point, I have serious envy towards anyone whose

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1 - Mencken - as in H. L. Mencken, as in Henry Louis, thank you very much (see left). One of the most influential writers of the early 20th century, both as a journalist and polemicist, Mencken is a rare soul whose work remains funny decades after his death. His famous coverage of the Scopes trial was both witty and vicious, and is a classic must-read. As an uncommon man of his times, his elitism and anti-Semitism is disappointing and confusing, especially in light of his work in helping Jews get out of Europe at the start of World War II to comments both for and against state-sponsored racism. A deeply important guy, if you're into such things, and someone all real and fake journalists should be familiar with.

2 - Ben Bagdikian - an American media critic and dean emeritus of Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. His generally left-wing analysis of media consolidation, "The Media Monopoly," was first published in 1983. While thoughtfully constructed, both technology and time have made many of his predictions, despite many reprints and revisions, outmoded. However, his general concern about how ownership and money interests affect reporting is worth reading, especially for a single-industry advertiser field like gaming journalism.





indicate an improper relationship whether one exists or not. Now, I have a sinking feeling that some of the folk working in the games industry publicity field don't know what an ombudsman is. That's life. Most of the people slagging fanciful first-person prose about gaming as "gonzo"<sup>4</sup> aren't familiar with Dr. Thompson's<sup>5</sup> excellent early work either.

Even a child knows if someone is being given gifts and then pushes a story by some foundation, a government office or a company, they probably aren't doing anything in the name of journalistic integrity. No one gets something for nothing. Why this distinction seems lost when it comes to writing about games puzzled me initially. It took a while to realize that it was partly due to my own unrealistic expectations.

I don't believe the market will support anything remotely like a mainstream publication with passable journalistic standards. A mix of stories about industry politics and backdoor deals combined with reviews and features would deliver meat and potatoes coverage while attempting to grow up and beyond the boundaries currently set. I do believe that the industry needs such an outlet, if only to act as a publicly visible focus for the already far more critical and individual work of bloggers – compare coverage of the Game Developers Conference by participants like Greg Costikyan with the treatment by traditional game media outlets.

The difference is striking and shows the value of critical voices if one believes, as I do, that all industries need watchdogs. They need external pressure from knowledgeable, unbiased and independent sources just as any other field does in order to respond to more than faceless sales data and the buzzing of internal politics. They are never going to receive that pressure from glossies and their web counterparts, who realize far too well who butters their bread. Lapdogs may yap, but they are entirely dependent upon the whims of the hand that feeds them. Without being able to garner advertising dollars from other fields there's little

principle critical audience embodies every virtue a lapdog has, but comes with the added bonus of being mostly toilet trained.

Let's put it another way – if you line up for freebies, don't return test items, or otherwise accept handouts from the companies and industries you cover, you're not a journalist.

You're a pet.

At a responsible journalistic outlet, you're reprimanded – or outright fired – for taking graft, and if it's a slow week, the ombudsman<sup>3</sup> writes a column on why receiving gifts from the companies and figures one covers is poor journalism. The problem isn't even whether or not the crap novelty items you get in the mail are going to sway your coverage, but that they

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3 - Ombudsman – in the context of journalism, the ombudsman acts as a public advocate, writing columns about why a paper wrote this story this way or that and addressing public concerns about bias, misconduct and other sins against journalistic integrity.

4 - We now pause for a brief invocation: May She What Done It All strike down (or at least bury in hot dog buns) the next illiterate bozo who uses the phrase "gonzo" to describe a piece because of their irritation with the creative use of pronouns.

5 - Dr. Thompson – someone made a movie about him starring Johnny Depp. I think there were drugs in it. (see above)



hope of breaking out of this trap, assuming such a desire exists in the first place.

Beyond the economic concern, there's also the more fundamental fact that fans don't care about details outside of the objects of their desire – and these media forms are staffed by fans, not adversarial journalists. It is difficult – nearly impossible – to step away from adoration and turn a critical eye, though the evolution of sports reporting over the past 150 years gives hope that such a stance will eventually be possible, given enough time.

If nothing else, the Jack Thompsons<sup>6</sup> of the world will be better fought by journalists sympathetic to game playing than by the free passes that *Newsweek* and company give to “what about the children?” crusades. Now, Mr. Thompson may or may not ever press a successful lawsuit, but people who call games “murder simulators” without being publicly humiliated are aided by the lack of actual journalism by the gaming press. Demagogues like Thompson – or newcomers like Senator Hillary Clinton – are screaming to be skewered by anyone beyond the safe haven of comment fields with even the slightest working knowledge of both games and effective writing.

Now, none of this is to say that there is not

a useful discussion to be had about traditional game reviews versus the experiential style, which lies at the heart of the NGJ debate. Personally, I enjoy reading about the 7th grade best friend and the ice cream sandwiches enjoyed during drawn out battles in *Final Fantasy* far more than the traditional model centered on graphics, sound and replay value. Being a heavily personal and largely solitary medium, games beg for this sort of approach. It has the added benefit of being a difficult form to craft well, which makes those who do pull it off easy to remember.

That's all a matter of personal taste, and certainly not a judgment of objective worth. Outside of reviews, I look for industry news from the business press and have found a few solid outlets for personalized coverage from industry players.

Most importantly, however, is that while there is obvious room for many review styles, the next generation of business and news journalists will be deeply familiar with video games. This is already starting to become apparent with the placement of game reviews and stories in the arts and entertainment sections of many major newspapers. It is a small start. But they will ultimately have far more of the impact I'm hoping for than the cycle of payola and frothing demand that dominates the bulk of game writing.

Pardon me - journalism.

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6 - Jack Thompson – Lost the Dade County State Attorney's seat to Janet Reno in 1988; responded by claiming she was a lesbian suffering from various mental illnesses as a side effect of Alzheimer's, her medication and Mafia blackmail concerning ladies of the night supposedly in her employ. Went on to tackle 2 Live Crew and the “Cop Killer” single off of a lukewarm thrash/rap project from Ice-T. Likes to refer to video games as “murder simulators” and was given quite a bit of air time during the DC sniper crisis by making a link between the snipers, the game *Doom* and “God Mode.” For some reason, invincibility in a game with no sniper rifle in it is more effective in Mr. Thompson's mind for creating mayhem and murder than actual rifle training in the military. Despite this, he receives far more airtime and column inches than any game journalist. The reason is obvious, if one takes a few minutes to examine the game-related publications on your typical news rack.





The Nokia Press Conference took place Tuesday evening in a swanky building in downtown LA.

It was guarded by a table of women with press papers and lists.



Nokia's Conference was highlighted with Hollywood quality trailers for their N-gage games featuring lots of actors and cinema but very little in-game action. That along with biased interviews with various no-name developers that spoke only in buzz words and jargon spelled out Nokia's new plans: N-gage technology will be integrated into all their new high-end phones, making the N-gage unavoidable!

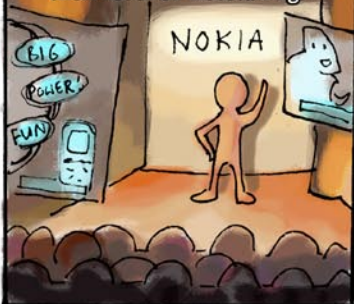




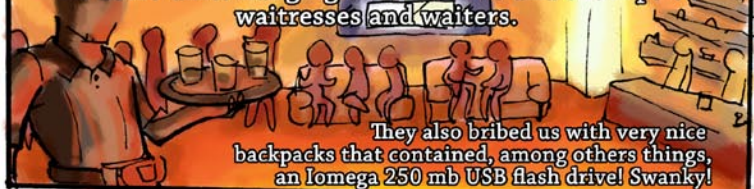
I wasn't on the invited list but as the time came closer to the beginning of the conference, they let anyone with a business card inside.



The conference was dimly lit with orange lights and populated with European, Asian, and non-gaming reporters. I could tell by their feverish notetaking.



The rest of the conference was a swanky party supplied with free drinks, high-class entrées, and free N-gage play on demo units hanging off of HDTVs and the hips of waitresses and waiters.



They also bribed us with very nice backpacks that contained, among other things, an Iomega 250 mb USB flash drive! Swanky!

By the end of the night, I felt thoroughly spoiled and disgusted with myself. I went to the bar and asked the bartender for a Coke.



# The Creation of a New Style, Giant Fish and The Fight for Survival



## A Darius Retrospective

Francesco-Alessio Ursini

### **“Our mythological past or, Bacterians and Bydos are but one side of the equation.”**

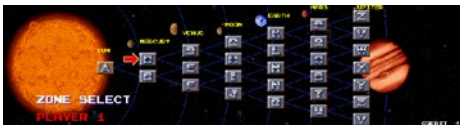
Darius is about the fight for life. Before human beings were the dominant life in the Galaxy the Great Old Ones ruled the universe (maybe the Taito guys were inspired by Cthulhu and company). The Great Old Ones decided to create life and to toy with it. The giant mechanical fish they created are not robots – they’re life forms called Chimerae. They could be considered hybrids, as their creators tried to implant brains from other creatures into their bodies. Unfortunately, this plan didn’t work out and the Chimerae, creatures of wonder, could only survive for a few hours, doomed to replicate and die shortly after that. The creators would then put them into hibernation, allowing them to rise again only in cases of great danger, when the entire universe is threatened by a supreme menace.

This menace is called humankind, hence, the fight between the ancient creatures and the Silver Hawk warriors. But this is something I would discover later when I hunted down the Darius original soundtrack.

Darius is a series of horizontal shmups based on speed. The original team of designers

were extremely motivated to create a unique series and ship - so motivated that they produced and released model kits of the hero’s ship and the bosses. The main theme of Darius is the fight for survival, resisting the tide of evolution and building yourself a future. Like a Matsumoto anime, you aren’t fighting with nameless baddies, but other life forms. What’s more menacing than a new species that can potentially dominate the galaxy? Species that have this funny idea of dominating territory tend to clash, and what’s funniest is that the guardians will die after the fight, even if they win it. The irony of this fight is that they’re doomed. You’re doomed as well, or one day will be. You may get far enough to see Proco the fourth and Tiat the Grand - granddaughter of Tiat, but they will still die in a few hours.

Maybe Taito decided that it’s better to end things with a bang, hence no Darius games since 1997, but instead they instead ended things with a whimper, or better, with a sad swan’s song, Raycrisis. Maybe it’s a sign that the giant fish will fly again, that they’re reprinting the much sought after Darius soundtracks. Darius composer Hisayoshi Ogura (OGR) has made some quality music over the past 10 years, highlighted when *G Darius* won the Gamest magazine award for best arcade soundtrack in 1997.



## “Close your eyes”

It's almost been 20 years since the first chapter. I don't want to write the same old rubbish about nonexistent golden ages of gaming or go on any rants that focus on personal senility. I would like, if this is not too audacious of a goal, to write a serious and committed article on the Darius Saga.

However, and this will surely raise a few eyebrows, I'm going to omit the two Super Famicom titles, and (more eyebrows will rise at this point) I would like to add Border Down as the illegitimate (or maybe just unofficial) latest chapter of the Darius epic.

20 years ago (almost), I was eight years old. My uncle runs (for the time being, retirement issues) an arcade. Thanks to this twist, I have been able to play some excellent, funny, obscure titles. Darius is surely not obscure and in Japan as it stands as of the most beloved series of shmups. I often wonder why westerners for the most part seem to be obsessed by two other series -- R-Type and Gradius. Because of this it is difficult to find people that know the series.

Why is this so?

*Darius* is an arcade series at the core – and most so-called gamers spend their time enjoying what big companies like Nintendo and Sony tell them to enjoy in the dark of their rooms. Arcade gaming is a social pastime; it's all about building hierarchies based on scores and skills. If you want to prove your manhood, young man, you have to be the first on the score table.

Back in the '80s, top scorers were king. Being the king meant that you had something to prove to others, it wasn't a question of crowns and legacies, but of score systems. The fight for Alpha male status was fierce. It was all about scenery. Give those frustrated kids something to blow up, add scenery to collide against,

rinse and repeat. Oh yeah, also, “Epic fights against aliens which are, of course, all evil and ugly (and maybe communist too?).” Thanks, Konami. Thanks, Irem. I really enjoyed your games as a kid, but now their enjoyment has gone the way of the dinosaur. In the meantime, other companies were willing to try something different. One was Capcom, but they're not the focus of this article. The other was Taito. We're almost on topic. Stay tuned!

Taito is an arcade-driven company. They still own a few arcades around Japan and in their life span they directed most of their titles to an arcade audience. This means that when speaking of Taito games we're talking about issues of status and competition– we're dealing with games that are, and have always been score-driven. Back in the day, shmups were largely stuff for children and people with a destructive attitude, but some were different.

On the surface it's the same old soup. However: it is 1986, I'm a young enthusiastic kid in my uncle's arcade and I suddenly see a cabinet with three screens. Add to this six amplifiers that give three-dimensional sound



and a default volume that would easily shatter steel.

I insert a coin and start shooting. I get to the first boss, King Fossil, for the first time. I beat him and am faced with the dilemma of which way to go. After a few more plays, a revelation hit me. If I take down all enemies of a formation I get a bonus! I then realize that it is much harder than it looks.

I have to be fast if I want to get all the enemies. I can only shoot again once my bullets have gone out of the screen or my bombs have hit something in the background. Bosses' parts can be destroyed and are worth a lot of points! Scoring systems are only for people who play for score, and at this time in my life I think this type of gaming is only suited for older people. I just want to blow things up! Then again, someone has given you a way to blow things up in style, and it requires some careful thought and pontification. I want to be the first on the score table, that's obvious: I'm eight years old and, being the local alpha male, at least Darius-wise, it sounds like one hell of an idea.

Months pass in search of the best score. Sure, my competitors are older and stronger, so I can deal with them being the alpha males. However, I know that something has changed. If I actually think about what I'm doing, I can do it with style.

Fast forward to 1989. I am now eleven years old and I'm wondering if my favorite arcade company will do another Darius. They do. I play it a bit and notice that it's even faster, with lots of bullets and aggressive enemies. The weapons work in a different way, especially the power-up system – but that's not too much of an issue. And then I get to the second stage. I can only fall in love, because I am listening to for the first time to "Muse Valley," one of Hisayoshi Ogura's (OGR) masterpieces. Then, exactly like the first Darius, I begin figuring out which route is the best, which is the hardest, the best way to kill enemies and bosses, and so on.

It's 1991: Taito created a bizarre shmup called *Gun Frontier* the previous year. It was



about planes that look like giant guns, a planet called Gloria, and the Wild West. Or maybe it was just an undeclared homage to Leiji Matsumoto, the genius behind *Captain Harlock* and *Galaxy 999*, an anime I was so fond of as a kid. What I really cared about right now was *Metal Black*, a new horizontal from Taito. It starts by presenting a story about a dark, hopeless future for Earth and humankind. Everything gets destroyed when aliens invade Earth immediately after a shower of meteorites. Something appears called the "Newalone." It's the main source behind the alien's power and their invisible beams. The Earth is doomed, and you fly one last, desperate mission: you will discover, once you've cleared the game, that there's hope after all.

However, the original plan was that you had to fight for the future of *Darius*, not Earth. *Metal Black* was originally planned to be the third arcade *Darius*. Think of the various fish-like enemies in the game, and then think of the other types, basically, pseudo-insects. Your ship is called Black Fly (or Beelzebub, for the ones versed in mythology). The last boss is a giant Dolphin, still a creature of the sea despite being a mammal.

Given the extremely dark setting, Taito decided to make *Metal Black* a stand-alone project. Despite this, something about Matsumoto's work lingers in the game (the same team as *Gun Frontier* worked on it), especially when the dried ocean is viewed as a symbol of life fading away from Earth. Life, and the pursuit of fish blasting, is one of the key themes of *Darius*, isn't it? Hence, a game where the *Darius*





planet gets devastated is not a good idea. Yeah, the mighty boss battles and the giant lasers are good, and we'll see them again in the future – but well, as good as the game is, I can't avoid noticing its sterile gameplay and absolutely linear scoring system. The soundtrack though, still leaves me speechless after fourteen years. Maybe that's the only reason I played it back in 1991.

Years pass, and I'm still wondering where the hell Darius III is. Well, Taito has done other incredible stuff in the meanwhile, and frankly, I'm still a bit busy playing *Rayforce*. Finally the wait is over. Fast forward again. *Darius Gaiden* is a side-story: the game is set between the first and the second *Darius*. Again, it is about fighting for life, Darius against Belsler. This time, however, things work in a slightly different way: well, a bit like the first *Darius* with power-ups. Taking bosses' sections down is pretty difficult, I've never seen so many bullets on screen at once. There's also an auto-fire button, but button-mashing at lightning speed is better. Finally, mid-bosses, or "Captains," can be captured in homage to *Galaga*.

*Darius Gaiden* was about the same time as my first love – and its melancholic and bizarre atmosphere acted as a soundtrack to my teenage romance. *Darius Gaiden* is a psychedelic game. Most of the bosses change shape when you damage them, often morphing into more colorful and dangerous forms. Most of the landscapes are incredibly detailed and promise worlds of wonder and hints at something much more radical than a fight between flying vehicles. Survival of the fittest?

I played *G Darius* for the first time in Rome. It was a dark period for me. It was 1999 and I was trying to recover from a very poor choice in my life. I made another bad choice after that one, and I'm in the wrong city, engaged to a woman that will start acting as a hindrance, at some point, to the progress of my own life. I've stopped playing games altogether, and frankly, it couldn't have been otherwise, since I simply didn't have an opportunity for the past two years. At some point, I'd just give up and go around looking for arcades when I was supposed to be doing something else, like studying. However there's always a chance to find diamonds in the rubbish. Despite the many idiotic things I'm doing in this period, I find an arcade that has one game worth my time and money.



### **"You will see the creation of new lives"**

Well, it must be said that I'm old fashioned. I see a few polygons and think, *Hell Taito, Raystorm was ok, but I'm afraid of another thing in 3D, you know?* Though this is not the point, I dismissed the game as simply "*Darius in 3D.*" Big mistake: the worst since I graduated from high school and threw away two years pursuing stupid forms of idealism. So, I split with my destructive love and realize that the chaotic city of Rome is not a good choice for me, finally moving on. Something got lost on the way, right? But it was just a 3D *Darius*, who cares.

Time passes and I discover MAME in 2000. I discover MAME and start being a player again. I know what being a player is about; learning the rules, finding out the right route, and solving the problem in the best way. And thus I decide that maybe it's time to get a Dreamcast. Then a Playstation. Then I get a copy of the 3D *Darius*.

On the surface, *G Darius* is the same old

game. However, there are a few innovations. Now, just about every enemy in the game can be captured and made your ally. Now, this is a nice recycling of an old *Galaga* idea, but there's more, if the last member of a squadron is destroyed with a particular ally, twice the bonus is given. Not only that, I found that I can make it detonate and get triple the points for any enemy destroyed with the detonation. Finally, I can do something that's taken straight out of *Metal Black* - wipe out everything in sight with a big laser. And, like *Metal Black*, the bosses also have a giant laser.



### **"We're at a time when the universe is not a promised land anymore"**

What I started doing again is dismissing the game. And I know why. In my evolution as a gamer, I've taken a step back. I've started playing games again just to complete them and brag. *G Darius* falls off quickly: the PSX version has some annoying slowdown which makes the game easy and my patience short. Sure, I bother to clear all routes, but I skip the most important part, namely the hunt for the best score.

But I can redeem myself because my uncle gets a *G Darius* cabinet for his arcade. I've taken advantage of the Internet and downloaded videos of Japanese superplays. I discover things that I was too lazy to find out by myself. I learn a few tricks and play the Omega route for points, but not too many, as I still lack the edge I had back in the early '90s. But still, I fail to play *G Darius* for what its worth. I won't get as good as I could have been in the '90s, because in that period I could compete with Japanese players on some titles.

*Darius* ended with a whimper and not with a bang. Some of the *G Darius* programmers

founded their own company. Why? It's 2002 and I'm playing *Ikaruga*. I'm not too crazy about it. I can't avoid noticing that a lot of elements seem to be taken from Taito games. It's something about the design, and the overall look, and once you see the credits, you see a name, Hideyoshi Katoh, and you know that you've seen it somewhere else. Besides, you see a few programmers that are actually from G Rev. Months pass, and G Rev produces a new game called *Border Down*. A Dreamcast port is rumored. Porting to an officially discontinued console sounds reckless. I see a few videos of the game and read about G Rev and I decide that I'm going to find the way to the best experience ever - playing for the high score.

Sure, I won't really be able to compete with the best players as they have a few months' advantage, but I won't give up before trying. Then a year's journey begins.

I start playing *G Darius* again the old way, no save states, no videos. I start understanding the marvelous charm of subtle gameplay, the intricacies of using the laser. I start feeling the epic soundtrack, realizing the true genius behind the design of the giant and incredibly well-animated bosses, the epic feeling of the life forms and their quest for survival.

I decide to hunt down a Dreamcast to play shmups the way I did when I was a kid, but at this point it's 2003. Dreamcast is officially discontinued. I don't care. *Border Down* keeps me going. It's spring and a lovely sun is shining upon my head as I write, 23rd of April, 2005. I still feel the sweet call of my childhood summers







and the Zuntata songs and Taito games, and playing "Upon the raid" in this lazy afternoon fills me with the past.

*Border Down* is a sequel of *G Darius*. However, it features a very innovative approach to the concept of life: every time you die you start playing a different section of a stage (except for bosses). Since the game features a ranking system, every time you "border down," as it is called, the rank lowers, so you will face a different enemy sequence in a different stage. Two weapons are at your disposal, the homing lasers and the normal frontal lasers. There is also a "break laser" you can use that will cancel all bullets on screen and damage enemies. While using the laser you lose energy. Refill it by destroying enemies and taking power-ups so that you can cancel bullets and get a multiplier when you destroy them (i.e. canceling ten bullets scores ten times the number of points when destroying an enemy).

It is with *Boarder Down* that I found the immense and unbounded joy of a flawless play, of executing a very difficult passage in the best possible way, and all this with the ease and gracefulness of perfection.

*Border Down* is about short but extremely intense moments. In a few seconds, you can get 20% of your total score by executing a difficult technique. It is difficult and frustrating to learn these techniques, but once you learn to do it, nothing can stop the sheer joy, the untamed pleasure of discharging accumulated tension.

Videogames, like the rest of life, are about meeting conditions and being able to obtain critical results at the crucial moment.

Regardless of the semi-serious considerations on the Universe, what still remains is one uncompleted issue: *G Darius*. Considering my past relationship with *Darius* games, I feel the need to play it for score. But, this time I know the right approach, thanks to its unofficial son, *Border Down*.

Time passes. Again I move; away from my house, my love, my friends. My choice is, again, not the best one, but maybe I can start a different route for my life. Maybe I will get something better, maybe not. But at least I have Taito. They have just published a new *Giga Wing* title, and another *Raiden* will come. They have also repressed the entire *Darius* soundtrack collection, and the dedicated site comes with a promise:

"Darius - the rebirth"

Maybe they noticed the success of *R-Type Final* and *Gradius V*, and maybe Taito knows that there's always a chance for a rebirth. Maybe it's just a reprint of items that are still successful on the Japanese auctions. But maybe, just maybe, I'll have again the privilege to see the creation of a new life.





## An Interview With Ryoichi Hasegawa

Wes Ehrlichman

Games developed in America and Europe have a history of selling poorly in Japan. In recent years this trend has been bucked by several titles of European and American origin, including the *Ratchet and Clank*, *Jak and Daxter*, and the *Grand Theft Auto* series. At the Game Developer's Conference in San Francisco, California I had the chance to sit down and chat with Ryoichi Hasegawa, a producer at Sony Computer Entertainment of Japan in charge of the localizations of many of the current crop of western-developed games.

Hasegawa and I had come to see a lecture given by Kenzo Tsujimoto, Capcom's president and head of the Computer Entertainment Software Association of Japan (CESA). We were both hoping to hear an uplifting lecture about the Japanese game industry, past, present, and future by the man who brought the world both *Street Fighter* and *Mega Man*, but Tsujimoto gave a tame, business-oriented overview of how CESA was helping Japanese publishers create a stronger game industry.

When the lecture ended, I asked Hasegawa what his thoughts were and he said he was very disappointed, but it was to be expected. Tsujimoto was a Japanese businessman and his speech was very typically Japanese in nature - inoffensive and business-minded. It

was apparent that Hasegawa had a knack for understanding differences between Japanese and Western culture. I found out later that he had given speeches on a similar topic at previous Game Developer Conferences and his discussions had been a bit closer to western sensibilities. We walked away from the lecture room and found a spot at a nearby table. I found out that Hasegawa has been working with Sony for more than six years, but his industry experience spans all the way back to working with Sega during the Mega Drive and Mega CD days. Hasegawa carries an impressive track record of over 40 games, including titles from the *Sonic*, *Virtua Fighter*, *Crash Bandicoot*, *Spyro*, *Sly Cooper*, *Jak*, *Ratchet and Clank*, and *Formula One* series of games.

Hasegawa understands what it takes to make a game successful in Japan. His localizations were among the first western-developed games to become top sellers in Japan. It's well known that *Crash Bandicoot's* updated Anime look made him more acceptable to a Japanese audience, but under Hasegawa's guidance, other modern mascot games have received similar treatment. He implemented some minor changes in *Jak 2*, including lowering the difficulty level to make it more suitable to the average Japanese gamer's skill level, and the removal of *Jak's* goatee.

Even more drastic changes were made to *Ratchet and Clank*. For its Japanese release,



Hasegawa added thick, Groucho Marx-esque eyebrows to Ratchet’s character design, which became one of Ratchet’s defining characteristics in Japan. As Hasegawa explains it, the eyebrows were added to give Ratchet’s character an iconic visual trait, so children drawing Ratchet’s face would always begin with the eyebrows. This has made Ratchet a much more marketable character in Japan; enough to include his first outing as a pack-in title with Playstation 2 systems shortly after its release.

According to Hasegawa, Japanese people expect to know more about the characters in their games than the average western player. Westerners aren’t interested in things like blood types and character measurements, but these help Japanese players to identify more with their game characters. Part of Hasegawa’s job involves creating character backstories for the figures in his games and using these in the marketing to make them more appealing.

To further explain Japanese tastes, Hasegawa used characters from two recent Disney movies as examples of characters that do and do not appeal to the Japanese sensibilities. He feels that the failure of *Lilo and Stitch* in Japan was mainly due to Lilo’s large nose and wide facial structure. To the Japanese

eye, her large, broad nose screamed of western design, making her a difficult character to feel sympathy with. *The Incredibles*, which was renamed *Mr. Incredible* in Japan, actually did very well at the box office. Hasegawa attributes its success not to Mr. Incredible himself, but rather to the mother and children, who look closer to the Japanese ideal than the broad shouldered, square jawed hero.

We spoke for a bit about *Grand Theft Auto’s* retail success; one of the biggest hurdles to its release in Japan wasn’t gamer awareness, but getting retailers to carry the game. So many games are released in Japan every week that only the games retailers feel will make them a profit are stocked. *GTA* was a challenge for Capcom both because of its violent content and its western heritage. Retailers shy away from games with either of these things, which normally would have made *GTA* only a listing in the catalog. Capcom used expensive and unconventional marketing methods to make sure both Japanese gamers and the general public was aware of the game.

Because of restrictions on what they could market during the day, Capcom turned to advertising during late night television programs and mainstream magazines to spread



the word. They used massive sales in other countries as a sales pitch to both consumers and retailers, focusing on its popularity and the freedom it provided. They also marketed the game to those outside of the gaming audience by setting up playable kiosks in popular clubs and discos instead of traditional gaming stores. Their marketing efforts paid off in a way that will hopefully open the Japanese public to the acceptance of more western games. Despite a relatively large number of sales, when Rockstar's licensing fees and *GTA*'s massive advertising budget were tallied up, *GTA* most likely didn't make very much money for Capcom. What it did do is help to establish the *GTA* brand, and prove to retailers that western games might not be such a terrible thing to stock.

With the subject of localization well covered, I asked Hasegawa a few more questions about the current state of gaming. With the popularity of sequels both in Japan and the rest of the world, it's becoming much more difficult to market an original title no matter its origin. I asked Hasegawa about this trend and his response was that people were simply getting more conservative with their money and less willing to pay for entertainment that isn't a sure thing. He said that as the hardcore gamers of the 90's are getting older they have less time



to spend reading gaming magazines to keep up on what's new and innovative so they end up going with what they know. Unfortunately, Hasegawa did not provide a good solution to this problem, but if his localizations are anything to go by, I have a sneaking suspicion his response would have had something to do with offering something within the game that targets the culture the game is appearing in and making the characters both memorable and detailed.

As Hasegawa and I finished our time together I made him tell me what games he's been playing recently. He responded that at home his time was being occupied by *Gran Turismo 4*, and when traveling he's been playing a lot of Mizuguchi's *Lumines* on his PSP. Not willing to let him leave, I followed up by asking him what games he's been working on recently. He said that he's been working on the next *Sly Cooper* and *Ratchet and Clank* games. He was unable to give me any details, but mentioned they would probably be shown at E3. As he walked away I was struck with the feeling that he had been analyzing the parts of my own culture that had made me ask the specific questions I did, but I guess it's also possible he was just thinking about how good I would look with thick, black eyebrows.







## Light at The End of The Tunnel

### Cave Story - Doukutsu Monogatari: PC/MAC

Raphael Valenzuela

On that most fateful day, as I sat there in the darkness, I heard the recognizable echo of voices. These indistinct voices, in their reverberating grace, compelled me to leave the comforting safety of the dank hole of dissatisfaction I hid myself in for so very long.

Weeks later, I found myself in a blind haze, tossed on the floor of my humble abode. As I woke up I wondered to myself, "Why did I spend so much time on this game?" I sat there and thought about it like I always do, since I overanalyze too damn much for my own good. I asked myself why did I, in all my hyper-mega pretentious nature, enjoy this game so much. I sat there for a long time, only to, in the end, give up and resume playing once again.

This game is called *Doukutsu Monogatari*. It is a small freeware action game for the PC platform created by a guy called "Pixel" who runs "Studio Pixel."<sup>1</sup> This man spent year of his valuable time slowly cobbling together this piece of wonderful entertainment. The fruit of his

labors is this grand work. *Doukutsu Monogatari* was soon modded and translated by the Aeon Genesis Translation Proclamation<sup>2</sup> group headed by the man-machine Ghideon Zhi and assisted by a talented 'translinguist' called Shih Tzu. This translation helped spread the game toward the English-speaking crowd, increasing the fan base.

At a distance, it seems too simplistic and one-dimensional but that's just a painful lie, as it is really more of a deep, soulful game. Plainly, it just reeks of a charming spunk I just can't quite place. It takes me back so many moons ago, when I blew into cartridges in order to play my most beloved games; the way everything moves and flows with grace pulls me into the jaws of its undead core. I felt genuinely entertained as its flat-out retroactive pixels bounced across the screen. The wondrous synthetic grooves came forth as I was hopping around from ledge to ledge, shooting down all those who stood in my way with the ever-powerful Polar star.

My time was spent running through hilly underground meadows, befriending rabbit-like humanoids with a penchant for asking you to do things, being accosted by a pale dominatrix and her oversized flying lunchbox television washing machine thing. This world is a stage on which the many actors portray their parts. It goes well

1 - The game can be downloaded for free at the officially official homepage at <http://hp.vector.co.jp/authors/A022293/>. It was also ported to the Mac by the way although I don't know how good the port is due to the fact that I am Mac less. It's hard to find and doesn't have a translation patch out for it (as far as I know). [Its still fun either way so I'll provide a link in hopes of producing some form of mass desire for more. <http://www.eonet.ne.jp/~fuge/nakiwo/software.htm>]

2 - The Aeon Genesis translation proclamation online headquarters is located at <http://agtp.romhack.net>. The translation patch may be found there as well as translation patches for many other games.

with the nice story the actors portray, actors who are really identifiable by their natures. You will indeed enjoy it to some extent; of that I can be reasonably sure.

This game gives off a surrealistic vibe similar to games of the timeframe *Doukutsu Monogatari* emulates, as well as the all the crazy visualizations created by the hands of man over the past 'bajillion' years<sup>3</sup>. It creates another arbitrary layer rarely seen in modern games, lying between the actual physical input of the medium and the part of the mind of which rationalizes everything. Not many games these days have this quality but, thankfully, this game is open to interpretation and shines (or rusts over) based on how you conceptualize and experiencing it. I found the optimal experience with a full-screen setting and a good gamepad. If you were an amnesiac robot with a speech impediment, would you not do what feels right rather than trying to remember lost memories? Would you steal to survive? Would you correct what wrongs you have committed? Would you put your life on the line to save a friend? Will the people that read this article even bother to play this game? One must strive to answer the questions that plague them.

I think it would be best if you go out and play it yourself, as I know for a fact that none of my words can do this game any justice at all. At least give it a try for all those developers out there cobbling together the things that make us happy. Stuff like this might be the only solace from any future unfortunate events that may or may not happen but quite possibly will - if things proceed at the same unfortunate rate of decay they are going at.



<sup>3</sup> - One thing I like is how people reinterpret another's work in their own special way. This can be easily seen at the *Doukutsu Monogatari* Oekaki BBS (an image board) over at [<http://www.16.oekakibbs.com/bbs/solidworks/oekakibbs.cgi>] or the interesting imagery, musical remixes, and other weird files over at the doukutsu uploader at [<http://doukutsu.rdy.jp/>]







## Important Failures in Videogame History

### The Pre-History of Video Gaming

Jeremy Penner

In the beginning, there was Pong.

Or at least, that's what over 100 people would tell you if you were to enter that exact phrase into Google. But as an intelligent gamer, you know that's not the whole story. The videogame didn't emerge fully formed from Nolan Bushnell's womb. Chances are you know some version of the truth. The words "Spacewar," or "Ralph Baer," may ring some bells in your mind, but who are these people and what are the details behind the first time computers were used for fun?

There are a lot of places you can go to find out the history behind the popular games of videogame history; the games that really made an impact. But what of the false starts along the way? What of the historical firsts that nobody at the time ever thought anything of? It's high time these games were celebrated.

#### NAUGHTS AND CROSSES

Let's start in 1952. Nolan Bushnell is nine years old. EDSAC, the first practical general-purpose computer, was built three years prior at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. It has about 2kb of memory, uses a rotary telephone dial to key in numbers, and has several blinky-light displays used for debugging.

A man named A.S. Douglas is writing his Ph.D thesis on human-computer interaction there. He realizes that one of the displays, which shows the current contents of an entire "tank" of memory, is essentially made up of a 35 x 16 pixel display.

So, he does what any self-respecting scientist he would do. He hacks together a little Tic-Tac-Toe game. It also happens to be the first thing that anyone could conceivably call a videogame (Feel free to be that obnoxious guy at parties who tells people that, actually, videogames were invented by the British).

Imagine, for a moment, playing with this thing on a real EDSAC -- squinting at a tiny debugging monitor, dialing in your moves on a rotary phone, and having no possibility at all of winning. This is a novelty at best.

This game has, thankfully, been preserved for posterity. "Naughts and Crosses," which I can only assume got the man his Ph.D, comes packaged with the EDSAC Simulator. It's available at <http://www.dcs.warwick.ac.uk/~edsac/>.

#### TENNIS FOR TWO

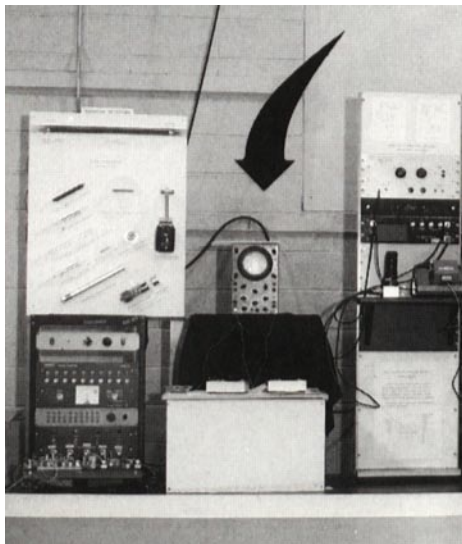
Let's move six years ahead, to 1958. Nolan Bushnell is starting to notice that he likes girls. William Higinbotham, head of the Brookhaven National Laboratory's Instrumentation Division, is thinking about how to entertain the people

who will be touring the place in the fall. So, he does something that he thinks is fairly obvious. He puts together a little electronic circuit to play tennis on an oscilloscope. It takes him three weeks.

You could probably be forgiven if, from the description, you think that Tennis For Two was a sort of proto-Pong. However, when you look at the gameplay footage that's available, you can see that it was really quite different -- think Scorched Earth-style ballistic physics, in real-time. The controllers had a knob and a button; the knob controlled the angle that you would hit the ball at when you pressed the button.

It's a simple game that, when looked at with modern sensibilities, has many flaws. There's the fact that, if both players felt like it, they could keep the ball in the air just by continuously smacking the buttons. There's also the fact that the game really didn't do any scorekeeping, and may not have actually enforced any of the actual rules of tennis. For all I know -- it may well have been possible to just keep hitting the ball to yourself and never try to make it over the net. These problems are all overridden by one simple fact -- it is fun to bounce a ball with your friends.

Since it was a custom analog computer, and since it's fairly obscure, no one has yet



developed an emulator of Tennis for Two. I decided, for this article, that I would take it upon myself to write a remake that you could play with your friends over the internet. As anyone who's played Kaboom! on a 2600 can attest, the mouse doesn't work nearly as nicely as the knob, but even 47 years later, it is still fun to knock a virtual tennis ball around. This remake can be downloaded from our website at <http://www.gamersquarter.com/tennisfortwo/>.

## GALAXY GAME

Now it's 1971. Nolan Bushnell, all grown up, has been inspired by a computer game called *Spacewar* to produce the world's first arcade game. Unfortunately, it appears that some enterprising hackers from Stanford University beat him to it.

Yes, there may have only been a few machines ever built, and they may have only serviced the Stanford campus, but evidence suggests that Bill Pitts and Hugh Tuck released the first commercial videogame, a straight port of *Spacewar* rechristened *Galaxy Game*, beating out Bushnell by mere months.

Now, there are conflicting reports as to *Computer Space's* actual release date, so I can't say for sure which actually came first. However, I will present the facts from which it appears that the information floating around was derived, and you can judge for yourself.

**August, 1971** - Nolan Bushnell is hired by Nutting Associates to work on *Computer Space*. At this point there was definitely an existing prototype, but it seems unlikely that a release would happen immediately after Bushnell was hired. Regardless, this date is cited by many as the release date.

**September, 1971** - Pitts and Tuck release *Galaxy Game*.

**November, 1971** - A flyer advertising *Computer Space* is distributed. This is the second, and more likely, date that claims to be the *Computer Space* release date.

If you want to try this one, your best bet is probably to fire up the MESS PDP-1 emulator, and pretend to put a dime in before you start playing. More detailed instructions are available at <http://www.computerspacefan.com/SpaceWarSim.htm>.

## COMPUTER SPACE

Wait a minute, here. *Computer Space* is a game that most videogame histories talk about. You probably know a fair amount of trivia about this *Spacewar* clone -- how it was a prop in *Soylent Green*, or how it failed because it was too complicated.

Some cursory thought leads us to some important questions, however. First - *Spacewar* was never a one-player game. It's fundamentally a deathmatch. Second -- the "too complicated" line comes straight out of Nolan Bushnell's mouth. It has much more to do with the direction he took with *Pong* than *Computer Space*'s actual merits as a game.

So, how does it actually play? Imagine *Asteroids* in *Jell-O*, with two dull-witted UFOs instead of a relentless barrage of asteroids. Now imagine those UFOs shooting deadly-accurate bullets directly at you, every time, at a much faster speed than your ship can maneuver. Imagine a quarter giving you exactly 99 seconds of this, no matter how well or poorly you play.

Complicated? Naah. *Computer Space* is just not very much fun.

It has its good points, mind you. Your bullets move in whatever direction your ship is facing, and it's actually quite enjoyable to steer them into those bastard UFOs. Also, if you somehow manage to score more than nine points, your score displays a garbled character instead of a number, which is undoubtedly pretty cool. But



turning and accelerating happens so unbearably slowly that the only reasonable strategy is to get yourself going in one direction and hope the UFOs don't meander too close to your ship.

You can find an accurate *Computer Space* simulator at [http://move.to/moose/moosees\\_freeware.html](http://move.to/moose/moosees_freeware.html) .

## ANYTHING ELSE?

Are these the only games of historical importance that you don't usually get to hear about? Almost certainly not. There were experiments going on in computerized checkers opponents around the same time that *Naughts and Crosses* was written. People who like to argue about semantics will tell you that radar displays are just as qualified to be called "videogames" as *Tennis For Two*, and were around much earlier than anything listed here. And surely there were dozens of experiments into the field that were simply never recorded. Ralph Baer claims he had the first idea for a game you could play on your TV in 1951, but not everyone went on to create the *Magnavox Odyssey*. Who knows -- maybe somewhere, in somebody's grandfather's attic, is an abandoned prototype of a videogame that predates all of this and never saw the light of day.

The fact remains, however, that these games existed, and they deserve a place in videogame history.



PERSONA VISITS E3 Pt. 3  
NINTENDO BOOTH!





Nintendo's booth was in the South Hall this year, right next to Sony's booth. Although Nintendo's conference was rather bland, their booth was very much alive with lots of demo kiosks, downloadable game stations for the DS, video screenings, and giveaways. They even had a small corner devoted just to the new Pokémon game with giant maps of every region of the Pokéworld wallpapering the area!

But anyway, I decided to mainly focus on the new DS games.



- I stood in line to play Nintendogs for over an hour. When I finally had a chance to play, the game left me feeling empty. The E3 demo only let me play with three preset dogs so I couldn't really get to tinker around with raising one. All I could do was toss around toys and poke the dogs using the stylus.



The dogs that were on my particular DS were also really ugly for some reason. Ugh.

On the otherhand, Animal Crossing DS left me feeling much more hopeful. Having played the Gamecube version a lot, I was pleasantly surprised by all the new features they added:

First, the entire game can be played with the stylus alone. From walking

Second, the world isn't seperated into Zelda-like screen pans. Instead the

Third, more personalization! The characters could now equip



to talking, it's all playable through menus and pointing.



world was one giant globe that spun as I ran across it. I could even see the circumference of the world!



things like glasses, mustaches, and hats along with the other handheld items.

Most importantly, the game also has online multiplayer! The only problem is the chatting: just to open up the keypad, I had to go through two menus. After that, I could only type in a few words before I reached the word limit.



The message I wrote then appeared on the bottom of the screen - it was barely even noticeable! It's like it was thrown there as an afterthought.



Really, why isn't this executed better?

In any case, when I was done, I unequipped all my items and dumped them next to the river.



It seemed an appropriate representation of the jackassery that online play would only bring.

Next up was Viewtiful Joe DS. I was impressed that the DS could already handle a 3D action game like this, but then I took a closer



look and saw the low polygon models and flat textures. It looked nice in action though.



The gimmick for this game was that the stage could be split in half by running the stylus across the upper part of the screen.

In the demo, I had to use this feature to smolder a fire that was burning on a floating platform, blocking my way. By dragging the



screen to the left, I pushed the fire into an open fire hydrant and cleared the path. Simple yet fun.

But the best DS game on the floor was Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney. A compilation of the three GBA Gyakuten Saiban games, the DS Phoenix Wright game added the improvement of using just the stylus to control all the action. This kept the focus on the fast paced story and made looking through evidence very convenient.



The localization was handled very well, keeping the sense of humor the original version had. It did have its corny moments, but overall the demo really entertained me and left a smile on my face.

I especially enjoyed the dramatic way the demo ended: after submitting my evidence and cornering the witness in his own pile of lies, it seems as though Phoenix will finally say his concluding lines. Instead, he ends with:





Besides DS games, I tried out a few Gamecube games as well:

Hello Kitty: Roller Rescue was surprisingly fun despite being a game made for young kids.

Meanwhile, Harvest Moon: Another Wonderful Life was a prettier update to the original Gamecube game, except that you play as a girl and end up laboring on a farm alone even after getting married and delivering a child. Deceptively realistic and depressing!

Pokémon XD: Gale of Darkness was another disappointing PokéRPG made by Genius Sonority to cash in on the vast pockets of little kids.

And last, Yoot Saito's Odama was a neat pinball game that used voice recognition to simulate an active battle-field.

It felt good in a Seaman way.

Fall back!

Crap!





## POPOGISA - THEORY AND PRACTICE

### **A Study Of The Distilled Essence Of The Videogame**

Amandeep Jutla

It's curious that the esteem someone gets in the videogame community is nearly always directly proportional to how long that person has been holding a controller. In one way, this makes sense - a kid whose first videogame ever was *Super Mario 64* probably doesn't know shit about what he's talking about, while someone who, like, played the 2600 *Defender* all the time back in the day has a bit more perspective.

Still, all too often, this kind of logic devolves into a pissing contest, where people "prove" how they have far more credibility as gamers than any mere mortal, and name-drop ancient titles from obscure consoles that five people in the world own, just to sound impressive. That irks me, a bit.

#### **It sure irked me three days ago, in a mall in the south part of Springfield, Missouri.**

Springfield, after all, is something of a boring place, especially for someone like me. Besides the town's Best Buy, which I frequent whenever I feel like getting screwed out of my money in exchange for a videogame, there are few other places of interest. The city is middle-sized, generic, and thoroughly devoid of interesting quirks. There are at least one hundred midwestern cities exactly like it, I am

certain - perhaps even more. It is thoroughly depressing.

Such were the lines I was thinking along that fateful night. I was sitting at home, moping, thinking about the stupidity of my situation and waiting for it to get sufficiently late for me to go to sleep. Videogames usually help me at times like this, but somehow my heart just wasn't in it. The time had come, I finally decided, to go do something bizarre and out-of-character - I would go to the mall and hang out. It would be a silly thing to do - nothing in the mall really interested me, after all. Still, it was something. An idea. A way to murder time.

This is how, two hours later, I found myself standing in line to buy carcinogenic, barely-edible garbage from a small indoor Taco Bell, while eavesdropping on a conversation being carried on by three college kids. They were complete idiots, all of them. I could tell just by looking.

"Dude," one of them said, "Videogames? I know all about that shit."

"Yeah?" said another.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Shit, man. I've been playing since *Super Mario World*, back in '91."

The other guy raised his eyebrows and let out a long, low whistle.

"Wow," he said. "I've only been at it since *Halo*." The other guy snorted derisively.



At this point, the third college kid cleared his throat and spoke up:

"You know," he said, **"I've been playing videogames ever since Pong."**

"Pong?" said the *Halo* guy.

"Pong!" said *Super Mario World*. "Holy shit, man! You're, like, really hardcore. That's fucking sweet."

At this point, I decided that I had to butt in.

"No, it's not," I said.

The three guys spun around.

"It's not fucking sweet," I said. "It's a lie. What the hell do you mean, you've been playing videogames since *Pong*? Are you stupid? Look at you, you're not nearly old enough for that!"

"You bastard," *Pong* said. "You complete bastard. I have too been playing videogames since *Pong*. I played it with Nolan Bushnell, even. In California. I played *Pong* before he even formed Atari."

"Look," I said. "I'm not an arrogant person - really, I'm not. At least, not usually. Still, I have to make one thing clear - I know more about videogames than you can possibly imagine. And I'm onto you. You're too young to have ever played *Pong* back in your childhood. Just admit

it. Lying isn't going to get you anywhere."

I should not have said this, and though it was hard, I somehow escaped with my life.

Once home, I raided the fridge; that whole Taco Bell thing had fallen through, after all, and I was slightly hungry.

And then, standing in the kitchen, piece of greenish, diseased cheese halfway to my mouth, I stopped. And I understood.

**1. That guy hadn't played *Pong* as a kid.**

**2. He was a bad person. He'd nearly killed me, after all. Just for pointing that out. I mean, honestly.**

**3. Step 2 followed from Step 3.**

Yes.

That guy was a bad person *precisely* because he hadn't played *Pong*. He thought he knew about videogames, but really he was little more than a sad, sad poseur, who would most likely die poor and lonely. He didn't realize that just *saying* you played *Pong* back in the day doesn't mean you understand it, or its genius. The guy, well, he'd probably played some *Super Mario World*, like his friend, and certainly hung out with the other frat boys and had marathon *Halo 2* sessions, but...*Pong*? The games like *Pong* that Atari made in its heyday were far, far better than the silly dross packaged and sold as "videogames" today. I think everyone can agree on that. *Pong*, though, is forgotten. It's stuck under a rock somewhere in the collective



# Pong...An Ideal Christmas Gift for the family . . .



consciousness of all gamers - we know it was the first videogame ever, and we respect it, and we pretend to have played it for status, but... shit. It's all by itself. It's bitter. We've buried it, but it's still alive and banging on the inside of its coffin, daring us to ask it for recognition.

We'd better grant its request.

## The Pongist Manifesto

Let's get one thing straight: I didn't play *Pong* when it came out, either. I couldn't have. Still, I have tried to rectify this mistake. I've got a pretty close approximation of the original system installed in that California bar so many years ago running on the computer next to me. It runs quickly enough.

And it's funny, if you think about it, that this simplistic, blocky, black-and-white piece of shit used to be **it**. There used to be nothing to which *Pong* could be compared. Before Master Chief and the Flood, *Pong* was the embodiment of everything a videogame should be. *Pong* looks like shit, but it was once *the* shit.

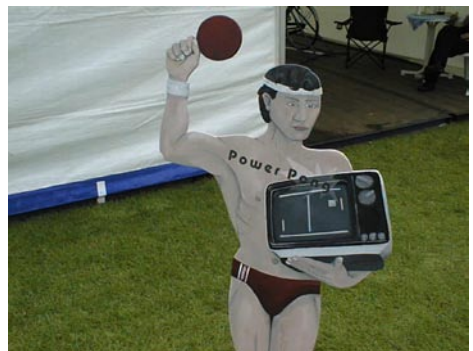
Conceptually, it is simplistic. Two paddles lie on either end of a rectangular playing field, batting a ball back and forth between them. When this ball hits a paddle, it bounces off and begins to move in the other direction. Each paddle is controlled by a player. The objective of both of them is to avoid missing the ball, for a high score.

**Avoid missing the ball, for a high score.**

But where *is* the ball? It's not a *real* ball. It's just a white blip somewhere on the screen - it's even square-shaped, for fuck's sake. That's representational abstraction. The paddles are meant to *stand for* real paddles; the ball *represents* a real ball. These objects, in-game, are idealized. If *Pong* is based on the "real-life" sport of table-tennis, then it follows that it is the *most perfect* version of table-tennis out there. You don't get tired, when you play it. You don't have to worry about orienting yourself in three dimensions, and you don't have to control all the hundreds of muscles running along your arms and legs. Instead, you move this paddle - completely precisely. Your opponent does that, too.

*Pong* takes this very real, very normal situation - a game of table-tennis - and digitizes it, turning into something which has a firm grounding in reality yet is bizarrely pure and perfect. When the ball hits the player's paddle, it goes "ping." When it hits that of his opponent, it goes "pong." Ping-pong; back-forth.

Years ago, when I was far younger, my family made the transition from being one that *didn't* have access to the Internet at home to one that did. We bought this boxy little thing, see, with all these green lights down the front; it was an analog modem. There were telephone cords coming out of it - one went into the back of our computer, and the other went into a phone jack. When we told the computer to dial the number of our ISP, all those lights down the modem's front would flicker, turning on and off,





on and off.

Ping and pong.

The lights were a kind of liberation. They meant communication, with the world at large. I could start up a browser and order it to fetch things for me, and it would talk to the Internet and then show me what it could see. The Internet and I had conversations that lasted long into the night, just based on those patterns of light, and that modem opened up a veritable universe of pornography and illegal games and information that I'd never had access to before.

And that's what *Pong* is - a metaphor for access, for communication, at its most basic level. All conversations, whether they be between browsers and web sites or between people and their grandmothers, can be boiled down to a series of pings and pongs.

But it runs even deeper.

The ping, right, *begets* the pong - and vice versa. There is a real, mutually causal relationship between the two. You get a pong because you sent out a ping, and the nature of the pong you receive determines the sort of ping you will send out. Subjectively speaking, this is a cause-and-effect process.

And, so, of course: *Pong is sex*.

If you're playing *Pong* with someone for ten minutes, the two of you could not be more intimately involved if you were making sweet love all the night. Picture it: Pretend you're there now, controlling your paddle, your hand twitching, wondering just *where* that ball is going to strike, furiously calculating trajectories in your head. It blows your mind. Hell, I'm

getting excited right now, just thinking about it and looking at this computer screen six inches in front of me.

The feeling is pure and communicative. You get to read the patterns of motion in your partner - just by examining how he plays his paddle. As it were. You start to predict what he's about to do. You think, yeah, here he is making a feint, and this, this is him getting ready to smack the ball with the very edge of his paddle, only now he's changing his mind and he's going to hit it head on. When you hit the ball yourself, and hear that ping, it echoes in the very depths of your heart, and it's a *delightful* feeling, squeal-worthy, even, because *you've seen the inside of your partner's skull*. With the pong, he feels the same way. The two of you are connected. It's pretty *hot*. It is a perfect moment.

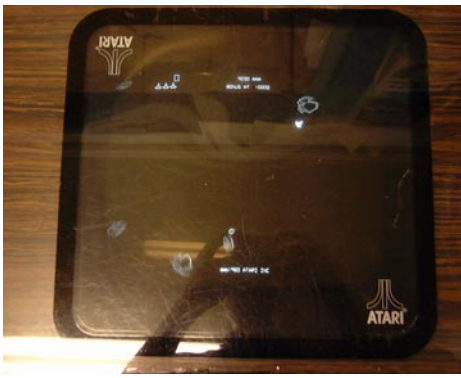
It is significant that pioneering videogames, such as *Pong*, were two-player affairs of this nature. The Go-playing, sake-drinking Gods of Atari understood that games come from life. They *are* life, only modified and fucked-around with, and turned into something else.

**THE POINT IS: although table tennis, when digitized, is indeed virtual homosexual lovemaking, it is also communication, cause-and-effect.**

*Pong* was the first Atari title, but it was not the last. *Asteroids* and *Centipede* and *The Legend of Zelda*, among many other classics, followed over the years. All of these, as Atari games, are very eastern, very Japanese, in their sensibilities. They also follow directly from *Pong*, philosophically speaking. They don't hide their







lineage, either: they make it entirely clear.

They are variations on a theme.

Look at *Asteroids*, why don't you. You can only play *Asteroids* solo, you know - there's no room for a second player. So you're by yourself, and you're controlling a ship. There are asteroids on screen, but you don't get to mess with them. Your goal is to maneuver about, shooting those asteroids, causing them to explode. The ship, therefore, is the ping, and so is the player. The signals the player sends out are filtered and responded to by the in-game environment. That's the pong.

**Thus, the two principal axioms of Pongism:**

**1. The player is the ping.**

**2. The game is the pong.**

If the game is the pong, then the philosophy of games is the philosophy of the pong. The pong, like the tao, is at turns inscrutable and mysterious. It's not something you can understand without living naked in a cave for several years living off nothing but small insects.

But there is also this: the pong, like the yang, cannot exist without the yin - or in this case, the ping. The words of Atari here ring true. You can almost see them in an old Chinese book of wisdom, next to a pretty three-color illustration of a pond..

**Atari say: There no ping without pong, no pong without ping. One is other. There no**

**separation.**

And this is when it hit me, late that night, thinking all of this, that for years and years I'd been approaching videogames the wrong way.

Videogames, as an artform, are defined by the ping/pong relationship - and nothing else. The player's input and the game's output must be considered with respect to one another, and they are two sides of the same coin. Games are a form of theater - a communication, or play-acting, between both participants. *Asteroids*, without the player to maneuver the ship, isn't a game - it's just a collection of harsh, angular lines. *Pong*, played by one person, loses its meaning and becomes boring as hell. The game becomes little more than those ugly blocks of whiteness I'm now looking at on my computer screen.

Look, let me tell you something, here. There was a time, once, when I harbored delusions of becoming a well-known director of art films. I would take my parents' camcorder and make tedious videos of drying paint or falling leaves. I'd then transfer this stuff to videotape and try to get people to watch it, to see my genius skills in the field of cinematography.

No one ever gave a shit. So, after a while, I



stopped.

What's the point of filming something if no one's going to watch that film afterwards? What's the point of putting on a play if no one's around to watch it? You know, trees often fall over in forests when there's no one around to hear them. Isn't that just a waste? I'll say it again: Videogames only make sense within the context of that ping/pong relationship.

Notice, however, that I keep using the word "videogames," rather than "electronic games" or something similar. I'm doing this on purpose. I'm really only discussing console games here, after all, as they are more delicate - more Japanese. *They* owe their existence to *Pong* and its philosophy. I'm ignoring most computer games, because I find them boring. Most of them are derivative of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and they are, generally speaking, nearly all pieces of American shit. I should mention in passing, however, that these games too are based on the theme of communication. When you play *Zork* or *Half-Life 2*, you're exploring, yes, but you're also speaking with the parser (or in *HL2*'s case, the game engine), who is your Dungeon Master. The principle is the same.

Thus, whether developed by the Japanese or not, all videogames are self-aware. Such is the nature of the medium. The videogame, as an entity, is inherently post-postmodern, on the cutting-edge of the avant-garde, and it depends in large part on the player's input and the game's response, which are combined.

As an example of this, take *Tetris*, another product of the Japanese, which is the most sublimely perfect videogame ever created. In *Tetris*, the ping is implicit - the player does not control an avatar; there is no little man putting bricks together. Instead, the control he has over the game's environment is both direct and immediate. As he spins and rotates blocks, he

makes decisions, causes things to happen. He's pushing, and the game, like any good lover, is pushing back, making some bricks disappear, giving him a score (even though he's already scoring, as it were), giving him *responses*. The relationship between man and machine, the player and the played, the flesh and the plastic, is here perfectly intertwined. The two sides aren't black-and-white, as they are in *Pong*.

The more you give *Tetris*, the more it gives you back, and this genius. Everyone loves *Tetris*. Millions of people play it the world over. They are captivated, but they don't know why. Well, this is why.

Now they know.

**But, again, it's not that simple. I mean, not all games are Tetris.**

It is often said that there are two schools of thought, in game design - the elegant, Japanese school, and the school of gaijin fucktards. Broadly speaking, the differences between these schools can be described in terms of pongism. Japanese games are dominant. They do most of the pushing, with their strength of narrative. There's more pong, and less ping. Western games, however, want you to give it to them as brutally as you can. They offer up no resistance. They are, therefore, loose and wide-open, probably because they've been raped so many times; that kind of fucks you up.

The videogame field has seen many technological advances, since *Pong* - even within the stagnant and ridiculous PC games market. There have been all manner of nifty new rules systems and storytelling devices. The back of the box for *Star Ocean: The Second Story*, which I personally believe is one of the five shittiest videogames ever created, for reasons I'll not get into now, advertises that the game has, like, **over eighty endings**. *Final Fantasy X* has **actual voice-acting**. **Like, whoa!** Right?

No. That's not right. We've made all of these superficial advances, but we've lost sight of what videogames truly are. We have



ignored that they are, as an *art*, about cause-and-effect, just as films are about temporal juxtaposition, and sculpture is about naked women. The "stories" games tell and the "rules" that comprise them are a means to an end - and the end is interaction. Videogames have no meaning, without it.

**A BIZARRE, YET CRUCIAL TANGENT BEGINS**

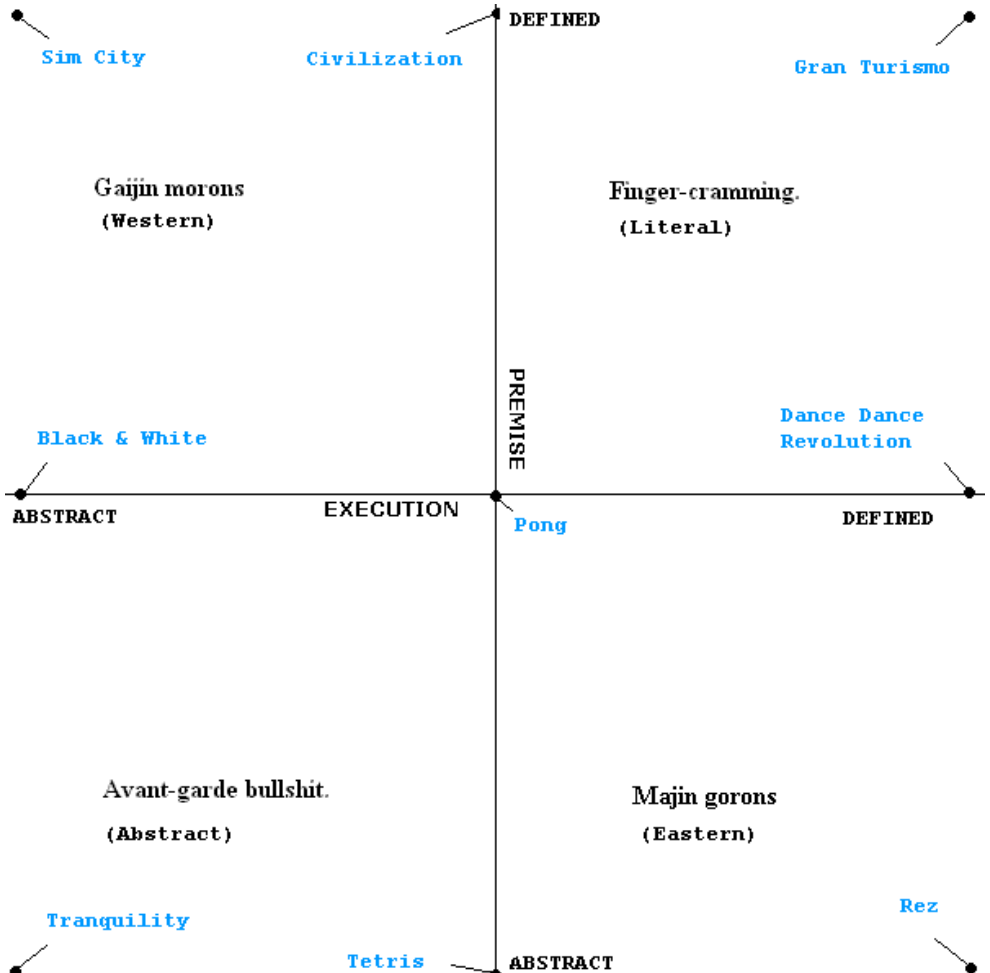
Videogames are intimate relationships. They *are* communication.

Hey, back when I was in about the fourth grade, I was all *about* communication. (That was a pathetic transition, I know, but work

with me here, okay?) And there was this one point, sometime in October or November, when our math class started getting into coordinate systems. We learned about the X and Y axes, about the origin, and about how to plot points. We learned that, when you do plot points, you move along the X axis first, *then* the Y axis. We learned all of this and then we moved on to long division and never used this information again until high school, where plotting points was totally crucial in Trig class.

Well, plotting points is also totally crucial in Pongism.

Behold:



That, there? It's important. Get to know it. It's a visual representation of the way videogames have slowly drifted away from *Pong*. You'll notice the way the axes are defined - the X axis represents a videogame's execution, and how abstract or literal it is. The Y axis represents the premise being executed. *Pong* is dead in the center - it is, in general, halfway between abstract and literal on both levels; the premise is that you're half playing table tennis and half having gay sex. The execution, similarly, is somewhat abstract, in that you're controlling digital representations of paddles and batting around a ball that really looks like more of a cube, but you can still recognize these things for the real-world objects that they are.

*Tetris* keeps the balance of execution - you push the game as hard as it pushes you - but in terms of premise it is skewed completely to the abstract. The bricks you're dropping in *Tetris* don't represent anything. They might be a metaphor, but if so, they stand for some vague and nebulous concept no one can figure out.

The further to the left something is on the X axis, the more you push, and the less the game resists. Thus, games out on the fringes of this side are entirely open in terms of what they allow the player to do; *Tranquility* lets you bounce around and do nothing; *Black & White* has you picking up trees and throwing them around; *Sim City* lets you do whatever the hell you want to the lives of two thousand virtual



people.

On the other end, the game does all of the pushing. *Rez* sticks you on rails; you go where it takes you. *Dance Dance Revolution* makes you master very specific sequences of dance moves that never, ever change. In *Gran Turismo*, you drive around in circles.

And there are more differentiations, if you look hard enough. The graph has four quadrants, as all graphs do - as I learned way back in fourth grade.

The first quadrant, the one in the upper-right, contains things that are almost too literal to be considered true videogames. *Gran Turismo*, for example, is about cars and how to drive them. When you're in the moment, on some road out in some back-country, in first place, you *are* racing. You can even use a steering-wheel controller, if you want, to put as few impediments between you and the driving experience as possible.

The second quadrant - those are your fucking stupid Western games. *Civilization* and shit. You know.

The third quadrant - those are your games that are too *abstract* to be considered true videogames. Stuff like *Tranquility*. No one plays *Tranquility*. I mean, honestly.

And the fourth quadrant - ah. That's where our sake-drinking gods live. That's where very Japanese games exist. They don't give you much freedom, you know, but they're abstract. Intellectual.

And that's the rundown. You can figure the rest out. I have faith in you.





## A BIZARRE, YET CRUCIAL TANGENT ENDS.

A guy I know saw *2001: A Space Odyssey* for the first time ever a few months ago.

"So," I told him, "Saw *2001*, eh?"

"Yeah," he said. He was frowning slightly.

"What did you think?" I asked. "I mean, it was a pretty damn good film, I thought."

He paused. "What did I *think*?"

"Yeah."

"It was bullshit."

I was slightly taken aback.

"Bullshit!" he repeated. "Nothing happened! Nothing! How the hell do you make a movie that boring?"

"I hate you," I said, and it's true - I *did*.

It's fine not to like *2001*. But to complain that nothing happens in it? That's like saying *Citizen Kane* is shitty because it doesn't contain any explosions. It's dismissing the Venus de Milo because it isn't a statue of a peacock..

It's discussing a videogame in terms of its replay value. It's breaking it into discrete

components, analyzing its graphics, and its sound, and how they interplay, and slapping on a numerical score. That's not the right view. It's a misguided view. It's also the ludological view. The ludological view is therefore fucking wrong.

The meaning of a game is more important than its anatomy. Quality is more important than form.

## The Manifestation of Pong

"Pongism" embodies the viewpoint of which "the game is the pong" is the crux. It understands that a game is its narrative; that the poetic beauty of a *Tetris* or an *Ikaruga* comes from an understanding of communication. It knows that the objective, academic, cut-and-dried approach to videogames is garbage.

Ping-pong is the distilled essence of the videogame. Any layers on top of this idea are beside the point or stupid, or both. When you talk about a game, you don't break out flowcharts and go on about how its different "parts" work "in concert" really "well," "9.8."

## That creates a kind of design-by-numbers.





I'll never forget the first time I played *Warcraft III*, and saw this. Everyone had raved about how perfect this game was, and I played it, and I thought, yeah, the developers sure got their shit together, and this game works really smoothly, but does it have a soul? Is there a point to what I'm doing? And the answer was: no.

I got the same feeling a couple of years ago, watching *Finding Nemo* in widescreen-stadium-seating-Dolby-Digital-surround-sound at my local multiplex, thinking, yeah, all the ingredients are here, and yet why do I hate this movie so much? Why have I not laughed once over the course of two hours?

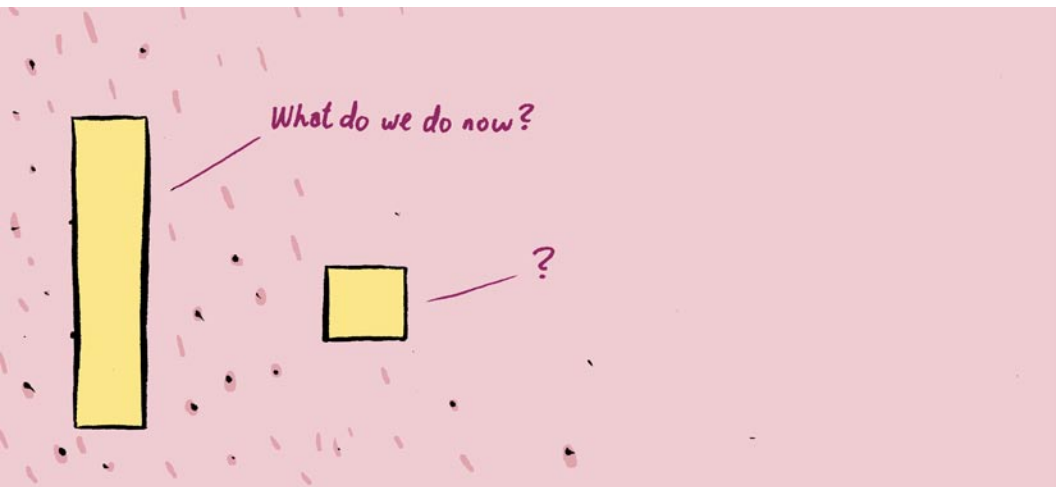
I get the same feeling playing *Donkey Kong 64*. Or reading a John Grisham novel. Or listening to U2's *How to Dismantle an Atomic*

*Bomb*.

Just because you know exactly how to write hip jokes that kids and adults *both* really love, and just because you know exactly where to put them in your film for maximum effect, that doesn't mean you're any good at making movies. Just because you can write a song that's, like, catchy, and has this cool bit where you say "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, *yeah!*" doesn't mean you're a great artist.

Screw all of that. Screw getting all the parts down. Instead, look at the basic things. Ask where the communication is taking place.

Philosophy, by definition, is rational investigation, into the *nature of The Arts*. Pongism is the philosophy of the videogame - it looks into its nature. Fuck college kids and their lies. Fuck Blizzard. Fuck everything. You know Pongism is right.



Now that you have these new ideas to ponder, what do you do? Well the answer is simple; the author invites you to share your feelings on the subject at hand by emailing him your comments, concerns and discussion to: [ajutla@gamersquarter.com](mailto:ajutla@gamersquarter.com)

You know Pongism is right.



# Prince of Hearts

## Ico & Prince of Persia: Point, Counter-Point

J.R. Freeman

Brandon Richard

***Prince of Persia* and *Ico* are very similar games on the surface. Both involve controlling a young man as he leads a mysterious woman around a castle, but looking beyond the outward appearance, you'll find two games that couldn't be more different in both mechanics and intent. The members of our staff have largely varying opinions on the games as well, and two of them got together and discussed the games' merits at length. They came up with some excellent points of discussion on what sets these games apart from each other and the rest of the gaming flock. Read the following and decide for yourself whether it's more important for games to capture your heart or your lust for battle.**

*Ico* is ultimately a more worthwhile endeavor than *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* because it actually uses its exposition to try to connect with us on a more human level. This type of connection is rarely attempted in video games. For example, the entirety of the game consists of leading a princess through a dangerous castle, and watching the tragedies that befall the characters at the end. The true intent of the game is to make the player feel a

connection with the characters via gameplay, without including unnecessary expository cutscenes that ultimately make you feel nothing. This alone is quite an achievement given that *Ico* has enjoyed the kind of underground success it has.

Perhaps. Though *Prince of Persia* didn't set to achieve high credentials through its story. It was a simple, by the books exposition that was executed flawlessly and gave the player an inventive, non-stop, narrative

You told me in a different conversation that your first play through for *Ico* was a less than stellar one because you didn't feel conjoined with the story. What changed your outlook so much that you've 180'd your opinion on the second go around? I ask mainly because in my eyes a first play through and the emotional baggage that comes with it should be the things that the producers should have had under consideration. If you're not holding the audience's attention in the beginning then you should expect it to have their attention lost throughout. So says theater etiquette, anyhow.

Well, what changed it for me was the ending and seeing how it all came together. Once I realized that all those black shadow monsters were actually the cursed spirits of other children born with horns I immediately saw how *Ico* connected with the princess and just how



significant his story was.

It's not that *Prince of Persia* isn't a good game, or that it doesn't do what it sets out to accomplish, because it certainly meets its goals. It's just that both games are kind of similar on a mechanical and structural level, yet quite different on the level of intent.

Now I'll ask you a question. What is it about *Prince of Persia* that sets it above *Ico* in your book? Is it the straightforward nature? The pacing? The fact that, as a game, it flows with a more natural cadence than *Ico* manages? I think we can both see the advantages and disadvantages that each approach to game design takes, it's just that *Ico* is ahead of it's time considering what it's trying to do. Your thoughts?

I think that *Ico* was, and will always be seen as, an influential game. How it was released on the world may not have been great for its success, but it could also be said that it was simply ahead of its time. I'll still recall *Ico*, in my belated play through of the game, as a worthy introduction to gaming on an interpersonal level, or games that grab hold of their audience's thoughts to evoke layers of emotion from the player that don't just tie into the power switch being on.

The question of what I preferred in *Prince of Persia*'s presentation in lieu of *Ico*'s can be answered in one solitary point: that *Prince of Persia* has an evolving exposition being played out for the audience. This more traditional mechanism is easier received by a larger audience than *Ico*'s theme-centered presentation. People like to be told a story. Through folk song, novels, hymns and nearly all other successful forms of entertainment

throughout history, stories have grown with each successive generation and advanced with culture to suit the times. I think that a game like *Ico* further advances how a story can be told through the gaming medium, but I do not think that *Ico* achieves this without flaw. At times, the game seems to cop out from its rural, despondent plot and forces the player to trade wits with his surroundings - not only making the story advancement underwhelming by breaking the flow with inane lever searching, but offering many uninspired moments that don't tie in with its distained nature. It disappoints me, and only because the game failed at utilizing its many environmental puzzles to connect with its story of escaping the stoned prison with your mute ally.

To sum up, *Prince of Persia* just seems more suited to my mainstream beliefs that exposition, when associated with switch finding, can more easily hold an audience's interest.

This is a good response, and says much about the current generation of people who label themselves "gamers." It's all about holding your interest for the moment, and in this regard *Prince of Persia* succeeds with flying colors whereas *Ico* falters.

For me, however, *Ico* was never about the moment, but the struggle of coming out on top. I was always looking ahead, trying to reassure myself that I'd guide Yorda to safety and see a happy ending. It affected me when that turned out to not exactly be the case. It's nice to see we agree in some areas though.





Yet are both games really about their exposition? Are people really playing them to see their stories play out? I know I played *Prince of Persia* mostly because the environmental puzzles were often fun to traverse, where *Ico* was more for the story than anything else. By game design standards, *Ico*'s puzzles barely fit the definition of the word.

Even if *Prince of Persia* was not the noir and emotional game that is *Ico*, didn't you find it more resolving to finish, since its story played a narrative role in its game play? For instance, the princess that allied with you was given a role of her own in the script. The horribly disfigured palace guards played a part in the story as the tragically befallen antagonists, thanks to the Sands of Time's curse. *Ico*'s entire plot, on the other hand, has to be self-interpreted. That's why I think that the story, as you call it, is flawed, since a large portion of the puzzles appear as trite handicaps in the story's progression. *Prince of Persia* does a much better job at using its entire palette of onscreen activities to tell its story.

The problem with *Ico* is that the parts that weren't story based were used to pad the gameplay out. If it weren't for the puzzles, then the game would be all of two hours long, and as I recall people complained enough about the length to begin with. Yes, that is a flaw, and it is a shame that the developer had to resort to such archaic methods of design as Box Puzzles to keep their game from being obscenely short,

no matter how sublime it was to poke around the castle and find a way out.

You are indeed correct that *Prince of Persia* managed to feel more cohesive due to its choice of more streamlined, interlocking design mechanics. However, for me at least, it was dreadfully transparent. Moving from an environmental puzzle I immediately knew that a room full of enemies was up next. Eventually the game got predictable in that I could feel the puzzle-battle-puzzle-battle structure weighing down on me. Having a frustrating combat engine didn't help it much either, but maybe that was just me, as I don't recall that many people complaining about it.

Of course, *Ico* was just as transparent. Eventually you developed a sixth sense for knowing exactly where the enemies would show up after leaving Yorda by her lonesome and climbing about the castle figuring out what to do next. At least *Ico* didn't bother with prolonged battles with groups of enemies that just got tougher and tougher, not because of a story element, but simply because you were advancing in the game.

In short, *Prince of Persia* was too much of a "game" for me. The levels were nice but they felt too much like video game levels, so much so that no matter how hard the game's dreamy visuals tried to convince me that it truly *existed* (like *Ico* and its castle); it ended up feeling like a maze with the player there just to jump through the hoops. If that's what you're looking for, that works. That's what games have been





since almost the beginning; a series of hoops and traps for you to run through and try and come out unscathed. I was expecting something more after coming away from my experiences with *Ico*, where the castle felt like it really existed somewhere and the people there really mattered. My actions held weight, whereas in *Prince of Persia* they simply did not.

*Prince of Persia* is a nice game with a nice story and nice everything, but not really much of a human element beneath its glossy surface. That's what I think *Ico* proves: that games can evoke a true emotional response by including human elements which make you care about the characters because of the gameplay and not just the cutscenes. Rather than just telling a straightforward story with a few hoops for you jump through, *Ico's* gameplay tells the story of his duty to protect the princess. This method of storytelling made the characters in *Ico* feel more real and alive than almost any other game I've played. Ico wasn't just protecting Yorda because he was there and that was his job. He took it upon himself to protect her because he felt sorry for her when he saw her caged up at the beginning of the game. In this way, I could tell that it was because they were both outcasts being held captive against their will that he identified with her. The moment I started caring about the characters was the moment I stopped playing it as a video game, and realized that *Ico* was trying to be something more than it was. That the emotional weight on screen was able to somehow cross over to the person playing it is testament to what it can accomplish.

*Ico* is flawed in its attempts, yes, but only because it relies on what came before it in the medium of the video game. This is what I mean when I say it's ahead of its time. I'll be

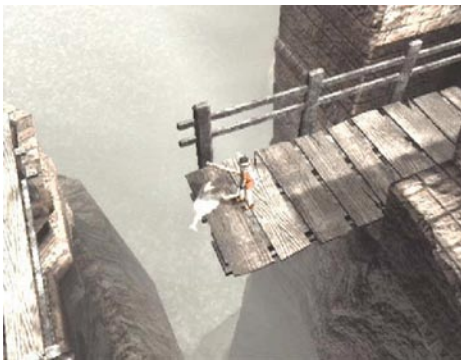
pretentious and say that it broke new ground that hasn't really been explored much since then. Although *Prince of Persia* shares some of the same style elements in its execution, it doesn't do anything beyond that, and I think that's a shame, really, that designers haven't tried harder to accomplish what *Ico* did.

Ico was a young and vulnerable warrior. His combat skills, though, aren't quite on par with the more acrobatic Prince. Yet, making Ico an unyielding force of power wouldn't have been a wise choice either. As frustrating as it was for me, Ico himself needed to play like a young and venerable warrior, with piss-poor aim I'd like to add. I'm sure it was written somewhere in the game's design documents that Ico would be the game's sole protagonist; that is, he would be the only creature in the game that the audience will have any connection with. That being said, Ico controls like a weak child who's caught up in a world bigger than himself. The producers triumph in overwhelming the player with unconventional tasks that have minimal definition behind them. This world that Ico inhabits isn't explained to him, and to convey this sense of abandonment there are no on-screen displays that comfort the player with a sixth sense about his surroundings. "How low is my health", "How large is this room", "Where is my large sprawling map, complete with the obligatory 'you are here' flashing red dot signifying my current position?"

You're never going to be burdened with these questions because there is never a need







for the game to provide its own handicaps. Though, to counter-point, there is a growing desire for the player to want these helpful hints, because stumbling about with your thumb up your ass, asking who, what, when, where's along the way as a stagnate tedium starts to make its way into your thoughts isn't much fun, but I believe that's been covered already. If there were visual hints in the game, then the overall focus of the story would be different than simply escaping the castle in one piece. It could be an "escape the castle while you dodge and evade enemy fire and smite anything that gets in your way," type of game. And just what type of game would we be playing in this case? Hmmmm?

Well, the short answer would be a fun one. But *Ico*, as scary as it may sound to my ears, wasn't meant wholly to be a fun game. To be blunt once more, it was meant to be compassionate. And I say the developer's hit their mark in this case.

To hark back to *Ico*'s somber beauty – never have I seen an environment so expertly realized as in *Ico*'s level design. Were you impressed by *Ico*'s graphics in your first play through; and would you say that they were a helpful aid in how you enjoyed the game? In other words, was it the glitz that allowed you to put up with the game play?

*Prince of Persia* does the "game" part of it right, I think. In that it plays well, and is rarely ever boring. Some of it may seem a bit nonsensical, such as the obviously designed

and planned out environment puzzles, but on their own they work really well. To say that *Ico* is able to stand on its own in the same area is a bit of a stretch – it's more about the characters in that game, and how you feel about them in the end that determines whether the game was successful or not. *Prince of Persia* doesn't have to do any of that, so it can simply focus on being an entertaining experience. In short, *Prince of Persia* engages its audience on a visceral level, whereas *Ico* is a game that can be appreciated on a more intellectual level.

As far as the visuals go, I think they worked given what the game was trying to accomplish. I wouldn't call it glitz or anything, simply means to an end with a little bit of flourish layered on. The visual style, much like the game itself, is not about the details but the general. Boy saves girl from castle. Evil tries to thwart him. The visual style reflects this in a simple, almost poetic way. People have given spite to the fact that the graphics were rather low resolution, but I don't think that's the point. They work fine in the resolution they're in. It's like a painting by Monet, if you complain that there isn't enough detail you simply need to step back further. Likewise for *Ico*, if you feel the resolution is too low then sit a few feet further away from the TV.

Conversely, I enjoyed the graphical style of *Prince of Persia*. The dreamy, blur effects helped further cement the idea in my mind that nothing was permanent, and the entire world could easily be erased with the touch of a button. I'm not sure if the developers were really going for this or not but it certainly sucked me in.



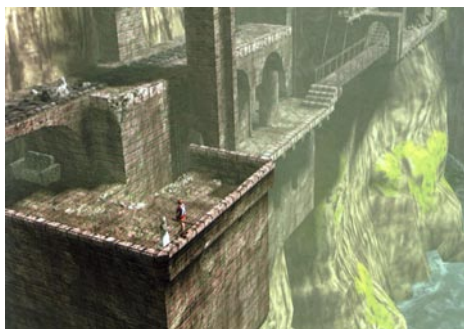


shown me that more intellectual games have a place in the gaming lineage as well. There will always be room for the kind of testosterone that *Prince of Persia* provides, but it is only in games like *Ico* that the player's hearts can be engaged rather than just their attention span.

It is the level design in both games where we can clearly see where one excels and one does not. *Prince of Persia* and *Ico* both share a similar way of going about it. *Prince of Persia* shows you where you're heading at the start of each stage. *Ico* does this too in a way, except *Ico* doesn't explicitly show you, instead relying on you to move the camera around while exploring and notice yourself the way the castle is laid out. This doesn't always work, because gamers are terrible cameramen, as the Resident Evil 4 piece from the previous issue so expertly explains.

It is interesting how you're looking at the perspectives of each game with an attention to visual cohesiveness, as well as level design. In all, that's what I was trying to pull from *Ico*, cohesiveness with the story that I could relate to. I wanted so much to feel at one with the outings of Ico and Yorda, but my mind refused to let me connect with them on the level that I sought most.

*Ico* requires focus, and focus is something not many games are willing to promote themselves as requiring, and even fewer allow themselves to stick to a design that stays focused throughout. *Prince of Persia* is much easier to digest than *Ico*, mainly because the story comes to a close once the credits role. The fate of the characters in *Ico* seems to waft by, while the game's writing doesn't even bat an eye over the protagonist's fate. The result is that the emotional afterglow of the game runs deeper than any game that I've played before. To add, I always favored more testosterone driven games that garnered the most marketing attention. Until *Ico*, I thought that was what all games should be: a thrill ride. But *Ico* has





We All Live In a Pokémon World

### **Pokémon Gold/Silver/Crystal - GB**

Jonathan Kim

Life and the new Pokémon games are deluded in execution.

Our society is setup so that one must live for one to two decades before they can fully become accustomed to living and interacting in society. In the ancient past, when lives were simpler, children became "mature" shortly after they hit ten. Now technology has "facilitated" life and made people live five times longer than they did before.

As it stands now, society requires many cogs to run its giant machine. Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, people have been swooped away from their communal towns and tossed into giant factories, deprived of identity and humanity. They become robots, working to survive in a market system designed to perpetuate the "roboticization" of humans for the benefit of a higher class.

Post-World War II: the government established the concept of the "nuclear family" - a condensed mobile labor force. Mom, Pop, Bro, Sis, and even little dog Spot were created to people cities and create markets. As a result, Grandma and Grandpa have been tossed away left with no alternative but suicide, Mom is once again left job-less, resorting to the bottle, and latch key kids are left running home to get beaten by Mom - who does so only because

their irate father beats her. Families break apart, people live longer, misery spreads, and then a strange man named Satoshi Tajiri makes Pokémon.

Pokémon is a Gameboy game that educates children to leave home before puberty and earn their rites of manhood by enslaving cute monsters and sleeping at youth hostels in various cities. The Pokémon world is a mild wilderness, populated with intelligent creatures in every grassy knoll. The main hobby of its inhabitants is to capture then battle these creatures against each other. It is eerily similar to African poachers, except instead of indigenous Africans driving jeeps into wild jungles and shooting animals with guns to capture them in iron cages, little children run around beating the creatures senseless and confine them into small spherical prisons no bigger than an orange. The result is a peaceful world filled with empty dangers, like a haunted house at an amusement park. This controlled freedom, designed by a Japanese man that was stuck in an urban jungle and longed for the open green fields of his youth, goes on and establishes to kids that YES, they don't need help from Mom to make themselves into real men Hell, they don't even need a Dad at all. A child's uncontrollable desire to obtain a fatherly figure can be obtained if the kid is allowed to run free and enslave thousands of harmless animals in a world where half the areas aren't



even developed. Thanks to Satoshi Tajiri we now have children like me.

Raised on fiction, bombarded with fiction, believing in fiction – we are told we can be anything we want to be when we grow up, simply because it's too cruel to tell us that we really probably won't be able to. We are raised in a structured environment, force-fed information that does nothing but perpetuate its own academic framework, then tossed from one institution to another, ultimately being thrown into the world and expected to seek shelter in other forms of institutionalization - squeaking out earnings just to keep ourselves alive. We then continue the cycle, pumping out new children to feed to the machine, until we realize the futility of it all and run away to buy Ferraris

What happens to the loyal servants of a manor when their master is killed? To those who live lives completely bound to servitude, structured to work day-in, day-out? They are crippled with fear and resort to finding a lifestyle that as closely resembles their previous lifestyle as possible.

This is what happened to Pokémon: Ruby and Sapphire.

The Gold and Silver generation of Pokémon games are the best in the series.

The current generations of Pokémon, the Ruby and Sapphire games, miss the point. Gamefreak, the developer, went about improving the graphics, tinkering with the elemental types of the Pokémon, and adding only redundant changes to the framework that had been established in the first games. Their

evolution is not unlike that of the strategy RPG, where inbreeding has created its own perplexing genre. Existing elements are being added to what has already been established without an understanding of why those elements were first created or used. The current Pokémon staff is confused and afraid to improve anything that Gold and Silver established.

Why? Because the Gold and Silver games created a Pokémon world with context. The focus in Gold and Silver was improving only the aspects of the original games that helped develop an actual sense of a world, and this was done by adding only four things.

First is the element of time. By adding time, each player experienced a unique and different experience in the Pokémon world. Depending on one's sleeping habits, Gold and Silver players would encounter either diurnal or nocturnal creatures only. Because of this, the monsters gained context themselves - they were no longer lifeless prey dumped into grassy fields waiting for players to abuse and enslave. Now they were actually creatures of the environment, doing their own activities at their own pace. For example, head-butting a tree when you first woke up would initiate a battle with an angry acorn, but doing so at midnight would cause a fight with a sleeping bird that's fallen off of its nightly perch.

In addition to the cycle of night and day, a weekly calendar system was implemented, allowed for daily special events at locations that a player would otherwise have no reason to visit again. Useless roads, such as the underground



passageway, would never be traversed again if not for the weekly swap meet sales being held there, selling off one of a kind items at low, low prices. Small towns with no memorable features suddenly gained personality by offering free Pokémon beauty makeovers on weekends. Even encountering NPCs was a special treat when certain characters only appeared on respective days of the week, giving the player rare items as congratulations for encountering them.

Second, the game added personality to the monsters. All of the Pokémon gained sexes, assigning genders even to the previously sexless monsters from the Red/Blue/Green generations when transferred over. With this they could now crossbreed and reproduce, creating a new, stronger generation of monsters for the player to tame and train.

The game also introduced "shiny" Pokémon – rare variations of the traditional monsters that were differently colored and carried a special sparkle animation into battle. This encouraged players to keep training their monsters in various random grass fields, hoping to encounter and capture one of these rare monsters. With an encounter rate of 1/60024, this also added incredible value to a shiny Pokémon and to the overall experience of training in the wild.

To further encourage continued battles with wild Pokémon the Gold and Silver generation also introduced a Pokémon virus called "Pokerus" that doubled the experience gained from battle for any Pokémon who had the virus. The virus could only be spread if a player caught a monster that already was infected with the virus. Once a Pokémon was afflicted with it, each monster in the player's active party immediately gained it, doubling the experience gained for all of them. However, after a week of playing, the Pokémon all gain immunity to its effects and the virus is lost. The Pokerus virus was a prize to encourage power levelers and those who liked to capture multiples of the same Pokémon.

Third, the game added a cellphone to the mix. The player could now record any willing



NPC's phone number and dial him/her up whenever and wherever they wanted. Calling Mom would allow the player to ask how much money they had saved in the bank. Hitting up Bill with a call caused an automatic message response indicating how much space was left in the currently used Pokémon box. Chatting with fisherman would reveal the latest info about rare Pokémon swimming by lately. Ringing previously defeated trainers would enable rematches, with young opponents eager to show how well they had built up their monsters since their previous defeat. Even gossiping with girls would open up





simple bits of data were added. Meanwhile, the new Pokémon Ruby and Sapphire have completely missed the point of truly improving the game, ignoring everything that added layers to the gameplay experience and instead opting for better graphics. What is the point of having a real-time clock in the game if its effects don't go beyond that of Berry tree Growth? Why bother to make hundreds of new Pokémon when the world they inhabit isn't defined or established as a believable world? Why bother making a sequel to a game only to cut off all ties with the previously established games altogether? It all comes off as meaningless. And come now, life is full of enough of that already.

information of rare sales happening now! Each seemingly insignificant response in the Pokémon world was now varied and full of reality, truly emphasizing how everyone was doing their own thing, not just waiting for the player to come and press "A" in front of their faces. The NPC's were now people.

Finally, the game now had a history. Gold/Silver players had already played the original Red/Blue/Green/Yellow games - they knew about Ash (Red) and Gary (Blue)'s rivalry; the pathetic terrorist attempts by Team Rocket; the terrible genetic manipulation that created Mewtwo; and the feeling of traversing up through the long Indigo Plateau to ultimately fight the Elite Four. The Gold and Silver games asked players to go back and see what effects time had had on the Kanto world of the previous games. Characters had changed - some gym leaders had moved on to become members of the Elite Four while others trained harder and improved their own Pokémon lineups. Places changed as well - volcanic eruptions sunk islands while other towns gained new skyscrapers, no longer run by the mafia! And then, to top it all off, the final battle took place inside of the deepest, most difficult cave in the entire game. In this battle there wasn't any need for words because your battle is with the only other character in the Pokémon universe that doesn't have anything to say!

These new elements tied together everything and made Pokémon Gold and Silver feel like an evolving world. People, Pokémon, cities, and even the past came alive when these





## A Different Perspective

John Szczepaniak

Videogames and their history as you know them are only a fluttering leaf in an unseen forest. There are worlds, subcultures, scenes, strange tales of bazaars in far off lands and things that would simply blow the lids off all you self-professed hardcore gamers. Yet, so few people know about them that these great legacies are in danger of being forgotten in the sands of time.

Most people easily fall into the trap of seeing the gaming world as one of three major super powers: Japan, America and Europe. The truth is that nearly every single nation on Earth, regardless of political or economic strife, has a gaming scene in one form or another. What makes this so fascinating is often the events in these areas are as exciting, if not more so, than what goes on in one's native country. Whether it's arcades, consoles or home computers, you will find something unique wherever you travel.

In the USA some good buddies head to the 7/11, play the latest arcade title and then maybe finish off the day with a few brewskies. In the UK, mates will gather at the local chippy and order the special of the day while besting each other's scores, before rounding things off with a pint at the pub. Japan has myths of spiky-haired students partaking in massive arcade tournaments while buxom young ladies

cheer them on, wearing skimpy Hello Kitty skirts.

But what of Russia? Yes, what of 1/6's of the world's surface? Where are the East Bloc tales of walking through woods to reach a local arcade centre and play simple arcade clones that have been fused with native legend? Of having to pay with Rubles to play per minute on a SNES housed in a wooden cabinet? Where have the stories of punks sharpening knives, padding their sweaters with magazines and drinking vodka, readying for a massive political street fight in suburban Moscow while the "World of Ruin" theme from *Final Fantasy VI* plays on a cigarette smoke-obscured screen, gone?

Where are our Latin American compatriots with their accounts of real brawls breaking out in arcades, because they take their games seriously there? Stories of unique arcade games we never received? Tales of modified *Street Fighter* cabs that allow dozens of simultaneous Hadokens?

African youth are as competitive as American youth; hell, they might even be better, but like everything else we never hear of these things. Only when Sammy announced that they would be using Sega hardware to make cheap arcades for 3rd world countries did people start to take notice of the international arena.

Consoles are no different. Sure, you may have a NeoGeo, maybe even a Duo-R or another unusual gaming piece of hardware, but how



deep does the rabbit hole really go? Do you have a multi-slotted system for both NES and Famicom carts? Do you have a Famicom/Megadrive hybrid? How many of the hundred-plus models of the FamiClone do you own, or have even seen? People may question the importance of these things being unsanctioned bootlegs after all. But these things are important, if only to show that necessity really is the mother of all invention.

While Eastern Europe in general may have suffered from poverty and questionable government regimes that destroyed any chance of games being officially released or even affordable to the average person, people still played games thanks to the bootleg scene. While governments were happy to demonise communist countries, the youth in these places were interested in the exact same things as the youth elsewhere - playing games in one form or another. Half a century of supposed difference and our kids were actually the same all along.

Even in places with near total corruption, such as Nigeria, you will find local merchants hawking their goods. If you're lucky you may find a VCD games console alongside some of their local moonshine; careful though, those tribal brews are potent stuff.

Perhaps the unofficial isn't to your taste? Perhaps you need the company logos to ease your conscience? Fair enough, but why settle for Western gaming with its region lockouts and territorial protection? Stuff like that only exists to feed corporate greed. Why limit yourself to only one region of game? In South Africa people

played official multi-region machines and games right off the official boxes, albeit with the power adapters replaced with the local standard. Looks like those trade embargoes put on them didn't quite work out as planned. Sure Nintendo and Sega didn't officially support the region, but that didn't stop them from legally selling "grey market" imports. It is a nice example of gamers simply picking and choosing the best of the rest of the world's fruits. Though when the embargoes went down Sony et al stepped in and made everything official, which raises the question "when did they have greater freedom?"

Travel to the steamy jungles of Brazil, and again you find a world of gaming mystery few talk about. Like Sega? They've got it. Officially licensed Master System games are still sold, though you may not recognize some of them. The rest of the world never did get to play SMS versions of classics like *Street Fighter*, *Mortal Kombat* or *Gunstar Heroes*. *Gunstar* is actually both very good AND very rare, so don't expect to find it anytime soon.

Rare Brazilian games don't end there though. Regard yourself as a bit of an Atari 2600 collector? The only way to complete that ultimate collection is to start learning Portuguese now and heading there. Several games, including Disney licenses, were only released in Brazil. While you're there, you should also rummage around the best open-air games markets outside those by the Black Sea.

"But what about the international Commodore, Spectrum and MSX scenes?" gamers with horn-rimmed glasses demand to know. You'll find those too, and often bigger, better, with more games than you may be used to. Best of all these regions, with their own unique home computer scenes, also have homebrew games still being developed. Russia allegedly has the biggest amount of Spectrum clones manufactured in the world, plus they come with the hallowed TR-DOS disk drives. More affordable for the average person than the official machines from Sir Clive<sup>1</sup>, they enabled an entire nation access to cheap computing.

For a more Japanese home computer flavor, try going Dutch with the MSX homebrew scene in Holland. Perhaps fly several thousand kilometers to Iran and again you'll find the MSX, this time nestled alongside the C64. Buying software here during the 1980s wasn't so easy, however, because if local computer stores hadn't been reduced to rubble, then there was a good chance the transport trucks had been hijacked by the Iraqis. Still, not everywhere in the Middle East had it so tough. Ask any gamer from the Arabian Gulf and they too will tell you their own personal gaming accounts.

But this barely scratches the surface of such a huge subject. It doesn't tell us anything about how cultural differences have affected exactly what these countries chose to absorb or change. In a unique way, uncontrolled gaming scenes have flourished without pruning by those in power and are good examples of true open markets directed only by those who purchase things, as opposed to what the big corporations think we should be buying. In this way it is also a reflection of the society and its culture.

Surely every nation has its own native equivalent words for Arthurian canon that deals with warriors and mystical things such as dragons? So why is it that so many countries choose to borrow or hybridize words rather than use their own legacies? Also worthy of note is the actual myths and legends used in creating unique narratives for games from these areas. In the West and Japan we forever recycle *Dungeons and Dragons*, but look a little deeper and you'll find that whether it's century old folktales or contemporary local comics, every other country enjoys stories that are unique to them and exotic to us. Any veteran of *Haung-Di* on the Famicom can attest to the thrilling influence of far eastern legends.

Exotic is the optimum word, since it nicely summarizes what makes these unwritten



gaming histories of the world so goddamned exciting. Attending E3 and the Tokyo expose is an amazing experience make no mistake, but so is haggling over Famicom cartridges, computer parts and tins of Beluga caviar, in the misty early-morning Polish markets, with a bearded Czechoslovak who looks like a mercenary. Do you pay the full price, or ask him to throw in some military surplus combat knives as well? It's this juxtaposition of exotic elements that makes everything so rich, like a scene out of those adventure movies starring Dr. Jones?. You could be browsing strange gaming wares in a shop under the African ground one moment before retiring to a small house in Chinatown to play NeoGeo and drink Bavarian ale while your friend's mother cooks crispy aromatic duck in the kitchen.

In the more publicized regions, game related products are manufactured in a factory. A man stands at a conveyor belt that carries identical cartridges, he then places these identical cartridges into identical plastic bags which are then placed into identical cardboard boxes. They all go to identical shops and are reviewed in identical game magazines. But with the unofficial, you can never be sure of the paths they took. How many programmers on the island nation of Hong Kong were needed to make an illegal port of *Street Fighter* for the NES? How often did they spill hot spicy noodles

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1 - Sir Clive Sinclair is the eccentric British MENZA member and inventor who brought cheap computing to the masses with his ZX80, ZX81, ZX Spectrum and other Sinclair home computers.

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2 - Dr. Indiana Jones, from the George Lucas films of the same name, was often shown in exotic locations, such as Cairo, engaging in exciting adventures.

on their keyboards in that cramped city apartment of theirs? How many bottles of Zubrowka vodka did those smugglers use to bribe their way across the Slavic borders? What exactly was the camel journey like when crossing the Middle-Eastern deserts? The games from these places that cross the seas do so in manners very different to the sealed crates that are shipped from Japan to Germany to be distributed across Western Europe.

These statements are not hyperbole, look closely and you will find clues and evidence relating to these events. A dozen broken links later and maybe, just maybe, you'll find a small fan site that tries to document such things. A whispered tale passed along friends that tells of the phenomenal adventures had by the merchant fathers of recent immigrants in order to earn a living off the gaming trade; this might be all that remains.

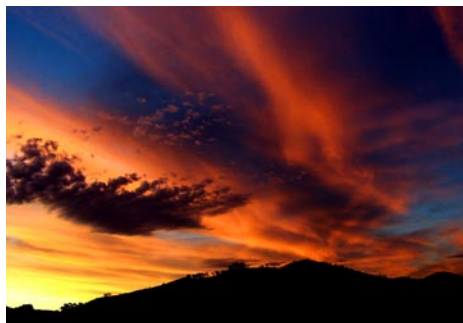
These unparalleled occurrences in the history of the video game industry, with the entire world as their backdrops, are real and did happen. Sadly, they are in danger of being forgotten. As of now so many remain undocumented and unrecorded. In light of globalization, not to mention the changes in political climates and economies, there is the risk that they will pass out of the memories of men and be lost.

Beyond the titillation or envy that such things may provide though, these foreign stories do something far more important. Of all the countries I have researched, all of them show evidence of being touched by videogames in one form or another. This proves to me that as human beings, all of us love to play games and understand the importance of 'play.' Whether chess, cricket or *Sapphire Ginga Fukei Densetsu*, there is a common bond between all the people of all the nations in the world. While our endlessly magnificent governments of the globe wisely choose to teeter on the brink of nuking the proverbial nonsense out of all of us, the children and young people of one country are interested in doing exactly the same things as

those of every other country - play games.

But these are but brief snapshots of our world and are only some of the things that I have personally experienced. I haven't haggled in Turkey or Morocco and neither have I wandered the Stockholm streets to attend a music show put on by leather-clad game-influenced musicians. I don't know if farmers in central China play games like their Hong Kong counterparts, or to what extent gaming has covered India. It's there - by God it must be there according to past experience - but like I said earlier, no one speaks of these things and no one records it.

A small child in a country plagued by war plays the original *Metal Gear*. A whole apartment block on the outskirts of Moscow is engaged in figuring out how to beat *Monkey Island*, but only a few people know any English. The game and its storyline become the talk of the apartment block for a whole week. Farther away in a city surrounded by deserts, a mother relaxes with her daughter who plays Tengen *Tetris*. Call me ridiculously naïve if you must, but simply knowing these things exist brings a smile to my face. When you step out your door to enjoy this beautiful world of ours, keep in mind the fact that videogames are a far more vast and complex pastime than you could ever have imagined.







SONIC has  
like three new  
games coming out!  
Totally awesome!

Gunstar Super Heroes is the sequel to the 1993 Genesis classic by Treasure. The GBA version is being published by Sega and was shown in a small kiosk near the back of the Sega booth. Despite being a GBA title, this game looks absolutely gorgeous! Every boss, level, and scene looks fabulous in motion and really pushes the GBA for what it's worth.



A lot of levels used the GBA's hardware to do tricks that looked amazing in action. For example, one level had the player running through an underground world chasing little birds and collecting them like in Sonic 3d Blast. As the player ran, the world spun around underfoot like a giant hamsterball. Beautiful!

Another level had the player riding on the back of an airplane as enemies pursued, firing at you and damaging the plane. As the player fired back, moving in a direction made the plane turn and rotated the background around like a dogfight from a movie. Then, after destroying a few airplanes, these huge mechas fly by, zooming right into the screen and flipping around the plane. Mode-7 beauty!



Another game really being shown off was Phantasy Star Universe for the PC and PS2. Taking place between Phantasy Star I and II, the game looks pretty much like a cross between Xenosaga and Phantasy Star Online. Gameplay-wise, it's not very different from PSO except that it's more of a single player action game rather than an online RPG. Well, that and the targeting system actually involved manually flipping through different enemies - something that never works well especially with Sonic Team games. Alas!

The setup is mostly the same: there's still a map with boundries that are only openable by killing all the enemies in the area.

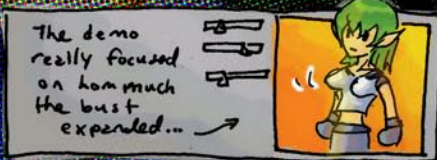
The only change was the ability to switch weapons on the fly, making for different attack combinations.

Different combos included:

- Saber + Pistol
  - Daggers + Pistol
  - Sword
  - Staff
- (Mostly Hunter combinations.)



The story consists of running to different points and initiating cut-scenes, and overall felt like Xenosaga in a really bad way. But the real focus is on the multiplayer anyway.



A video of the online features showed off the new character creation system for PSU. The character are now completely customizable, from small facial details to changing the length of arms and legs. It's like Sonic Team's counter attack on the Sims 2! Nice!

And that concludes my E3 report! There's some other awesome games coming out, like Dragon Quest VIII and Final Fight: Streetwise, but I'm sure you guys will hear plenty about that when the time comes. Until next time, everyone!

We got shafted for this crap?



Yeah! WTF?



# In Which I Discover That The King of Fighters is Really Pretty Good

## In A Way That *Mortal Kombat* Isn't, I Mean.

Amandeep Jutla

I used to wonder why people fought each other, and how it happened.

It seemed so strange, after all, so alien, when I thought about it - the idea that people actually look at each other, sometimes, and hate each other enough that they ball their hands up into fists and attempt to do damage. The person you're facing is a living, breathing human being, with blood vessels and muscles and internal organs, and you're trying to do what? Rupture them?

It just seems sick.

I didn't get that for a long time - years, even. I'd always been a peaceful kid, and a sheltered one too. I've never owned a toy weapon of any kind, and despite the fact that I'd seen possibly hundreds of wholly violent and inappropriate movies, I never actually got the urge to go out and behead people with meat cleavers. At age six I begged my mother for a watergun - they were all the rage, then, and there were tantalizingly stupid commercials for them showing up every fifteen minutes on television - but there was nothing for it. I whined about this at first and then stopped. Life, I decided, was too short to get worked up about pretending to shoot people. I just was not a violent person.

I believed that for a while, until I was nine,

and in fourth grade, and one day in class some stupid bastard stole my lunchbox. I hunted the kid down and punched him in the eyeball-socket as hard as I could. Now, I can't actually punch, so the kid was more annoyed and angry than hurt and upset, yet went and told the teacher anyway, because he was an asshole. I ended up getting my lunchbox back, but I also got a severe talking-to from the principal, no less, who asked me why I had done such a thing.

Well, I told her, I'd felt this furious, righteous anger at this kid - and I thought I was wholly justified, really, in my actions, and I was only sorry that I hadn't managed to draw blood.

Yeah, I was a stupid kid like that.

No, she said. You don't ever solve your problems in a forcible way like that, you fucking kid. You have to use diplomacy, instead. Talk to people! Things will work out!

So I filed that bit of information away and didn't question it for years.

Now, however, I wonder. You see, I'm starting to believe that hitting people is actually kind of okay.

\* \* \*

Fighting games.

They comprise a genre - just another genre, but a genre I've been entirely sealed away from for a long time.

My mother wouldn't let me own a

watergun. Do you really think she would buy me a videogame with a title like *Street Fighter II*? There was no way in hell. I wasn't even interested, myself.

I mean, if you think about it what happens in a fighting game is pretty raw. You stare at a lengthy list of characters, painted in harsh colors. You choose one, wait for your opponent to do the same, and suddenly the both of you are whisked away to a platform. Your characters stare at each other and snarl. A husky male voice shouts out something like "*Fight!*" or "*Heaven or Hell!*" and you both proceed to beat the shit out of each other.

That's all that goes on in a fighting game. Back when *Mortal Kombat* was the hottest thing going, I went to visit my cousins, who lived on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. and had a Sega Genesis. It was there that I spent hours in their living room, against my will, watching them play that stupid game over and over again. When they weren't playing it, they'd chase each other around the house throwing beanbag chairs around and shouting out names like "Sub-Zero." When they *were* playing it, they smashed down on random combinations of buttons, furiously trying to finish off their opponents as quickly as possible. They were usually pretty successful.

"So, do you guys have *Sonic*?" I asked them one day.

They just laughed. They were into *fighting games*, not that *Sonic* garbage!

There was just no point. If Arbitrary Quasi-Chinese Caricature tears out Another Arbitrary Quasi-Chinese Caricature's still-beating heart and eats it, then what's that mean? The other caricature can't be dead, because when the game ends I can select him again normally. If Arbitrary 1 scissor-kicks Arbitrary 2 halfway across the screen and Arbitrary 2 is not only still alive but is also actually capable of running right back at Arbitrary 1 and giving him a swift kick to the crotch, what is that saying?

When people fight in real life, you can feel meaning. You have to think. You don't just press buttons. There are consequences for your



actions - you hit someone hard enough, and they will bleed. You don't hit someone hard enough, and they will tell a teacher to tell you that negotiation is the best problem-solving technique.

There's no negotiation in *Mortal Kombat*. But there's also no context. I didn't care about any of the people involved, what they were doing, fighting, why they were doing it. "Sub-Zero" is the only *Mortal Kombat* character I can remember. I don't even remember what he looks like - I just know he's called *Sub-Zero*, and that always struck me as an asinine name. Even for a videogame character.

\* \* \*

Right now I like to think of myself as older and wiser than I was in my *Mortal Kombat* days, and it was with that attitude that I bought *Soul Calibur II*, the critically-acclaimed three-dimensional fighter by Namco.

It was also with this attitude that I discovered that I was not older and wiser, after all. Either that, or I just didn't get fighting games.

*SCII* is slickly-packaged and perfect. It has variegated and detailed polygonal characters. It has pretty, stylish backdrops. It has music that is far from low in quality.

And I still can't play it. It's because *SCII* is still *Mortal Kombat*, just prettier. You pick someone. An announcer tells you to start fighting. You hit buttons, and do outlandishly

violent things to the other player's character; they retaliate. After a bit of this, someone dies. The entire process repeats itself, two, maybe three times. A winner is declared.

A winner of what? Why am I playing? Why does it matter?

It shouldn't have to be this way. The fighter archetype is a strong, pure thing - as pure as that of shooters. There's you, there's the enemy. Shit happens and someone dies. The idea is visceral. There's not a lot of room for ambiguity, because either my Cassandra will lay the smack down on your Nightmare, or she will get her petite rear end handed to her; one or the other will happen and that's why you and I are playing this game.

Those are the basics. There are attempts to give these basics context. *Mortal Kombat* does it, kind of. There was a *Mortal Kombat* movie once, and in it one character says to another, "You! You broke my five-hundred dollar sunglasses!" This was all over the playgrounds right after the movie came out; everyone at school was talking about it and how it was so badass. Still, what do five-hundred dollar sunglasses have to do with anything? Do they just demonstrate that *Mortal Kombat* is sweet and the characters in it are rich, like, so rich you wouldn't believe?

Every match of *Soul Calibur II* begins with a narrator saying something grandiose like, "The warriors strive for the Sword of Legend!"

Well. I don't care about the Sword of Legend. It's a pair of sunglasses. It gets in the way. The point of *Soul Calibur II* hitting start, a fraction of a second into this speech to get started with the flashy weapons-based fighting already.

I'd have been grateful to Namco had they told me, "Hey, you want a game where the whole focus is on the fighting? Then here you go," but instead they gave me *Soul Calibur II*, which attempts to have a mythos, and a story, and a weapons-master mode, and God-knows-what-else.

The game doesn't need that. It is fluff. It



is kind of insulting, almost. If *Soul Calibur II* is about concept, make it about concept, which doesn't need to be grounded in anything, because it's conceptual. If you want to, come up with a game where all the fighters are wireframe models, characters with no personality traits or blood types who are fighting solely because they are fighting. It would be free of bullshit. They could call it *Hitting*. Simplicity is key.

So it's like this: There is a line. It is long and pointed, as all lines are, and it stretches out from the Hypothetically Most Conceptual Fighter Ever Made to the Hypothetically Most Emotionally-Involving Fighter Ever Made. At the former end, there is *Hitting*. In the middle are confused, jumbled games like *Soul Calibur II*. *Soul Calibur II* doesn't know what it is, what it wants to be. It needs to work that out.

But at the latter end, where *real* context that makes *sense* goes, we have *The King of Fighters*.

\* \* \*

Shigeru Miyamoto is a videogame rockstar. People listen to what he says. When he makes sojourns to Redmond to speak with the fine people at Nintendo of America and shake the hands of seven-foot-tall Mario dolls whilst being photographed by EGM, he sometimes takes the time to convey a few choice nuggets o' wisdom to his devoted followers.

I remember one time when he did this. The year was 1998, *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* was nearing the end of its development cycle.

Someone asked him a few questions about it, and he obligingly answered them. The game, he said, was going to be pretty pants-dropping-tastic. Just not perfect.

"What?" his interviewer said. "Not perfect? You can't be serious!"

"No, no," Miyamoto said. "I mean, ha, if I'd allowed myself another two years to work on *Ocarina*, it would be amazing. But, I haven't done that. I have to settle for 'very good.'"

Way back when I'd read what the guy had said, stoked as I had been about *Ocarina*, I felt slightly let down. Miyamoto *knew Ocarina of Time* could have been great, but he wasn't making it great. He was limiting himself. He was saying, okay, 1998 is the deadline. No more game past here. What if he'd been given more than just two years but *nine* of them to do the new *Zelda*? Wouldn't it have been simply mind-blowing? There would probably have been seven or eight towns, and fifty dungeons. The world would have been vast and beautiful and never-ending.

But the needs of the global market obviously force this fanciful thinking away. If Miyamoto had done that, *Ocarina* would have been released in 2005, this year. Right now, there are something like seven active Nintendo 64 owners left in the world. No one would have played that. It would have slipped away, without making any money. Miyamoto, sensitive, intelligent man that he is, would never have made such a brain-damaged business decision. It would have cost him his livelihood. His kids would be out on the street.

And so Miyamoto does what Nintendo and the rest of the industry - does. Games that were in gestation for four or more years are whispered about in hushed voices and with good reason - many of them are brilliant, perhaps because of that time spent. *Deus Ex*. *Shenmue*. *Riven*. *Daikatana*. These games are few and far between, because most titles are given production schedules that last two or three years.

That's okay. That's good business sense, and



it works, and people seem to like it, and, hell, even I like it. Two years is already longer than the average time it takes for a movie to be shot, right? So it can't be all that bad.

There is, however, a problem. There usually is. And that problem is, development cycles like this lead one to think in terms of small, chopped, discrete *fragments*; like this bit of writing, right here. Miyamoto doesn't think of *Zelda* as a continuous entity; as a series of games with what I could call a teleological high concept. He thinks of it as a series of games for which he spends X amount of time working on each installment and then moves on. *Ocarina* wasn't so hot, but the next one would maybe be better. That's how most games work. *Ocarina* doesn't reference *Link's Awakening*, and it pretends *Link to the Past* didn't exist. The *Zeldas* are mostly unrelated, like that. When I'm talking about the concept that we know as "Zelda," I don't say "Zelda" to refer to all the games. I say "the *Zelda* games," or "those *Zeldas*." They are not all the same.

\* \* \*

The way SNK has approached *King of Fighters* is very un-Miyamoto.

There are ten games in the main series, not counting spin-offs and other weirdness I don't yet understand. The first one came out in 1994. The latest one came out in 2003. One has been released every year like clockwork. Some of them took less than twelve months to hit the arcades.



If you'd asked someone at SNK around 1996 why they don't slow down the release schedule and spend three or four years on one really good *King of Fighters*, he probably would have laughed hollowly. That's no way to make money.

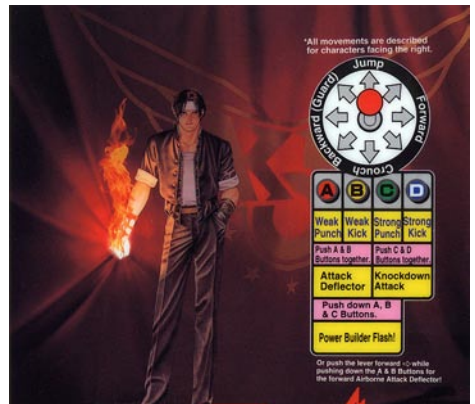
This seems a little crass, but it isn't. There's a dichotomy at work: on one level, SNK's been doing nothing but milking their chief franchise for all it was worth, coming out with yearly updates like EA does with *Madden* or some shit, but on another level, this works in its own way. Every one of these ten *King of Fighters* games improves on the one before it only marginally. *KOF '94* played pretty lousily, but *KOF '95* improved on it conceptually, and '96 refined it further. Every game from then on has added another level of polish to the existing base. There aren't any radical changes.

If you think about it, all of those *KOFs* have come out on the Neo-Geo arcade hardware. The system's main board was designed in the late 1980s. *KOF '94* looks very much like *KOF '03*. The sprites are very similar, featuring perhaps a touch more detail-work and a little bit of cleaning-up. Maybe the backgrounds are a little flashier.

Still. If you put 2003 and 94 next to each other and stand about fifty feet away, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. The series has not changed too much, but every year new ideas and mechanics are brought in, and old mechanics and ideas are tossed out. Characters sometimes die. Other characters take their place. There's a convoluted plot that changes, from game to game. It involves a vaguely evil being called Orochi, for the first few years, and then it changes focus to NESTS, which is an organization that enjoys cloning people and giving said clones stupid names.

This all doesn't really matter.

*King of Fighters* is *King of Fighters*, not "the *King of Fighters* games" or "these chapters of *King of Fighters*." It is what it is. The yearly updates freshen and tweak the core gameplay, and rearrange the roster, and bring us new HUDs and menus, but what's there at bottom is



still KOF and remains KOF.  
I'm digging that.

\*\*\*

I've said it before. I'll say it again. I can't play fighting games. I don't like them. They contradict what I'd been told by my mother growing up. They whisper sweet nothings in my ear trying to get me to forget all about what my teacher told me back in fourth grade, and when I go over to their side and try to embrace them, they rape me in the ass with a rake and leave me for dead, as I lie there clutching a Dual Shock and wondering how the hell I'm supposed to be able to guard-impact, and why I'm wasting my time with this damn game anyway.

Then *King of Fighters* comes along, and it's a fighting game that's been in development for ten years. It's the concentrated essence of a fighting game. All the titles in the series form a bigger picture, like an impressionist painting.

*KOF* is intimidating. I avoided it for a while. I'd hear people talking *KOF* and I'd pretend they weren't, you know, talking *KOF*. And I was good with that. I didn't play fighters, anyway. A few weeks ago, I got drawn in. I was told that *KOF '98* wouldn't be a horrible starting place. So, diligently, I obtained a Neo-Geo emulator and the appropriate ROM files and tried it out.

My head nearly exploded.

*King of Fighters* is dangerous, if you don't know what you're doing. When you start up arcade mode in '98, you have a list of 38

characters there, none of whom are familiar to you and all of whom look pretty much the same. You have 30 seconds to choose a group of three from those 38. Then the computer chooses its own team, and you fight. And you die.

I felt compelled, despite that. I kept playing '98, and got to the point where if I tried really hard, I could pull off a couple of combos and sort of hold my own. The game wasn't the focus for me, though. I disliked fighting games before I tried *KOF*, and I still don't really enjoy them. I don't, however, hate *KOF*. There is a difference.

*KOF* can't be handled without tongs and a hazmat suit. There is a stomach-turning amount of complexity there - *King of Fighters* inherits some of its plot and characters from *Fatal Fury*, and others from *Art of Fighting*. It exists in a parallel universe to the continuities of those two series. It is more complex than most games have a right to be. Be careful. It's possible to suffocate, under all of that. Since I started playing, I've likely annoyed the hell out of my friend Eric-Jon, asking him many a dumb question about the series, and I'm still not quite getting it. At the very least, I should be glad I'm not choking.

Density is the big thing.

SNK has ignored Miyamoto and come up with their own strange system of rushing games out the door, but making them all smash together into a monstrous black hole of a videogame concept that sucked me in and tore my body apart into its component atoms and tore those atoms apart, leaving them to be sucked down past the event horizon or given off as Hawking radiation over a period of millions of years.

This is heady stuff. Yes, *King of Fighters* has you doing a lot of staring down the other guy and beating him to a pulp, but it feels more refined. Even though I can't say I'm particularly enamored with the striker system or the combos (some of which seem so hard to pull off that I'm convinced they were put into the games as a cruel joke) I like *KOF* as a concept. I can't help but be fascinated by it.



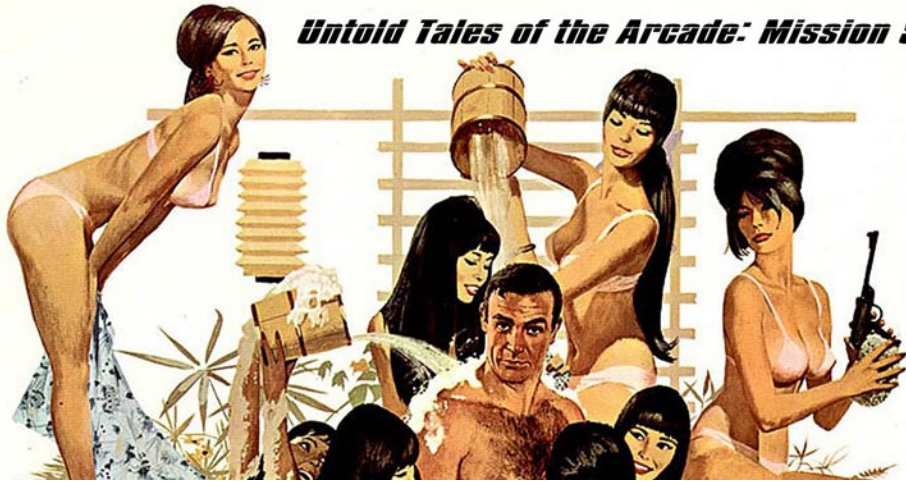
Devoid of the childish melodrama of a *Soul Calibur II*, *KOF* has characters that feel things and do things, and those characters stay the same from game to game except, sometimes, they change, and act differently. Kyo and Iori aren't just two guys who think fighting in a tournament is cool. There's an unfriendly relationship between them. *KOF* rosters are big and scary, but that's because they aren't a collection of "fighters" who "fight," they're a collection of people who have attitudes.

Every year, the *King of Fighters* tournament recurs. People go to it. They fight. They have a good time. The end of the world is sometimes a problem, but it's taken care of more often than not. But, in the end, it's all *King of Fighters*, and when I get the urge to hit people, it's going to be there for me.

I don't like to bandy about words like "art," so I'm not going to do it here. Just know that there is a significance to everything that is *KOF*. I feel it in my head, rather than fighting it with my hands. In the end, I could care less about cool mechanics, or about secret characters, or about death animations. I don't just want to play a game. I want an experience. I want something that's organic, and continual, and brought together by a strong concept. Something that has some heft.

That's *King of Fighters*.

While Midway and Namco were dicking around with fatalities and weapon master mode, trying to make their games prettier and cooler than anything out there, SNK was busy. It was busy creating the *Ulysses* of fighters.



## A Look Into Old and Obscure Arcade Games

Francesco-Alessio Ursini

I've played a lot of arcade games in my life: sometimes just for the music (before it became easy to import OSTs), and sometimes because the gameplay was so well designed and smooth that every play was a subtle and sublime experience. Everyone understands this with a title like *Shinobi*, but what about *Elevator Action Returns*, *Crime City* or *Rolling Thunder*?

### PART 1 - ROLLING THUNDER, MISS PEEL AND MR STEED: WHERE IS THE TARGET?

The first *Rolling Thunder* was far ahead of its time. Not because of the immensely cool music (jazz rearrangements courtesy of the Namco sound team, of course), its incredibly refined and obscenity-inducing gameplay, or its fluid sprites, but because of its introduction of a new genre and its focus on cool.

*Rolling Thunder* was published by Namco in 1986. The game is an homage to the Britannia-flavored spy series of the '60s. You control Albatross, a groovy special agent who has to defeat Geldra, a mysterious secret society whose members are actually synthetic robots manipulated by a deformed scientist. As a game, *Rolling Thunder* is perhaps the father of all platform/action games. It's simple: you shoot (your bullets are limited) you jump, travel up

stairs (if you can) and if you get hit twice by enemies or once by projectiles, you're dead.

I was 9, I think, and I played it in 1986-1987, from early autumn till late winter. At that time there were still re-runs of "The Avengers" and other spy-stories on TV, and it wasn't difficult to catch a random Michael Caine movie either - all the better if he played as Nigel Powers. Of course there was also James Bond, back when he still had the novelty of exotic adventures to save the world from some bizarre baddie. *Rolling Thunder* was playing as James Bond and Mr. Steed at the same time - and I had the honor of playing one of the finest games ever in my uncle's arcade, with crowds waiting in line to do the same thing.

What is the game about?

Time: there is never enough - be fast or you won't complete most of the stages. There are two versions, "old" and "new," the earlier being tougher, with more time at disposal, no extends, and a lot of bugs. The new one with less time, more bullets per room, less bugs and nastier enemies.

This said, you should take the main theme song (via MAME ROM and M1 emulator) and put it on before going further. Better yet, put it on, go back to the beginning and read again.

*Rolling Thunder* is about coolness. Other games after this one have more complex gameplay, but that's because this is one hell of a genre-founder; extras need a hook, after all.



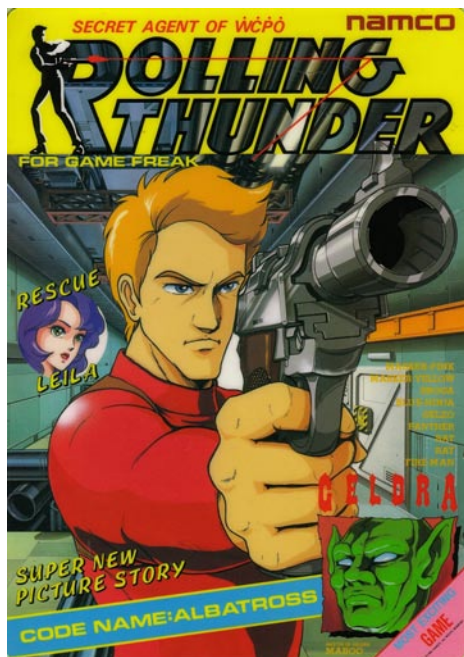
if he's touched or punched twice and bullets, lasers, bombs, or falling into pits cause instant death, as anyone might expect. Now, if it this is not enough, add jumping. Many of the leaps you are required to make are tight, and they have to be. At some point you will usually have to shoot a stream of bullets then make a perfect jump immediately after, so while the bullets are still on screen, you can advance and get on the first pixel of the next platform while the floating bullets defeat the dashing enemies. That's pretty hardcore, isn't it? Try doing it for 150 seconds, jumping up and down platforms, exploiting every single trick, and taking advantage of every untouched bug that could save a second or two!

You have to know most of the enemies in order of appearance, though a good chunk of them are random. For the first five stages, an enemy will have a given uniform (i.e. green dress and white cape) and always use the same attack (low shot). During the second quintuplet of stages, they may try something else – and frankly, you should avoid discovering what. *Tempus fugit*, they're torturing Leila, so it's best to hurry up.

*Rolling Thunder* is about smoothness; it's not just shooting down every enemy before it attacks, because every enemy can be incredibly aggressive. The game won't give you an excess of time - scratch that, the time allotted is barely enough. You get 150 seconds per stage and you can do the last three stages only if you're smooth, meaning not a single movement from your hands that isn't a flawless jump or perfect hit, and you want to always be moving forward, of course.

It's a mad rush, and it can only be done if you know how to deal with giant bats, lava men, yellow dwarfs, black panthers - do you see a pattern? It's not exactly like "The Avengers," my favorite Brit TV series, but more like a distorted version of "The Prisoner," with a mix of disturbingly psychedelic touches. Why go through this? Because, well, your work partner Leila was kidnapped by Mobbo, the green evil leader of Geldra, and you're the one who has the best shot to take down the hoards of caped clones. In order to conclude your mission, though, you have to be perfect.

Many games are hard once you care about your score - *Rolling Thunder* is hard from the beginning, because Albatross is a wimp. He dies







Of course, there's the final stage. Picture hordes of all possible enemies, caped clones appearing from walls and Mobbo himself.

Albatross is not a ninja, like *Shinobi* - his jump seems always to be barely enough to go from the tip of one platform to another. He's strong, so he can jump high, put a hand on the balcony and go upstairs, though if he doesn't make his jump he'll fall down and be exposed to attacks. Besides that, he needs to aim, so don't expect lightning-fast shots. It's not much but it's enough, and if you know what you're doing, every single movement is an act of grace.

It would be easy if you simply needed to jump half your maximum distance with no one bent on killing you, but that's not the way it goes. Everything is perfectly timed, and for every hundred times you fail and curse, there will be the 101st time where you will be flawless, and perform a perfect jump after killing the enemy pixels before they hit you. The smoothness and the elegance required are more than enough of a reward for your effort; in fact, they're the essence of arcade gameplay itself.

Well, we've started with one hell of an action game. My martini is almost finished, so let's go ahead three years. But let's stay in my uncle's arcade. And get another drink, of course.

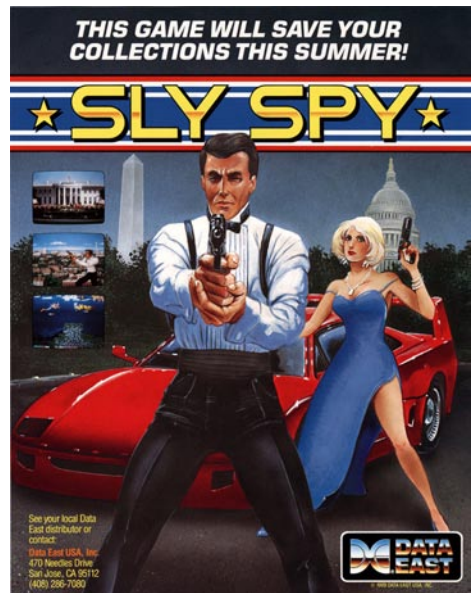
## PART 2 – AFTER RONNIE, THE BAD DUDES HAVE KIDNAPPED GEORGIE.

Data East has never done masterpieces. Well, except for the *Magical Drop* games, but we're referring to the '90s. You have probably

heard of *Sly Spy*, as Data East games had a wide distribution (*had*, as the company is sadly no more). The game itself is by the same group of Dragoninja, or "the bad dudes who had kidnapped Ronnie" (Reagan). If you've never laughed at this line I question your arcade experience. Better yet, go hide in a dark corner, please.

At the swimming pool again, in the winter of 1990. I needed a game for a quick post-training play. Luckily, in the cold and dark afternoons of that winter, I found two excellent companions: *Sly Spy* and *Ninja Gaiden* (which we'll speak of in another installment). *Sly Spy* is a good title, but not outstanding. Data East, in the '80s, didn't have the habit of animating their games too well, and it must be said their soundtracks weren't too hot. However, *Sly Spy* captured the Britannia flavor mentioned above very well, by the virtue of the main theme and a design that cleverly ripped off Bond movies.

The game has tigers, sharks (and two scuba diving levels), Draxo (the Nazi-Communist guy who throws the hat) enemies in jet pack, and the golden gun, a special weapon obtained by collecting the golden power-ups, which destroy everything in sight.







mental temperature. After all these years, *Sly Spy*, in style and gameplay, is a winter game for me.

The game is hectic only if you proceed in a reckless way. Time is, to the say the least, excessive. So, unless you want to make it difficult, you have to proceed slowly and, most importantly, exploit a few tricks in order to get your mission accomplished. While not reaching the peaks of the other titles mentioned here, it was still cool enough, and is still cool enough to play for a quick dive into a James Bond-like world.

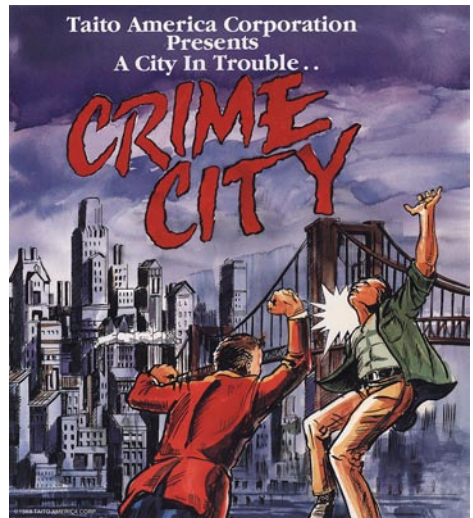
The game itself is simple - get bullets, shoot the baddies, get the random jet-pack, shoot the giant shark's carcass for points (a bug that gives you 10k per hit) and so forth. It may be said that game looks cheap at the beginning, but so long as you don't put yourself in chaotic situations, it's not that difficult to manage the huge amount of enemies. Most of the game will be spent shooting like a madman because of the silly amount of enemies coming at you (only *Metal Slug* surpasses it in terms of characters on screen, probably). Another interesting feature is the ability to abuse the invulnerability induced by bouncing against enemies.

From *Shinobi on*, bouncing against enemies has been implemented in various ways: in this special case, you will get an invulnerability window (about two seconds) that won't be easily detected by any graphical signs. In English: once you bounce, you will be invulnerable to everything (you can even walk on spikes without getting damaged). However, your sprite won't change, so you have to get used to the exact timing as you can't easily detect when you're not invulnerable anymore.

A serious reason for my passion for the game lies in the atmosphere. I may have said it before, but I like to play some games in specific parts of the year. This game is no exception. There's something pretty groovy about playing a cool game during a cold winter. You just want to play something cool to maintain the necessary

### PART 3 - A SPIN-OFF STARRING THE MIAMI VICES RIP-OFF GUYS

Before analyzing this retro experience, let me clarify a few things: *Chase H.Q.* and its three sequels are an homage - or a rip-off - of *Miami Vice*. If you don't know *Miami Vice*, you've skipped the worst (editor's note: best) part of the '80s. In any case, Taito created this very successful driving game where you had to arrest criminals by bashing onto their cars with your Porsche 911. At some point - to be exact, in 1989 - Taito decided to give Raymond Bready and Tony Gibson a chance to finally shoot at the baddies: *Crime City*.





This is an action game: you shoot, jump and kill criminals, along with other neat stuff. You have an energy bar so if you get hit you will lose one energy point out of 8, and you become momentarily invincible, so it's much easier to handle than Rolling Thunder. If you're close to your enemies, you can either take them down with a punch or roll against them. If you press the jump button more than once while doing a high jump (i.e. command move: up/up-left/up-right+jump) you will do a somersault, which will kill or damage any enemy. You're one hell of an acrobatic cop!

You can also shoot, of course. Bullets are limited, but you have a few interesting weapons: the basic gun, a rifle, a "piercing gun" (at least that's what it does), and a three-way shot gun. Add a hand-grenade and a beer to replenish your energy, plus a kevlar jacket that will make you momentarily invincible to that mix. Of course, this is a Taito game. This means that you have to be fast, as you don't get too much time to clear stages. Fast and action-packed... what else do you need?

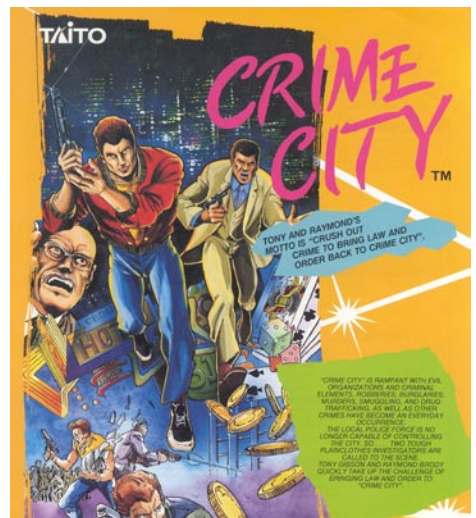
Music, of course, and end credits. Well, unfortunately *Crime City* lacks proper ending credits - when you complete the game, you get movie-like credits showing who acted in the game, and that's all. Maybe someone can clear up a mystery I've been trying to solve since my youth by letting me know who did the soundtrack for this game. My bet is Yasuhisa Watanabe, known as "Yack." Yes, he was a Zuntata member at the time. If he's not the author, maybe MAR, Masahiko Tataka, is.

The soundtrack for this game, if you ever

had any doubts, is a charm. Picture the feeling of a TV series in the '80s, with its urban settings and yuppie-esque style. Add the unique sounds of Zuntata and, more than anything the typical Yack sound (I'm taking his authorship for granted), and you get a perfect blend of late '80s sophisticated pop with a bit of melancholy. Sixteen springs ago I was in my uncle's arcade. My father had the healthy habit of playing *Special Criminal Investigation*, the second chapter of the *Chase H.Q.* saga. I've never been too fond of driving games, partly due to the fact that their nature is the apotheosis of the coin-eating attitude. Sure, all arcade games can be coin-munchers, but driving games tend to be incredibly short, even if you can complete them.

I had a limited amount of free credits as a kid, and time is money, so I didn't like to pay for a short experience. However, I was fascinated by this Taito series. I arrived at my arcade one day after swimming practice and saw my father chatting with my uncle about the latest batch of games. He saw me and said "Ehi, sonny, since you don't like driving games, they've made the action equivalent for you. It's upstairs." He handed me my credits with a smile. A bit puzzled, I thanked him and went upstairs to the sit-down cabs.

There's one aspect of loved games, or



perhaps love in general, that is based on first glance: you see someone -or some game - and you know it's love. Maybe you won't get any love back, or maybe time passes and you wonder how you got so high (or drunk, as per my experience with human beings) during that first glance. In this case, however, the first glance was absolutely prophetic. Sixteen springs later I still take a brief shot at the game on a daily basis.

*Crime City* itself isn't a masterpiece, but I would say the gameplay is interesting and it's nice that it offers a lot of opportunities for legalized violence. The pace is fast and the difficulty curve is smooth. As I said, if you get hit, you will lose one bar of energy but gain a couple of seconds of invincibility: used wisely, you can actually cancel attacks. Consider that all the enemies are very aggressive and that time is strict and you have an explosive mix.

But, alas, the game is not a masterpiece. In these modern times, full of flamboyant and bombastic propaganda by the money-driven media, all we get are "life-changing post-modern experiences!" But let's get back to a very basic point: a game can be immensely fun without being perfect. You can enjoy flawless gameplay for years, beyond music or graphics, because



that's what really counts.

Now let's fast forward to the summer of 2001: back when I had recently discovered MAME. One of the first games I looked for, of course, was *Crime City*. After a few more versions, the MAME team added it. One glance later I was right back in the spring of 1989.

#### **PART 4 - LEILA AND ALBATROSS ARE BACK**

Now, one simple recipe before we go on: it's called "The American," a simple aperitif that was invented in the Florence of the 30's. It got its name because of its astounding success among US tourists. Take half a glass of red Martini, half a glass of white Martini, just a sprinkle of soda, one slice of lemon and one of orange. Shake a bit, and serve with some ice, but just enough to keep it cool.

Namco, back in the pre-Tekken days, was one hell of a company. In 1990, they decided to produce a sequel to one of their best games. It's 199x (damn those '90s games) and someone is shutting off all satellites orbiting the Earth. Chaos ensues, and since the resurrected Geldra is discovered behind the diabolical plot, there's only one thing to do: call agents Leila and Albatross.

*Rolling Thunder 2* is one hell of a sequel. Learning from other titles in the genre, this second chapter has a few tweaks that make it





a bit less demanding and more relaxed, but still maintain smooth gameplay. Enemies have a new look and new attacks (well, some of them) but will always use a given attack associated to their uniform. This time, you fight in two different locations: Miami (and the secret Geldra base below the sea) and Egypt (of course, the secret base is behind the pyramids). You have to stop the nefarious Geldra boys before they launch their final attack, and to do this you will have to be every bit as perfect as in the first chapter.

We're in 1990, remember? It was a warm summer and my family and I were on vacation in a beautiful place near Amalfi (which is not very far from Naples and Capri). A kid like me can't stay too long without videogames, of course, and by the end of the first day, I'd been able to find a very good arcade. To my surprise, one of their new titles was *Rolling Thunder 2*. I was in love after the first play.

I always liked *Rolling Thunder 2* because of its slightly easier difficulty. It is a tad different and allows for a few more errors than chapter 1, but the most important thing is that you have some room for pauses, even if you still need to go at breakneck speed. Sometimes it can be frustrating, and the last stage is probably one of the most difficult levels ever in an action game. But the simple and breath-taking experience of fighting hundreds of enemies in a desperate effort to save Earth from Geldra's schemes



as the time goes down quickly, is one of the ultimate gaming experiences, considering the pretty hardcore tricks you will need to do in order to achieve this result.

*Rolling Thunder 2* is actually faster than the first installment. Enemies are quicker, more aggressive and harder to kill, and there's also less ammunition to kill them with. Luckily, you can still freely bounce against enemies, giving you the chance to take them down.

Even now, in the third millennium, this game looks excellent. It would be easy to just say, for its time, that the zooming and parallax effects were incredibly well-done, but they're still excellent for today. In this age, the few 2D games still being released lack even the most basic of effects, featuring shallow backgrounds with no sense of depth or interaction.

In contrast, *Rolling Thunder 2* abounds with brilliant design ideas. But there's one final note that has to be added in this celebration: music. Are you surprised *Rolling Thunder 2* has a great soundtrack? This is probably the first professional work by Sasou Ayako - as always, take the M1 emulator and enjoy a groovy, Bondesque score. From the swift, jazzy songs of stage 1 and 2, you go to the inner core of the Sea base while humming "Where is the Target?," the absolutely majestic stage four song. Few games have such timing between music and game events. The jazzy solo part of "Where is the target?" kicking in while you cruise through Geldra's headquarters is one of the classiest points in gaming.

In case this is still not enough, you really



have to play through the final stage, one of the hardest challenges around. You can't kill all the enemies, and bullets won't suffice, because there are a lot of enemies that require more than 2 bullets to die. Not only that, there are no checkpoints and not enough time; it's start to finish, no excuses.

Picture the lovely coasts of Italy in summer, an arcade on the seaside and a young kid who found his most desired sequel. The vacations didn't last forever, so I spent most of those lovely summer evenings playing the second chapter of Albatross and Leila's adventures like a fiend. On the final evening, I was successful in completing the game on one credit, one of the sweetest pleasures in my life. It was a perfect example of arcade dolce vita.

Thankfully, my uncle received the game in the early days of September, so I could continue enjoying the swinging adventures of my two favorite special agents.

## PART 5 - I CAN ONLY THINK IN JOB

It should be clear by now that I'm a bit



of a Taito fanboy. I'm also a Martini fanboy. Combine these two passions with a lazy, hot Sunday afternoon and you get one explosive mix. At this point, we go a bit ahead and a bit back, depending on where we put our point of view: in short, we're back in 1994. Where? The swimming pool, to be exact, my other favorite place for gaming (and for peeping at hot girls lazily tanning in the sunny summer morning, but that's another issue).

You probably know the Taito title *Elevator Action*. One interesting thing Taito did with their F3 hardware in the mid-90s was to recreate many of their classic games. "Taito" and "classic game" is a combination that has generated a lot of interesting results, but I will focus on this specific element for the next page or so.

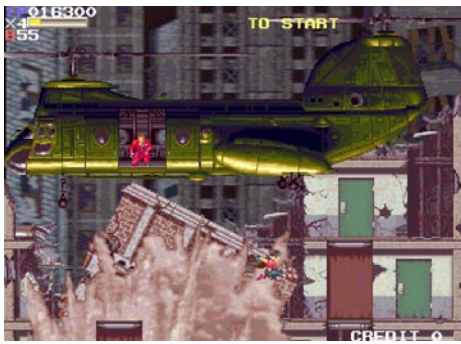
*Elevator Action Returns* (or "2," depending on the version) is like its precursor, more or less. After 11 years, and many other action games, this sequel plays more like an action game in the sense that the platforming part (i.e. going up and down in the building) has been toned down from the second stage on.

So what's the game about? Of course, there's a terrorist organization that wants to conquer the world. In order to do this, the lunatics go around blowing up buildings, airports, etc or acquiring nuclear weapons from the former Soviet Union. It goes without saying that you won't let them do this, since you're one of the best secret agents around, aren't you?

This game is slow. I wouldn't say that it has a slow pace but, unless you're playing for score, the overall rhythm is somewhat slow. You have a lot of time to clear a stage, the action is relaxed







and all the sprites are pretty small, so you can see a pretty big gaming area at any time. None of this is a problem, as the game has been designed in this way.

You can choose between three characters, and once you find out your style, you have more than a few creative ways to take down punks. One way is to shoot them, and this time you can aim 30° above your head. Another way is to use close range attacks, which will double the points obtained. If you're in a risky situation, or can take down a baddie before it even realizes the incoming death, you'll get four times the points. You can also tap to run, something very useful in some situations. If you jump, this will also hit enemies and, unless they require multiple hits, they will be killed.

That said, let's focus back on the pace. You can take it easy and move around slowly because the buildings are big and your characters small. You'll need a few seconds to go from side to side anyway. The enemies will usually aim at you, take their time and shoot. Forget people dashing left and right, they know they're safer if distant because they fear your punches. As I said, close range attacks are useful to double, even quadruple, your points. In this game, enemies will actually allow you to close in and punch them to oblivion, so the game lacks the hectic pace found in more "bullet-based" action games. However, the trick, if you want to play for score, is to quickly clear the stage and maneuver to a single spot where you can... well, start milking by killing spawning enemies using close-range attacks. There is basically one spot per stage where you can do

this, so yes, it's all about being fast and then spending minutes milking.

However, the game still is incredibly successful, by the virtue of its slowness, in giving the sensation of a spy story in the style of *Mission Impossible*. Most of the time you sneak behind an enemy, take him down with a punch, move on to get your data and take the elevator down to escape. As this happens, you can literally feel the sense of secrecy and of stealth behind the minutes spent to clear a stage. You can understand why you may suddenly need to run through a stage, kill dozens of enemies and suddenly, abruptly, move to a section mainly based on platforms where baddies will suddenly appear behind you and fire bullets that can only be dodged by perfectly timed jumps. In short, you pass from a fast to a slow-paced section in a matter of half a screen.

*Elevator Action Returns* is all about the cinematic style, something that works wonders when complemented by brilliant gameplay with the proper pace and, of course, by a masterful OST. It goes without saying that we're speaking of Zuntata, but, which member? Well, if I'm here writing this article, you can be sure I'm speaking about Yasuhisa Watanabe, Yack (well, it may be that I'm also speaking of OSTs by OGR or MAR, or uh, any other Zuntata member). Well, this is another masterpiece of his. This one can be defined as lounge music, in the sense that it is more or less reminiscent of the spy movies we've talked about so far.

Since we've spoken so far of a cinematic style, the OST blends flawlessly with the rest



of the game. Let's take for instance, again, the second stage: the first section has a slow style. Picture one of those summer days in which you can do two things: sunbathe in the swimming pool garden or play *Elevator Action Returns* game in the bar of said location. The music slowly builds up until at some point tons of enemies start to attack and the theme suddenly changes and goes faster. After clearing that section, the song slow downs to a low, menacing hum while you clear the last platforms before the end of the stage. By the time you will read this article it will be summer. Maybe the best thing to do, in the hot moments of the day, when the sun is too hot to think of important issues, once your glass is full, is have a run of *Elevator Action Returns*.

## AND THE CONCLUSION IS

I've played a lot of cool games in my life, some of them being more than just cool. Some of them about groovyness or style, a bit like the difference between a cocktail and a good cocktail. While a game can be cool and a charm to play, some games have the necessary edge of just being smooth to play. That's why I like to play them again. To be able to appreciate them with the added luxury of a good cocktail by my side. Let's get back to old classics and see how they mix. How they mix with other old classics – a synesthetic experience that makes my life... hipper, to say the least.





## Halo 2 - Xbox

Andrew Juarez

I remember when the Matrix came out in 1999, a film that washed out the sour and ugly stink of *The Phantom Menace* with a refreshing taste of gravity defying stunts, dominatrix clothing and bong water philosophy. This is what made The Matrix franchise the cult phenomenon it is with our generation, but I have always personally viewed the movie in a different light. What intrigued me most about the Matrix universe was the universe itself: a computer program devised meticulously by a machine race with a sole intent to distract and delude humans from grasping the perception of what is "real." It certainly enlightened me, the idea of understanding that we may not have as much command of our lives as we think we do.

After watching *The Matrix* as much as some compulsively watch porn, I became hooked on educating myself about the several different levels of philosophy and religion - the chance to understand how others perceived the world around them. With this obsession came books, message boards and a totally different approach to comprehending my intimate surroundings. Yet, as with all phases, I lost interest. Maybe it was the underwhelming *Matrix Revolutions*, maybe it was Larry Wachowski's ostentatious and disturbing sex change, or maybe I just have a very short attention span. Regardless, it was

upon this loss that I found the Xbox and Halo, my new drug that motivated me into writing this article you are currently reading.

Some readers may be asking themselves what this writer's affinity for the Matrix has to do with Halo. The movie opened my eyes to a new approach to perceiving reality; the act of one's mind occupying one world as the body physically inhabits another. I saw how this idea worked within the Matrix universe, with the Matrix viewed as a persistent online video game with humans who maneuver a digital avatar, comparisons to my time with Halo 2's Xbox Live service are chillingly inevitable.

The Matrix was a computer program created to comfort humans, to give them a world where they could live, breathe and maneuver in a perpetual state of complacency. When Neo escaped the fantasy of the Matrix to experience the "real world" (a place vastly different from what his mind was accustomed to) he was frightened, shocked and forcefully enlightened by what he was seeing. In simpler terms, he had trouble letting go of his supposed and artificial "reality" and accepting his lack of control. The more I played Halo 2, the more I came to realize that my mind and body were no longer in the same place when I played online. I had this strange compulsion to engage a new and readily active online community, and when I stopped playing, there would be an inexplicable sense of emptiness and uneasiness that went through

me. This cannot be easily understood by passive observation. As Morpheus said, "You have to see it for yourself."

Why Halo 2 though? There are plenty of online games with addicted subscribers/players who sit wearily in front of their television screen or computer monitor, experiencing the constructs of another alternate reality. Counter-Strike, Everquest, Warcraft III, etc...all of these online games include a base community where players can keep track of other players and have the ability to chat live with them. I've played these games before, but their gameplay didn't exactly *click* the same way Halo's did.

Playing Halo Combat Evolved for the first time was indeed a surreal experience, an experimentation with something that appeared so genuinely beautiful at the time, that I became instantly hooked. While at a friend's house, I took the Xbox controller and became astoundingly impressed by how much precise *control* I had when controlling the Master Chief. When I moved him around the screen, I could lose myself within the game as if I was the one walking around exploring alien worlds and fighting off the covenant. I've played



many games that infuriated me because of the inability to perform whatever actions I should've been able to perform with the on-screen avatar. Halo fixes this with superb control. Superb control breeds superb immersion, and from there, who knows where the game will take me.

Halo accomplishes this facet of gameplay and does it with intoxicating perfection.

I run through the remains of the gunned down Pillar of Autumn, with my pistol in hand and my assault rifle as my secondary. It has the vacant feel of an abandoned ship, yet the known presence of enemy troopers only raises the tension. As I continue, I see an Elite soldier from a safe distance, standing with a fellow warrior, waiting impatiently for my impending arrival. I toss a fragmentation grenade towards the feet of one Elite soldier, who is too surprised to move. Upon detonation, it's quite evident that his (or her?) shield is depleted and I land a couple headshots to take him down for good. Before I can rest safely, the other Elite charges at me with and fires his Plasma Rifle to take out my shield. In a startled panic, I hide behind a column to wait for my shield to regenerate, but it isn't long before a plasma grenade lands in front of my feet. I immediately back up and wait for the grenade to detonate, then once my shield is full again I know it's my turn to move. I look the Elite in the eyes, judge the distance between the two of us, and throw a flaming round blue plasma grenade which sticks to his torso. I watch him flail around for his last moments of life before the grenade explodes and my progress is saved, akin to having a virtual pat on the back from the gaming gods. The main character, Master Chief, has no part in any of this tomfoolery. *I am* Master Chief. This could be the same scenario from any first person shooter, but it was the *feeling* of being there that only Halo could accomplish.

Needless to say, I became a fan. And as a fan, I had the November 9<sup>th</sup> release date of Halo 2 visibly jotted down on my unwritten daily to do list. If I had somehow, by grave misfortune, forgotten that the game existed,

I had a reminder set on my cell phone with the message, "12:00 AM 11/09/04 Buy Halo 2 asshole." Indeed, I would feel like an asshole if I didn't buy the sequel to my favorite game ever. Not only would I get to experience Halo with the control system I'd grown to love, but I would get to immerse myself in an online community with humans, not computer A.I. Maybe this was the reason I was waiting in line at EB Games with 500 other addicts, salivating at the very thought of taking my skills online against others across the world. Playing Halo was something I was good at. Even if I wasn't the world's greatest, I knew I was better than others and could finally find some type of superiority to drown out this incorrigible feeling of male insecurity and my powerless role in our flamboyantly, show-off society.

But I didn't tell anybody this. Shit, I didn't even remotely think about it. I ignored all the self-indulgent rambling and just marveled. Only one thing mattered right then and there, and that was the shiny new Halo 2 case clenched tightly and protectively within my anxious fingers, ready to be torn open. I wanted this game to take control of me.

After I toiled around with Halo 2's single player for a bit, I got familiar with the new features, thanked the gods at Bungie that their awesome control set-up was still intact, and signed onto Xbox Live to savor my virgin experience. Playing Halo 2 on Xbox Live for the first time was a Christmas morning experience - that warm feeling that tranquilizes every nerve with the sweet feeling of accomplishment and fulfillment. I took notice and let it all sink in: What Microsoft (or if I wanted to refer to the Matrix, the Machine) gave me was a 24 hour Halo multiplayer party. Granted, Bill Gates still wants my money despite my happiness, but that's beside the point.

I've always held online gaming, or simply multiplayer gaming, in high regard because multiplayer gaming produces what I like to call *moments*, no matter how frequent or rare they may be. Single player gaming has it



WETA 'MAD MAN'

shares of thrills, but I can't help but feel the game developers want me to win. Sure, there are the *Ninja Gaidens* of extreme difficulty gaming, but it is the thrill of victory in human competition that is truly exciting. When I got an interception playing against a human opponent on *Madden 2004*, that was a *moment*. When I took down one last enemy for the game winning kill, that was a *moment*. When I captured the flag, it wasn't just a gaming moment, but a genuine *moment*. This is why I jack into online gaming...in hopes for the chance to savor and acknowledge those moments I only seem to find when playing video games.

Although *The Matrix* never delved into it, I'm certain that Neo lived his life in the Matrix searching for those series of moments and the opportunity to take control of them. No matter how taxing it may be on some to raise a child, there are ultimately those moments when a child makes a parent proud, making it all worth the effort. It's why a cocaine addict endures nerve-racking comedowns and lives miserably to find that rare moment of euphoria, no matter how contrived it may seem. It's why I played Halo 2, to visualize the image of another gamer viewing my name across their TV screen as they went down in a hail of my gunfire. I just wanted these *moments* to come





in something as readily accessible as a video game. Perhaps because of the many hours I put into the game, the memories of that Christmas morning experience were growing stale. I didn't notice it immediately, but it slowly crept up and eventually culminated in a single infuriating match.

As the four of us gather to strengthen our resistance against the opposing Red team, one of us with the Energy Sword, one with the Battle Rifle and two packing dual plasma rifles. I patrol our newly established and temporary base of operations on the Midship, a rather small, purple, circular and multi-tiered room with possibilities for hundreds of gaming scenarios. I examine my surroundings, making sure I acutely take notice of any oncoming enemy action. With the opposing team winning 48 to 47, sweat moistens between my palms and controller, but I disregard this along with everything else in the "real" world...responsibilities, surroundings, aspirations, whatever. I have one goal as of now, and that is to immobilize the opposition.

But before I can even pull the trigger I hear the burning hissing sound of a bright-blue plasma grenade stuck to my upper body, the sound of inevitable doom. The explosion kills me. 49 to 47. I very impatiently wait for the damn timer to get to zero so I can respawn and nervously assist my outnumbered team. As I open my eyes to return to my position, the menacing sneer of the authoritarian-like announcer proclaims "Game Over!" in his crystal-clear annunciation, this phrase signifies that a winner has taken this bout.

50 to 48, Red team wins. The announcer could've said "Shame on You" and the meaning would still ring the same to me.

Although there are exceptions, the post game lobby is often full of nothing but snott nosed little shits who chew out a losing team with half-assed, indolent insults. I may only hear their voices, but I know their breath smells like only something an ugly, hollow soul can produce. I usually tend to laugh off these people as I make an effort to employ rational thought, but it isn't the insults that trouble me, it's my own insecurities as a gamer. I knew I shouldn't have reloaded at that specific time, when the enemies sent their sub machine guns a-blasting towards my avatar. I knew I should have stayed back with the sniper rifle, but my egotistical and cowardly actions led me to my death, leaving them with the only sniper rifle on the map and another win towards their record. These are just some of the thoughts that run through my mind as I am branded with more insults. I shouldn't be so genuinely angered from a game, something that's intended to be played just for fun, no matter if I win or lose. It's just a game, right?

That's what I try to tell my teammate after we exit the post game lobby. His respectable 15 ranking waned to a meager 14, and he is pointing his e-finger at me for letting such a terrible catastrophe occur within his elite presence. Apparently, he was doing just fine in that match, and according to him we were nothing but useless deadweight keeping him from reaching that elusive 16 ranking. He then proceeded to throw a tantrum by booting all players from his clan, including myself. I think it was at this moment I finally woke up from my Halo 2 coma (after an enduring six months or so of it) and realized that this has gone too far. Why is Halo making my mind gather an upheaval of deep thoughts that escaped me before then?

I'm reminded of that college dropout who played Everquest for 36 hours straight then ran through the streets of his neighborhood terrified

by delusional images of goblins and gnomes gnawing at what little was left of his mental stability. Poor kid. He became so seduced by the promise of an alternate society; a society where his gaming skills would dictate how others viewed him. He had an equal opportunity to become *somebody* important, no matter how immature it may have seemed to others outside the gaming community. Where others deprived him of control and power, he had the opportunity to gain it in an artificial gaming world. I couldn't escape the feeling that I've been subconsciously playing six months on Halo 2 for this very reason. Was I already another statistic?

Looking back on what I've written so far I realize this has very little to do with Halo. Much of what I've written could apply to anybody's experience with their video game of choice, and I'm just presenting mine. Halo just serves a catalyst for an Eastern philosophy paper on control, or the "illusion" of control as some professors might say. Although I've included a story or two that revolve around the gameplay of Halo, this is just another selfish piece of work about me, me, me and how *I* perceive these types of situations.

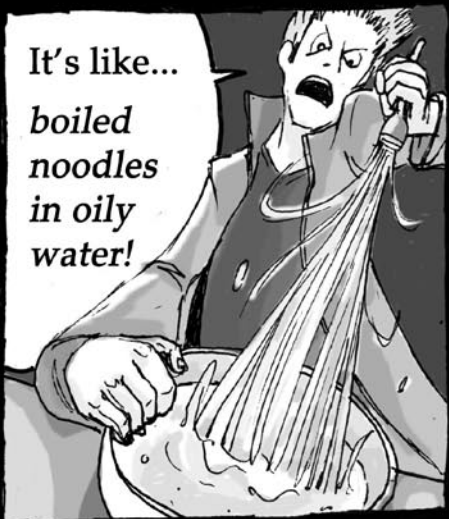
It's quite astounding to think a game could make me think this deeply. Ever since I put Halo 2 in my Xbox I have watched and studied it from many different angles. At first, there was joy and unbridled happiness. As I was originally introduced to the new guns, new multiplayer levels, new strategies and basically new everything, I was easily and impulsively drawn in and delightfully manipulated. I thought I could control these moments of happiness, but then time would progress and so would my perception. I would start finding new flaws in the gameplay, whether they be unbalanced weapons that would garner unwanted results or severe internet lag that would infuriate me and test my patience. Amongst all the monotony and repetitiveness, I hopelessly prayed for those great moments to come to me again, no matter how much I drudged through the game to

achieve them. Nevertheless, I can still stop and comprehend what I was experiencing and put it into some perspective.

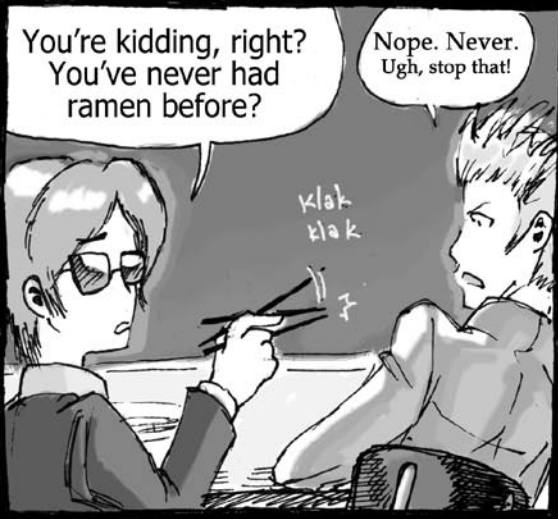
I should discontinue my use of past tense and wipe the plate clean... I still play online, but only in small doses. I have flesh and blood friends (the ones I've met in person *and* identify by their first names) that I play with, but we still take advantage of Xbox Live to play in the comfort of our own home. I'm still addicted from a casual viewpoint, but I've never considered this compulsiveness to be too dangerous in the long run. In spite of my concerns, I now tend to laugh it off as something akin to watching television excessively or anxiously biting finger nails. But Halo 2 wasn't just a minor diversion for me. It was a full fledged community, serving as a rough draft for what the Architect probably had in mind when designing the Matrix. He thought "Let's just create the program...leave it to the humans to make sense of it all."







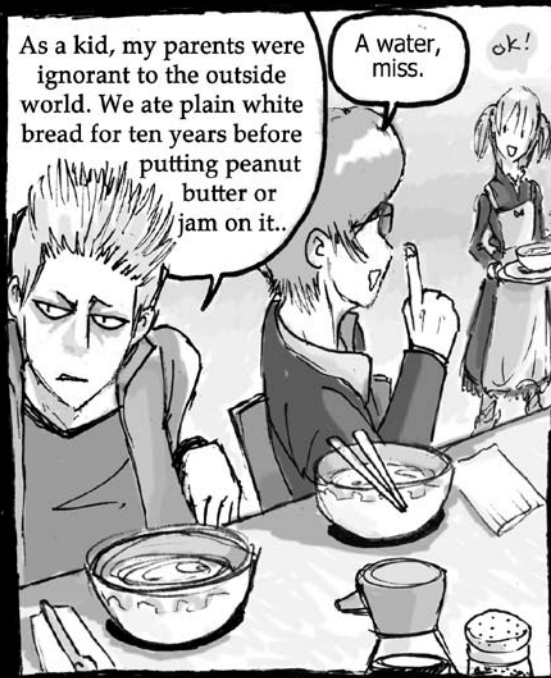
It's like...  
*boiled  
noodles  
in oily  
water!*



You're kidding, right?  
You've never had  
ramen before?

Nope. Never.  
Ugh, stop that!

klak  
klak



As a kid, my parents were  
ignorant to the outside  
world. We ate plain white  
bread for ten years before  
putting peanut  
butter or  
jam on it..

A water,  
miss.

ok!



Well,  
you  
should  
learn to  
enjoy it  
anyway.

Afterall,  
you're  
paying.

That  
reminds  
me: aren't  
we still  
on duty?

It's okay.  
Forget about it!

Your water,  
sir!



### What's it all for?

J.R. Freeman

A few weeks ago, I was playing some games with a friend. My friend is not really much of a "gamer" anymore, but that has never stopped me from hanging out with someone. In some instances, it is better to have a non-gamer's perspective.

So we're just hanging out in my room one night while I'm playing an Xbox game (I think it was *OutRun 2*) while he watches. We were talking about school, work, and whatnot when the conversation suddenly died. For a moment the only thing to be heard was the engine of my Ferrari revving and whirring over the delicious Magical Sound Shower from the in-game soundtrack as we both just sat there, momentarily transfixed.

Snapping out of the spell, my friend turns to me and asks "So why do you still do this?"

"Do what?" came the obvious reply.

"Play these games." He said. "Why do you still play them?"

I sat there for a minute, confused, drifting my shiny red car around a bend in the track. Wondering to myself, what does he mean? Why do I \*still\* play these games? Like there's a reason I should have given them up by now?

"I don't know," I told him, "because it's fun, I guess. And because I get something out of it."

"Oh really, like what?" He asked, obviously

baiting me into some kind of argument over the merits of the video game as an art form. Despite my best efforts I still haven't been able to convince him that video games can be anything more than mindless entertainment.

"I don't know, what do you get out of all those movies you watch?" I shot back, knowing he fancied himself a film buff, and knowing that in the past he had faced similar criticisms among some of his non-film buff peers over the merits of film as art.

"Easy." He said. "Film has the power to speak to me on a personal level that I just haven't experienced in video games like you have. We've been over this, film is an accepted artistic medium."

"Yeah, but it wasn't always like that, you know." I said, trying to concentrate on not driving my pretty car off the road and losing precious time.

"Right, so?" He snorted.

"That's about where video games are right now, from my view. They are growing to be more and more accepted by the mainstream and as a result people are doing things that can only be done with games. Games like *Earthbound*, or more recently *Metal Gear Solid*, have completely redefined people's definitions of what a game can do or be, and it's only getting bigger from there." I said, momentarily contemplating breaking out *Katamari Damacy* right then and there for him. Perhaps next time, I decided,





because my shiny car was coming to a junction in the road, left or right. I chose right.

I sped on down the right junction and left him chewing on that while wondering why I do still play these games? Why does anyone still play them? These people who call themselves “gamers.” What’s it all for anyway, if you want to get philosophical about it, why game at all? Since I wrote that last paragraph I have flip-flopped between two games. One of them I’m playing to gain better perspective on another game for an article I’m writing with a fellow staff which may or may not have already been published by now.

The other is just a game I enjoy playing because the act of playing is its own reward.

So what am I getting out of it, besides carpal-tunnel syndrome? Relaxation and catharsis? Sure, in some instances. In others, however, I play because I think games as a medium have something to say, or something they could be saying.

I still find them entertaining, of course. That’s part of the prime motivator that keeps me coming back to this hobby. It’s just that I find myself staying with it because the potential for the medium to deepen and mature beyond levels we never expected is constantly there, staring me in the face like my own reflection in the television after the console has been turned

off. Boring right through me, to my very core where it shakes me.

There’s that, and the fact that I enjoy actually **playing** video games. The act of pushing a button, stick or directional pad and seeing something move on the television screen shifts something within me. To have that kind of control over something as abstract as a character in a video game, speaks to something that rests deep inside beyond all the logic and reason. The joy that exists from simply moving something around on your own in this world made up of mathematics is profound.

It is creation from within.

When I play I am creating my own experience, or trying to interpret someone else’s. It moves me on the same level that listening to music or watching a movie does for other people, like my friend who posed the aforementioned question, because of which the experience is more engaging, more personal. Video games could be the first artistic medium to require more than a passive approach to be engaged. Through gaming one is no longer the observer but the participant. Creating and destroying worlds, both commercially built and completely within the imagination of the user, on the fly. A true staple of the modern age, works of art that really speak to you.

They have that potential, at least.

As my pretty red car was rounding its last bend on the way to the finish line I reached over and turned off the console. *OutRun 2* and the music and the beautiful blue skies blipped out of existence, leaving only a blank screen. Walking him to the door we made plans to get together again.

“Next time,” He says, “let’s go to Denny’s or something.”

“Okay.” I agree.

T D E R R Y E S N Z D Q H G K V E K Z S T S F U I  
 J K K Y W U S Q E X L O B J F I A C G W S K I Y K  
 U Y R L I V E W G Y O M U W L R Y X E R V A M R A  
 O T O K A M B A I P O N E R I I T L M E D Y G V M  
 E T K L S F Q W A X I T A N F K V A G G S P M A Y  
 A M U K A J L J R B X H N L A E N K Q U W O P E T  
 M O D O S N N S J O C W F E N P G T N N A X R B R  
 S G A S G J O P H Q E E Y V L I E O Y G D X N O M  
 O G U H M J I E P I I M Q E N O S E U L K K Q M V  
 A K I M R V O L B G E N Q C A I R U I Y T W L N A  
 A K N A L B M U N Q Z J D R B G H O T D L G D S T  
 S C Y D P S K A R S C X F M A Q L Y H K R G U A Y  
 D Q D H B I Z B A L R O G W P U N E E G U I E K J  
 W F Y A E F Y C C T Q R X U R A H H S I A B B U E  
 E G I L L H A H L V I J O I E N O P L B U Y J R X  
 F G U S I N N D C E H R E S Q N U E D S O N J A M  
 B E O I L Z G L H W C N K W D U D Y E D R Y O R Y  
 Y D I M Z G N A U E R I D A E Q E L E N A J N D H  
 L L J L K L V M N K V N V Y T S T Y V J L P U L A  
 X E L A O L K S L M L L E S D U D L E Y H W A L P  
 K W A H T N Y E I J C H U K G U K E Y T Q X M X I  
 Y M M A C Z G P H A C E G K U P D W S C A P L G B  
 L S K B H V I V O P B M Z P Y F W Q K G O N Y K F  
 Z F Y V Q T C R N L D A N B H W B J E Z E D G W Q  
 X D L T L Z O L C G F C L X O M G V T L P V Y S V

Ryu  
 Ken  
 Chun Li  
 Blanka  
 E Honda  
 Dhalsim  
 Zangief  
 Guile  
 Balrog  
 Vega  
 Sagat  
 M Bison  
 Cammy  
 Fei Long  
 T Hawk  
 Dee Jay  
 Akuma

Charlie  
 Guy  
 Birdie  
 Adon  
 Sodom  
 Rose  
 Dan  
 Sakura  
 Gen

Evil Ryu  
 Rolento  
 Cody  
 Karin  
 R Mika  
 Juli  
 Juni  
 Ibuki

Necro  
 Sean  
 Oro  
 Elena  
 Dudley  
 Alex  
 Yun  
 Yang  
 Gill  
 Hugo  
 Urien  
 Makoto  
 Q  
 Remy  
 Twelve  
 Eagle  
 Maki

# Guess The Box Art!

Try and guess what game's Box Art these title thumbnails have been taken from.

1



6



2



7



3



8



4



9



5



10



1) Sonic Adventure 2) Pokémon Red 3) Thunderforce II 4) King of Fighters '98 5) F-Zero 6) Alex Kidd in Miracle World  
7) Final Fantasy VIII 8) NIGHTS: Into the Dreams 9) Castlevania II: Simon's Quest 10) Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater





# We take the term "Gaming Journalism" extremely lightly.

"What is 'Gaming Journalism' anyways?" You may not find the answer to that question inside, but you will be asked to decide for yourself, and examine many other aspects of gaming that you may have never even considered.

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Multiplayer



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The Gamer's Quarter magazine is a collaborative project between dedicated gamers who don't just play games, but experience them. Rather than sitting in a lonely room plowing through a game just to attach a few numbers and witty quote for the box art, we play the games we want and write about how and why they attach themselves to our hearts and minds in a way that no other form of media is capable of. It is our intent to publish honest, provocative, and entertaining writing which reflects our belief that video games can be more than mere vehicles for entertainment, but also creative, meaningful works.

