THE GAMER'S QUARTER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial

From the Editor's Desk

-Matthew Williamson

Thinking back to a year ago today, I was assembling my party and setting out on an adventure to publish the first issue of The Gamer's Quarter. We almost made it, but because a lot of the staff was still in college finals got in the way. This issue was almost the one year anniversary issue.

Alas, we're just on the year end round up. Some amazing things happened with gaming this year that most of us won't soon forget, including the release of Shadow of the Colossus. I know that the time I spent with the game in this little hotel room won't be duplicated any time soon. I tip my hat to Fumito Ueda, and everyone else out there really trying to bring us something new.

Things for me are still working their ways out as I continue life far away from my New Orleans home. My trusty sidekick through all this has been my Nintendo DS. The doubts I had about the system early on have completely vanished as the year has gone by. With the recent release of some DS WiFi games, I can't think of a contemporary system with more to offer. Sure, the 360 has better online capabilities, which are far more robust, but I can't play it in my boxers on my bed. If I even had a 360, that is.

I sit here very close to the online release of this issue and can only wonder how I came across such an excellent team here at The Gamer's Quarter. Working really long hours at the office for the past fifteen days has made getting time to work on the magazine difficult, but thankfully I always had support and help.

As the amount of time left to work on the magazine quickly dwindled, I put aside a few hours to go out and purchase *Animal Crossing: Wild World*. I ended up completely blowing off a night of editing and formatting just so I could harvest all my apples and start paying off my house note to that evil bastard Tom Nook. I managed to do it on the first night too, but only because my wife had also purchased a copy.

Good cooperative games seem to be few and far between, but every once in a while, a game like *The Adventures of Cookie & Crème* will come along and really please those who have a spouse, sibling or friend to play with. For the most part gaming partners are left to make do with games that have co-op tacked on only to "extend replayability," but *Animal Crossing* goes all out. Part of what caught my eye about *AC:WW* was this text on a flyer for the game at Best Buy:

"Much of the cast of the original *Animal Crossing* returns, [...] but the true characters will be your own friends!"

It's no lie; the design emphasizes cooperation and communication. Earlier this week, some friends from New Orleans met me in my *Animal Crossing* "home" just to hang out. Nothing else can make me smile quite like that.

Until next year, keep warm.

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SHADOWS OF AN ART FORM

Shadow of the Colossus - PS2

- J. R. Freeman

Art by: Troy Boyle

Cold. Barren. Lonely. Desolate. These terms form an apt enough description of Sony's latest opus. For all intents and purposes it winds up being something a bit more in the end than the beginning. Then again, what else was there to expect from the development team that created Ico? With Fumito Ueda at the helm, *Shadow of the Colossus* is looking to steer gamer (and non-gamer) attention away from the big bangs and wannabe Hollywood productions that most major game releases have spiraled into, and instead placing it, through epic exposition, to a different place. In fact, a better place. A place that is hard to talk about without sounding artsy-fartsy.

As Ueda and Co. have proven, first with *Ico* and now with *Shadow*, there is often more to a game than just the game. In Ico's case it was a sense of childlike wonder, interspersed with a quiet melancholy, as the player guided a princess of white, glowing light through an abandoned castle. This emotional thread persists on into *Shadow* where it is beholden of the player to wage battle with giant, magical behemoths at the ends of the earth in order to save a soulmate from the abyss. The men of Sony's internal development house proved that it is possible to tell modern day fairy tales through the medium of videogames, without resorting to many of the conventions that have become standard, and without compromising an artistic vision for the sake of marketability. They have proven with this latest game that a game with actual nar-

rative is possible and not only that, completely feasible to boot. I am not talking about the formulaic kind of narrative either; I am talking about real organic narrative of motivations, emotions, actions and real characters acting out of empathy for their fellow companions. Even though most of the "acting" is done through the player holding the controller.

Shadow of the Colossus is the closest gaming has gotten to literature in years. See what I was saying about sounding pretentious? That is to say, it understands its conventions and its limitations, and knows how to work within them to tell a story that is ultimately human at the core. A lone warrior bringing his dearly beloved, who is now his dearly departed, to the mystical forbidden land at the ends of the earth in a last ditch attempt to rescue her from the clutches of death. It is really a tale more fit for Homer or any of the other ancient epics than a mere videogame. One does not simply play the game portions and then watch the exposition, one plays the game and *it is* the exposition. You start at the temple in the center of the map, the Shrine of Worship, and from there you raise the magical sword so that it can reflect sunlight. The sunlight focuses when the targeting reticule passes over the location of the mighty colossus, thus guiding the way. Then the player mounts his trusty steed (and only friend in the game) Agro and rides off into battle. The story is as much in the gameplay as it is in the short cutscenes that play after each Colossus battle.

Battles are waged, mountain sized battles the likes of which one has never seen or experienced before, and that is not mere hyperbole. People have never experienced

ter than *Zelda*. It does not have any puzzles or dungeons to speak of, although the colossi themselves serve those purposes nicely and without drawing your attention to it. There is none of the typical "Look at me! I'm a heart piece! Get three more of me for a whole heart!" or "Hey! This is a silver key! You can use it to open any door in this dungeon you are in!" *ad infinitum* that one would normally associate with a *Zelda* game. *Shadow of the Colossus* goes a great way to *not* break the illusion and instead is content to let the player work things out for himself in most cases. Hints for the controls only pop up during the beginning portion of the game and never again after that. Just as well too, for the game is obscenely simple to come to terms with, meaning the interface is simple, elegant and intuitive. The only people who should have trouble with it are those who are not, by nature, gamers and therefore unable to grasp the thought processes necessary to use a controller with twelve buttons.

Yet it is these people, the non-gamers, who should play this game the most. *Shadow of the Colossus,* like *Rez* or *Silent Hill 2*, is another game to be added to that small stack that legitimize the medium as something worthy of artistic merit. We should be foisting this game onto the unsuspecting eyes of our non-gaming friends and families. It is we who should be quickly explaining the controls and then leaving our dear gaming virgins to be bedded by that sweetest of lovers, that gentlest of giants. In many ways *Shadow of the Colossus* is a love poem to those who have not tasted the sweet nectar that should be all gaming: it is almost as if it were made for them exclusively. They, those casual gamers, who have not had their gaming pallets sullied by the memories of a past game called *The Legend of Zelda* that might potentially color their opinion and obscure their view of such an otherwise wonderful achievement as we see today in *Shadow*.

Is this truly a better game than *Zelda*? Well, yes and no. Yes because the original *Zelda*, while still a great experience for those who take the time to experience it, is almost inaccessible to anyone without the patience of an entire Buddhist monastery. No because it is not *Zelda*, it is something else entirely. It is the very word epic, the same epic that once brushed us by in the dark during our time with *The Legend of Zelda*, only given shape and form. It was epic from the moment we first laid eyes

fighting a magical stone behemoth the size of a building and watching it topple at their hand before until this point except in their own imaginations or the epic hero tales of old. The colossi vary in size, though that is not to say that they ever stray from being anything but completely epic in nature. Some require the patience of a sage, the steady hand of the artisan, and the timing of a clockmaker, while others require the quick reflexes of a gunslinger. No colossus itself is ever too difficult to overcome, though many require a more cerebral approach to figure out how to bring them down. It is both wholly entertaining, enthralling, and emotionally livid all at once. At the end of each battle, as each creature crumbles before the unnamed hero, we are strongly reminded of all that hangs in the balance. Inky black tendrils of shadow burst forth from each fallen foe and strike through the hero, taking away another portion of his own soul before transporting him back to the temple where his beloved lays in repose. Once again, he must then take up his sword and venture out on horseback through the open landscape searching for the next battle to be fought. In short, it is an epic adventure game not unlike the original *Zelda*, except done the right way for the modern day.

It does not take a rocket scientist or a gaming historian to acknowledge where Ueda gets his influences. Upon letting a friend try his hand at the game the first thing he had to say to me after a few minutes of gameplay was; "Dude, this is exactly like *Zelda*." No, my friend, it is bet-

on the wanderer in the opening cutscene, following that narrow mountain path on horseback at night. It was epic when we saw the sight of that first colossus lumber into view, the camera slowly panning upward so that we may take in all its majesty. It was epic and truly haunting when we first set foot into the thick, enclosed forest and spun the camera around us creating that magical motion blur effect.

Yet not even mountains of praise can overshadow the horrible truths that we must ultimately face at the end of the day. All the good the game does will not be enough to actually reform the rotten wasteland of the millions spent in pointless marketing blitzes, booth babes and lazy-but-financially-"safe" "me-too" attitudes that the mainstream videogame industry has spiraled into. This one game will not change the minds and thought processes of those corporate moneymen who have never touched a controller in their lives yet see fit to decide how a development studio should funnel their artistic talents.
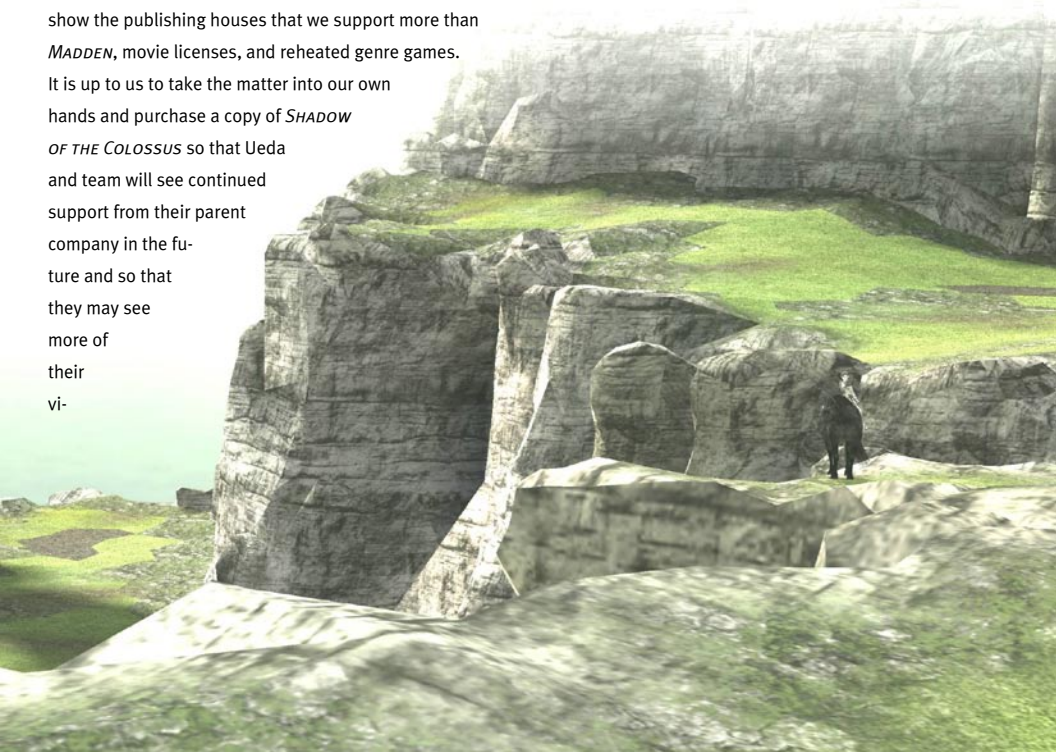
The truth of the matter is that publishers only listen to the sound of the almighty dollar, so it is up to us; those who consider themselves invested in the matter must show the publishing houses that we support more than *Madden*, movie licenses, and reheated genre games. It is up to us to take the matter into our own hands and purchase a copy of *Shadow of the Colossus* so that Ueda and team will see continued support from their parent company in the future and so that they may see more of their vi-

sions to beautiful fruition. However we cannot stop there, we must turn that leaf over for others we may know who have never experienced the wonders of interactive art, be it a friend or family member. We must show them how forgiving the controller can be once the mystery behind the functions of its buttons is revealed, it is not hard to do.

Cold. Barren. Lonely. Desolate. Support innovation in games any way you can, even if it is just by buying this one game and showing it to someone who does not play games, or these terms will be an apt enough description of the shape of things to come.

Ueda and team have done their part in bringing us this majestic work and now the torch has been passed to us to insure that the industry stays ripe for these kinds of games. Anyone who has ever loved videogames should give this one their undying support, especially for those who have not yet seen the joy that can be gaming. For every moment of this game is a gift to anyone who has ever dreamt of performing an heroic deed, of being awed by feats of amazing strength and will, of witnessing with their own eyes the wonder and splendor of a magical landscape, washed away by the sun. 🎮

Myth and Good Storytelling in Video Games
- Jared M. Gordon

Sleeping Beauty. *The Legend of Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*. *Shadow of the Colossus*. In each, a well-loved young woman with a noble air can be found sleeping soundly and unnaturally. What drives our interest in the story of the sleeping princess? Why are there always dragons to slay, crystals to return to their rightful place, or colossi to destroy in order to rouse them? Is there something deeper here that resonates upon the human psyche?

The answer is yes. The journey of the hero is fraught with peril, and the hero can't be just anybody. The idea of an event or a peculiar attribute particular to him is a common motif. In *The Adventure of Link*, a triforce-shaped crest appeared on the back of Link's hand. In *Shadow of the Colossus*'s predecessor *ICO*, the hero is a boy born with horns. In *Shadow* itself, the main character is special for possessing the sacred sword and having been allowed by Dormin into the realm of the colossi. There is the idea of being chosen, the idea of being unique, and the idea of being special. Playing as a hero who is set apart makes us, in some way, share in his unique qualities.

But what about the woman who sleeps? Lifeless and yet still very much alive, her transition from slumber into wakefulness is our goal. It is the triforce we must collect or the colossi essences we must obtain in order to wake her. But what does it mean in myth as well as video game? What does it teach us about the very nature of relationships and compassion?

Nothing is constant except for change, and in life, transition is a constant reminder of the way of the cosmos. Such experiences, or "little deaths" of our previous modes of thought, are necessary for us to move on and become stronger. When the hero wakes the maiden with a kiss, a triforce, or 16 colossi essences, he is destroying the way things have been in order to make a clean slate for the way things will be. He is the active participant in this change, and his agreement to sacrifice what he holds most dear is the very definition of heroic action.

By waking the woman on the bed or pedestal, the hero teaches us something fundamental about compassion. Compassion, when taken apart (com-passion) means

to "suffer with." When you feel compassion for someone, you are agreeing to suffer alongside them as well as share in their respective triumphs. It means loving them despite their faults, and agreeing to help them move along. The hero offers his own life for the sake of his beloved.

That is what the hero does, and, to a passive extent, the sleeping woman. The hero goes on these awe-inspiring challenges and makes the decision to go after what he wants; he's willing to put his life on the line. He wants to help the woman, the one for whom he feels compassion, the one for whom he undergoes a transition. In life, we can apply this to anyone stuck in a rut. Modern life can indeed seem like a dreamless sleep, a long, soulless rest upon an altar. The maiden's situation entices the hero to not only help her transition, but to also transition himself. The two must change, and in the end, the two become one. Zelda pulls Link in for a kiss, and the young girl of Colossus accepts the responsibility of taking care of the new life created from the ashes of the old. The circle is complete - the heroine in effect becomes the savior. It is her crisis that precipitates the great transition.

Of course, it's never enough to merely kiss the sleeping girl to wake her - a dragon must be defeated. Aside from the hero and the sleeping victim, there is a third player, the antagonist whose challenges stand between the hero and resolution. Ganon as well as Dormin have established the conflict. It is their challenges which the hero must subdue. In both games, this third party is in some manner impeded or impotent from directly facing the hero. In *ZELDA II*, Ganon has already been defeated

and his minions, acting through his will, set out against Link. *SHADOW*'s Dormin has been reduced to a disembodied voice from the heavens. In both cases, the hero is required for the antagonist's revival. Link's blood, sprinkled upon Ganon's ashes; the body of the wanderer, having freed Dormin's sixteen essences. What's the significance of the hampered antagonist and his immutable link to the hero?

The hero and his enemy are two sides of the same coin. Each has desires and each is portrayed as a character who will do anything to fulfill such desires. The conflict must be faced and the enemy confronted. One cannot exist without the other. The antagonist needs the hero to survive and conquer and the hero needs the power that the antagonist guards. It's an uneasy relationship, and its ultimate conflict is what makes for great games and great storytelling.

From Greek myth to Link's 8-bit Nintendo days to the Playstation 2 and beyond, there will always be heroes to guide, victims to save, and villains to stop. There will always be, in the case of the well-written game, the question of whether evil is truly black and white or merely another point of view. Regardless of whether or not *SHADOW*'s ending is truly a happy one, one thing it makes universally clear is that from death and sacrifice, new life emerges. No other game in recent memory makes it as plain, as shocking, or as refreshing. Through Dormin, the hero is reborn; Link must destroy his own shadow. From the sacrifice of the hero comes new life, and the cycle continues. ▣

Remembering

ZELDA II

The Adventure of

LINK™

The Adventure Of Link, 15 Years Later

- Chris St.Louis

There should be some sort of support group for troubled gamers: the kids who somehow never found out how to blow across the bottom of a dusty NES cart to make it work. The kids who got the Mike Tyson-less version of *Punch Out!* and never threw their controller in frustration at his gruesomely deformed pixellated visage.

I guess I could be one of them. I'd walk into that church basement wearing "Hi, my name is Chris" in block sharpie on a dopey white sticker. I'd take my seat in an uncomfortable metal chair, shift around a bit, and finally confess my shortcoming to the group:

I didn't play *The Legend Of Zelda* until after playing – and beating – *A Link To The Past*. I played *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link* before either of them.

Through some parental oversight, I was never blessed with the chance to play *Legend Of Zelda* until after the Super Nintendo's mighty debut, and my experience with the game was constantly colored by what I still consider to be the apex of the series. I couldn't pick up the Magical Sword without reflecting on that dramatic moment when Link triumphantly pulled the Master Sword out of the block in the clearing of the Lost Woods. My travels with Link on his first adventure were sullied by those shining 16-bit graphics; every new surprise was diluted as I found analog with *A Link To The Past*.

Playing *Zelda II, The Adventure Of Link*, however, was the purest gaming experience I've ever had. It wouldn't have really mattered if I'd played any Zelda

games before. In fact that same foreknowledge that tainted my romp through *The Legend Of Zelda* would have had no bearing whatsoever on *Zelda II*. This is because *Zelda II* is a glorious beast unlike any ever seen in the series before or since.

I was five when Nintendo made its shining debut into my parents' household. A Christmas present in 1988, the state-of-the-art in electronic entertainment arrived accompanied by the pack-in *Super Mario Bros./Duck Hunt* and the digital representation of my boyhood favorite merchandising monster, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. *Super Mario* easily made it into my top-10 list of all-time favorite games. *TMNT* created in me a violent fear of water as I struggled time and time again to keep my pixilated amphibious avatar from dying a horrible death by asphyxiation or electrocution while I attempted to diffuse bombs in that accursed dam stage. I did not have *Zelda II* yet though.

We were on a family trip going somewhere – my memory is foggy in my "old age" – and the year was 1991. We stayed a night at the house of one of my dad's friends. To my childish amazement, he had a NES hooked up in the living room of what I thought was a barren house. My years now acquaint me with the distinct architectural style of the bachelor's apartment.

Jeff was the guy's name. Jeff had just rented *Super Mario Bros. 3*, and when I mentioned my familiarity with the game, he wanted me to show him the ropes. But *Mario 3* was old hat to me – I'd got it from my grandmother for my 7th birthday back in November 1990. I was more interested in the gleaming gold cartridge he had sitting on

the top of his NES.

I'd never seen anything like it before. *Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link* read the label. *Ka-chung* went the NES' toaster-like maw as it swallowed the gold cart. The title screen wowed me back then - a lone sword embedded in a mountainside as the story scrolled in the background, a sprite routine that should have given George Lucas licensing fits.

I returned from vacation with *Zelda II* in tow. Fully boxed with the instructions, I was amazed that Jeff let me borrow it indefinitely. Looking back, I imagine he was probably sick of it and had no better way of unloading the game at the time – Gamestop and such being just a twinkle in some corporate exec's eye. Jeff got married a few years later; I'm not sure if his wife made him give up gaming – as so many wives tend to do.

Zelda II disappeared a few years later. My little brother lent it to a friend in the perpetual trading circle we had among the gaming elite of my youth. As with *Rygar* and a few other personal favorites, the little bastard 'friend' claimed he returned the game in a timely fashion. Anal-retentive about my collection even then, I knew this was not so.

The old box, beaten and dust-covered, was thrown away a few years later.

I found *Zelda II* again on a rainy Friday in November. Of course, there have been many occasions for me to acquire it in the intervening years, but it was usually courtesy of an overpriced game store or eBay. No, I vowed to find *Zelda II* on my own terms.

I did, the cart still glittering on top of stacks of gray in the NES drawer of the pawnshop responsible for much of my current collection. $5 was cheap enough, if one can put a price on nostalgia.

Home that night, I thrilled to the tinny sounds of the opening theme. The cart booted up on the first try, a

rarity among my NES games: nearly all of them must be coaxed into starting through an intricate hoodoo ritual involving blowing on the connector, finely adjusting the cart's position in the machine, and other unspeakable nameless acts.

My girlfriend watched from my futon as I sat cross-legged in front of the TV, the sound of my childhood swirling all around us. She laughed the first time I encountered the ubiquitous slime; we saw Hori's bizarre *Dragon Quest VIII* controller in an EB Games earlier that day. The parallel is not a hard one to draw.

Slowly, slowly, it all came back to me.

Zelda II is nothing like *The Legend Of Zelda, A Link To The Past, Ocarina Of Time,* et al. If you are stricken by some primal **need** to classify the title by comparison to another, I can make this sweeping statement: *Zelda II* is like *Castlevania II*.

For starters – and this is important – it is hard.

In every 2D *Zelda* title before and after, Link has had the power to shoot shimmering magical swords when his life meter is filled. *Zelda II* is no exception.

However, Link's magical sword fires from the tip of his corporeal blade and pop like soap bubbles not one-fifth of the screen away. To add to the insult, they do actual damage to only the lowliest of opponents - the types not found in the depths of palaces when Link's life runs low.

This is not the only occasion, however, in which Link is essentially and thoroughly emasculated. We are confronted time and time again throughout this adventure by Link's fundamental inability to *deal*. Deal with what? Deal with, well, anything, I'd say to you, gesturing wildly with a Dutch Bros. coffee cup, and probably spitting a bit when I talk. Deal with slimes, knights and bubbles.

Link takes damage from bubbles.

Innocent bubbles that float up from rivers as the player treks across a bridge. Touching this watery menace, Link stumbles back uttering a grunt all too familiar

to the seasoned player. 9 times out of ten, you stumble and grunt your way backwards into a watery grave. Like *Castlevania II*; you curse and scream at Link instead of Simon for not *keeping it together in a moment of weakness, goddammit!*

In its own way, *Zelda II* is more unsettling – albeit very, very subtly – *than Castlevania II ever was*. I find a Link doll – an extra life – in the middle of some ruins in the middle of the swamp. *'Cyclopean masonry'* immediately springs to mind as I watch these pixel-ly representations of moss-covered Doric columns; I've been reading too much Lovecraft lately.

Conversations with townsfolk are quaint, confusing, and underlined with palpable menace. "I AM ERROR." speaks one man in the same ominous delivery that informs Simon that it's a horrible night to have a curse. In my youth, I thought this was cool. Error was his name, just like the guy at the beginning of the village might have been Bob, or the lady who restored Link's life was Susan. But now, I really wonder. SHOULD his name be Error? Forbidden knowledge of adulthood – whispered names like ERMAC – make me question this reality of Link's.

The surreal is perpetuated in a later town; an old lady exhorts Link to find medicine for her sick daughter. Ever the dauntless hero, Link (by proxy of my steady hands) returns with medicine triumphant. "THE WATER OF LIFE!


FAIRY

QUICK COME WITH ME!" exclaims the old woman with heart-stopping urgency. Link follows her into the house to find: a corridor leading to the town wizard. He gives Link the power to turn into a fairy.

Fairy transmutation is all well and good, but what about the girl? Is she saved? Did I make it?

Or what about the towns where all the villagers turn into evil bats if you talk with them long enough? What was Nintendo trying to say?

What about Link's death? The trademark warning beep when low on hearts is still to be found, but in the heat of combat against hatchet wielding reptiles, it's often heard too late - Link's black silhouette is framed against a wildly flashing background as a horrific noise like an 8-bit bomb explodes in my ears. Is this what death is like? I can't help but wonder about those suscep-

When I have no more lives left, that's the end of me.
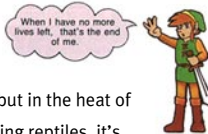
tible to epilepsy. Where does this screen leave them?

Suppose epilepsy doesn't get you and you just run out of lives. Yes, Link has lives in *Zelda II*, just as Mario and Simon and Mega Man all had lives. But the stakes are a lot higher here. Maybe Luigi saved Princess Toadstool if Mario fell to the Hammer Bros. Another one of Dr. Light's robots could have taken out Gutsman; maybe Simon had a little brother waiting in the wings, ready to dismantle Dracula's castle brick-by-pork-chop-hiding-brick. You run out of lives in *Zelda II* though, and you've blown it big time. GAME OVER proclaims the screen. THE RETURN OF GANON. His inky black silhouette stares accusingly at you from a blood-red background, and from your TV comes real laughter. Triumphant laughter - you, the hero, have perished, and your blood has summoned the prince of darkness back into the land of the living. There is no one else. You have failed.

It's a harsh message. Death, doom, and failure are all mere steps behind you for the whole game. Perish in the bowels of a palace and those 1894 experience points you were saving to level up your attack (at 2000) are gone forever. Hesitate and be buried in an avalanche of unbreakable blocks. Jump too late and be thrown into a watery grave by a single bubble.

Scream and throw the controller, with its neon replacement buttons, at the TV. Turn off the NES. And come back tomorrow, drawn once more to the glint of gold. 🎮

Riven Is Probably My Favorite Game Ever

Riven - **MAC, PC, PS1, SAT**
-Amandeep Jutla

The library on Myst Island is slightly cozier than its chilly, neoclassical architecture might suggest. Inside that grey slab with its sterile columns is a room with wood paneling, containing a nondescript fireplace and a bookshelf. A map is on one wall, and a painting adorns another. No furniture is in sight, but there is the distinct feeling that the floor probably would not mind being sat on. It's an inviting floor. It's an inviting library, too, or it would be if it were less unreal.

The first time I visited the library, I had to climb from the docks up a slight rise, until I stood on a plateau of sorts that oversaw the entirety of the island. On Myst, the grass is always a sickly green. The sky is always pale and whitish, and the weather never changes. The ocean never ripples. The whole place is locked in stasis, and the library is symbolic of that: it is frozen in time and space. One of the library's main, distinguishing features is a secret passage behind its bookshelf. When it opens, the bookshelf itself folds into the ground, and the entrance to the outside world also seals itself shut. Suddenly, the library is a claustrophobic cave. There is no way out except through that dark passageway that's making eerie, dripping sounds.

The first time I triggered that secret passageway, it was by accident. I had merely touched the painting, and it activated the bookshelf's collapse. How was I to know something so innocent would have caused that?

The library's secret passage disturbed me a little, but I figured it didn't hurt to walk in there and explore a little,

so I did. At the end of the passage, there was an elevator, which took me to a chamber where there were phrases and numbers carved into brass plaques and bolted to the walls. Surely, I thought, they were significant, so I wrote them down. Outside the library, wandering around the island proper, I began to find places where the clues could be used. For instance, I saw a clock tower, submerged in water on the far end of the island, and there was a control panel half-buried in the sand across from it. Fiddling with it, I found I could control the time that clock tower displayed. One of the clues I'd had was the cryptic "2:40," so maybe, just maybe -

I set the tower's time to 2:40. Suddenly, gears sprung forth from the water and formed a makeshift bridge that could lead me over there. All right, then, I thought, cross this, and I'll have made the next step, and the clue I had found right near "2:40," on the same plaque, even, was "2-2-1," so it would probably also be of some help.

I began to cross, and the world flickered, for an instant. The clock tower turned a hideous greenish-purple. The gears fell out from under me. I dropped into blackness.

Myst

This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down.

If the problem persists, contact the program vendor.

* * *

Myst and my computer normally got along, but every once in a while they'd have nasty catfights over who was doing what with QuickTime, and the game would crash hard, Myst Island dissolving along with it. I'd rub my eyes,

stare at Windows's cryptic error message, and click past it to my desktop. And start the game all over again.

I could now write, "every time MYST crashed, that killed my sense of disbelief, because the game was so immersive." This would, however, be a bald lie. I never thought of MYST's world as real - it was a collection of puzzles scattered across dead, empty worlds. It was as contrived as contrived gets. That was somehow what I loved about it.

MYST was an unprofessionally-made toy. It was designed for the Macintosh in '94 by two brothers and a bunch of their friends. That it played on my top-of-the-line-by-early-1998-standards Intel machine at all was miraculous, because "MYST for Windows" was a dodgy port made quickly and in response to how well the original version of the game seemed to have been selling.

In fact, it was because of MYST that I became attuned to the demands and workings of computer software at all. I learned that when MYST seemed to pause for several seconds while my CD-ROM drive light flickered orangely and madly, the game was trying to load data into its RAM cache.

Seams were always there, in MYST. It was pretty obvious to me that the game was composed of a collection of absurdly-pristine computer-generated images that I clicked through to move around, and that "Myst Island" was an imaginary space that only existed in my head. The "Ages of Myst" - the other islands that I could access through space-time-bending "link books" locked behind puzzles-the-answers-to-which-were-all-conveniently-located-in-that-space-behind-the-library- were just the same: white-skied, limited, coldly-rendered. Real places don't look like MYST's worlds. I was drawn to the game anyway.

MYST set something off within me. I understood the logic by which it worked easily enough. I played the game, and followed the breadcrumb-trails of clues, and solved the puzzles, and uncovered the islands' secrets. Long after I'd finished the game proper, I kept playing. I would sit in the library and thoughts would run through my mind.

This library doesn't exist, I would consciously tell myself. It's a static image on my computer screen. But what if it wasn't? What if I could get closer to MYST? Why can't I? Sometimes I would leave the library, rush

outside through the forest and down to the clocktower, and I would watch the frozen water at the island's shore, I would howl with internal frustration, with desire.

MYST was leading me on. My mind kept turning to the fifteen-minute-long MAKING OF MYST video that had been included with the game; I had seen the way sketches and maps were turned into wireframe images and then into textured pieces of unreality. Somewhere in the video, MYST's co-creator, Robyn Miller, holds up a schematic diagram of Myst Island and exclaims, "Myst Island - hahaha!" Robyn, I sometimes asked, is MYST real or isn't it?

But all of this came to facilitate my understanding of MYST at the time. I saw MYST as fragmentary, a thing created by humans with a sense of humor and a sense of wonder, a thing whose suggestions were far more significant than its accomplishments. MYST spurned me to write very bad and very derivative short stories about lonely people suddenly marooned on islands. It even made me try to write a clone using HTML and Microsoft Paint. MYST turned me into a crazed, twitching fan, desperate for more moments like the one the library seemed to - but didn't quite - create.

* * *

RIVEN is the sequel to MYST, and it had been out for several months by the time I finished the first game. I wanted to own it as soon as I found out it existed, but for me adolescence meant getting games when my parents felt like it. Thus, RIVEN came to me on Christmas Day, 1998, at a point when my excitement about the game had hit an absurd fever-pitch. High from the aching mystique[1] that MYST provided, I'd delved into RIVEN as much as I could. Online, I read everything I could about the game. I looked at screenshots. I read reviews. I even e-mailed someone at Cyan and got a real response. My brain was already trying to rive RIVEN, looking, desperately, for

something that picked up where *Myst* left off.

Riven isn't very *Myst*-like, even though it *is*, at first glance; it seems to involve puzzle-solving on islands, and it is an adventure game. It has a kind of hokey story: Atrus, the man you rescued from imprisonment at the end of *Myst*, now wants you to travel to an Age called Riven, to find his wife, whom he misses, and to oust his father, who is insane and seems to be toying with Riven itself. I started the game with the half-smile of one who thought he knew what to expect and what he was looking for.

I forgot about all that for the following eight or nine straight hours, because I forgot who I was. *Riven* has this kind of power - it creates an alternate world which is unified, coherent, and completely convincing, yet also completely different from the real world; it is awash in heavily-saturated atmosphere, and it can be inspiring and terrifying and intriguing all at once. It can wring sickening degrees of emotion out of me.

This has to do with context and explanation - *Riven* provides these for everything, and *Myst* never did. *Myst* made me contemplate the ridiculousness of a notion such as a library that (1. has a secret passage that's (2. activated by touching a particular painting and (3. cannot be open at the same time as the main entrance. And then there's also (4. the fact that the secret passage leads to an area that provides explicit, cut-and-dried answers to not-exactly-hidden and completely-unrelated puzzles scattered across the island.

In the beginning, *Myst* dropped me onto its island with no explanation; I suddenly appeared standing next to a dock. Why the dock? I never found out. Maybe it was just a place that made it easy to go elsewhere. From the dock, I could easily climb up the library. But even though I was moving around Myst Island's surface, I wasn't convinced of the solidity, of the reality, of anything I was doing. *Myst*'s main attraction for me was that it was a dreamy kind of amusement park, an obviously fabricated environment, blurry and out-of-focus. It was tantalizingly close to being rendered clear, but also, heartbreakingly, so far away.

Once, a long time ago, I had a vivid dream about living in a small apartment for a few weeks, alone with nothing but a good-natured pet cat to keep me company.

1: I know! I know!

It was a happy dream. The situation was perfect and idyllic, though silly by the standards of the Real World. When I woke up, I realized: I don't live alone in an apartment,

and I don't have a cat. That was all garbage created by the duo of my subconscious mind and my having once read that subplot of *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* involving the senile old man who lived with *his* cat on a rainy, distant rock, and enjoyed it, too.

But playing *Myst* is like experiencing the single instant of disappointment I'd had upon awakening, over and over again, closed into a loop of disillusioned frustration. Sitting in the library is waiting and wishing for a dream to turn into reality, but watching it, paradoxically, recede and stay put at the same time.

Riven, though. It is real. If it creates a dream-state, I stay firmly in it. The conscious, exterior world melts away, and *Riven*'s own takes its place. The water in this game ripples, the sky is not a white void, and there is a gritty weatheredness to every building and rusty dagger jammed in the dirt. When entering Riven after Atrus had explained his predicament, nudging his linking book towards me, and after I fell into the pages and was warped onto one of the islands, I appeared standing inside of some device that seemed to have been built in *anticipation of* people's warping in. It wasn't the dock, not by a long shot.

Everything in *Riven* - which means everything on Riven - has an easily understandable purpose; the byzantine machinery and crumbling buildings have specific, interconnected purposes. *Myst* had separate worlds, such as "the Mechanical Age," a place accessed by solving some blunt puzzles about clocks and gears, and then walking over to a giant gear-shaped structure that warped me to - wait for it - a giant, barren fortress

shaped like a gear, in the middle of one of *Myst*'s creepy, infinitely-large oceans with that same damned pale sky. *Myst* was heavy-handed that way; a game of ideas and shadows. *Riven*'s islands, though, are a part of the same Age, and so share a common theme, a people, an ecology, a culture. Villagers live in a knotted network of huts and trees; they retreat when I approach them, because they're afraid, but I can see them out of the corner of my eye. Once, in the middle of some dense greenery, I saw a little girl, and she saw me. She ran away. She'd been startled, but so had I.

The only thing that could have drawn me out of *Riven*'s atmosphere would have been the game's crashing, but it never did. There was no trouble with QuickTime, no choppiness, no sluggishness. *Riven,* unlike *Myst,* was released as a hybrid Mac/PC product, universal and seamless even its design. Mind, when I moved to another island in Riven's chain, I would get intrusive messages telling me to insert another one of the game's discs - there were five of them, and they had to be swapped in and out, because Riven is a huge place. The times that I would stop playing *Riven* usually tended to come shortly after one of those messages came up - I thought of them as gentle reminders that there really was a layer between me and what was on my computer screen, even though the game erased it. Those reminders whispered that there was a real life, and that I needed to do things in it. Since then, I have obtained a DVD-ROM reissue of *Riven* that avoids this problem entirely, as it crams all the game's data onto one disc. I am afraid of actually playing it much, though, because it could be dangerous; the disc-swapping was what kept me from forgetting to eat, when I was at the peak of my *Riven*-engrossment.

I eventually discovered that I have a favorite place in *Riven*. Maybe everyone who's played it does. Mine is at an earlyish point in the game, maybe; a spot at the bottom of some descending, dusty stairs: a pool of water with a few big rocks in the middle of it, surrounded by sand and, further on, the ocean itself. On those rocks, there sit a couple of Riven's indigenous platypus-like animals, the sunners, doing, well, what their name says - relaxing in the sun, reveling in the hyperblue sky and relishing in the fact that out there, in the middle of this clear pool of water, they don't have to do a thing in the world. They could swim, if they wanted. Instead, they lie there. It's

because they want to.

When I approach this spot from the stairs, I see the sunners from a distance at first, and they see me. If I *rush* down towards them, they decide I'm too impatient, too hurried, too much a Gamer, and they swim away. If I'm slow and deliberate, though, if I respect their presence, then they come to trust and respect me. And then I can get right up next to them, and the three of us share in a perfect moment.

This is Wholeness.

The sunners treat me as a part of their world, and I treat them as mine. I'm not playing a game anymore. I just want to sit down here and hang out for a long time. To drink it in. Smell the salty air. Gaze at the tranquility of the water. Watch the sunners laze some, and do it myself some. There's no yearning in my feelings, though - this isn't *Myst*, with its library's reluctant half-efforts. I'm not Tantalus, and I'm not even a fox staring up at some grapes. Instead, as long as I am here, I am at peace. I am complete. I am somewhere, and I am in the place where I am because it's the place where I want to be.

This is what I have always been looking for, what I have always told people I want, need, admire, in a computer game. It is fantastic. It is being there.

Myst, you electrified my brain at the right moment. You suggested something. You gave me questions. I drove myself half-mad thinking about those questions, while I spent time with you. You led me to want to think, create, reach out, pick you apart and see what made you tick.

But, *Riven*, you gave me answers. And answers are fulfillment. Your world was a world. I'd like to live there. 🖥
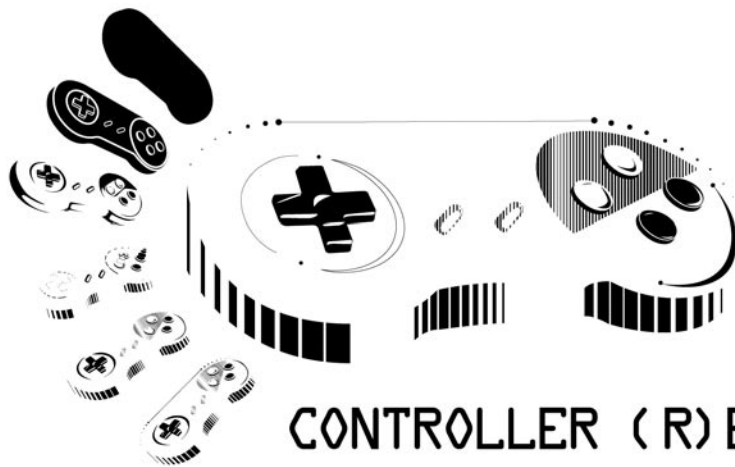
CONTROLLER (R)EVOLUTION

Nintendo, my mother, and the future of videogames.

- Ancil Anthropy

My mother was a force to be reckoned with in video-games.

I watched her complete both quests of *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA* armed with nothing more than her power, wisdom, courage, and a NES controller. I was little then, but in all the time since I've never been able to finish even the first quest. My efforts have never been more than half-hearted, though; this was my mother's victory.

My mother hasn't seen many victories since; I have. When *A LINK TO THE PAST* came out on the Super Nintendo, that was mine. While I played that game from start to finish, and completed many of the optional quests besides, she barely touched it.

I realize now that *A LINK TO THE PAST* - with its gentle difficulty curve and dungeons built around a single item - is a much easier game than *THE LEGEND OF ZELDA*, which hides its secrets behind unmarked walls and crowded rooms of Darknuts. Yet I, not my mother, have been the one to tackle *A LINK TO THE PAST* and every Zelda game since.

What changed? I know my mother has lost none of her power, her wisdom or courage. That leaves the controller.

The NES controller.

In 1983 western gamers were playing videogames with chunky joysticks displaced from the arcades, or with huge many-buttoned controllers meant to emulate the other bastion of home gaming - the computer keyboard.

While Nintendo was developing its Famicom, Atari - who created the arcade cabinet and later the Atari Video Computer System - was struggling with its Atari 5200 machine. Players were struggling with a controller that contains a joystick, four "action buttons", keys for pause, start and restart, and a numeric keypad of buttons 0 through 9 (plus * and #). The problem was ubiquitous in the western industry: the Intellivision and Colecovision controllers are just as cumbersome and unwieldy.

When Nintendo's Famicom arrived in North America in 1985 - as the **NINTENDO ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM** - it had a controller with a straightforward layout and a clear hierarchy of buttons, and allowed for games that are elegant, transparent, and *ACCESSIBLE*. The old schematics were forgotten (mostly[1]). Everything that came after was designed after the Famicom/NES controller. It was nothing short of a revolution.

The Famicom controller's prototype was the Game & Watch series of handheld games Nintendo released in the early 80s. The multiscreen games have a flip-open clamshell design that necessitated Nintendo develop an

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1: Except maybe for the Jaguar, Atari's last console endevour - which combined a MegaDrive-like three-button setup with a 12-button numeric keypad. It wasn't fantastically sucessful.

alternative to the fat, extruding joystick.

1982's Game & Watch port of arcade hit **DONKEY KONG** was the first game to feature what would become the Famicom's hallmark: a flat, cross-shaped pad - the joystick stripped to its digital essence. Pressing right makes Jumpman move right, pressing up makes him climb up a ladder. On the other side of the handheld is a button marked "JUMP".

To create the Famicom controller, the JUMP button was split into two, "A" and "B", and the "GAME A" or "GAME B" buttons were relocated to the middle of the pad as "START" and "SELECT".

The A and B buttons are big, round, invitingly convex. They're positioned just where the thumb should be when the controller is held with both hands. On the North American NES, they're painted a bright, immediate red[2]. They're the "action buttons" - the ones you tap, or mash, or hold. START and SELECT are smaller, thinner, and a quieter color grey on the NES. They're positioned in the very center of the controller - too far for tapping or mashing. They take on secondary functions.

When you're holding it, it's obvious that the big red buttons swing your sword (specifically, the A button, the first letter for the most important function) and use other tools (the B button). Testing the middle buttons reveals that START opens a sub-screen where you can check your map and choose secondary items.

This setup is uncluttered. There was nothing to get in my mother's way as she applied the aforementioned wisdom, power and courage to solve the riddles of Hyrule.

2: The NES controller is also lacking the mic on the Famicom's second controller. However, they gave the second controller START and SELECT buttons.

3: The Master System's d-pad is actually a rounded square, not a cross. This is because Nintendo actually had the cross design copyrighted - which is why every d-pad released by a non-Nintendo looks slightly different.

For a long time, this was the dominant design paradigm for game console controllers. Sega's Master System would have the directional pad[3] and two buttons, labelled "1" and "2". NEC's PC-Engine had "I" and "II" (and "RUN" in place of START). Atari's 7800, which followed the button-slathered 5600, was given controllers with a single d-pad and two red buttons.

In 1988 Sega released the Mega Drive, which has a third "action" button in place of SELECT. What was more significant was that the Mega Drive - a fully 16-bit system - made Nintendo realize they needed to design a new console.

Hiroshi Yamauchi, then-CEO of Nintendo, demanded the new Super Famicom do just one thing - look better and sound better than the Sega Mega Drive. To this end the Super Famicom was given a plethora of graphical abilities and features - including rudimentary 3D. Well, if the console could play 3D games, it would need a controller to accommodate this.

The Super Famicom controller was given two new action buttons - X and Y - which form a cross shape with A and B. To allow players to grapple with 3D games, "shoulder" buttons were added - long buttons along the top of the controller, one on each side. The new controller now had double the buttons of the original Famicom.

I remember playing SUPER MARIO WORLD for the first time on my Super NES and being very confused that the A button no longer was "jump".

In SUPER MARIO WORLD, the A button is "spin jump". The Y button is "jump". But I spin-jumped through as many stages as I could before a wall too high to spin-jump over forced me to finally learn to play the game "right". It took me a while. I never understood how X and Y related to A and B.

Earlier, I wrote that the one thing my mother lost by the time we owned a Super NES was a simple controller. That's not entirely true. She also lost time.

My mother went back to school to finish her degree, and after that, she began working full-time as a teacher. And she still takes classes to earn her master's.

She makes time to play games, though. She finished *Pokemon Yellow* a while back. Mostly she plays "casual games" - bouncing from one game to another as her free trial periods expire - and *Snood*.

But she rarely will play a new Zelda title. She played *Wind Waker* for a little while before giving up.

The reason is because every new game means a new controller scheme to learn. This isn't asking too much when there are only two action buttons on the controller: *Pokemon* on the Gameboy has the same controller setup as the NES. *Snood* is played with a mouse and one button.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time

The **Nintendo 64** controller is a monstrosity. It is actually two controllers: one wants to teach people to play games differently, and the other is terrified that no one will want to. The former wants to innovate, the latter needs to be sure it can do everything its competitors can. Both controllers are there, grafted together into a three-pronged plastic frankenstein.

The competitors to the N64 were: the Sony Playstation, which was originally designed as an extension to the Super Famicom, and kept the controller more or less; and the Sega Saturn, whose controller resembles the MegaDrive's late six-button controller (designed for fighting game ports). So the N64 controller was given a d-pad, an A and B button, four yellow C buttons and two shoulder buttons.

But Nintendo's software developers wanted to teach people to play real 3D games in real 3D. So the controller was given a 360-degree analog control stick that senses how far the player is moving it and a button in the back that can be pressed like a trigger. After seeing Nintendo's controller, both Sony and Sega went back and gave their controllers analog sticks.

After seeing Nintendo's controller, most players had no idea what to do with it.

I remember no one knew quite how to hold it. The controller has three huge prongs and depending on what game you're playing, you either hold the right prong and the middle prong, or the left and right prongs. You keep one finger on the hidden trigger button and one on the right shoulder button. You keep your thumb between A and B and the C buttons, or in the middle of the four C buttons.

My mother didn't have the time to figure out how to play *Ocarina of Time*. But I was young, and had no work or college classes. I did have time. I learned how to reposition the camera, and target things with the trigger button, and keep my eyes on the little icons that tell me which button does what, when. I finished the game.

Many similarly young people with fewer demands on their time also did. And many older people, with too little time, did not. Including my mother, who had so utterly completed the original Zelda.

A schism was forming. People were "gamers" or "non-gamers," or they are "casual gamers" - a group large enough now that

developers market to it, namely the Developers of simple, playable, web-distributed games often requiring only a mouse and single button to play.

Game consoles, however, have become more and more the domain of the "gamer" - the player with the time to learn the Microsoft Xbox controller's eight face buttons and two thumbsticks, or the Playstation 2 controller's four shoulder buttons and hidden L3 and R3 click buttons. Nintendo's response to these, the Gamecube controller, is another compromise of simplicity and conformity. The controller has a big green A button and a smaller red B button. It also has two grey bean-shaped X and Y buttons. It has a d-pad and two control sticks. It has a "Z" button, next to the R shoulder button, a last-minute addition.

The extra buttons and sticks make the controllers just about capable of doing whatever the Microsoft XBox and Sony PS2 can do, though unlike Sony and Microsoft, (which are far larger and more diversified corporations), Nintendo doesn't have an alternative source of income to fall back on should their games do poorly.

Nintendo's steady source of income was the hand-

held market. The Game-
boy, Gameboy Color
and Gameboy Advance
have been more or
less unshakable in the
handheld market. In
2003, though, Sony
announced their
intention to release a
handheld videogame system.
Nintendo decided its best option was to do something dif-
ferently, to tap into an audience that largely wasn't being
reached. There are more "non-gamers" who want to play
than there are self-identified "gamers" who are playing.
Sony released the Playstation Portable, which does the
same as what the Playstation can do, with the same but-
tons. Nintendo released the **DS** (for "Dual Screen").

DS games are controlled by moving a stylus over a
touch pad[4]. If you know how to write with a pen, then you
know how to play a DS game. And more people know how
to write than know how to operate a PS2 controller.

Soon after I got a copy of Pac-Pix, my mother
snatched it away and played for hours. All you need to
know to play Pac-Pix is how to draw Pac-Man, and in later
stages, how to draw an arrow. By the time my rental had
ended, my mother had made it further in the game than I
had. Today she told me she wants a DS for the holidays.
In Japan, a DS game called *Brain Training for Adults*
has achieved unprecedented popularity among older
players – players that Sony's Play-
station Portable has seen
fit to ignore. This game
is played with the
DS held vertically
like a book while
the player scribbles
numbers and kanji on the touch screen. This
game is selling a lot of DSes.
By now, Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo have all unveiled

their plans for "next-generation" game
consoles.

The Playstation 3's controller
is the same as the PS2's, but shaped like a
boomerang. The Xbox 360's is the same as
the Xbox's, but two face buttons are now
shoulder buttons.

The Nintendo Revolution control-
ler is a wand that the player moves through
the air. It senses where it's being aimed and how far from
the screen it is. There's a single big A button to click.

It's a mouse. There's a smaller B button next to the A,
and a d-pad on the other end. When the wand is turned on
its side, it becomes a Famicom controller.

Nintendo has made the important realization that
many more people *WANT* to play games than do. And
Nintendo's Revolution wants to be the machine that lets
them. Nintendo wants your grandparents to play games,
and your children, and you too.

Nintendo wants my mother to play games again. That
would be a revolution. 🎮

4: The DS does have the d-pad, four face buttons, and two shoulder
buttons of the Super Famicom, as a conservative concession. But
they're easy to ignore, if you're playing a game that doesn't use
them. Many games don't.
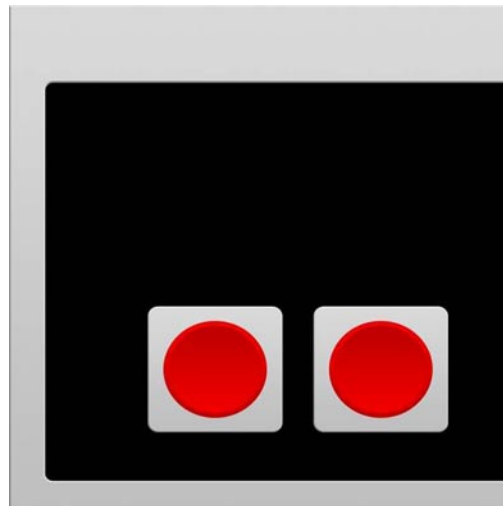
We Must Free The Things We Love

We ♥ Katamari - PS2

-M. O'connor

WE LOVE KATAMARI is a very good game and everyone should buy a copy.

Sometimes for someone there's a place that never fails to recharge your spirit no matter how many times you may go there. Hopefully, it's close to where you live and not the sort of journey that involves trains. Maybe you're a terribly lucky soul whose most special place is your bathroom, but most have to settle for a park or a ridge or a hill or a landscape or a church.

Anyway, these places are locations that nourish the "most you" – or in the inelegant western shorthand, they feed your "soul."

Returning to these kinds of places is a lifelong dream, often morphing into an obsessive stew of resentment, bitterness and betrayal. But let's not dwell on the bad, because there's something about this desire to return to the same place – which may not even be a place at all – that is truly good.

Some of us have reached a point where certain games – electronic and otherwise, but mostly the former – are that place and that time. Such an intense love breeds jealousies and fears. A certain segment of gamers – in a fit of early 90s flashback hubris we shall call them "intelligent gamers" - finds themselves so deeply in love with the form that they confuse it for an actual territory to be fought over. And so they clash, along with the other ignorant armies of the True Believers, to save the industry from itself. If their love has truly turned to bitter dust, they stand and hope – and perhaps pray, if their intuition can hold back their intellect – for the destruction of the industry so that it can be reborn again.

I huddle down on the darkling plain, and frankly, I'm confused. You can't save an industry any more than you could hug a poem. You can't go back to the way things were, if they ever were that way, because the way it was isn't the way you were. These poor folk most afflicted by the bitterness are enraged (in part) by the betrayal of their childhood, and rather than see the opportunities they seek an Other to blame.

We – and by this I mean civil society as a whole – are quite lucky that this segment of the population isn't more violent. Soccer fans riot; these unfortunates buy launch hardware.

The violence turns inward. This obsessive juvenile love is the demanding connection between infant and mother; a tie that binds rather than frees. More of the Other is required to keep baby happy and as time passes the bond moves from emotional tyranny to outright vampirism.

I don't play sports games. Like Nintendogs, sports games are a bit too far into one of those sci-fi movie futures where everyone plays three dimensional chess and buys sexual experiences from a vending ma-

chine using a "future primative" tattoo on their forearm. I don't play a lot of games. Let's face it – I'm old. I have lost the compulsion to love as though I were drowning. I take my wins where I can get them, especially in the competently familiar.

We Love Katamari is a sequel. It is indeed "more of the same." Each and every one of us who feel some of this love for the form should take a moment and thank that which is good and holy – that which, in a word, nourishes – that we can even get such a thing. The game is essentially perfect; it innovates by resisting the notion of "newness" as anything but the ravings of those who confuse their love of the form with the form itself. It's crazy to feel anything other than joy at the creation of a toy which is joyful to many, harms none, and pulls one back into that past tense which weds adults to childish pursuits.

Wall-Jumping For Kicks

Super Metroid - SNES

-Tim McGowan

Super Metroid is often regarded as the pinnacle of the series, the perfect refinement of the "Metroid Formula," one of the best games on the Super Nintendo, and the precursor to the current generation of Metroid Formula games. I consider this view to be horribly wrong.

A less popular notion, growing in some independent gaming circles, is that *Super Metroid* is too easy; it took the formula of the original *Metroid*, made it all pretty-like for the Super Nintendo generation and added nothing of substance.It even forgot some of the lessons learned in *Metroid II: The Return of Samus*. This is somewhat closer to the truth, but it mischaracterizes the nature of *Super Metroid*.

Our common videogame misnomer for the day is "The Metroid Formula." It describes games that require movement back and forth among various areas, collecting new items as keys to unlock even more items until the player gets everything or beats the game. *Super Metroid* certainly follows this formula, but not the extent of its GBA followers or the Gamecube's Prime series. However, *The Legend of Zelda* series, at least from *Link to the Past* onward, follows this same formula. More importantly, the original *Metroid* bears only a passing resemblance to the modern, oft-admired Metroid Formula, and its GameBoy follower bears even less.

Metroid was, at least to those who couldn't afford monthly videogame magazines with super-detailed maps, a game about getting lost. With careful mapping and memorization, one could learn the details of Zebes, the easiest order to collect items, and the best path to beat the game. However, because of its NES rawness, it was possible to skip many items. They existed not as keys but useful helpers to Samus. *Metroid II*, as well, does not treat individual items as any more than tools. All that's really necessary to beat that game are bombs, the spider ball, lots of missiles, and perhaps the screw attack to fight off those bastard Zeta and Omega Metroids. The rest exists to make the player feel powerful. Also worth noting is *Metroid II* does not require backtracking except in one or two very minor instances, and never for the discovery of new items – only for the discovery of new Metroids. It is structured as a central hallway with side rooms of action, similar to levels. It in no way follows the "Metroid Formula."

The Metroid Formula, then, was established in the days of the Super Nintendo, following Nintendo's rising love affair with lock-and-key design which is even evident in *Super Mario World*. *Metroid Prime* (though I love it dearly) is so steeped in the tradition that, after the development team discovered several glitches allowing sequence breaks, it was adjusted for the European version to ensure that nobody played the game with freedom. *Metroid: Zero Mission* foresaw the Metroid fans' love of sequence breaks and actually built them into the game system, essentially taking all the fun out of beating the designers' intentions. This isn't limited to the Metroid series, but this is where it feels the most wrong: where it is the greatest betrayal of a game's roots.

The Metroid Formula is anti-Metroid. Somewhere

between *Metroid* and the bastardization of Metroid, is *Super Metroid*. Is it to blame? Yes, but not for the reasons you think.

What was the real standard set by the first two Metroid games? What was the cohesive theme that made them fit so well together? They were games about being lost. *Super Metroid* gave us a nice map to look at, right there; there was no way to get lost.   There's something deeper than that, though. Panic is induced in *Metroid* after having your life siphoned by acid pools and gigantic monsters you couldn't handle, the fear of Omega Metroids when you couldn't spare to miss a single shot in *Return of Samus*, the obstacles, the spikes, the pools of lava, and the scarcity. *Metroid Prime*, in an attempt to recapture this, reduced it all to fear, replacing real danger with darker, "scarier" situations. What is fear, though? Perceived danger? That's not Metroid fear. Metroid fear is the lack of control. It's being in a game world that's harsh and violent, not necessarily suited to all of your abilities, unless you can really control those awkward jumps.

Super Metroid strips the real Metroid formula, the theme that the gameplay implies, away and replaces it with its opposite: control. In contrast to the first two games, *Super Metroid* might as well be a sim game, or an inverse sim game; it gives the player so much control over Samus that the boundaries mean nothing. It's all about wall-jumping.

Anyone who knows how to single-wall-jump knows what I'm talking about; those who know how to hit those tiny little ledges know even better. Those who throw a giant finger to ledges high above them that normally require long work-arounds to reach - they freeze a nearby enemy,

wall-jump off it, then off the higher ledge, and land on the poor frozen sap and jump straight to the hateful ledge - know precisely what I mean. Those who shoot straight up those long, enemy-filled corridors without standing on a single platform can't help but think to themselves "This game is my bitch." Morph-balling mid-jump and just making it into that hole in the wall only enhances the feeling. Even in the few instances where the game guarantees wall-jumping will not get you where you want, there's always speed-jumping. With clever use of both, one can skip the oh-so-terrible grappling beam you're supposed to get used to. Contrary to previous Metroid games, where walls can be your biggest enemy, they become your best friend. The acid pools suddenly mean nothing, and harmless pools of water become more of a nuisance. Super-missiles, the charge beam, and the now-overpowered screw attack work together to take away any feeling of dread or helplessness. And those beautiful little wall jumps, combined with numerous glitches, give the player the ability to control, completely, the not-so-alien planet. It is this that betrays the sensibilities of the Metroid series more than anything else. It is *this* that makes *Super Metroid* my favorite title in the series. It is certainly not its brilliant application of the Metroid Formula.

In a similar way *Metroid II* allows a level of control with the spider ball. But did you ever feel that way while you were playing it? I never did. The walls in *Return of Samus* harbor their own dangers – spikes, random-moving enemies, and so on – that keep one from ever feeling like a god over them.

Zero Mission likewise offers some semblance of control if the player ever masters very precise bomb-jumping. However, diagonally bomb-jumping is emphatically not fun. And, as mentioned earlier, the developers saw ahead of time what people would do this. There are
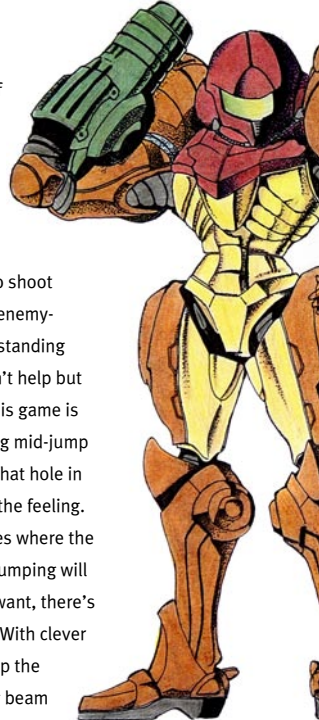
still torturous segments littered throughout the game in which no clever work-around can solve the puzzle. Most notable is an energy tank near the end that requires the player to precisely space-jump through some lasers that, if touched, will block off the tank. If this happens, you must leave the room and try again – and again, and again, and again. Space-jumping in *Zero Mission* is less precise than in Super Metroid and takes place on a small screen, with a small D-pad. It hurts me to think about doing that again (I've done it three times, and tried countless more). It is the same control offered in Super Metroid only if you can overcome the game's stubborn, self-important "cleverness" – that is, in name only.

I'd like to see a return to the real Metroid formula some day. These recent attempts to copy *Super Metroid* are falling short in large part because this feeling of control it offers the player was completely accidental. I doubt anyone at Nintendo will be replicating it any time soon. [TGQ]

Good Old Fashioned Family Fun

Video Game Championship of the World

-Lara Crigger

Art by: Benjamin Rivers

My grandfather is a complete SCOUNDREL. He smells of trickery and deceit. If he were a Norse god, he'd be Loki; if he were a FINAL FANTASY character, he'd be Cait Sith. He is a rogue, a rapscallion, a villain, a knave, and all the other Shakespearean insults combined. He is a man who, when playing a game of Boggle against his seven-year old granddaughter, cheats shamelessly and mercilessly - only to lie when he is caught. (Just so you know, "fazumy" is not a real word, and certainly not some African bush bird - no matter what he says).

Don't get me wrong: I love my grandfather, even when - especially when - he tries to cheat. He is a good man, though he doesn't sound like it; he only cheats when playing games with his family, and only then when the odds are overwhelmingly in his favor. He thinks it's funny, which, I suppose, it is - just not when he's doing it to me.

When I was younger, I lived with my father in a Baltimore suburb, and on alternate weekends I'd visit my grandparents, who lived an hour away. Every Friday the script would be the same. Grandmom, a Jewish stereotype incarnate, would spend the night at the auction house scavenging bargains, leaving Grandpop and me to amuse ourselves. Inevitably, ritualistically, we'd descend to the basement, where waiting on a wobbly bureau was an Atari 2600, painfully obsolete but treasured beyond compare.

Near the TV was an industrial-sized trashcan filled with musty stuffed animals. One by one, I'd take them

out, and for several minutes I'd meticulously place them around the room: on bookshelves, in armchairs, on ottomans and coat-racks. Sometimes, Grandpop would help me, but usually he'd set up the Atari and our favorite game, BREAKOUT, instead. When we both finished, he'd plop into a green chair absent of stuffed residents, pull down an imaginary microphone, and announce in his best Howard Cosell voice:

"Welcome! Thank you all for coming!" The stuffed animal audience, voiced by my clumsy ventriloquism, would cheer loudly.

"It's time for the rumble in the jungle… the battle to end all battles… the Video Game Champion-ship-" He'd pause dramatically, "- of the WORLD!"

The crowd would go wild.

"In this corner, the lass with sass… Lara!" The crowd would cheer so wildly that one or two of them would fall over in wildness.

"In the other corner, the defending Atari champion… Grandpop!" Abruptly, the audience would fall silent. He'd continue unfazed, "Tonight, it will all be decided: who is the Champion of the World, and who is just a sad, little fazumy…"

And then, we'd play.

Surprisingly, my grandfather is rather good at video games. In addition to the Atari, my grandparents owned an NES, upon which Grandpop unleashed his true gaming fury: Second Quest Gannon fell before his dexterity; Samus removed her Varia Suit in honor of his speed; he even managed to navigate the mountain level in Ninja Gaiden (goddamn birds). When playing a mere Atari game, he could have schooled me blind-folded. But he wasn't about to let *TALENT* get in the way of his fun.

It's hard to cheat at video games, because, unless you can telepathically fiddle with circuitry, the high score displayed is generally correct. Ataris do not lie; it isn't in their programming. Although you can always declare, "I wasn't doing it right, lemme go again", at some point, you are either good at a game or not.

Nevertheless, Grandpop would find his ways. If I had to go to the bathroom, he'd play my round without telling me. Or he'd launch into a funny story about dinosaurs living in the sewers, so distracting me with laughter that I'd lose track of the ball. Sometimes he would body-check me. Once, he even pretended the stuffed animals were heckling me, but that made me cry, so he never did it again.

He would always win, of course. I never once beat him. I remember a time when I came close, but conveniently the power went out. He cackled, exclaiming, "Honey-pot, even *GOD'S* on my side."

Yet, still I tried. Like Sisyphus with his boulder, still I tried.

All of those Friday nights accumulated have crafted me into a gamer of staggering tenacity, especially in the face of defeat. Shutting a game off before I've beaten the level, mission, or boss seems to me an act of despair and failure.

Countless nights I've sacrificed, endlessly seeking that one last gold coin, that one last mini-boss, that one last power-up, clinging to my quest like a dog to a bone, refusing to just do the sensible thing and quit.

Eventually, I got better and started beating the games I played; now, I too can beat the mountain level in Ninja Gaiden. However, success is not the reason I continue. On some subconscious level, I see nearly every game I play as a competition against my memories. More than fifteen years later, I am still driven to absolve my defeat at the hand of my trickster grandfather.

Do I expect that one day, I will hear his voice in the back of my head, congratulating me on a game well played? If that is the case, I'm sorely mistaken; he'd never do anything so gracious as that.

I play so that if ever there is another Video Game Championship, I'll beat him whether he plays fair or not. Although, just between you and me, I hope he cheats. Indeed, I hope he'll continue to cheat forever.

Show Me Something Gorgeous

A Brief Analysis of Videogame Aesthetics

-Andrew Toups

The debate exploded when the film critic Roger Ebert responded to one of his readers that, because videogames are built on player choice, and thus lack authorial control, they cannot be on the same level as film and literature. He did not even directly argue that games cannot be "art," yet, wherever you look, that's how the argument was interpreted. Of course, everyone was waiting for a moment like this. A growing industry produces games like *Halo 2*, whose launches rival and often outstrip box office revenues; or games like *Killer 7* and *Shadow of the Colossus*, the thematic ambition of which rivals the great films of the 70's; or even games like *Grand Theft Auto III*, which feature about as much seedy sex and crime as a gangster movie (only stretched out over about a hundred hours of gameplay) gamers are beginning to wonder why the rest of the world can't accept the legitimacy of their hobby. I mentioned that I recently spent a lot of money on videogames to an attractive female friend of mine, and she laughed and responded, "you're such a nerd!" It was an affectionate gesture, but on the other hand I can't deny I felt that familiar sting of alienation, driving the urge to justify why I spend so much time and money on the things.

The question of why no one accepts video games as a legitimate cultural phenomenon is something I'm not really concerned with at the moment. There do exist preconceived biases and assumptions that gaming is a nerd's hobby, but the burden is ultimately on developers

-- scratch that, creators -- to make a compelling piece of interactive entertainment that speaks strongly for the medium's strengths without having to make excuses or apologies. Some may say that this game has already been made; some think it's Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy VII*, others Akira Yamaoka's *Silent Hill 2*, others Yu Suzuki's *Shenmue*, still others Fumito Ueda's *Shadow of the Colossus*, and even a few people insist that it's Rockstar North's *Grand Theft Auto III*, but it is none of these games, nor is it any other game, because if it was, I would be writing video game reviews for the New Yorker and getting paid quite well for it instead of arguing this point for free in an online magazine.

Videogames (not *video games*) mind you are called that because they are equally video and game. Which is to say they are things that we see (*video*) and that we play (*game*), and we do both equally. The game shows us something and we react to it, or we do something and the game reacts by showing us something else, and the two keep playing off each other, and this is why we like them: because videogames, or at least good ones, maintain an illusion of communication, which is the most basic act of human civilization.

Videogames as a bona fide cultural phenomenon started with *Pong*, which was a game about rectangles fighting over a square. The most complex graphical element of *Pong* was not the player avatars (the rectangles) or the playing field (the square), but rather the scoreboard at top, which often consisted of both rectangles and squares. Years after *Pong* appeared, people started playing *Pac Man*, which is a game about a man in a maze

who eats ghosts. If it weren't for the name "Pac Man," calling him a "man" might be a stretch - he is nothing more than a circle with a pie-wedge cut out for a mouth. But the mouth, quite essentially, is still recognizable as a mouth, and if you add lipstick and a single pixel as a beauty mark, it becomes recognizable as a female mouth. Soon *Pac Man* gave way to Jump Man, who we know as Mario on the Nintendo Entertainment System. *Super Mario Brothers* was a game set in a world called "the mushroom kingdom," about an Italian plumber who jumps on things in order to rescue a princess. Mario was fully identifiable as a man, with a face, a body, arms and legs, and even a mustache, hat and overalls. His appearance was a result of purely practical concerns of pixel art in low resolutions - he wears the hat because it's difficult to draw hair, the overalls to distinguish his arms from his body, and the mustache to make his face more visible. At exactly what point along the line it was decided he be an Italian plumber is irrelevant - Mario owes his identity to hardware limitations of the past. Despite this, his existence set the tone for what was to come in the future - games which were even more concretely representative, games in which we know we are a very specific "x" doing a very specific "y." The days when these things were represented with abstraction were, and still are, rapidly disappearing.

Many "old school" purists have bemoaned this trend, despite it being as natural an evolution in game design as opposable thumbs were in human physiology. The rallying cry, which we have heard since the "golden age" of the Super NES and Genesis, has been "gameplay over graphics." It's this rather superficial claim that I'm addressing today. It's become something of a weird double standard - writers, developers, and fans alike all pay lip service to it, yet journalists still rate the graphics of games, developers still advertise them and fans still drool over them.

On the other hand, there are people (often the same people) who ask whether games are, ever were, or can be "art." This utterance has found a few differ-

ent manifestations. Sometimes it is asked: "can games be art?" Sometimes it is stated "games are just as legitimate a form of art as film or literature!" Sometimes particular games are invoked to question or to prove game's validity as an "art form." The question, as I've already said, is kind of a stupid one, and before I speak any more of it I will let some of my friends from the staff of insertcredit.com answer the question. Eric-Jon Rossel Waugh, in his essay "Ishmael," says "It is not for us to judge what is, and is not art. The whole practice is a waste of time. Even if art could take form as or within an object, it would be futile to try to measure or verify that frozen art; reason is not just antithetical but also blind to the irrational. If you see art, if you feel art, then you are experiencing art." Tim Rogers, in his review of *Shadow of the Colossus* says "if there exists one man who would aim a shotgun in the name of screaming 'videogames are not art,' then I could very well be the man to say 'well, neither is anything else.'" Any question of what makes something "art" ultimately devolves into a semantic debate about what "art" really is, accusations that the other's definition of art is "just like, your opinion, man", and at its worst, self-conscious name-dropping.

In between these two debates is a very troubling conundrum, one that is indeed at the very heart of the matter - the question of videogame aesthetics. If we are to understand videogames as things that are defined just as much by what they show us as by how we play them, then where exactly do we start when analyzing them as creative works? Some people have argued that videogames are the most sophisticated of all popular media, because these days they require a synthesis of skills from nearly every field - film, music, literature, theatre, even (especially!) architecture. On the other hand, it's hard to have faith in this argument when a game like *Katamari Damacy* comes along, which seems to know nothing about any other media than its own, and is a game that is just as fun with the volume turned down and with Beck's *Midnite Vultures* on the stereo. Absent this, are we forced to rely on vague phrases and concepts such as "fun factor", "controls", and "graphics"? And what does it mean for *Silent Hill*, a game which is not by any stretch of imagination "fun," controls terribly, has really awkward and often amateurish graphics, but is still one of the most compelling games ever made? And what are we to say

then, about the spacious gap between *Silent Hill* and *Katamari Damacy*? What is it, exactly, that these games have in common?

Before attending to that, let's return to the question of "are games art?" The problem with this question is that it only begets more questions which never have satisfying answers, so long as you are looking for a clear-cut, objective solution to the whole thing. What is art, anyway? I can tell you what art isn't - art isn't the Mona Lisa hung up at the Louvre. I visited the Louvre over two years ago when I was in school in Paris, and I saw the actual Mona Lisa. It was surrounded by a crowd of tourists, many of whom were taking photographs despite being instructed, quite politely but with a cold air of condescension, not to. I saw it, recognized it, and observed how much smaller it was than I expected, but didn't give it a second thought. I could've paid it more attention, and maybe even come to have appreciated it in a way that I haven't ever from just seeing prints of it. Even if I had, it wouldn't have been art.

Art isn't an idol that you sit on a pedestal and worship. Nor is it a specimen that you sit beneath a microscope and study. Most emphatically, art isn't a painting that you hang in a museum and appreciate. In fact, the moment art is hung in a museum to be passively appreciated by patrons is the moment it dies. A beat up old VHS tape of Stephen Spielberg's *AI* on rent from Blockbuster that I watch on my fuzzy, small and too-bright TV in my messy apartment in the middle of a miserable semester is a hundred times more art than the Mona Lisa hanging in that sterile room in the Louvre. Never mind that one is a timeless work that has been appreciated and studied for generations, and the other is a disposable, pseudo-philosophical spectacle with a tearjerker ending. At the end of the day art is something that happens in your life, in-between you and the artist. The so-called

work of art is just the vehicle for that something to occur.

Don't ask others whether or not a videogame can ever be "art". Instead, ask yourself if any game you've played made you laugh, cry, or fondly recall your youth. Has a game ever stirred your imagination, made you wistful and longing to travel? Has a game caused you to realize something about yourself, about your life, or about your world? Has a game ever simply called to mind something beyond the game itself? If it has, then you shouldn't need to ask anyone about the artistic potential of the medium, because you've felt it yourself! You were there when it happened!

It is here that I find the commonality between *Katamari Damacy* and *Silent Hill*. At the core of both experiences is the understanding of how videogames communicate. The answer is neither "all about the gameplay" or "all about the graphics" - if you were to remove either from either game, you'd would in fact lose the essence of what makes them so entertaining, so moving, so fun!

Katamari Damacy, as a game, is boring. Its creator, Keita Takahashi, has said that if the game was reduced to ultimate abstraction, just a sphere picking up cubes of varying size, it would still be entertaining. I disagree with this, mostly because if the game were completely abstract, there would be no way to tell how much you had progressed. Every time you get larger, the camera zooms out and the world is subtley scaled back somewhat. The raw and uncomfortable truth underlying *Katamari Damacy* (and, well, most JRPG's, but that's a whole other article) is that there really is no progression. You collect enough small objects to become larger, and then you collect larger objects, which, because you yourself are larger, aren't so large anymore. Soon enough those large objects become the new small objects, until you get even larger still, and the cycle repeats. But at any given point in time in a game of *Katamari Damacy*, you are abstractly doing the exact same thing, which is pushing around a ball, which, despite the number at the top right, still occupies about half of the screen, and picking up smaller objects, which, despite appearing as either a thumbtack or elephant, are still only significant in that they are smaller than your ball. On an abstract level, there's nothing really entertaining about that. It ceases becoming a game that you experience and becomes

maybe more like fidgeting. After growing a few orders of magnitude in the hypothetical abstract version of *Kamatari Damacy*, you'd realize how hollow and formulaic it is and quit, because, quite frankly, it's far cheaper to just twiddle your thumbs without the aid of a $200 PS2 console and Dual Shock controller.

The genius of *Katamari Damacy* lies entirely in the game's visual presentation. I'm not even talking about how "wacky" it is - that's just icing on the cake, really. The important, functional element of *Katamari Damacy* is that you know what each of the objects are and that you can identify them from your life. You start by picking up thumbtacks –(and hey, thumbtacks are small!) and soon you are picking up elephants – (which are pretty big!). Even though you are essentially performing the same mundane action over and over again, the game is constantly reminding you how far you have come, and it does this by relying on your familiarity with everyday objects.

In other words, it is a game that is founded on a lie, and the reason we feel miserable at the end of *Katamari Damacy*, (with our huge, lonely star rolling in the in the empty ocean) is that suddenly we have no frame of reference, and we realize that for everything in our katamari, it still takes up as much of the screen as it did when we started, and despite the happy-go-lucky music, all we have to show for our efforts is a number at the top right of the screen. For that brief moment, the lie sits there, exposed, naked, and we, who were so enraptured at rolling up clouds a mere moment ago, realize how profoundly silly it was that we had wrapped up in such nonsense. Before this can really sink in, though, the king appears, we ride the royal rainbow up one last time, and the game invites us to start rolling up entire countries. It all happened so fast, so we continue on, trying to forget the crushing feeling we had moments earlier, but never quite succeeding. It is what made the game such a memorable and moving experience for me, and it is a situation the second game nobly avoids, which is why (despite people complaining that *We ❤ Katamari* was just "more of the same") I see the two games as being
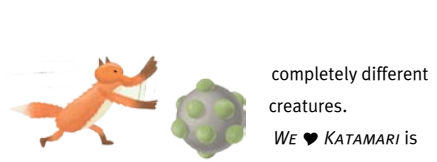
completely different creatures.

We ❤ Katamari is instead a game which is explicitly focused on the metaphorical power of its gameplay model: one which quite satisfyingly explores them. The "main stages" which consist of simply rolling the katamari to a certain size within a certain time limit are no longer the point. The true heart of that game lies within the "side stages", which involve collecting "friends" at the zoo, or collecting as many flowers as possible, or fireflies to make the katamari bright enough to serve as reading light for a student. These levels all try to ascribe some kind of meaning to the basic gameplay model by providing outside context for your actions. You aren't making celestial bodies (though, ultimately, of course, you are) but instead you are performing a very concrete task, in a very concrete environment, with a very concrete set of objects. Even though the raw gameplay is unchanged from the original game, the raw gameplay was never the point to begin with. The magic of the game is that if you change the context for what you are doing, you are in fact changing the very nature of the game.

The same argument could be made, then, for *Silent Hill*. What is the core gameplay of *Silent Hill*, anyway? On an abstract level, it's a beat-em-up. We walk around hitting creatures with a blunt object till they die. If we get hit too many times, we die. In order to progress, we must occasionally solve puzzles -- and yet the puzzles exist mostly so that we can't simply rush through the levels and ignore most of the traps and enemies. They are pacing mechanisms. This same pattern is shared by every Silent Hill game made, and yet you will not find many people complaining that every game in the series is exactly alike -- in fact, despite being nearly mechanically identical (even *The Room* doesn't depart too significantly), all four games are decidedly different in focus. The difference is simply that we are being shown different things in each game. In *Silent Hill 3*, a character makes a remark halfway through the game that implies that the monsters we've been killing were actually human beings. He is joking, but the implication gives us pause -- what if he's right? What if we were killing people the whole time?

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The aesthetic potential of the medium lies somewhere within the nexus of player action (game mechanics, interface) and game response (visuals, level design, art direction, etc). Generally speaking, the games which understand this in one way or another tend to be the ones that stick with us emotionally, the ones we feel nostalgia towards, the ones we recall with fondness and feel drawn to years after first experiencing them.

How, then, can a designer exert authorial control?

On the one hand, the developer can always remove control from the player at key moments. Even a game like *Final Fantasy VII*, with its nonsensical, convoluted plotline, and needlessly complex gameplay mechanics, knows this well enough to be cited as a frequent example of games as "art." The cutscene of Aeris' death, removed from the context of the game, isn't particularly jarring or moving - even at the time, the CG models looked stiff and lifeless, resembling two marionettes in a macabre dance than a man killing a woman. But this didn't matter, because we could recognize the image of Aeris as the same character that we had kept in our party and bought equipment for and kept alive, whose healing limit breaks we had gotten much use from and of whom we had possibly even downloaded pornographic fanart. We know that from that point on in the game we will no longer be able to teach her any more magic spells, level up any materia, teach her her final limit break; when we try to masturbate to crude drawings of her being violated by a Marlboro, we will only be mixing sexual pleasure with loss and regret. In regular battles we are always capable of saving Aeris by curing her, using revive potions or leaving her out of the battles, because we are in control of the situation. It is one of the most basic expressive tricks a game can pull; *Final Fantasy VII*, in its youthful exuberance, exploits it fully. Yet we still remember it fondly despite it really kind of being a shitty game. If we were to go around awarding medals to games which are "art," *Final Fantasy VII* would not get one, though it would certainly get a ribbon for honorable mention.

There is, on the other hand, the approach of "design by subtraction." Games like *Shadow of the Colossus* and the *Silent Hill* series are perhaps the most noteworthy examples of this model. These are games that strictly limit player choice at every turn, and they write the setting, backstory and objectives around those limitations. In *Shadow of the Colossus*, you are given a few basic tools - a horse for transportation, a sword and bow and arrow for combat and your own bare hands for climbing and clinging. The game world consists of a beautiful, spacious wilderness that for the most part is empty of any kind of meaningful interaction save basic exploration. Half of the game time is spent on your horse, exploring and searching for the next colossus. In these portions of the game, it's just the hero, the horse and the great outdoors. Interaction is kept to a minimum - we only need press the X button occasionally and tilt the left control stick to steer; the important thing is to pay attention to the surroundings so as not to forget where we're going. It's never very challenging or involving, so instead we're left looking at the world around us - the camera pans back and fills most of the screen with the background to enforce this - and we are given a chance to admire and take in the beautiful backdrop. Fighting the colossi, on the other hand, requires intense concentration and interaction, yet the background remains visible all the while; as much as we need to focus on fighting the colossus at hand, we can never forget where we came from and how we got there, because it's still there, just over the hairy shoulder we're clinging to.

Nearly every person who plays *Shadow of the Colossus* eventually feels some sort of guilt for (or at least questions why they are) killing the colossi. This effect is ultimately achieved not by what the game gives you but what the game takes away. Though we may feel bad fighting the colossi, given what the game has shown us, we can't shake the feeling that killing them is inevitable, that it is something that we must do. If there

were smaller, less threatening monsters to fight, sidequests, stat-management or new weapons and armor to collect, that sense of urgency would be compromised. At the very least, our battles with the colossi would feel more justifiable; otherwise, what were we building our stats for? What were we fighting all those regular monsters for? What did we buy the equipment for, if not to slay such a massive beast? As it is, though, we are only given the most basic means and motivation. We are here because we want to revive our lost love. All we must do is destroy the sixteen colossi. There isn't anything else to get in the way.

Both *Final Fantasy VII* and *Shadow of the Colossus*, of course, have simple narratives. I mean, yes, *Final Fantasy VII*'s story is complex, but, barring a few sidequests and hidden characters, it is entirely linear and scripted - nothing will ever happen differently regardless of how you play the game. Aeris will always die at the end of the first disc, the meteor will always hurtle towards earth at the end of the second, and Barret will always embarass us when he talks like Mr. T. And we will always slay every last colossus in *Shadow of the Collosus* in the same way, and we must ultimately traverse the same

routes to reach them, and our hero will, in the end, meet the same fate every time we finish the game.

Yet expanding the role of player choice beyond "do this or game over" does not necessarily entail abandoning authorial voice.

In fact, there is just as much (if not more) possibility for authorial control in even the most open-ended games - the difference is of course in how it is applied. Though the player always has some kind of choice, it's not really his choice to begin with - the designer first must decide what the game's outcome may be. Often the choice isn't really a choice at all; you can either succeed at the task at hand or die. In either case the designer of the game is in complete control of the appearance of the game world, the characters that populate it, and even the rules that govern its existence. Even if the player's actions are not scripted and are always predetermined by hard lines of code. This is an undeniable fact that will never change, regardless of whatever advances appear in the realm of procedurally generated narratives. The rare game that strives for open-ended play and still succeeds at delivering compelling narratives is one that understands the relationship between player psychology, game response, and interface.

Take *Metal Gear Solid 3* for instance.

The most common complaint about the Metal Gear Solid series is the frequency and length of its cutscenes and coded conversations. Given its reliance on scripted story events it wouldn't seem much of a candidate for a game with open narrative possibilities. And yet, it is the game's understanding of the nature of narrative in videogames that is precisely what lets us forgive its long-winded excursions into story-stuff.

The overarching story as it's expressed in plot scenes never changes in Metal Gear, save perhaps a few flags that trigger alternate cutscenes and endings. Nevertheless, on the grand story arc you still progress from point A to point B to point C. What's important is the variation that can occur between those points. There are rules, to be sure, but they are quite literally made to be broken. We are told, for instance, that we must never let anyone become aware of our presence. Unlike other stealth games, (say, *Splinter Cell*) if we do get caught, it's not game over - in fact, only death results in a game

over, and even that rule isn't 100% infallible. Instead, we are faced with more choices: do you hide? Run away? Take out the guard before he can alert the others? And each choice begets more choices, until we are safely free from enemy pursuit or dead.

The reason it all works is that the game's presentation is unflinching, and its interface is natural and ultimately transparent, even when it isn't. It may seem ridiculous, for instance, that the general tells us to "press X to crouch," or that the boss explains the detailed use of the "CQC button" - on the other hand, why should they be coy about it? For all its appearance, *Metal Gear Solid 3* is a game in which we must push buttons to do anything, and we often must push very complex combinations of them. That the game doesn't try to hide this, and is instead very confident in its presentation, means that in the end, it's a little easier for us as the player to forget that we are playing a game with a complex interface. The game knows that as long as we see a very convincing jungle environment filled with all sorts of flora and fauna, and guards that react in logical ways to your actions, and enough well rendered sights and sounds to these effects, even when we must hold R2 to scroll through an HUD menu to use some rations, it's easy to accept this as a metaphor for digging through your bag. When we go to the cure menu and perform first aid by selecting sutures and bandages from a list, we can better accept it as a stand-in for the act of repairing and caring for damage to your body. The game even goes so far as to show us a brief movie of Snake performing the operation in question on occasion.

It's very much a process of give and take -- the more the game gives you, the more it can get away with.

***

Ebert was both right and wrong. It is true that it's hard to accept the current body of work of videogames as being on the same level of those of literature and film, or even rock and roll music. There has yet to be even a single game that grants legitimacy to the medium in the way that, say, *Citizen Kane* did for film. On the other hand, his assertion that this is impossible, because videogame inherently lack authorial control, is false - as I hope I've demonstrated.

In the meantime none of us need go about trumpeting games as art, trying to convince the masses. Whenever a talented creator who has both a strong vision and an innate understanding of the craft releases a game that undeniably demonstrates that videogames, as a medium, have something to say in the great discussion of human civilization and culture, we will have that game, and the games that follow it, to speak for us. [FGC]
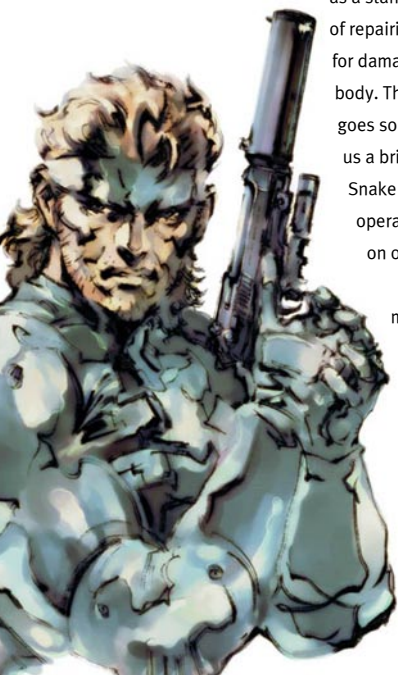
Otacon:
Ok, Snake!
Our target this time is
to infiltrate a small island
off the Pacific Coast and
find where they're
storing the Metal Gear!

Snake:
Metal Gear?!

Otacon:
Yes... Metal Gear.
Snake:
METAL GEAR!!

Otacon:
ARMORED CORE!!
Snake:
GUILTY GEAR!!

Otacon:
HUWAAAAAAAAAH-!!
Snake:
OWOOOOOOOOOH-!
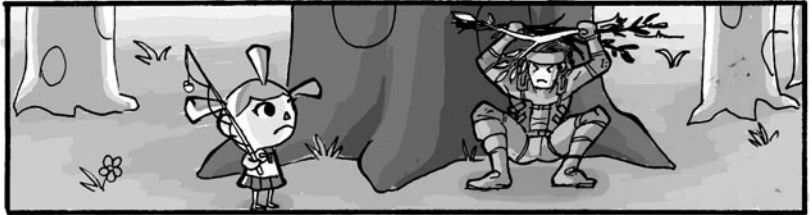
Otacon:
HYAAAAAAAAAHHHH-!
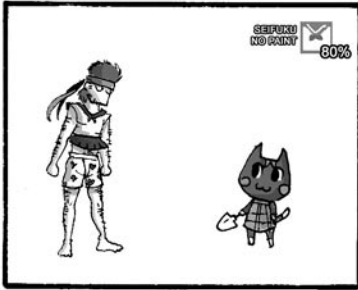**Snake:**
I'm getting too old for this.
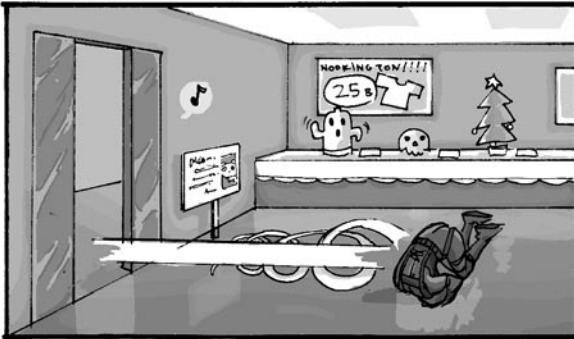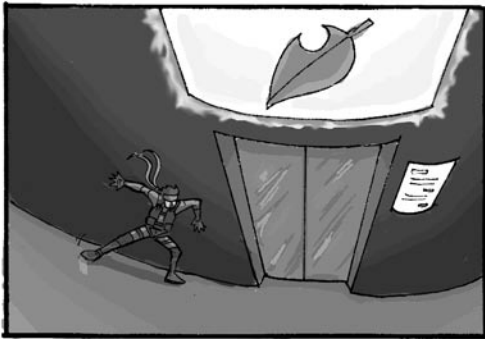
06:55:23
Mariel Island

Interview with Greg Costikyan

Manifesto Games

-M. O'Connor

I met Greg Costikyan in Moran's, a bar in Manhattan's Financial District, on a cold Friday evening, a few blocks from the memorial craters of what used to be the World Trade Center. I arrived early, which gave me time to collect notes and nurse a beer.

Between the time of that meeting and the deadline for this publication I've had a chance to read a few recent interviews with Mr. Costikyan. Generally, they've all covered the same few topics; Mr. Costikyan is very good at pushing his talking points. As well he should be, because Mr. Costikyan, his business partners and their backing investors are taking off on a wild ride of sorts.

For example, when discussing the issue of "The Long Tail" – a semi-fancy term popularized by a Wired article last year, not the statistical concept, though they are sort of related – Mr. Costikyan drew the slope of the curve out with his finger on the bar top. The Long Tail (capitalized) refers to the ability of a product with a long and steady shelf life to stay competitive within a market that is largely dominated by products that quickly peak and then disappear.

Now, there's a mighty big caveat in this formulation; one has to assume that the distribution channel – i.e. how the stuff gets to people - is both large enough and stable enough to gather enough customers over a lengthy period of time. Some obvious examples are Amazon.com and Netflix. Manifesto Games' business model is based on the idea of building a platform both broad and stable enough

to live off of the enthusiasm of gamers and the niche markets they love.

During the course of the evening I wasn't so interested in goading Mr. Costikyan into fiery statements, though he let a few drop. I've read his polemics; in fact, I still contest he wrote far better gaming "journalism" than anyone who attended the Game Developers Conference, even though his presentation consisted largely of insults and ridicule designed to rally troops to his cause.

[However, I enjoyed his summation of the battle between creative types and management: "The industry is dominated by people who have no taste and don't appreciate talent." It would make an excellent MG t-shirt.]

The first question brings us back to that long tail. It's predicated on two assumptions – the first being that bandwith and server space will stay cheap or become less expensive. The second, in Mr. Costikyan's words, is "Not everything has to sell three hundred thousand copies." In other words, it's partially a search for "underserved niches."

Lots of genres long dead in traditional retail channels are still alive and kicking, especially interactive fiction and graphic adventures. Computer wargaming, for example, has it's own vast cottage industry, offering everything from large game downloads to online communities for devotees to share their passion. Most importantly - from a business standpoint - that passion does drive sales.

In regards to venture capital, Mr. Costikyan is blogging the results of their fundraising efforts on his site, which is an interesting step. But VC can be a tricky thing, namely that whole "balance between one's vision and

providing value to stakeholders and investors" thing. He said their initial hopes were for $1 million, to be followed by further fundraising down the road.

"A critical issue for niche markets is marketing, which is an issue of having adequate capital," he said. MG need venture capital, in part, to draw customers to the site, promote products, engage in careful public relations, create online and print advertising campaigns, cultivate relationships with the gaming press and anything else that attracts traffic.

Regarding the relationship between developers - a relationship which fits into his "Old Farts and Young Turks" dichotomy, which we'll get to in a moment – and MG, one major question is who you let into the club and who stands out in the cold.

When asked about a hypothetical developer bringing them a generic but well-made first person shooter – or something equally vanilla and obvious - approaching MG for distribution, he made a face like someone had pinched him, forced a smile, then shrugged.

"We'd rather err on the side of inclusiveness, rather than exclusiveness," he said. "If we think it can sell a few hundred copies, we'll give it a shot."

Fair enough. He obviously hopes to capture the attention of the public with offerings that embody creativity and passion over polish, which is a word that has a negative connotation in Mr. Costikyan's lexicon because it is often mentioned along with one of his favorite topics – the soaring cost of making video games for today's platforms.

"I'm willing to trust gamers to have enough sophistication to look past graphics and not expect lots of polish," he said. Mr. Costikyan paused a moment and

made that half-smile, half-grimace again, as if he were wryly laughing at his own folly. "They [developers] may not get rich, but I think they can make interesting products and a living. I may be dreaming here, but I'd like to believe it's possible."

Incidentally, for you aspiring developers out there, the revenue split is set to be 60/40 without any exclusive distribution rights to deal with. Mr. Costikyan said MG hopes to launch with over 100 titles.

Speaking of developers, the "Old Fart/Young Turk" axis is something that obviously gets his blood boiling, especially when Mr. Costikyan gets into what's happened to the OF contingent.

"Gaming is still a growth industry, but they're casting aside talents that still have enormous contributions to make," he said. "It's not like they're an anachronism, but they want to do something different, beyond graphics and technology."

He sees the OFYTs as being fundamentally similar; both want to do something different with the medium and neither want to spend their lives making new reiterations of old sports licenses.

I didn't ask him in so many words about the issue of creating a movement, but 'Manifesto Games' is a rallying cry. (Mr. Costikyan did mention he'd gotten some hate mail for picking a name and color scheme that was vaguely comsymp in tone, but I assure you, dear reader, that none of it came from my keyboard.) As he emphatically put it, Mr. Costikyan wants MG to succeed, but he's also interested in creating a cultural change, akin to the impact of a Miramax or Fine Line on the film industry; the creation of an alternative world of well-crafted art.

"If we succeed the games industry will get a place to experiment," he said, and when asked about competition from from the majors – i.e. EA jumping into the fray with their own vanity labels or indie games download sites – Mr. Costikyan smiled. "I will view that as high praise, and a clear indication we have succeeded," he said. "

He also spoke a bit about creating some sort of recommendation system and relying on customer feedback, news and reviews to create guidelines for shoppers. Obviously, the hope is that a community of devoted customers – acting as tastemakers in one sense - will come together and help push traffic and sales.

"It's hard for folks who want something different to

find what they want," he said. " There's good products out there and we have to figure out a way to expose people to them."

Another future goal is the funding of promising independent developers with the profits by MG, and leaving the VC money to fund the media blitz.

Around this point I ran out of real questions and started pulling nonsense out of my ass. Did you know he and Warren Spector both attended the same high school? (New York City's elite Horace Mann School, whose illustrious alums include Eliot Spitzer, William Carlos Williams and Roy Cohn) He talked about his daughters and their gaming habits, the future of the industry ("I don't see any major crash, and all signs are that the games industry will grow, just slowly…the industry faces a long-term problem if they don't have any sources of innovation.") and what he likes (Rag Doll Kung Fu) and doesn't like (Steam) about Valve's online distribution system.

He also mentioned a great idea for an E3 spread – rough concrete walls and floors, demo PCs held together by wood and nails, all underneath a banner reading "We apologize for our appearance: we value gaming over glitz."

We paused for a semi-uncomfortable silence near the end, staring at the dregs of cider and Guinness respectively, which was my cue to head home and catch up with the wife. Mr. Costikyan is a nice guy, at least in my dealings with him, but beyond that I hope he succeeds because independent channels only adds more options for developers and players. The last ten years of the recording industry should be enough to prove the obvious advantages to having "indie label" sensibilities backed by mainstream business structure.

One of the last things we touched on is my personal bugabear – the advent of "adult" games that aren't a synonym for porno. I like the phrase that popped up, "adolescent power fantasies," as a means of describing games which are supposed to be "adult" but really mean "scads of violence and the odd boob for good measure."

It's what an adolescent thinks of as "adult" – not games that expect intellectual participation or sophistication on the part of their users. Not everyone has to like everything, which he said a few times during the evening, but providing everyone with the ability to find something they like is a pretty damn decent goal.

The cab ride back was uneventful, gliding over the Brooklyn Bridge while rolling under the bright Watchtower neon that hangs above the Jehovah's Witness' headquarters. Heading south down Court St., I glanced at the local GameStop's window display, something I usually walk past without notice; King Kong and 50 Cent both glared at me, obviously pissed off about something. Movie properties, vanity projects for rappers and endless sequels are the most visible part of the spectacle of games. However, there exists a very broad and diverse market, and if Manifesto Games takes off, it can coexist within it's own spheres of influence, if not prosperity. [TGQ]

Man!festoGAMES

NO$GMB – Gateway PC

-Amandeep Jutla

I'm a little bit sad because someone has my games.

Anyone with a modicum of interest in videogames and access to the Internet will eventually discover emulation. I came across it when I was nine years old and stumbled onto some guy's Geocities site about Zelda. It was like every Geocities site about *Zelda* ever made all rolled into one - the color scheme nearly set off my vomit reflex, midi music played continuously in the background and obnoxious animated globes sat on every page. However, somewhere in the mass of yellow-on-green, the guy mentioned that *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening* for the Game Boy was a great game, and he would like to extend an invitation to download the ROM by clicking the spinning globe below.

I didn't know what a ROM was and had no idea what he was talking about, so I did a little research. A ROM is a perfect copy of a videogame, stripped from its cartridge and shunted to a computer, where a separate piece of software, an emulator, can play it. The whole thing seemed pretty novel to me, and I'd never played *Link's Awakening*, so a few moments later I obtained the NO$GMB emulator and a ROM file called "zelda.gb." I was in business.

These days, I like *Link's Awakening* for the way it exploits the fact that it is a Game Boy game in whacked and wonderful ways. It creates something surreal and almost uncomfortably weird from a tiny, washed-out, monochrome screen and a bleeping sound chip. The funny thing is, even though I first played the game emulated on a computer, these same qualities rose to the surface.

NO$GMB was a finicky, odd little program that ran in DOS mode, and its replication of *Link's Awakening* was inconsistent and a bit transient. Sometimes the music would suddenly change in pitch and garbage would show up on-screen, forcing me to stop playing and reload. Even though I played *Link's Awakening* in a way the designers never intended, it still had an aura of strangeness about it.

I came to almost treasure *Link's Awakening*. After arriving home from school or waking up at six a.m. on weekends to play, I would rush to the family computer, open the NO$GMB directory and play this low-res grayscale game expanded to stretch across my monitor. It transfixed me. I knew nothing about the particulars of emulation, such as using save states or pretty palettes or higher resolutions. I played *Link's Awakening* raw.

At this point, I did not even own a Game Boy, but quickly decided that would change. I asked my mother for one, but she said that they were way too expensive. "Besides," she said, "they're videogame devices and I don't want you to have too many of those. You'll rot your brain and ruin your childhood."

But my luck changed one day at school. During lunch I somehow struck up a conversation with a slightly-greasy kid who, it turned out, he had a Game Boy, a copy of *Tetris*, and a copy of *Kirby's Dreamland*, all of which he was willing to part with for an even sum of ten dollars.

My mother relented. "Ten dollars," she said. "Sure, fine." I took the money to school and gave it to the kid. I

found out that his Game Boy was both badly scuffed and missing a battery cover. The copy of *Tetris* had a torn label and was generally in terrible shape (though it did work), and even worse, the copy of *Kirby's Dreamland* didn't exist. Still, I took what I could get.

I later persuaded my mother to let me buy *Link's Awakening*, the "deluxe" version, from Best Buy. When I opened the box, my breathing slowed momentarily. Here it was, a physical copy of the game I had loved for so many months. But though my Game Boy played it well, and I was happy, I felt that something was missing. I was more accustomed to the emulated version than I was to the real deal. The Game Boy screen rendered the dream world of Koholint Island just a little too sharply. This *Link's Awakening* seemed too in-focus, too defined, too solid. It didn't help that my batteries kept falling out, and my screen was so scratched that I couldn't be entirely sure of what I was doing in-game.

My eleventh birthday came in late 1999. I got a Game Boy Color and inserted my copy of *Link's Awakening*. The deluxe version of the cartridge I owned detected that I was using the advanced GBC hardware, and so it treated me to a brashly-colorized version of the game that made many objects green, purple and red. In so doing, I thought it missed a rather large percentage of the whole point of the game. I wasn't too comfortable with that. At least I still had NO$GMB's rendering. It was there when I wanted *Link's Awakening*.

I used to see an irony there: my personal, definitive version of a game (that appeared so inextricably attached to the Game Boy) was a version that was divorced from that same machine. With time I came to understand that there was nothing particularly strange about this. Emulation tended to heighten the meaning of a game for me - it ripped games from their original context and placed them in an alien one. If they still worked there, and if I could see why, then that improved my perspective, and made the game that much stronger, in my mind. NO$GMB was a combined microscope, mirror and picture frame.

Back then my Internet connection was slow and unwieldy. The computer I used was in the living room and the only nearby telephone jack was in the kitchen. Connecting meant dragging a seven foot cable to that jack, plugging it in, and then taping it into place. The little piece of plastic meant to make the cord stay in position had

broken off a long time ago, so if someone walked past, the cable usually ended up getting jostled and I would have to reconnect. Even leaving the computer idle for over thirty minutes was itself grounds for my ISP to kick me off the network.

So I understood the Internet as a fragile thing that was not to be trifled with. I played *Link's Awakening* by itself for months on end. It didn't even occur to me to download more ROMs, because it was such a hassle and besides, I already had this game to deal with.

Slowly that one game gave way to more. As a kid who came of gaming age after *Super Mario 64*, I had never properly experienced the Game Boy thing. I wasn't even around for the NES era, the Genesis period, or the Super Nintendo age. I was curious about what I had missed and followed online murmurings about these systems. Clicking here, typing in a search term there and panicking at the accidental discovery of freaked-out porn in the other place; this all led to little Geocities sites, Angelfire pages, and places with addresses like EmuRomz.Cjb.Net.De. The accruement of more games came slowly. Many Super Nintendo ROM files, for instance, were greater than one megabyte in size and were not trivial downloads, given the circumstances of my connection. I had to carefully consider what I would download. I wanted to give every game a fair chance. Gradually, oh, so gradually, over years, I built up a limited collecti of games. I spent some mean- ingful time with all of them in their own special folder on my hard disk. I took care of them.
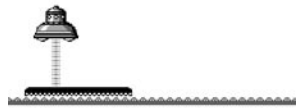
In return, they gave me moments that I think of fondly even now: playing *Super Mario Land* on a grey day and noting that the colors outside and the colors on my computer screen matched up perfectly; living the first few hours of *Earthbound* on one of those summer mornings where there is nothing to do for the rest of the day and nothing to worry about. Playing *F-Zero* on Christmas Eve - it was so right and so natural, somehow.

I first experienced *Super Mario Bros. 2* one spring afternoon, while I suffered from hay fever. The cave early on in the game's first level mesmerized me.

All of my ROM files had memories associated with them. Sometimes I copied them to floppy disks and

moved them to my father's new laptop[1]. Stretched out with it on my bed, I did the emulation thing. When I was done, I copied those same files right back to my main computer. I knew that this was an unnecessary action, but I wanted to do it anyway, to make sure that the ROMs understood that I was keeping track of where they were.

Much of the meaning the games had for me came not just from the emulated environment they were transplanted into, but from the circumstances around them as well. *Soul Blazer* can move me to tears when I revisit it now. It's not really that the game itself does anything interesting, or that I'm particularly a bedwetting, girly-man. It's more that it takes me back to a specific period in my life: the days of sixth grade and specifically, a certain December morning when I paused the game to go with my parents to the mall, something I rarely did. We drove through powdery white streets and outside it was clear and bright and shiny just like a Super NES game, honest.

When I came back and resumed my *Soul Blazer* game, it continued as though nothing had happened in the intervening time. When I play *Soul Blazer* now, I basically want the same thing to happen: I want to go back and be who I was then. I want to be in sixth grade. I don't want to have to worry about things. I want to sit in a car and have my parents drive me through snow. I can't do any of that, obviously, but the game gets me close. It's not just *Soul Blazer*, there are others. *Super Metroid* and *Final Fantasy V* may not be particularly great games, but once they meant something to me. I can't play them anymore without getting wracked by wave after wave of nostalgia; they wash over me until I can't breathe or think or feel. It gets so I have to stop playing the games, get back to the surface, gasp for air, and stare fondly at the little files on my hard drive. It makes me wistful.

I'm not even going to get into what *Link's Awakening*

1: That laptop was a Gateway laptop. This detail will be important later.

makes me feel.

All those ROMs were important to me. I'm not sure how other people sort out their lives. I guess they use other pop culture landmarks. Certain music gets them choked up, certain television programs are connected with other past events, films, books, perhaps old advertisements. I have gotten contemplative about those types of things myself, but the ROMs, the emulators. That's what it was all about. They were the reference point, and still are. They represented my past. Those old videogames that I never-owned-for-real had deep, ridiculous meaning. I wasn't one of those guys who went on Kazaa and downloaded game after game after game and burned them all on CD-Rs and never played or cared about half of them. I had a personal collection, and it had me. I liked it that way.

Just this year I started college and a moron lives next door. He is a guy who plays *Starcraft*, buys T-shirts from ThinkGeek.com, and solves Rubik's Cubes in his spare time. He is also the guy who stole my ROMs.

He's a big kid, heavy-set. He talks as though he has something in his mouth all the time, saying "dat" instead of "that" and "ey" instead of "hey." When I first met him, he was sorting out Magic: The Gathering trading cards. In an effort to be friendly, I told him I used to play the game on a casual basis. He got all excited and demanded we play a match. He gave me one of his decks, and I saw that it was in a hard plastic box that read "DECK BOX" on the front in a cheesy font. Every individual card was in its own protective sleeve. When I started to play, he asked me what the hell I was doing. Didn't I know that creature cards totally go in a separate row from enchantments? Perplexed, I told him it didn't matter. No one played the game that way except for tournament-attending freaks.

He was a tournament-attending freak, of course. I should have known better, because all the warning signs were there.

The guy had a bizarre pompousness about him. Every time he put down a new card, he would ask me if I "knew what it was." When one of his cards had trample, he asked me if I "know what that means." When the game ended and I beat him (I'm not sure how it happened; I wasn't paying attention, I just wanted to get away as fast as humanly possible), he demanded a rematch, and with a lurch of my stomach I realized the crushing truth. With

some people, feigning polite interest means being there all night.

He didn't let me go away until he had beaten me. Once he'd done that, he told me about the strategies he'd used with his special deck-type. He asked I knew what special deck-type it was, and when I expressed that I didn't know and didn't care, he decided to tell me. "It's a sliver deck", he said, "and there is a web site that breaks down how these work. I'll give you the link if you're interested." He said that word with four distinct syllables.

I escaped.

The next day I woke up early and started playing my old *Link's Awakening* ROM. I was still in the beginning of the game, not yet in the Tail Cave. I was in the village, listening to the thirty-second loop of town music repeat, and walking, in a circle, around and around the inexplicable rooster statue in the middle of town.

"Hey!" It's Guy Next Door.

"What game is that?" he asks.

I tell him.

"Ooh, *Zelda*," he says. "Yeah, *Zelda* is really awesome."

I've got no comment. "So is that like a Game Boy game or something? Are you playing on an emulator?"

I was.

"Dude, do you have, like, a lot of ROM games or something? Can you burn them onto a CD for me sometime? That would be really cool."

I tell him, later. I'm busy. Later.

(Never.)

Nearly every day, the guy next door would ask me if I wanted to play Magic again, or perhaps join him in a friendly game of Starcraft. Sometimes he would look over my shoulder at what I was doing on the computer and make some bizarre comment.

"When was the last time you defragged?" he said, once.

Me: "Defragged?" It was just an echo; I couldn't see why he was asking me about that.

"You know," he said, slowly, as though I were a moron. "Defragged. Defragmented. It's what you do when the files on your hard drive get all - "

"I know what it means," I said. Of course I did. Over time data on my hard disk becomes scattered and disorganized, so every once in a while I defragment that disk to tidy up. It's periodic housekeeping. It's not something to worry about and certainly not something to worry about for other people.

There was a second-long silence.

"Well?" he said. Again, that condescending tone of voice.

"I last defragmented my hard disk about a month ago," I said.

Another pause. Then a wince.

"Man," he said. "You should probably do it again. I mean, I defrag my own drive once a day."

How completely unnecessary! I thought, but said nothing.

"If you want," he said, pushing in and waving one of those little USB flash-memory sticks, "I have Diskeeper, I can install it for you and set it up so - "

"No," I said. "That's quite all right."

Pause.

"If you say so."

Pause.

"Hey, um, about those ROMs..."

"Later."

(Never.)

Over the ensuing weeks I came to dislike the guy next door who defragmented his hard disk once every day and played Magic, *Starcraft, Counter-Strike: Source*, and *Halo*. He got under my skin. People would approach him asking for computer help and he would rub his hands together with joy and then proceed to lecture them in a way so high-strung that I wanted to hit him very badly.

I told all of this to my mother once, in an anguished phone call home.

She asked, "Why do you let him bother you so

much?"

I guess she had a point. What, specifically, was bugging me about this guy?

Well, here's something else. On a Sunday evening three weeks ago, I was lying on a bean bag chair in my dorm room, wearing headphones and watching RETURN OF THE JEDI on my laptop. There was a legitimate reason for this: I had never seen any of the STAR WARS films beyond A NEW HOPE, and that was when I was eight. Thus, in the interest of making myself culturally-literate, I procured video-CD copies of all of the original trilogy that very weekend, and forced myself to sit through them. I say "forced" because the more I saw, the more I understood that STAR WARS mostly bores me. But that's something I'll get into later.

My roommate, a thoroughly irritating guy of slightly-less-than-average intellect, was soliciting computer help from the Guy Next Door. He was asking him rather than me, because he avoids speaking to me whenever possible, but that is another story.

Now he and Guy Next Door were discussing computers. My roommate's laptop, a hulking six-hundred-pound beast from Hewlett-Packard with essentially every feature it is possible for a computer to have crammed into it, was having Internet connectivity problems. But that was nothing to fear, as Guy Next Door fixed them. He hooked my roommate's machine back up to the network and told him that he obviously needed a firewall.

My roommate said, "What's a firewall?" and said it in exactly the quizzical way that Guy Next Door wanted.

"Gee, you don't know what a firewall is?" Guy Next Door said. "That's almost mandatory in this day and age. Worry not, for I shall explain it in a way that your small mind can comprehend. The best way I can put this - and this will be hard, and involve many simplifications, because you are not a privileged member of the Digerati Generation as am I, is-" He went on. My attention returned to STAR WARS.

Later, discussion moved from firewalls to the relative merits of particular models of computer.

"Yeah," my roommate said. "My dad bought my computer from HP's web site. I told him, 'Dad, I need a good computer,' and so he found, like, the best computer HP had, like, this thing was, um, you know, four thousand dollars or something. It's kind of big, though."

"Well, naturally," said Guy Next Door. "You get up to your more expensive computers, and they're going to have more features, and that will, of course, translate into higher price."

"Do you think HP was a good brand to go with, though?" my roommate asked, worried.

"Well, yes, it's fine," said Guy Next Door. "Personally, of course, I would have gone with Dell. Dell really understands how to make a fine computer. Mind you, my own laptop is a Toshiba. That means it's Japanese, you know."

My roommate stared blankly at him.

"You know. Japanese. The Japanese, their engineering is just one-hundred-percent perfect in every respect. And they build their computers out of gold dust."

He went on. "The worst brand to go with is definitely Gateway. They use inferior parts." My roommate laughed. "Oh, don't worry. I'd definitely never be dumb enough to buy a Gateway, hah!"

I glanced down from an onscreen Ewok to the GATEWAY logo positioned right above my laptop's keyboard, and then kind of stroked it, as if to provide it reassurance.

An hour later, about to leave, Guy Next Door walks around behind me and sees that I'm watching Mark Hamill swing a big rod at some guy in black.

"Dude Star Wars is awesome," he said - no pauses in his speech.

"Right," I said.

"Um, I was wondering, about those ROMs. Are you going to, um - "

"Later." I said.

(Never!)

* * *

A bit more recently, I found out that ENTER THE MATRIX is actually one of the Guy Next Door's favorite games of all time. It's just so cool. How can you not love it?

"It's by Atari too," he told my roommate. "You know, the same guys who did all those classic arcade games in the forties."

I wished Guy Next Door would have a little respect.

Atari didn't just do "classic arcade games," they did *Pong*. And that wasn't in the forties. And that Atari is not the same Atari as the one that *published*, not *developed*, *Enter The Matrix*. He lacked perspective; there was no other way of putting it. A fan of *Homeworld*, he said, of *Homeworld 2,* that he hasn't played it, but it is sure to be awesome because it's *Homeworld*, only 2. Which is one more than 1.

He walked in on me again. "Hey, um, when are you going to burn me those ROMs?"

"Later," I said.

(Never, ever.

Why? Why won't you do it? Why do you keep saying 'never?' Why does the boy bother you so much?

And what is my mother doing in my internal dialogues?)

* * *

It's two o'clock one morning, and I'm staring at my computer screen. Everyone around is asleep. I have my instant messenger client turned off. I have told myself that if I open my web browser, I will be very angry. I'm staring at an empty text file I mean to fill it up with words that explain something.

GUY NEXT DOOR = DARTH VADER

No.

GUY NEXT DOOR = A GUY WHO THINKS STAR WARS IS AWESOME

Better.

GUY NEXT DOOR ALSO = A GUY WHO TOTALLY THINKS THE JAPANESE ARE THE MASTER RACE.

I think those two propositions are related, but I don't take that thought any further because I'm getting tired. I want to sleep, but I have to relax myself first.

So I put on headphones and start *Super Mario Bros. 2*. I choose to play as the princess. I walk into the first cave I see, stay there for half an hour, and watch. And listen. And feel.

* * *

Star Wars is cold. I think that's it. A film like *The Empire Strikes Back* doesn't want me to feel it, it wants to hit me on the head with the weight of its melodrama. There's nothing smooth or effortless about the way it's put together. There is no flow. The movie cuts back and forth - Luke and Yoda; Han and Leia; Luke and Yoda again. The Millennium Falcon is rescued at the last minute from certain destruction by a whole pantheon of ridiculous deus ex machina. In the end, when Luke gets his hand chopped off, I kind of want to chortle. I don't think the movie really wants me to care about him. If it does, it doesn't show it.

Star Wars is an amalgamation of things that are cool, and also things that are awesome. You've got lightsabers, X-wings, Y-wings, TIE fighters, and Yoda's speech patterns. Those things were all that the *Star Wars* aficionados I knew in grade school talked about; those tiny elements that seemed to mean something to them. The "*Star Wars* universe," taken in its entirety, is an incoherent mishmash of disconnected bits and pieces of alien races and technologies that are only somewhat interesting by themselves and form a whole that is at best slightly-less-than the sum of its parts. The iconography of *Star Wars* - Luke's lightsaber, Han's jacket, Vader's mask, Leia's bikini - if any of it ties together somewhere, I don't see where. Despite this, people seem to love *Star Wars*. They love the minutiae and don't care about what collective meaning they might have.

It is for this reason that I get angry and frustrated when I read videogame reviews that rate separate categories of "graphics," "sound," "replay value," and "to buy or rent." That view is missing something.[2]

When I took Japanese in high school, there were plenty of people in my classes who were into Japan. Like the Guy Next Door, they bought only Japanese electronics because they were superior. They thought of Japanese videogames as the pinnacle of human cultural

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2: Am I implying that those reviews are mostly written by people who like *Star Wars?* Well, maybe I am.

achievement. I know that there are plenty of people out there like this - I parodied them months ago in another article for this very magazine. I implied that everything good about videogames came from Japan, and that Americans and Europeans obviously didn't get it. I got a handful of e-mails asking me what I was smoking because I was making such a silly generalization, but fewer than I had expected. Are people letting statements like that slide? Does the view seem that normal? Where does it come from? Those questions have been bothering me for a long time, because they're important and unanswered.

But the view comes from Japan.

There are all kinds of popular myths about Japan out there. Japan, the myths say, is a wonderful place - not only do videogames come from there, but so does manga - Japanese comic books. When I once walked into the Guy Next Door's room when he wasn't around and saw his bookshelf, it was full of that stuff. So were the bookshelves of countless people I knew from high school. Those people watched anime - animated Japanese cartoons - too, because it was so obviously high art. Even bad *anime* seemed better than anything westerners could have created. They had these ideas that every other girl in Japan is into videogames, chews bubblegum twenty-three hours a day, dyes her hair purple, and will instantly want to have sex with them if they fly there. Why else are comics like Megatokyo so popular? Japan is a magical world where the sexual fantasies - any fantasies - of lonely American teenage geeks are fulfilled. More than that, it is a place that has the answers to what is cool and awesome.

Now, I have never been to Japan. However, I am willing to bet a large sum of money that were I to go there, I would not observe this magic. I would not suddenly be able to pick up women. I would not suddenly have the meaning of life-and-anime revealed to me in a sunburst of J-pop. It's because Japan is, on the whole, normal. The people there are normal because they are people. The culture there is more manic than that of America, but it is not that strange.[3] And yet, Japan is viewed as exotic, external and removed.

If you're looking for meaning, you've got to start somewhere - so why not start with something way out there? I think that explains why people latch onto *Star Wars* - because it is outside of themselves, something separate. They genuinely feel that George Lucas (the pre-1999 George Lucas, at the very least), really did know best and that *Star Wars* is a sweeping story. *Star Wars* fans lose themselves in the details of the films' "universe," because they find it comforting. It gives them answers. It gives them safety and support.

Japan, from that view, is also a source for meaning. It's one of the big ones. Japanese people on the Internet know things Americans don't about all sorts of mysterious things. They think Japanese anime is superior to the American cartoon - so it must be true. An obsession with the weirdness of Japanese culture comes naturally to those who look for things they can get into. There are other places to get meaning. The Guy Next Door may get some of his answers from technology web sites - he will read the testimonials of random fifteen-year-olds who had great experiences with Dell's computers, and something in his mind is at rest; he now understands that Dell must be the finest brand in the world, because that guy said so. The Guy Next Door may get other answers from videogame review outlets, which tell him that *Enter The Matrix* is cool; he is allowed to like it because *The Matrix* was an awesome movie and not a pretentious pile of crud - critics agree! *Homeworld 2* will be bigger and better than *Homeworld 1*. It will have more parts and more things.

When *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace* was released, it disappointed many. I'm not sure why. I saw it, for the first time, a few days ago. It is largely the same as the original movies; it's a collection of those weird little ideas, halfway-interesting on their own. Pod racing, Lightsabers, again, this time with two blades, Jedis. It's all there. All the *Star Wars* pieces are in place.

People protested, though, because the lack of feelings behind the thing was so clear; because if the original *Star Wars* movies were "cold," *The Phantom*

3: The apparent national predilection for tentacle-porn notwithstanding. Incidentally, why is it that there seems to be some unwritten rule that every discussion of Japanese culture, ever, must include a sentence something like the preceding?

Menace was at absolute zero. There was a nagging notion that the film had no substance, that the world it created was tenuous and only existed as long as you were staring at the million-dollar special effects. Most people get distracted by feelings, and look at pieces, but that doesn't mean they don't intuitively understand that the feelings are there. *Super Mario All-Stars*, a compilation of the three original NES *Mario* games, "updated" for the 16-bit generation was released in the early nineties to much excitement. Yet, to this day, some people squirm uncomfortably in their seats when they play *All-Stars*.

"This doesn't feel right," they'll say. *All-Stars* doesn't feel right to me, either. I am young enough to have perhaps played it before the NES originals, but I didn't; I was familiar with them long before trying the remakes, thanks to emulation. The day I downloaded *All-Stars*, I tried to play *Super Mario Bros. 2* first. Wandering into a cave, I waited to feel something. No. Layers of gloss, like so many droid armies and gungans, obscured it. I didn't delete *Super Mario All-Stars* after that because I'm not a cruel man, but it doesn't get accessed nearly as often as something like *Link's Awakening*.

* * *

So - *Link's Awakening*.

Tal Tal Heights.

It's a place in the game. The foothills of a big mountain, in the north of Koholint Island. Its name is a groan-inducing pun, but in a good way. It is so absurd that it passes through absurdity and becomes poetic. The place feels evanescent, like it'll evaporate into the air. It's something about the staccato music that plays there; it is the sound of intrigue. There's also something about the way the perspective gradually dips as I walk towards the top of the mountain, where there is a giant spotted egg. It's a little weird that a big egg would be up there, but it fits. I can stand there, lean up against it,

and feel the wind. It cuts into me and makes me shiver.

"Hey."

It's the Guy Next Door. He is holding a USB flash drive. He is looking at me expectantly.

"What?" I say. I minimize my game. He can't see what I've been doing because he would never understand.

"Are you going to burn those - "

"Later," I said.

"Here, look, you can just put them on this flash drive."

He plugs it into my computer.

No. Get that away. Stop it.

I get a message near my system tray - Windows has detected the flash drive, it is getting it ready for use -

And I always feel awkward in situations like this. I never know quite what to say, what is being polite and what is being rude, what fits within acceptable social standards. I very much want to tell this guy to go away and to explain to him that there's no way I'm giving him my ROMs. Still, he's there, breathing on me, heavily, standing, waiting, pompously sneering at the Gateway logo on my computer, why won't he leave me alone?

"Look," I say, again. "I'll, uh. I'll burn this stuff for you later - "

"Come on, man," he said. "I'm right here. There's space on my flash drive, don't worry."

Yeah, it's a very-pricey one-gigabyte SanDisk Cruzer. I would expect no less.

I navigate to my ROMs directory.

"Umm," he says. "Let's take a look at Super Nintendo!"

I... I click on the Super Nintendo folder. A list of ROMs appears.

"Umm," he says. Again. That "um." It's offensive. It's a smarmy kind of "um."

"Yeah, I'll take *Link to the Past*," he said.

My hand is shaking. I

drag the file to the Cruzer. It copies.

"*Super Metroid?*"

"Oh, all the *Final Fantasy* games, of course."

"*Super Mario World!*"

"What's *Soulblazer?* Is it any good?"

"Nothing you'd be interested in, probably," I say. *Soulblazer* is - it's sixth grade.

"Oh, give it to me anyway!"

My hand is shaking harder.

"Something wrong, man?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "You're - "

He's looking at me.

"You can't take my ROMs," I said.

He laughed. "Ha, ha! Good one! You have a Game Boy emulator, right?"

Dear god no dear god no dear god no dear god no dear god no.

He ended up with copies of some of my Super Nintendo, NES and Game Boy stuff. He didn't get everything. He wasn't interested in Sega, for instance. But.

He copied *Link's Awakening*. He... he *took Link's Awakening.*

Let me say that again:

He *took* Link's Awakening.

That fucker took *Link's Awakening.*

* * *

I left the dorm room and went to a nearby park. It was about fifty degrees outside; blustery. Trees swayed gently. Fallen leaves swirled on the grass. I sat on a bench. Yes, I cried, okay?

Later I explained all of this to my mother, because hey, that's what mothers are for.

"But you still have your games," she said.

I said that wasn't the point. I still have my games, but he has perfect 1:1 copies of them, and the games he has are the games that have followed me since I was nine years old. He has perfect 1:1 copies of the games I have looked at, felt, wallowed in, examined, and thought fondly of. He has perfect 1:1 copies of my past, of my memories,

of my things. They will never be only mine again. They have been tainted. This guy has them.

"You could have stopped him," she said.

I could have. Why didn't I? Maybe I'm too passive. Maybe I didn't want to come off as a jerk. Maybe I'm...

"You're just too sensitive," she said. "You shouldn't let yourself get attached to silly things like that."

* * *

The guy lives next door, and that means there is only a bathroom between the room where he lives and the room where I live.

When I walk into the bathroom, sometimes, and his door is closed, I can still hear him blasting things. Sometimes it's music - he likes Green Day a whole lot. Sometimes it's games. Sometimes it's my games. He gives a running commentary of them.

I once heard the strains of the *Link's Awakening* overworld theme - that wonderful piece of music that begins sounding like the traditional *Zelda* theme, but diverges from it and forms a loopy, bizarre melody all of its -

"HEY WHAT THE HELL SO WHERE AM I SUPPOSED TO GO NOW THAT DUNGEON WHERE IS IT"

I wince. I fight back something. Emotions. I want to run in and tell him, stop, stop, stop doing this to me. Stop playing my games that way.

Sometimes it'll be *Super Metroid* - the Brinstar theme erupting from his speakers at a quadrillion decibels, and the sound of him hammering his keyboard, smashing its buttons, and yelling things like "YES! ENERGY POWERUP!" This is *Super Metroid*. It's eerie and kind of subdued. Have some respect. Please?

Please.

It tears me apart. This guy is defiling a part of me. It's as though someone went into my brain and selectively made photocopies of portions of it. As though someone went through my collection of books and reproduced them all; as though someone raided my hard drive and lifted my whole collection of music, and paid none of it any respect. Like someone has listened to something and laughed at how stupid it was; read a book, screamed at it, dog-eared a page, ran a black marker across it, hey, it's fun, let's rip another page out.

***

My ROMs are sacred. Don't mess with my ROMs.

Don't tear them apart. Don't pick them into pieces. Don't you think they're above that, Guy Next Door? Don't you think for a moment that someone might play videogames for a reason other than to kill time? Don't you think for a moment that they might mean something to you if you let them? That you don't just shove your way through them all in the name of having a good time, leaving a path of destruction and disrespect in your wake?

I get this same kind of feeling when I walk into game stores and listen to people talk. I listen to them talk about how such-and-such game is "sweet," such-and-such other game "sucked, but the graphics were badass," how this was great and that was not great and did you read what EGM said about this other thing?

When my mother told me not to get attached to my games, I think she meant that I should put a distance between them and me.

But I think the fact that I don't put a distance between me and "my silly little things" is exactly what separates me from the Guys Next Door of the world, from the STAR WARS fans and Japanophiles out there. All of them direct their energy outward. They don't want to understand things - they want things to be understood for them. They look to see what the Japanese thought of a game before they decide how good it was. They trust that the Japanese build the best computers. Instead of buying their laptops as I did, for aesthetic or personal reasons - this Gateway machine I use now seemed to speak to me at the store where I bought it, it endeared itself to me somehow and echoed a much-older laptop of my childhood on which I used to play ROMs - they look for breakdowns. They look to see whether the service and support meet their needs and lets them "build" the right "rigs" for "gaming."

They don't try to understand things. They just want to use them. They believe that things that are there for them to play with, and so they place a barrier, a distance, between them and those things. Videogames are just videogames. They're time sinks. LINK'S AWAKENING sucks because it's in black-and-white. The color "deluxe" remake is better. SUPER MARIO ALL-STARS has the superior versions of the old NES games. HOMEWORLD 2 will always rock harder than HOMEWORLD 1.

My understanding of videogames, my understanding of the world, comes from a different place. I use myself - my self - as a filter and emulator to play my games. I see them through me. They reflect me, and I, in turn, reflect them. Together, we create something small, and gorgeous, and fragile that is partly stored on a hard drive and partly within my head. This interaction, the dialogue between us - that conversation is a beautiful thing that I love and want to keep forever.

The understanding is subjective. It's very personal. It's not something I like to see disturbed. I get kind of upset, kind of emotional when that happens, and I can't help it.

I wish people would slow down a little and take some time to examine the things around them. I wish they would try to understand where they are coming from, spend a bit of time with them, get to be on friendly terms. Find something with weight and meaning. Otherwise, rushing around, headless, haphazard, bang-bang-bang, shooting through game after game, obsessing over lightsabers one minute and AT-ATs the next - that comes down to nothing.

There's no whole. There's no coherency. There are cool things, there are awesome things, and then there are the other things that no one bothers with. Is that really what we want to say the world boils down to? To nothing? To trifles?

That's a little bit sad.

DOUBTING HEROES

GOD OF WAR - PS2

-Heather Campbell

Telling the story of a hero is a difficult charge. When one experiences the heroic narrative, there are ethereal elements that immediately rise up and grab our consciousnesses regardless of their author. Within the account of heroes, we cannot help but find elements of ourselves – our weaknesses and our strengths, our limits and our aspirations. As Joseph Campbell has described, the Hero's Journey is the Universal tale of a human being, who is called forth from the everyday world, and despite his initial misgivings, overcomes his limitations – or is ruined by them.

The story of the hero is powerful because of how we identify with him, how we can transform into him through the narrative. We set ourselves onto his shoulders, encourage him, fear for him, and ascend with him because He is Us. Before he began he wasn't sure of success. We can be heroes, because heroes have doubts.

***

I lived in Amsterdam for two-and-a-half years. I was told by friends when I moved there that it was an expensive waste of time to ship my consoles overseas; it's easier to just grab the games locally. Did I really want to pay import tax on Amazon.com overnight packages when I could just bike over to the nearest Free Record Shop and pick up my games the day they were released? It seemed like an obvious choice, but I had my doubts. Would the

games be more expensive in Europe? Would I build up a collection in Holland, just to miserably abandon it when I returned to the states? Would the games be in English? My worries were misplaced. It didn't matter if they were in English, or if they were even more expensive than American games. It was irrelevant. I wasn't reading game text or spending extra game money because games don't come out in Europe. Forget about whether you can get *LUMINES* or *NINTENDOGS*. In Amsterdam, they're not even playing Super Nintendo yet. Dutch people are moving hand-carved wooden Marios around in the mud. So when I returned to the states, I had a lot of work to do. Standing in the aisle at Best Buy in Hollywood, I was simply overwhelmed. I had to catch up on theBest of 2003-2005. (And the quirky failures, too).

To my disappointment, most of the games were un-available; the international hype had already worn off, or they'd simply sold out long ago. Games like *SILENT HILL: THE ROOM* were hard to come by; *KATAMARI DAMACY* was shoved into some under-shelf purgatory. What's worse, there was such a long list that I couldn't even remember some of the names. What was it that I had been excited about a year ago?But there was one game that Best Buy *DID* have. *GOD OF WAR*.

This was a game I remembered reading about, but as I stood in the sunflower glow of the Best of Buys, holding David Jaffe's masterpiece in my hands, I had an epiphany. *GOD OF WAR* got 100s from everyone except *EDGE*. Kratos was the new Dante; he was the King of Persia. So where was the post-launch legacy?

The aisle I stood in was silent, but I was up –to –my

sleeves in the Intended Demographic. When I picked up
RESIDENT EVIL 4, someone stuttered, "T-that g-game is
sweet." Reviewing the back of San Andreas garnered me
The Nod. Someone had even smiled softly when I finally
found KATAMARI, small and hidden behind the stack of
Fantastic Four PS2 Controllers.

But still, here I was, a girl clutching God of War, and
no one even cared. How could this be? What had hap-
pened to all the Hype?
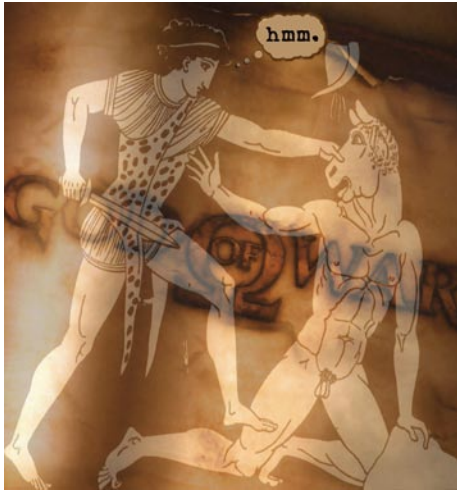
My initial response to God of War was astonishment.
The game was, as reviewers had foretold, a gleefully
grotesque accomplishment. Violence was painted into
the gameplay in weighty, unembarrassed strokes; playing
as Kratos was a slaughterhouse ballet. What's more, the
controls were tight and fluid, and the backgrounds were
rendered with activity. This game felt like money. Blood
money.

But when I was finished with the story of Kratos, I
wasn't shaken. In fact, I was left hollow and wanting. GOD
OF WAR didn't satisfy me, despite the length gone to bathe
me in carnage and glory. Even after unlocking all of the
additional material and suffering through less forgiving
difficulty settings, I was still cold.

GOD OF WAR isn't just a Video Game, in the classic
sense of the word. It's also a story. It's not so much a
puzzle as an interactive narrative. Games have evolved
into theater-on-rails, and there are times when an author
steps in to explain What Is Happening, through voiceover,

cut scene or text dump. Games have gained a question-
able, passive depth.

This wasn't always the case. Mario has no back-
story. His experience is our experience; when he jumps
over a turtle, we are dictating his story through our input,
directly controlling his character and narrative. If you
wanted Mario to be a depressive, suicidal maniac, you
can run into the first Goomba over and over again, until
the game ends. It wouldn't go against the Story of Mario
– instead, the ageless adventure would be the parable
of wasted potential. Mario didn't dictate who he was,
beyond his iconic design..

But if Mario suddenly spoke about his ideas, or the
situations he was facing, we could only hope that he
would be easy to relate to; that he would have a mythic,
universal, human heroism. If Mario told you he was cou-
rageous, or if he spoke of his great need to kill Goombas,
then his suicides would be absurd, or simply boring.
Thankfully Mario stays silent in his platform games, save
for a few whoopees when he jumps more than once or
falls a great distance. Whether it be Link, or The Prince, or
the hero of GTA 3, we can become these giants because of
what they do not say.

Kratos, on the other hand, talks all the time. And he's
talked to. Gods grant his desires, and he roars boastfully
about his actions and abilities. He yells at his enemies in
easily digested English, and an English narrator tells us
what he's thinking. God of War tells us who Kratos is, and
we have no choice but to agree. We watch Kratos behave,
and we interact only with the action-filled intermissions.
Which is not necessarily a bad thing, if we can relate to
Kratos. If we can believe we are him, then his actions can
still be our own.

Unfortunately, Kratos doesn't let us in. He has no
doubts, no moment of refusal. He has regrets, true. He
is ashamed of his past but never of his potential. Kratos
is unafraid of what he has to do to accomplish his goals.
When Athena calls him to adventure, Kratos doesn't flinch,
despite his history with the Gods, and their effortless
betrayals of men. Kratos is confidence and invulnerable.
As a result, we are simply witnesses to his acts, as op-
posed to the soul of his actions. There is no transposition
of ourselves onto the archetype in front of us, because he
is missing that most important heroic quality - doubt.

And sure, there are heroes who do not doubt.

Hercules, a classic hero, does not blanch in the face of adversity. James Bond doesn't consider his actions before he behaves. The Terminator does not balk at the idea of destroying John Connor, nor of saving him. But these heroes are outmoded, antiquated. They are heroes we watch, but do not become.

Today's heroes are obsessed with doubt. Cinema's Spiderman is trapped in the doubt cycle, and his endless fears allow him to become more human than most. His doubts make him infinitely identifiable, propelling his stories into international box-office success. Peter Parker's doubt is Frodo's doubt is Anakin Skywalker's whining, poorly acted doubt. These are our archetypes, our universal heroes. You don't need to believe they exist to identify with them; they are our modern legends.

So how can we possibly be expected to relate to Kratos? He is fearless, unlike us in every way. No matter how graceful his moves, regardless of the polish of his design, despite every calculated effort to make his journey enjoyable, he remains remote and unbelievable.

This is why the aisle in Best Buy had been so silent. People are ready to rush to the defense of their heroes, but will always remain still in the shadows of mere stories. I returned to game department to pick up a copy of *We ❤ Katamari*. At the checkout, someone smiled, and said, "That is a great game." 🎲

THE MIGHTY SWORD AGAINST THE BACTERIANS
THE STORY OF GRADIUS, THE ALMIGHTY

A retrospective on the legend of planet Gradius, the Bacterian, and the last 20 years or so of Options around the screen.

-Francesco-Alessio Ursini

THE NEMESIS HAS RISEN — UNSHEATH YOUR SWORD AND FIGHT

Talking about Gradius is at the same time an honor and a burden. I can't think of a series with a wider base in the niche genre of shmups. Well, maybe R-Type with all those H.R. Giger-rip-off Bydo thingies. It's funny, the two most recognized series in this damn genre are horizontal (hori), don't sport a contorted scoring system, and hail from the '80s. It seems like their fame comes from their strong nostalgia factor.

But let's talk about Gradius. Unless you literally lived on Mars, hidden behind an obscure and forgotten Mars rock, you **MUST** have played *GRADIUS*. It's the official Famicom shmup in this regard, and every single human being with an NES had **AT LEAST** one copy of the game. True, I never had an NES (!) nor a copy of *GRADIUS* (!!), but at least I had the decency to play it in the arcade.

You remember me, my uncle's arcade, my long and lost memories of the past. And there was this game, *NEMESIS* — I mean *GRADIUS* (at least I remember playing the version called *NEMESIS*, which was released in Europe) — which was one of those games that took you violently and glued you to the screen, unless you hated the genre. And I didn't. Do you remember? The Options, the cool backgrounds, the tricky power-up system, the

vocal samples, the . . . ancient statues from Easter Island called, um, Moai? And, wait a second, are these giant brains? Volcanoes erupting above my head and below my ass? What the hell?

Yes, Gradius, and its cheese.
It was the '80s, and Gradius was a part of that cheesiness. Not because of its gameplay, which was a few light-years ahead of everything. Except for the charge shot (which is courtesy of our other milestone series, R-Type), everything in shmups, at least in its basic form, comes from Gradius. Power-ups? Gradius. Ground weapons? Gradius. Multi-tapping with the weapon or auto-fire? Gradius. Rank? Gradius.

But this is one of those cases where gameplay isn't the only and most important factor behind a game. If you remember me, you may think that I've gone crazy. No rant about the heights of gameplay technique behind a game? No dissing of anything which doesn't have hardcore gameplay for billion-point scores? No. Because Gradius is, in some sense, pure science fiction made game.

Let's start from the last chapter, *GRADIUS V*. The boys at Treasure received a call from Konami and were asked to develop a sequel to *GRADIUS*. It is, to say the least, ironic. Treasure was formed by a group of Konami employees that didn't want to succumb to sequelitis. After a few years, Treasure (or Konami, officially) gave us *GRADIUS V*.

GRADIUS IV had been a bit of a disappointement. I only played it a few times, ages ago, while I was lost in the mists of stupidity. It was about the same time as *G.DARIUS*, actually. All I thought about *GRADIUS IV* was, "Ah, bah, *GRADIUS* in 3-D, but without any new things. And

Moai are so cheesy now, damnit!" Iuchi Hiroshi must have thought this as well. "Moai? What are they supposed to represent? No, let's stop with this bullshit, and let's make Gradius what it is supposed to be . . . pure, undiluted science fiction."

And in the first stage of GRADIUS V, I hear a few notes from Hitoshi Sakimoto, and the Vic Viper launches up in the sky, and the planet Gradius slowly appears in the background, in its absolute grandeur, much like the Mars of BORDER DOWN. The entire cosmos stretches before my eyes, and suddenly I remember what Gradius is. Suddenly I'm somewhere else, where the old charts of the stars originate. The lasers of my Vic Viper sweep across the vast infiniteness of Space, with a capital S. And suddenly an old friend (and foe) appears. Do you remember? The first GRADIUS boss. The ship that appears at end of the first stage, and all other stages as well, except the last one. You know it. Everyone knows it. It's part of our collective gaming consciousness, no?

¹Gradius is about the epic fight. The almighty spaceship Vic Viper against the evil fiends of Bacteria. The powerful Gladius of Justice in the face of cruel, greedy creatures.

Back to 1985. Do you remember the simple yet incredibly catchy theme of GRADIUS? I do. I can't think of a song that has a deeper, more moving effect in me, evoking the vast, infinite fields of Beyond. Maybe this is

what I always liked about GRADIUS, the feeling of otherness and infinite freedom that comes from this fundamental melody. GRADIUS was about that catchy theme, "The Beginning of Our Story," followed by the hypnotic beauty of stage one's theme. It was also about sweeping the screen with Options, and the kid that I was, long time ago. It was about learning how to use the weapons at my disposal, in an elegant way. (I would learn even more with the Giant Fishes' saga, but that's another story.²)

GRADIUS was my first hori love, a love of space and big mysteries. But my heart has a weak spot for the other side of the coin — the bug-eyed monsters from the dark nebula. On one side, science fiction is all about otherness of place, the distant stars and mysterious worlds. On the other side, there is otherness of person: bizarre Giger-esque creatures. After roughly one year, Konami decided that the other side deserved a game as well. Hence, SALAMANDER (or LIFE FORCE).

I have more love for this simpler spin-off than for the main series. I can't tell you why — wait, I can. The gameplay is faster, and less complicated. You can grab a power-up or weapon without wasting time with those pesky yellow capsules, then blast the evil ~~Bydo emperor~~ . . . er, blast the suckers from the dark nebula, which also look a lot like H.R. Giger designed them. Yes, I had a sort of fascination with Giger's monsters; I still do, to some extent. So, SALAMANDER and its dark style, filled with lucid organic nightmares and a brilliant soundtrack, attracted me more than GRADIUS. It's not surprising that I also loved DARIUS to death that year. There is something about the mix of life and technology that always screams, "This is sci-fi, my friend!"

I think the story of SALAMANDER might have been a fight against the monsters of Acheron. And . . . some Moai? Hell, I can't remember; Konami had some bizarre ideas. (Let's not even mention CONTRA.) But I do remember those clear, cold days of winter, the power of the "Anger" theme, and my love for SALAMANDER's fast-paced gameplay. And now, it is again cold, and the sky holds a sad moon shining, but it is "Universe" from

² "The Creation of a New Style, Giant Fish and the Fight for Survival" in TGQ #2.

Gradius V that accompanies me in this solitary flashback to space, distant stars, and a lone battle to avert the Bacterians' domination. And the stars, my destination, are, as they were twenty years ago, the main drive behind my love for *Gradius*.

This love was renewed with *Vulcan Venture*, or *Gradius II: Gofer no Yabou*. Think of it: remember the first stage, the Vic Viper floating across stars between giant fire dragons, and the immense, superb, epic theme of the first stage, "Burning Heat." This time the plot was about tearing down the ambitions of Gofer, some evil mastermind plotting to control the universe, or something like that. It was nothing more than a stray comment from the magazine ads of the time, but still, in my child's mind, it was the perfect plot for a lone ship against a whole armada of bizarre creatures . . . and Moai. *Gofer No Yabou*, if you were there and if you were of the Gradius arcade brotherhood, was a pure blast. One of those cases were you really could say, "Bigger, better, faster!" (or whatever you say to sound mass-appealing). I think that when I saw this game for the first time, I had to buy a new jaw.

You start playing, and after a few seconds, "Burning Heat" and its greatness surrounds you, with giant flame dragons floating around the screen. Then there are Moai armies, an immense phoenix, *Alien* rip-offs, the massive (#$%&!) ice-cube stage, volcanos, a boss rush, the high-speed-scrolling zone . . . and the walker. I mean, if it's Gradius, you need a walker. It's like a marble without its track, or a fisher without his best bait[3]: Gradius is a walker and then a cheap boss which is a colossal immobile head, damnit!

I remember, as a kid, I sweated, cursed and endured bittersweet progress while playing this game with its fussy ranking system, its superb Moai stage, its various cheap shots, and the majestic walker. I remember the seasons passing, in my humble progresses on the game; and cold winter became warm spring. And when it was about to be hot summer, Gofer was no more.

In the battle for Gradius' survival, I was the winner! Hooray for the Gradius brotherhood!

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[3] This is a rather silly reference to a quite non-sensical Italian song., in case you wonder.

Then came *Gradius III*. Ok, we're still speaking of the '80s. Remember the bad haircuts, the crappy dresses, the random lame things. *Gradius II* was ace, this is unquestionable. *Gradius III*, however, was just more of the same. Yes, I said it, and I think that you must be warped if you don't agree.

Gradius III is recycle-land. That is not the worst problem, but let's proceed with some order. We've said that *Gofer no Yabou* is a bigger, faster, nicer, better, whatever *Gradius*. That's what everyone expects from sequels. But *Gradius III* overdoes it. Too much of everything is not good. In fact, it's bad. *Gradius III* is too long, but the gameplay? That's where the true problem lies. I mean, Gradius is about tight corridors, smart tricks to use Options, all that stuff. Picture this done to excess from stage two on. I think that the Konami programmers wanted to pull off something hardcore for no other reason than to prove they could. If you go around the almighty Interweb, most will agree. Remember the times, rummaging across porn sites, when you found comments like "OMG *Gradius III* is insanely hard?!?!"? Ok, maybe not on porn sites, but the point is still the same: *Gradius III* is exorbitant in its zeal and length. I agree that epic fights are cool, but there's a balance to meet.

And the bubble stage is insane. There, I said it. Generations of frustrated gamers shaking their fists at the screen are now feeling relieved by this clear, obvious, but nevertheless necessary epiphany. Ladies and gentlemen, let's say it together:

"I CAN'T FUCKING STAND THE BUBBLE STAGE."

End of the article. A new sense of collective awareness spreads over the universe. Multiversal peace becomes the norm for the next 20 aeons.

But seriously, *Gradius III* was the beginning of the end. I gave up somewhere around stage eight. The insane difficulty was too much, and eternal love is difficult when our lovers demand too much of us, no?

And honestly, someone else was courting me. The summer of 1990 provided a new paramour for the broken-hearted *Gradius III* players. Put together a penguin, an octopus, a Twin Bee ship, and a Vic Viper. An odd *ménage à quatre*, no? And then let's say that they have to fight giant ballerinas, killer clowns, pirate-ship cats, and titanic sumo-wrestling pigs.

Everyone, including me, raised an eyebrow at this back in 1990. The first time I saw *Parodius* I was like, " . . . Uhhh?" Not because I had never been exposed to Japanese nonsensical humour, but because it was the first time that I saw it in a shmup, and a rather brilliant one. I must confess: gone from my heart was the passion for glorious space opera and epic fights, replaced by sunny landscapes, odd creatures, and random penguins. Time passed, and my most of my fun came from *Parodius* and other games, not Gradius. There was still a place of my heart reserved to Gradius, but the years passed. Soon, it was 1994. Another Parodius arrived, but no sign of *Gradius IV*. And, after a while, I stopped thinking about my first love. After all, a similar inamorata, with a better sense of humor, was right beside me.

And then, as you may remember, the '90s passed. I wasn't there when *Gradius Gaiden* appeared. I knew about it, but, well, it was before importing was easy, and it was on the PlayStation. I've never been a console person, and I wasn't thrilled with the idea of a console-only Gradius. My love, in spite of this glorious reappearance, had finally faded from my heart.

I wasn't there when *Salamander 2* appeared. I like the game, same with *Sexy Parodius* — but well, they came out for *consoles*. And when Gradius, the almighty sword against the Bacterians, was resurrected in the arcades in 1999, where was I? Away from the arcades, fighting other kinds of battles and busy with other passions, like Darius.

Gradius IV: Fukkatsu caught my eye three years after its release one afternoon of 2002, in an anonymous arcade. I don't even remember what I thought at the beginning — something along the lines of "Oh, what's this, a too-late rehash of *Gradius*?" I played a few credits

and wasn't impressed. It was like meeting an old love after years and wondering why I fell in love with her in the first place. I remember something, sure, but why I did love you? So, I thought, this is the end of an epic love, between me, the stars, and the Vic Viper. Ah, well, all good things must come to an end, no?

Little did I know, though, that Konami had decided to make *Gradius V*. They had also decided to hire their ex-employees, as I told you. "Hi guys, do you remember *Gradius*? Can you do us a sequel?" Nothing short of an epic challenge for the ones who left from the company because they didn't want to make endless sequels. I can picture Iuchi Hiroshi meditating upon Gradius.

"What is Gradius?"

Gradius is Space. Maybe not the last frontier, but close enough. It's something epic and primeval. I wouldn't say evil vs. good; that's not my cup of tea. But still, it's something that has to do with the pure, mythopoeic idea of a cosmic fight against prodigious, alien wonders. And again, "Universe" captures me and brings up in the sky, in the vast, cold cosmos of the winter skies, on the powerful engines of the Vic Viper. I turn back and realize: Konami has stopped making arcade shmups. This is the first Gradius after *Fukkatsu*, produced in 1999. The last Parodius? 1996. *Salamander 2*, which was no more than a 10th anniversary title, was 1996 as well. Vertical titles? *Twin Bee Yahhoo* (sic!), 1995. The glorious times of Konami arcade sequels, sadly, are over.

And then I think back to the first *Gradius*. I recall its first theme, "The Beginning of Our Story."

"What is Gradius?"

Gradius is space opera, in the most untamed form. Remember *Star Trek*? Imagine Spock, with his

impeccable and logical tone, devoid of any emotion whatsoever, telling Kirk, "Captain, it is logical to launch the Vic Viper against the Bacterians." Scotty says "Och, cap'n, the engine is still not ready for the battle, and the Options aren't at full power!" Bones gets angry, "Jim, what are you waiting for?! This is the most fundamental battle for us; the Moai are close to Earth!"

The amount of cheese was more or less the same, if you compare the old STAR TREK series and the old Gradii. Remember the first GRADIUS: the idea was simple, no? And it's the same cheese that can be found in GRADIUS V. No, wait a second:

The first thing that really hits me is the lack of any cheese. It's the same game, but after 20 years it has grown up. Gone are the Moai, the oddities, the bizarre creatures (well, except for stage four), and the oh-so-cheesy '50s and '60s sci-fi. It's different, this time. It's a game of the 3rd millennium (something that I always wanted to say in an article).

No more cheese, just sci-fi, a fierce battle against a cruel enemies, the stars and planet Gradius shining in the dark, vast infinities surrounding us. My long-forgotten love has become much more appealing with maturity, like a fine red wine I'd banished to the cellar. I'm finally appreciating something fundamental, unchanged beneath cosmetics.

Maybe the next Gradius will have Moai or dancing ballerinas or whatever. Maybe it will finally reveal to us why there were Moai in the first place, and some epic battle will again unfold. Maybe it will have a more sophisticated scoring system.

Or maybe there's something really timeless about Gradius. And maybe GRADIUS V is, again, the beginning of our story. 🝚
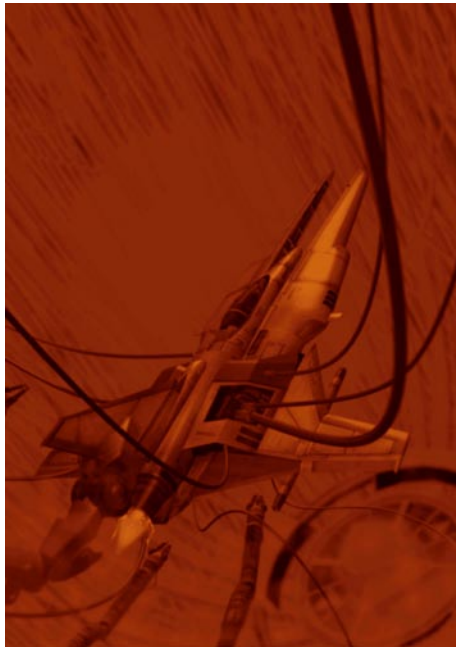
ARCADIA OF MY YOUTH

On Japanese Role-Playing Games and Life

-Sergei Servianov

The World On the Tip of a Radiant Sunrise

I often wonder what kind of person I would be if the nerdy, effusive Stas hadn't handed me the American version of *Final Fantasy VI* at the beginning of 1995. His arms trembled as he let go of the cartridge, with the words: "Only you have enough English and cultivation to properly understand this masterwork."

He gave me too much credit; at the age of twelve I was neither cultivated nor very intelligent. The only basis for his faith was that I was the finest student of English at our Moscow suburb school, which wasn't saying much, and that we had both been enamored to an insane degree with *Final Fantasy IV*.

We had played that game everyday after school, from three o'clock to twelve, for three months, discussing the plot every free moment and often wondering about what the characters did after the ending. It was a fun, hopeful time for both of us. *Final Fantasy* promised us future adventures that would be as wonderful as the one it presented and many more days of careless daydreaming. My schoolwork suffered, though, and my parents punished me by not letting me see any of my friends for six months. Stas ended up going through *Final Fantasy VI* alone.

I could tell that the experience of playing it had deeply unsettled him. At school he would act sullen and withdrawn, only hinting at the things that transpired within the game. I was deeply curious.

Two months before my parents lifted my isolation; an uncle came back from a business trip with a Super NES. It was his gift for all the birthdays he had neglected.

I didn't have any games to play. When I asked Stas to loan me a few, he came back the next day with *FFVI* and said: "This is the only reason you'll ever need to own an SNES. Take your time with it, it deserves it." I took his words with a hint of caution and shovelful of excitement. I brought it home, ignored lunch and began playing. I went to school the next day without sleep; it was the first time I had stayed up all night because of a videogame.

More than any other game, *Final Fantasy VI* has defined the path my life has taken. Perhaps if I hadn't played it at that age I wouldn't be a chain-smoking, introspective, gloomy, bitterly radical dreamer that lives with his parents. Perhaps I wouldn't be nursing dreams of indefinable glory and adventure; dreams that have yet to leave me. Perhaps I wouldn't still be playing videogames.

It's silly to waste time speculating about what might've been. I can't change who I am no more than *Final Fantasy VI* can change what it represents to the millions that played it upon its release: a shimmering banner lifted up above the mundane world by the pimply, nerdy masses that revere it. Like the people who worship it, *Final Fantasy VI* is at times painfully immature, and at other times woefully misguided, yet contains at its core a quest of pure, laser-guided magnificence. Above any other game, it remains and will always be the RPG player's gospel.

The reason that *FF VI* occupies this position has little to do with its merits as a lasting work of art, which there are many, and lots to do with timing. Yoshinori Kitase is a shrewd man, I gather, because he knew unleashing *FF VI*

on the Nintendo generation would make it legendary. His intuition told him he was making a game for its time and place.

This is a generation that I can honestly claim as my own. My first platform was a NES brought by my father from the United States. He brought it as a curiosity to amuse his stupid son. This stupid son would regard it as much more than a curiosity, and proceeded to fill his life with tragic 8-bit cinemas courtesy of *Ninja Gaiden* and its sequel, tunes from *Journey to Silius* that he would hum for years afterwards, and nights of frustrated controller gripping caused by *Castlevania III*. This would not make his father particularly happy, who wanted to see his son outside, playing with dogs and other children.

My father was not very pleased when I received a SNES. I, on the other hand, was ecstatic.

Like so many others, I played *Final Fantasy VI* at the age of twelve. It was the perfect game for a boy of twelve, because it seemed to crystallize and focus everything that a twelve-year-old mind revolves around. I can think of no other explanation for why I thought of nothing but it's story and music for an entire year.

At that age, though, I wasn't thinking of why I thought about *FF VI* so much. I did so, because to *not* think of *Final Fantasy VI* would be difficult. Every leap the storyline took, every synthesized beat, was replayed and recycled in my head because I willed it. One of the more beautiful things about childhood is that one never feels the need to justify what one does. One acts merely because it seems natural.

FF VI had everything our growing bodies desired. An epic quest filled with epic characters that acted in a way that was undeniably epic. People who fly in airships, ride oversized birds, and destroy the world could not be anything but.

It complemented our lives. At twelve our bones are growing, our strength is increasing at a frantic pace. Which is why *FF VI* was a natural progression of the path that *FF IV* had started. Everything in it needed to be more massive because we ourselves were becoming larger and larger.

Even as I was becoming stronger and stronger, reality had yet to firmly sink its vile claws into me. I didn't consider the world of *FF VI* to be,

well, utterly fake. Terra was always somewhere in need of saving, Sabin awaited me in mountains somewhere and the castle Figaro was sunk beneath a sea of sand in the Arabian desert. I just had to become older to find them. The game seemed like it was just a glimpse of everything that life could offer. That the emotions I felt as I heard the "World of Ruin" theme were things that I would experience some day in the actual world. I was nothing but happy at that time. Everything about my life seemed to remind me of adventure. I would look at the sky and see airships. I would walk through the woods and see phantoms. I would go on long backpacking adventures with my friends and imagine finding ancient relics. There was nothing in the world that didn't seem possible and I had only a videogame to thank for this feeling.

Final Fantasy VI is beloved because of this. It came at that period that divides childhood from adolescence, as a game that mirrored, channeled and encouraged all the emotions that that age brings. It came when the world seemed destined for one to conquer it. It came right before one realizes that he matters very little to anyone, least of all his peers. Before the cruel Darwinistic phase of adolescence truly begins and all those crystal palaces begin crumbling. It's loved because it came at our strongest moment and exalted us.

A Sky that Never Darkens

I've said all of this, because *Skies of Arcadia* acts as

if *Final Fantasy VI* had never existed; it mirrors the same emotions *FF VI* inspires with a different set of techniques. It's a rather refreshing and frustrating game because of this.

Its story is one that seems to have been written at the height of the Mega Drive's popularity, filed away in Sega's offices and discovered a few years later by a curious, culturally outdated Rieko Kodama. It's about Vyse, an earnest, hopeful air pirate and his chummy, platonic friend Aika, on a quest to become legendary pirates. On their journey they befriend a bitter, old sailor, a female-obsessed gunman and the woman that won't leave him alone; all eventually become allies, trying to stop a man who wants to use the Power of the Ancients to become a God. At one point, they save a princess from an empire intent on using her powers for *evil*. As you can guess there really is nothing about the game's story that makes it any different from any generic RPG ever made.

Similarly, the game's locations are those that even an RPG neophyte has trampled through a few dozen times before. Lost tribal civilizations, pyramid filled deserts, cold, metallic empires, Asian-styled reclusive nations; add the fact that you're looking for a set of crystals and you'd swear that you were playing *Final Fantasy I*, or *Lunar*, or *Grandia*, or the *Tales* series.

The only thing that saves *Skies of Arcadia* from being forgotten along with so much other rubbish, is it's execution, setting, and atmosphere.

As the title implies, *Skies of Arcadia* takes place entirely in the sky. Your party flies from floating island to floating island through a world that never bothers to explain why it is the way it is. Kodama rightly understood that it didn't matter, anyway.

There's something romantic and childlike about it. How many children, hell, how many people like to stare into the sky? Millions! Because the sky is like the horizon: something that's endless, goes on forever and imbues one with a sense of hope and longing. Looking into the sky makes one's dreams seem possible. That's why

Rieko Kodama

traveling the skies has been one of the more often recurring themes in RPGs. Everyone hungers for the moment when he can finally gain an airship and fly it to his heart's content. Kodama looked at this, squinted and wondered why not just set her whole game there, since this is where the player ultimately wants to be.

One of the game's finest moments is actually the title screen. There's nothing particularly flashy about it. It's merely the game's logo superimposed on a first-person view of the sky as glimpsed from the bridge of an airship as day turns to evening, then night and eventually dawn. It's a beautiful, simple, and effective sequence that summarizes everything that's wonderful about RPGs. Namely, simple moments of quiet beauty as enjoyed by one on an epic quest.

Though *Skies of Arcadia*'s quest isn't really all that epic. When compared to *FF VI* it seems downright personal. While the world may be at stake, the game never makes one feel as if the quest is about anyone other than Vyse and whether he can become the leader that he was destined to.

This is where *FF VI* and *Arcadia* differ most radically. *FF VI* had no main character, it had only a group of characters and it offered the player the choice of picking his favorites and thus pursuing and clearing up their stories if they so wished during the game's second half. From the very beginning, though, *Arcadia* makes it clear that this is Vyse's story and, consequently, your story.

The player never felt truly immersed in *Final Fantasy VI* because it never offered him a clear avatar. The game feels like a

portal into a world where one can influence the course of events, yet never truly be a part of them. *Skies of Arcadia* always strives to make you fully identify with Vyse. This is handled through one of the game's more ingenious devices: the Swashbuckler rating.

Throughout the game Vyse is haunted by a rating that judges how chivalrous and plucky he is. This rating is determined by the way you answer questions asked by various characters on your quest. Answer optimistically and your rating improves. This works so well, because it forces the player to answer pluckily even if he doesn't want to. A person who plays RPGs is used to arbitrary rules and won't want lower his rating, because he doesn't know what effect it will have on the future; it might limit

his chances of getting some items later on. Better to play on the safe side, he figures. So even the most cynical, hard-nosed player, sick of Vyse's pluck will gradually, naturally begin picking the pluckiest choices because he's so inured to picking them. Eventually this habit, leads one to identify with Vyse's pluck more and more, to the point where it doesn't even offend the cynical player.

This is why the game is so rewarding in the end, and why it's so shocking. It never once flinches away from its optimism. It never misses a beat to pound its desire to shake the cynicism out of you. It tries it's best.

Now, I'll admit that Vyse's pluckier-than-thou attitude irritated me for two thirds of the game. I couldn't help it. Here I was, a man with a recently acquired journalism degree, a degree he didn't even want in the first place, with no job, sitting in his room, a room that he hadn't left for a month, playing a childish game about sky pirates. Every hour I'd pause the game, walk out onto my balcony, light a cigarette and contemplate the sky. There were no airships, just a few airplanes headed to or from JFK. What

the hell was I doing with my life? What the hell was the point of playing a videogame at this point of my life?

I still don't have the answer to that question.

I can only say that *Skies of Arcadia* had a cumulative effect on me by the end. Like a shonen manga character that doesn't give up no matter how unrealistic the situation he finds himself in, Vyse conquered me with his charm, because he was feeding me lies I wanted to believe. When Vyse comforts Aika and Fina near the end, I'm the one that made his choices. I did so because I wanted to hear that reassuring blip that goes off whenever Vyse's Swashbuckler Rating goes up.

It was the point where you get the Delphinus that I began to stop being hostile to the game. When I saw that ship, which, perhaps intentionally, resembled Harlock's Arcadia, I thought: "With a ship like that I can become *legendary*!"

I marveled at the childishness of my reaction. It was so damn stupid to get enthusiastic about a ship. But there it was. It was what the game was waiting for. At least, I was somewhat happy that I still had the capacity to be enthusiastic about silly things somewhere in me.

By the time the entire cast comes to join Vyse in the final battle against the Imperial Armada, I won't lie, I couldn't control my grin. I almost wanted to cry. The game had won me over completely.

There's something very childlike about Vyse's, and, consequently, the whole game's optimism, to the point where it's very infectious. In our age, when scenario writers seem to be competing to see who can produce the angstiest protagonist, it's odd to encounter a character that never once wavers in his optimism. It's as if you're taken back to another age. To an age where optimism about the future didn't feel misguided.

Final Fantasy VI wasn't an optimistic game by any stretch. It aims to be downright depressing. It creates a story so marvelous that twelve year olds would think it's the best thing they've ever seen. The optimism that it inspires is side effect impressionable lads taking its story for fact.

Skies of Arcadia knew that it was going to sell to an older audience. An audience who's been playing role-playing games for a long time. It tries to recapture that innocence, that longing for adventure mixed with optimism for the future that we've all lost.

For this *Skies of Arcadia* has acquired the mark of greatness in my eyes. I hated it's first half. I almost chocked on the raw sugar water that passed for its storyline and characters. It was a saccharine journey from beginning to end, though by the halfway point I stopped chocking.

Skies of Arcadia has made me feel like a twelve-year old again. I don't know if that's something I should be happy about.

A Sea of Stars Headed Toward the Horizon

I always feel a tender sadness whenever I finish an RPG. Every time I feel as if another part of my life has passed and that some part of me has disappeared forever. I wonder if I'll have the same feeling when my own life eventually ends. As I near my twenty-second year I wonder if I'll be playing RPGs ten years from now. Part of me doesn't want to be.

Japanese RPGs are the only strand of my life that connects me to my youth. I've lost my friends, my country, and my language. I wonder if it was right to place so much faith in RPGs. I remember the ones I've played; how much sadness, how much happiness, how much life they've filled me with over the years. Perhaps, RPGs really aren't as amazing, as life altering, and as wonderful as I imagine them to be.

Yet they seem to be a parallel, the only parallel that my life has any more. I think back to an age and remember the RPG that I played. And remember feeling how my life would eventually resemble them if I just waited.

I recall Luna's boat song in *Lunar: Silver Star Story Complete*, Cid's Spaceship in *Final Fantasy VII*, Darus'

final gift to Setzer…

Maybe I wasn't really happy? Maybe RPGs were just a cheap substitute for living a real life?

Of all the answers I can give at this point, of all the things I could say to myself, only a quote from Leiji Matsumoto seems to ring true:

"At the end of the journey, every man thinks that his youth was arcadia." TGQ

Ambidextrous Ambience

Beatmania - Arcade, PS1, PS2

-Matthew Williamson

Art by: Benjamin Rivers

I once thought that techno music was some of the coolest stuff on earth. To some extent I still do. DJs were even cooler than the music itself, as they gave it a life unimagined before. Is it not obvious, then, why a Playstation game with a turntable controller made grin from ear to ear? Now many years later I find out the game is finally coming overseas.

Beatmania started humbly enough in 1997 within dark arcades, not yet pumping with cheesy dance music, but with beeps, punches and electronic gun fire. With gigantic speakers, a huge display and a turntable controller it must have stood out like a sore thumb to the arcades it was unleashed upon. Don't forget, this came out before Dance Dance Revolution.

Its premise is simple enough: 5 buttons to press in time with the bars that fall on the screen and a turntable to spin when instructed. Simple enough to learn, yet exceptionally difficult to master. Manual dexterity issues aside, someone at Konami (possibly game designer Yuichiro Sagawa) decided to keep a steady stream of more difficult and varied songs coming out for the series to keep masters at bay.

A home version of the series was brought out for the Playstation in 1998. This was the first that I found out about it. While browsing the internet[1] I ran across a large

ad for this strange game. My obvious joy of a video game with the ability to be a DJ (or so I thought) was too much to contain. Hooked on concept alone I called the local import shop (which was overpriced, but far too convenient) to see if it was in stock. One week later it was mine and the quest began.

Looking back on it now I wish that I had kept up with it a bit more. Every year or so I would pull it out to show off how crazy this game was, and how talented I was at it, I even ran into one at a Dave & Busters which I pumped quite a few dollars into. It was a short but passionate affair, I had other things to do, it all ended on a good note a few month after inception.

Beatmania itself prevailed without me, spawning 13 arcade releases[2] over its namesake between 1997 and 2003. In 1999 a series sequel was demanded, thus Beatmania II came about. The premise still the same, but now you have 7 buttons to press with a turntable to spin. The other notable addition was the use of better technology for higher quality videos playing with the songs. The sequel's home release is commonly known as Beatmania IIDX. In the arcade there were once two models of cabinet; the smaller model, and the Deluxe (DX) model with a larger widescreen display and more speakers. The

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1: Unfortunately it was on the now defunct Buy Rite games. Defunct for a good reason mind you. For more information visit the Better Business Bureau's website.

2: The Beatmania series sequels were called "mixes," which defined them from the sequel series "styles."

home release came after the third arcade release, titled Beatmania IIDX: 3rd Style for the Playstation 2 in 2000. The cult following of the game bought it up, and its high priced controller.

The series still had yet to catch on in the United States[3] while its older sister (Dance Dance Revolution) was enjoying quite a success by this time. Yet the series prevailed and even harvested another sequel in the form of Beatmania III. It added a foot pedal for some songs, contained 10 speakers and a huge array of effect choices for the key pressed sounds. Having only 5 releases (4 of which were in 2000 and the 5th later in 2003 three as THE FINAL) III did not fare as well as IIDX which was into its 5th release in 2000.

After the other two Beatmanias died IIDX continued on. If you are not familiar with the series you might be a bit confused at this point. Well, it is only natural to feel this way; a lot was going on with the Bemani[4] games at the time and still is today. In late 2003 I got back into Bemani games but in the most unconventional of manners: I built a Pop'n Music controller out of spare arcade buttons on commission.

Pop'n Music is one of the closer Bemani games to the Beatmania series in that you hit 9 brightly colored buttons as the notes on screen reach to the bottom. The main difference is that these buttons are huge, at approximately 3.25 inches in diameter. The principal of the game is the same nonetheless.

In order to make sure I shipped out a working product I acquired a copy of Pop'n Music to test it. All it took

was one test play and I was hooked again. I remembered all those nights of attempting to play the more difficult songs of Beatmania instantly. But this game was more fun somehow.

Not being completely oblivious to the arcade scene in Japan I was aware of Beatmania IIDX and looked further into it now that I was enjoying the learning curve of Bemani. A hefty investment later[5] I was slammed back to the bottom of the curve.

The series had continued and progressed well beyond what I had imagined it to be. There were levels of difficulty in IIDX that I did not think possible, yet when searching out others for tips on playing[6] they were complaining at how easy some of these impossible songs were. Not many mind you, but some.

What I failed to realize when I first played the game was what Konami was really asking of you: a time investment. In order to even complete the higher echelon of songs in Beatmania IIDX you are going to invest more time than a years worth of RPGs will ask of you. If you asked some of the top players how many hours they had spent practicing most won't be able to give you a straight number.

I spent over 800 hours between Pop'n Music and IIDX from early 2004 to early 2005 by an attempted calculation (rounding down). 480,000 minutes. 33 days on end.

I also have a full time job and I was playing other games as well. The worst part, I never got really good at the game. Not as good as I wanted to anyways. I was an average player clearing songs well into the 7 star[7] range, but never one of the best. I really have no idea what it takes to clear the most difficult songs with AAA scores. The thought almost scares me.

This is the game that Konami is going to attempt to ease the US market into. It is going to attempt to make up for 9 years and 32 arcade releases in one Playstation 2

3: There was a failed attempt to release it in US arcades under the name Hip Hop Mania.

4: Bemani is Konami's name for their rhythm/action series which includes, but not limited to; Dance Dance Revolution, Pop'n Music, Guitar Freaks, Keyboard Mania, ect.

5: At this point in time the controllers were running at about $80 USD + about $15 shipping with the games maintaining close to retail price.

6: The best tip anyone will give you at bemanistyle.com is to keep practicing, and it is the truth.

DVD disk. I know that letting IIDX, even at the easiest settings, upon someone new to the series is harsh, frustrating and difficult. It seems wise that they are including, and starting, with the older 5 button system as the beginner levels of the game. From the information released so far it seems like Konami is pulling songs from its entire backlist all the way to original Beatmania songs.

This is going to be a bumpy ride.

I can't tell if Konami is hoping to sell this game to people who knew about it but never had the ability to import, or an entirely naive crowd. By the looks of their E3 demonstration earlier this year (where they had people rapping, dancing and playing a IIDX controller like an air guitar) it seems like they are trying to get this out to a completely new crowd.

Crowds who don't even know how to properly hold the controller.

I still play IIDX and Pop'n Music. Not anywhere near as much as I use to, but I will pull both out a couple times a month and see if I still got what it takes. Mostly I just get worse: skills deteriorating. Last year, for Christmas, I got a guitar. I try to play that now as it is something that I can mold and develop to how I want it to sound, not how it was programmed to be beaten out like a robot would. I refuse to purchase Guitar Hero, no matter how much I know that I really want to, because I know I should be spending the time it would take to get good, and play a real guitar.

Beatmania is a fantastic series of games. I miss the gratification of a high letter grade score and moving up in the ranks of difficulty. I try to play my guitar and improve at it. I always sounded better at IIDX. ⬚

7: Originally the song difficulty was ranked on a 1 – 7 star ranking, with 7 stars that flashed representing anywhere from 8 to 80 stars. Recently Konami started to add stars for the higher ranking players to judge themselves and the difficulty better.
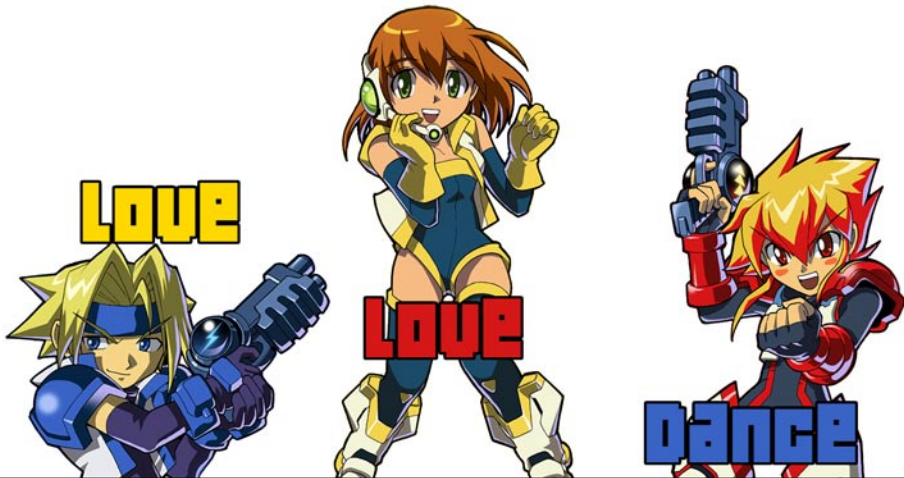
Gunstar Super Heroes - GBA

-Ancil Anthropy

Ikaruga is a game of revision. Black ships and white ships appear, and destroying three of the same color in a row will start a chain. All the enemies in the game appear in sets of three, so it's possible to chain the game from start to finish - to play perfectly. It's not only possible; the design of the game funnels you toward it. Every time you play you are moving steadily closer to perfection.

Ikaruga is, in many ways, a game of black and white.

The game appeared in Japanese arcades in 2001, the work of development house Treasure. Treasure was formed in 1992 by Konami employees who were tired of having to work on *Contra* sequels. They set two tenets to guide their work: that every game they release be considered a "treasure" and that they never release a sequel.

Treasure released its first game in 1993. *Gunstar Heroes* looks, at first glance, a lot like *Contra*.

The heroes of the game are named after primary colors: Red, Blue and Yellow. Green, the additive primary[1], is the hero who has fallen to the dark side. The cast of villains is rounded out by Pink, Orange, Black, and a colonel - "Smash Daisaku" - and his General. They seek to awaken the Terrible Destructor, "Golden Silver" - a name formed of two colors that are metals.

1: Additive primary colors (red, blue and green) assume a black background, while subtractive primaries (red, blue and yellow) assume a white.

In contrast to *Ikaruga*, *Gunstar Heroes* is a game of choice.

The game begins by presenting you with a flowchart. You pick a "fixed" or "free" shot, then your starting weapon (out of four), then which stage (again, out of four) you want to play first. Any two weapons you find in those stages can be combined into a new weapon, creating a total of 14 different shot types to choose from.

This isn't the limit of your options in battle. Unlike *Contra*, *Gunstar Heroes* gives the player a generous health meter - encouraging players to get close to enemies and fight hand-to-hand. You can clear a screen with a homing laser or by tossing enemies into each other until there are none left standing.

Gunstar Heroes gained Treasure a lot of fans, and a lot of notoriety. The fans wanted a sequel. But, they were to learn, Treasure doesn't make sequels.

Following their initial success, Treasure went on to make many games that were not a *Gunstar Heroes* sequel: *Alien Soldier*, *Guardian Heroes*, *Radiant Silvergun*.

Radiant Silvergun, released in 1998, was Treasure's first arcade game. Like *Gunstar Heroes*, it is full of primary colors: red, blue and yellow. Destroying three enemies of the same color begins a chain and powers up your weapons. There are three of them, and they can be combined, just like in *Gunstar*.

The development team of *Radiant Silvergun* had a great time making it. They cut

their inhibitions loose. Whenever anyone came up with an idea for a stage, a setpiece, a boss fight - they put it in. They put so much in that they had to split the game into two different routes. The final game has 18 stages total - unheard of in a modern shooter.

The game's wild energy, combined with its rarity[2], ensured it devoted fans. And fans want sequels.

Treasure doesn't make sequels. But they did make *Ikaruga*.

Ikaruga, the game of black and white, was designed as a *follow-up* to *Radiant Silvergun*. They had already made the most boisterously excessive game they could, so the developers turned inward instead. They began to trim.

They cut away the excess - the fifteen-minute city boss fights, the weapon upgrades for chaining enemies of the same color. What the developers ended up with was a five-stage game based around chaining two colors of enemies.

The game has a different goal. Instead of dazzling the player with a parade of sights and setpieces, *Ikaruga* takes *Silvergun*'s core gameplay and builds a game the player can play over and over again, getting better every time. If *Radiant Silvergun* is a game of experience, *Ikaruga* is - in many ways - a game of revision.

In May of 2005, Sega announced they would be publishing *Gunstar Super Heroes*. Fans were necessarily

excited, expecting a sequel twelve years in the making. Treasure has this policy about sequels, though.

If *Gunstar Super Heroes* isn't a sequel - and it isn't - let's call it a revision.

We can certainly identify the original *Gunstar* as a

"game of experience". Treasure's first game, it served as a kind of proof of concept, a statement of identity. Like *Radiant Silvergun,* you can feel the developers' excitement when you play it. Every idea they had went into the game - every boss has a name and a list of attacks that prints out on the screen before the fight. They had to introduce the "dice palace" stage just so they could work all of their boss ideas into the game.

Super Heroes resembles *Gunstar Heroes* on a superficial level, having the same stages and the same characters (minus White[3]). But it plays more like *Alien Soldier*, a game released by Treasure two years after the first *Gunstar*. This is, of course, because *Alien Soldier* is *Gunstar Heroes* 1.5. Now that Treasure had established their name as a developer, they could refine the mechanics of their proof of concept. They could trim it down.

Gunstar Super Heroes is not *Gunstar Heroes* 2 as much as it is *Gunstar Heroes* 2.0. Twelve years has given Treasure a lot of time to trim.

The stages are quick and fast; there is one boss for every two the original had. Some players expressed dismay over the original's showy throw move being replaced by a quick, practical sword slash. But *Super Heroes* is a much less showy game than its predecessor, the epic stages edited down to the moments that make them work.

A stage was added to the game, right at the beginning. It's there to supersede your choice of starting stage. When you do get to the stage-select screen - which shows only one stage on-screen at a time - you'll think nothing of pressing the button and starting the "next" stage, even though you can play the first four stages in any order. You're not meant to hesitate in this game.

In fact, your time and total score are shown at the end of each stage, and remain viewable on a menu that lets you to replay every stage, for optimum time and score if you wish. It's just as easy to clear a finished game and

2: Radiant Silvergun was only released on the japanese Saturn. According to myth, a North American Playstation release was planned, but SCEA chose not to permit it - wanting to establish their console as a 3D machine.

3: White was the old hero who stole the power gems from the Terrible Destructor, disabling it, and briefed the Gunstars before stages. White is also a color that mutes the colors around it.

start a new one, though.

In fact, it's easier to start a new game of *Gunstar Super Heroes* than it is to start a new game of *Gunstar Heroes*. *Gunstar Heroes* was made to show you all the wonderful ideas Treasure came up with. Once you've seen every stage, you've experienced most of what the game has to offer. When you get a game over, you'll be encouraged to continue, to press onward until you've seen everything.

When you hit a game over in *Gunstar Super Heroes*, you're dropped back to the title screen, where continuing your old game and starting a new one are equally viable options. The experience of Gunstar Super Heroes lies not in playing the game but in *re*-playing the game.

Every time you play *Gunstar Super Heroes*, you learn more about the game, and you get a little closer to perfection. That's as good an allegory as any for the path Treasure's taken since the original *Gunstar Heroes*. 🎮

I'm not regret

Furries: Hedgehog Hodgepodge

Influences for a Hedgehog

-Brandon Richard

Anthropomorphism, by its definition, is the act of taking an animal or object, living or dead, or any other idea envisioned by the creator, and giving it human emotions and consciousness that helps this entity judge right from wrong. You've seen it in Brother's Grimm fairy tales, and a few children's shows, save for that damn purple dinosaur.

Today's anthropomorphism has been inspired by many cultures. One of Japan's first mangas starred a fox making political statements about the government, which rules out the notion that anthropomorphism is just some newfangled trend whose only voice is through the internet. However, a lot of cultures through the years have strengthened via the internet - Star Wars fandom, and otaku culture - and it's not fair for me to generalize these people as niches. You can't fight city hall, as they say, and to convince everybody about the uniqueness of one culture is simply going to downplay another, which makes becoming an advocate for any people a complete political affair.

But, I generalize only to show what contrasts exist. When people advocate and preach about one sort of culture, there's likely going to be a bias formed for another that has the same intentions, but a much different message.

Furries

A taboo if there ever was one, and possibly the most notorious.

What is beyond me is the gross ignorance that people have about furries. Like most taboos, people seem to have the knee-jerk reaction to have this issue kept to oneself.

What I'd like to fight for is what rights furries have to express themselves without always being thought of as a niche in society. But from here I can only make this fight for gamers. If any terms pique your curiosity toward this culture's identities, I'd suggest using WiKipedia, and this incredible census about the culture that I found through Wiki, titled "The Sociology of Furry Fandom."

Anthropomorphism is a partially therapeutic approach to human interaction. While fans of the culture are greatly influenced and have a love of animals, they also feel an intimate bond with them. Some may even say that they are one. Is it because of a detachment from real people that causes them to look elsewhere for a personal bound with someone? I don't think so; most people who may claim to like animals don't identify themselves as being furry.

And that's fine, since they're not the same thing. Furries like to watch the portrayal of animals in more common, everyday interactions. Animal lovers may only have a few pets that they care of, or may someday see their lives as a veterinarian. But that doesn't mean that the furries can't find ways to hold a living, all the while influencing more art in furry culture.

Art is currently the strongest focal point for anthropomorphic expression. Basically, furries seek anthropomorphism portrayed in some form of media. Some activists may live this dream with self-made art (which I've timidly asked to be featured here), and also may look for it in media (a trend that movie-goer's might be slowly noticing, with films like *Madagascar, Under the Hedge,*

Chronicles of Narnia, and other films featuring anthropomorphic characters appearing in theaters).

So, if you're furry and you want your interests catered to, you don't have to look that hard. Just take what ever medium you want, create a group, and you're a member. Your group meetings will be held on whatever online forum (or college campus) that you can find that shares your interests.

Now, this sort of an admiration for animals may be a bit useless. You may say that "We have artists and figures in our culture that don't need this sort of inspiration for their means and they do just fine, ya furry." Well, as true as that is, that doesn't mean that anthropomorphism (when taken outside of its fan base) doesn't have any uses and applications.

Let's take a human icon like Paris Hilton, for instance.

She's a popular image in today's media, if only for being notorious. And, truth be told, she hasn't really done anything as far as advancing the progress of man (though she promoted the "Vote or Die" campaign, she didn't even vote). Paris Hilton is not the most impressive of television figures, and seeing her shill herself on reality shows may cause you to think about the frailties of today's broadcasting policies, causing you to retch uncontrollably

This shameful waste
WEAKENS AMERICA !

Remember— Only you can
PREVENT THE MADNESS!

at the notion that any dumb cluck can have the media's attention. She may even epitomize what you see in other over-privileged people in your life. You hate her instantly.

Whatever message she is trying to advocate to her audience is lost, because people aren't dumb. We know when under-the-table pandering is afoot, when someone with no fan base is given a television show and personally limelight to tan in.

Now in that light, Smokey the Bear has done pretty well for himself.

Take burning down a large populated forest, for example. Smoky the Bear doesn't want you to do that. He even goes the extra mile to say that, "only you can prevent" the things from happening. He had a pretty successful string of supporting characters in the mid 90's, as useless they may have been, including people who lived in suburbs surrounded by highways and sand. But, he was certainly an icon.

Why did he become so popular? Why did his claim seem so convincing? Well, ask yourself this - what bear has ever led you wrong? Bears aren't predominantly known as being liars or attention whores. You don't even see them all for a whole winter.

It's a marketing ruse to trick people into thinking that an animal can have a reaction to the activities in its environment and advocate about it. In turn, it sort of turns the process of anthropomorphism as a teaching tool. So this case really isn't all that different from the characters that you may see on breakfast cereals

The marketer really want you to think that an animal became tired of seeing his home laid waste and finally put on a hat (and pants!), walked out of the forest and asked broadcasters to allow him air time to make public service announcements.

Outside of that he's just a marketing tool; he has no real relation with the (human) people that he's speaking to.

Now, some games that have furries in their titles are guilty of this, too. You see it a lot, as the characters are mainly just there as filler or color commentary, taking advantage of their "funny animal" roots with the likes of Disney or Warner Bros. and their many icons.

Daxter of *Jak and Daxter* is one. His back-story merely allows him to keep his "furred" being in the title without much need to delve into his actual reasons for

being in the game. He's fun to look at and has a comical presentation, so he serves his purpose in the game.

Characters from the original *Devil May Cry* also have this trait. Dante is entering a bewitched castle that he has little knowledge about, the scripting in the game can get any with introducing a giant talking spider made of molten rock for no apparent reason other than to give the player something cool to fight.

Other culprits are fighting games that make this aesthetic service available to the consumers. Look at the *Bloody Roar* and *Dragon Ball Z* games as examples.

Though, the DBZ saga has an original story it doesn't really service much toward the games that are made in its name. Most of its characters have very deep backgrounds from which they string from before being toss in a rushed title. Most of the people that buy these games already know about their favorite character's. The designers know this and just service these peoples' desire by including their favorite characters, with a breezy story mode for the rest of the crowd.

Now *Bloody Roar* may have just been a collage of various animals made by artists that needed a game to be put into. And this is more of the same dilemma that we got from *Devil May Cry* - just another loosely-scripted title that pits these transforming-beings together in a fighting free-for-all. As the years move along soap opera elements are added, which keeps the characters interesting.

Are there any figures for our fandom that don't need any back story, and yet still have a presentation that can appeal to a larger audience than just furries?

Fur Fighters is a good start

I'm missing it right now, since I'm about a few hundred miles away from my Dreamcast. That title had a respected, catchy little soundtrack to it, too. The rhythm scheme would change during a level, depending on what character you changed to, and what level you're playing on.

It's a fairly simple run-and-gun title, and has its fill of cute little fuzzy critters scampering about shooting the heads off each other in a hectic bullet opera; so, it had something for everyone. Though I'm not sure if the game's original design was really meant to focus on the animals all being plushies (when any character is shot at or takes damage, some stuffing whiffs around them).

The characters in the game certainly don't talk that

much about it. But that would likely kill the whimsical mystic of a fantastical setting such as a bunch of animals taking root to a stable society. Contemplation about one's origins doesn't really have a much of a place in a game about critters living in a large metropolis and running electrical dams.

Fur Fighters maybe be a very quintessential jab into finding a niche with furries and the fur pursuant. One note being that the game has plushies in the lead - not a lot of designers can say that for their titles.

Fur Fighters, © Bizarre Creations/From the book "Game Over Memes". Reflected by TASCHEN/www.rasfilter.com

Other titles came before *Fur Fighters* that may have done an even better job of including that secret aesthetic for any couriers of the fandom. *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Sypro the Dragon* came before *Fur Fighters*, and featured a more soft and whimsical approach. As games are maturing, other titles are using more abstract approaches to anthropomorphism, including titles such as: *Mischief Makers* from Treasure, Doug TenNapel's[1] foray's into video games, like *Earthworm Jim* and his "*The Never-hood*" series, and current day innovator, the Oddworld series. All these games featured anthropomorphism, but not solely as attractive visual prose like the other games that I listed. In these titles, the look of anthropomorphism is made to re-imagine what we are used to. It's not solely a visual flair that the artists and designers were looking for, but an alternative spin on what we are used to in

1: Neither of the games that I listed had to solely be enjoyed by fans to be considered furry material. And by that I mean that it doesn't take someone who may have more perverted interests to drag down the morality of a series. Like I said earlier, it's just an aesthetic quality.

games.

These people are breeding a whole new entity of living things for their titles instead of just recycling traditional creatures as a way to separate themselves from the pack. Now, these games could just be using this appeal to strike up a new license, trying to avoid clichés like "the ice level" and "the ominous castle." In this quest for a new identity, they did a very favorable job toward reinventing what most people would consider anthropomorphism, in that they aren't using the "man with a lion's head" formula to make things visually appealing, but crafting all new beings for us to enjoy.

Anime and video games are now in bed with one another. It took a few effects from little known television networks at the time (*Pokemon* for the WB and DBZ for *Toonami*) to broaden its audience for us here in the US, but now it's a common reality that gamers are expected to at least with have heard of Japanese animations, if not already love them.

That doesn't sit well with me, having two well-known markets that can scratch each other's backs. Now, what furries have to enjoy in today's market is a lot more subtle than anime. The only prominent figure of furridom that has made it to the big leagues of gaming with private publishing is the *Neopets* franchise, an online pet simulation company.

This advancement has to be made with baby steps. As a pure socialist of furries, and not a proprietor, I'd like to have this sort of attention done in a way that isn't too brash. It certainly can't do much good if it's done through a game, since it's not a niche that's as easy to introduce (and exploit) as anime has become. A small list of current anime games off the top of my head; *Inuyasha, Dragon Ball, Ghost in the Shell, Gundam, One Piece, Naruto.* I'm not saying anything about the quality of these games just by listing them. I only want to point out how plentiful and easy to list they are. Furries, on the other hand, don't really have any licensed seniority. Outside of *Starfox, Sly Cooper* and Conker as the heavyweight contenders, that's about it.

What furries really need to break into the market and allow more of our type of content is acceptance. Not just acceptance from other people, but acceptance and respect of our own little niche as well.

Now, while I can't speak for every fur out there,

I've got a sinking feeling that there's a sum of us who don't want our fandom to be brought to light. Maybe it's because of a shame for how we are represented in the media, with a shoddy and misleading MTV documentary and the CSI episode being the only encounters people have with our culture. It could also be because a large percentage of income from outlets that sell and publish furry fiction is mostly in the red light district.

While certain issues of the furry lifestyle may have matured a little faster than others, that shouldn't speak for the overall crowd of members. It's not like these issues are that different from other media as well, but I don't want to end my article with an invitation to a shouting match. If anything, I just want this piece to be a testament to what sane people that we have in our society. I'm lucky to have a few members of the culture as a 'furiends,' and I'd like to end with a peace offering for any opposed to our cause. ▣

Street Fighter Alpha: Generations - DVD

-Wes Ehrlichman

It all started innocently enough. I got an email from a guy named Dave at a company called Traction PR. I'm not sure how he got my name, but it was clearly written out to Wes - or rather – "WES," as he must have had the caps lock key on when writing it. The e-mail offered me a pre-release review copy of the STREET FIGHTER ALPHA: GENERATIONS DVD movie. I gracefully accepted his offer, responding to it with an e-mail assuring him that I would do my best to see that it got some sort of coverage. About a week later, a package arrived containing a boxed retail copy of STREET FIGHTER ALPHA: GENERATIONS along with a press release and a set of foam nunchakus. Nobody in the STREET FIGHTER universe has ever wielded a pair of nunchakus, so I knew then and there that something was fishy, but I never imagined that the lack of STREET FIGHTER understanding present in the marketing materials would extend to the movie itself.

Before I go any further, I guess a little background information is needed. STREET FIGHTER ALPHA is more than just a game to me. The series played a big part in my life as I grew up. The first game helped me get through a time in my life when I was hopelessly co-dependant with a girl I was dating. She bought me the import Playstation version for my birthday and I played it regularly to cool off whenever she would do something that had me enraged. This happened more than I would care to admit, and I ended up getting pretty good at it. My character for casual play was Chun Li, but whenever I was upset I would switch

to Charlie and use his powerful kicks for a more brutal feeling game.

The second game wasn't meaningful in quite the same way, but it is the first version of STREET FIGHTER that I actually used for something one could consider "training." My character at this time in my life was Ryu, and every night for an entire summer I would turn on the Saturn, set it to the second to the highest difficulty, and play through the game - turning it off and restarting if I

happened to lose even a single round before reaching the ending. I wouldn't allow myself to go to sleep until Ryu was able to destroy Akuma's Island without fault. This began in early summer and took several hours a night, but by the end of the summer, I could usually get to bed within 15 minutes of entering my room.

The third game, easily my favorite in the series, pretty much defined my entire college existence. I spent nearly every one of my weekends challenging the members of my core *STREET FIGHTER* Posse of five. Collectively, our group had every art book, the versus books strategy guide set, imported copies of both Ryu Final Mangas, and every version of *STREET FIGHTER ALPHA* for every possible system. We had even discussed putting our money together and buying an Alpha 3 arcade machine, but that fell through. My character in Alpha 3 was Blanka, and my mastery of Ryu in *STREET FIGHTER ALPHA 2* had conditioned me to the point where I knew exactly when the Shotokan characters were the most vulnerable. Despite this, every member of the group grew to be nearly the same level. Confident in our skills, we even went as far as tracking down a local *STREET FIGHTER* crew on Shoryuken.com and challenging them to a friendly match. One of their members who claimed to have done well in a recent nationwide tournament came to the apartment that three members of my posse and I shared and proceeded to get completely romped. About a month later, he came back again with a friend and each one of us, right down to our weakest player proceeded to defeat both of them. In short, we were serious about *STREET FIGHTER ALPHA*.

Since college, we've all split up and gone in different directions, but we get together a few times each year to hang out, drink rum and reminisce about the good old days. Shortly after the DVD arrived, one such occasion was scheduled to take place in my apartment. *STREET FIGHTER* is still important to each of us, but because we don't see each other very often we tend to limit our play time so that we don't end up spending our few precious moments each year in a rage of *STREET FIGHTER*-induced anger. I figured watching the movie would be a great idea, but when my crew finally arrived, nobody really showed any interest in watching it.

The final day of our weekend, after all but one person had left and we had run out of things to do, I popped *STREET FIGHTER ALPHA: GENERATIONS* in the DVD player. As the credits rolled through the opening sequence, we saw a battle between a young Akuma and his master, an old man wearing Akuma's trademark prayer Beads. The movie's art doesn't resemble the expertly crafted CRMK, Edaman, or Daichan art from the game, instead taking on a modern day generic Anime styling fused with the proportion issues of a 70s era cartoon. It may be good on a technical level, but it fails to match the look or feel that the game or its promotional artwork creates. As this battle wages, a wifebeater-wearing, mullet-haired Ryu look-a-like and a young woman look on. The battle ends with Akuma surrendering to the dark hadou and murdering his master – a moment that is one of the defining moments of *STREET FIGHTER* canon. Aside from the art issues, things were looking mostly good thus far.

The Ryu look-a-like from the intro was actually Gouken, a character that series fans will recognize as Ryu and Ken's master. Gouken's existence in this manor is the first sign that the movie isn't afraid to take liberties with *STREET FIGHTER* canon. Very few images of Gouken exist, but the few out there depict someone who looks very different from Ryu. The original *STREET FIGHTER II V* television series once made the mistake of showing Guile's War

buddy Charlie, the one alluded to in the ending of *Street Fighter II*, long before *Street Fighter Alpha* introduced his genuine look. As a result, the show instantly lost much of its relevance when Charlie appeared on the screen as a dark-haired goatee-wearing soldier instead of the lightning-haired spectacle wearing man of action from the games.

After the intro battle ended, there was some character development done through flashback, and then we got caught up to where the intro began. Again we witnessed Akuma's final blow on his master, but in this extended sequence after the deadly blow Akuma walks over to Goukutetsu's bloody corpse, removes the beads from around his neck, and proceeds to drape them over his head in great defiance of Street Fighter canon. According to the Japanese manga it was actually Gouken that took the beads from Goukutetsu. It wasn't until Gouken was murdered by Akuma that the beads finally arrived in his hands. In fact, the remainder of the movie seems to imply that Gouken died a natural death instead of having had his life taken by Akuma.

We then jumped ahead to modern times where the movie continues its downward spiral. Ryu meets a random girl that seems only to serve as a love interest and an elderly fighting monk that holds no prior place in the *Street Fighter* universe. The monk is introduced through a battle that eventually culminates with Ryu realizing that he's fighting a losing battle and pulling out the big guns by charging up and throwing a fireball at the monk. The old man then proceeds to *grab the fireball out of mid air*, hold onto it for a few seconds, and then throw it back to Ryu. This part was so absurd that my friend and I rewound the movie just to watch it again. Not only did this movie have the nerve to add all new non-canonical characters, but they gave one of them powers that don't exist within the rules of *Street Fighter*, and even exceed the powers of the existing characters. In no part of Street Fighter's 15 years of history, has a character has ever given even the tiniest hint that fireballs can be grabbed, and no character ever should.

After defeating Ryu with his fireball grabbing trick, the monk agrees to train him for his inevitable battle with Akuma. Keep in mind, this battle should be Ryu avenging his master, but according to the movie, Akuma actually killed his Master's Master. Ryu has no personal grudge against Akuma, but still feels the need to fight this battle for some reason.

The short, 45 minute movie gives Sakura and Ken some screen time, but any scenes with them only seem to be stalling for the Ryu's inevitable battle with Akuma. The writers seem to be almost mocking how needless these characters are to the plot by dropping in some Sakura fan service and having her take a hot bath with the monk's granddaughter.

After unnecessary delay, Ryu's battle with Akuma finally takes place. It is drawn-out and unexciting, ending with Gouki running away, saying, "some day I intend to fight you again," effectively negating the entire purpose of the movie. The worthlessness of the movie's main battle wasn't the worst part though; I'm still getting to that.

After Gouki disappears into the night, the scene shifts to a conversation between the old man and Ken in which the monk nearly explicitly states that Ryu is Akuma's child. At this point, my friend and I couldn't handle the movie's disregard for Street Fighter any more and we just shut it off. This wasn't just a small embellishment. This little tidbit of info would be the ultimate in *Street Fighter* revelations if it didn't have strong contradicting evidence. Ryu's father is German! According to the Japanese Manga series – a series that ran at the height of *Street Fighter* popularity, when Capcom seemed to care about the story their characters were given – Ryu was born from a Japanese mother and a German father. Why did Capcom let this movie, a movie that trashes the mythology of *Street Fighter* so overtly, get made?

My issues with the movie may seem nitpicky to people who don't have a love of *Street Fighter*, but honestly, who else – other myself and people like me – would be interested in an animated *Street Fighter* movie at this

current stage in gaming history? Who is this movie even made for? Not even my friends– the ones who skipped out on the movie – who devoted part of their lives to *Street Fighter* weren't interested in seeing this movie when it was sitting in my apartment, completely free to watch. If they were not willing to watch the movie why would someone less devoted be willing to buy it?

Street Fighter celebrated its 20th anniversary last year and it's been over 5 years since the last true *Street Fighter* game. I think it's safe to say that at this point, the only people still interested in *Street Fighter* are the ones who care enough about the series to want to see it done justice. Until Capcom steps forward and shows us what the young Gouken really looked like, we shouldn't be given any more pieces of the story that have been filled in by outsiders. Capcom can take all the time they need to learn how to count to four because just as I never want to see this movie again, I don't want to see another *Street Fighter* game done if it's not done right. Whatever you do, I implore you not to buy this movie. Watching this movie will not entertain you, it will only reinforce Capcom's decision to farm out its properties to those that just don't seem to care. 🎮

The Doom Generation

Fast, Hard and Brutal, Like Doom Was, But Not Really.

- J. R. Freeman

Knee-Deep in the 32-bit True Color Dead

There was a time when a computer wasn't really a computer. At one time, computers were word processors used to occasionally post on BBSes and interact with others via multi-user dungeon type programs (Some still refer to these programs as games). At least, that's what "computer" meant to my older sister during her early obsession with the new fangled "internet" thing that all the geeky kids were into at the time. The internet and its many text based games were not my domain in these days. There was not enough color to satisfy my young, childlike mind – a need later answered by our family's NES. No, it seemed that our computer was destined to be a clunky grey box with a two-tone screen that sat in the corner of the dining room; the thing my father damn near fetishised over in the 1980s while I was busy discovering the joys of simple, colorful games and a controller with just two buttons.

Then something funny happened. Technological progress started to catch up and computer games became more colorful. Computer games had always had some modicum of color at their disposal, but developers were finally learning to make clever use of the palettes at hand. My history is a bit off from the "official record" with regards to the simple aesthetic beauty of works produced in that time period. In the 1990s several things happened that allowed my personal computing history

to finally catch up with reality: more hard disk space, the aforementioned increase in color variety, and that one important thing that practically spawned a geek subculture - shareware. Shareware meant we didn't actually have to buy games; we could just borrow a few disks with games on them from friends or through mail order and get a taste of the product before we decided to buy.

And buy we did. As we made our way through the Apogee lineup of games like *Commander Keen*, *Blake Stone*, and *Duke Nukem* my father and I became acquainted with id. They made neat, colorful games that were a lot of fun to play. Most of them were based around simple concepts and existing genres and they always used the latest technology to tax our 386. Sharing was good, and I was happy because now we had two machines that I could play videogames on.

Then came *Doom*. It burst onto the scene rather unexpectedly with its unabashed preference for fast-paced action, blood and Big Fucking Guns™ in a way that has yet to be replicated by the videogame industry. The game was something of a revelation for us at the time because its first-person perspective brought a new way of viewing game worlds. The action games we had enjoyed up until that point were either two-dimensional side-scrolling affairs or overhead

MINE EYES CAN BUT WEEP
AS THEY BEAR WITNESS TO
THE MAJESTY... THE BFG 9000!

games like Pac Man. *Doom* brought us a new type of joy that came from a simple perspective shift. No longer were we controlling cute little avatars around an overtly tile-based screen – now we *were* the avatars in a wonderfully vivid nightmare.

Over a decade before my introduction to The Beatles, the phrase "Happiness is a Warm Gun" made its way into my youthful lexicon. Hillary Clinton might find the previous sentence alarming, but I can assure her it was all in good fun. Now, first-person games were around before *Doom*. I can personally recall *Catacombs 3D* and *Wolfenstein 3D* - a game that all the males in my family greatly enjoyed - but those games were mere proof of concepts compared to *Doom*'s complexity. *Doom* was fast, hard and brutal in a way that those games weren't, and it made running and gunning the ultimately visceral experience we take for granted today.

Doom is often remembered most for its multiplayer aspect and the way it provided the tools for its players to create the slews of user-created content which have sprung forth its vast online community that still thrives to this day. I have to confess that I have yet to play a single *Doom* deathmatch, nor have I created my own personal *Doom* WAD. For my family and I *Doom* wasn't about competition, it was about dumb fun. Combining the best of the arcane and the arcade, never had such dire satanic visions of the future been so colorful and amazingly addictive. Snaking through darkened corridors and blasting imps with shotguns wasn't anything new to us because we had seen it all before, but never had we seen it from a perspective that made us feel like we were actually inside of the action.

An entire generation feels the same way, apparently. Doom was a huge success and spawned an infinite amount of copycat games. After a while, people stopped calling them "Doom clones" and instead opted for First-Person Shooters. This probably happened around the time that games started doing more with the first-person perspective than the tried and true "stick a gun barrel in the center of screen, stick a few enemies in front of it, lather-rinse-repeat". *Heretic II*, *Thief*, *System Shock 2*, *Half-Life*, and *Deus Ex* are all examples that spring immediately to mind. Suddenly, people were figuring out neat things to do with storytelling with that perspective and many creative and unique games were coming out. So

what did id do?

They eventually made *Doom 3*, which almost completely ignored the progress that had been made with regards to intelligently designing a first-person game, instead falling back on their traditional "let the tech sell the game" method. Unfortunately, due to the law of diminishing returns, the tech wasn't even that impressive. People weren't wowed playing the same game (but with realistic lighting!) the same way they were wowed when they experienced a perspective that was wholly unique to them for the first time. To be fair, the method of storytelling through various PDA devices and random computer screens was a step above the non-story of the previous Doom games, but it was nothing that hadn't already been done before. *Doom 3* had great atmosphere, but the rest of the game was tarnished by surprise encounters from enemies coming at you though the walls – a technique that the original games had used. This worked ten years ago when no one knew any better, but these days it only served to make the game feel dated. There's no denying that *Doom 3* is visually striking, but what big-budget game isn't these days? In many ways, advancing to the next level of technology has had more adverse effects than good. Anyone else find it ironic that in these days of 64 player online deathmatches and massively multiplayer persistent worlds, both *Doom* and *Doom 3* can only support four people?

The Shores of Gamer Hell

You're probably sick of hearing the tired old story going that's been going around about there not being enough innovation in games these days, but it's going around like that for a reason. I believe that reason is the inclusive nature of the industry at large. The original *Doom* game was simple enough that anyone, even someone who didn't really play many games, could pick it up and get into it fairly easily and in short order. Despite being essentially the same as the original game, *Doom 3* is steeped in modern design complexities that seasoned players won't even think about, but might herd off any potential newcomers. Games are big complex beasts these days, and anything that requires more than a few buttons to operate is like a locked box for which the key is but a phantom of smoke and shadows. The damned things aren't as accessible as they used to be is what I'm trying to say, and it hurts when we can't all play together and have fun. Whether it's the high-end technology that means regular people with regular computers won't be able to run the game for five more years, the outdated and archaic design, or the fact that by the time most people can play *Doom 3* something better and cooler might be taking up shelf space, the simple fact is that a lot of developers (especially those on PC) are stuck in a cycle where they only attempt to please people who are already familiar with the games.

I say this because as much as most gamers like to drone on and on in message boards and blogs about how much they'd kill for some genuine innovation in the games industry, the dollars they vote with often go towards stuff they're already familiar with. If they were actually tired of playing the same old games, then they'd stop investing in derivation and sales would begin to reflect their message board woes in a more pronounced fashion. Despite this,

each month we check the charts we see things like *Madden* selling another million units, licenses and sequels climbing into top ten lists, and PC games like *Doom 3* pulling up the rear: their poor sales blamed on piracy (not because it isn't that great of a game. How could I even suggest such a thing?). The truth is gamers are a finicky bunch. We ask for innovation, but when that innovation threatens to change something that we already know we like, we get scared. We all saw how people were running for the hills when the Revolution controller was revealed.

This is what we've become though. We, the *Doom* generation, have brought everything upon ourselves by hungrily lapping up whatever was thrown to us like rabid dogs chomping for a slice of meat. We ravenously played what we were given and let the game makers know what we did and did not like about our experiences, thus creating an era of development by focus group, which in turn created a strict conglomeration of several niches. The niche groups are the videogame fetishists who keep the industry afloat by buying whatever Final Fantasy is put to market. They group together to form their own communities, online or off, where they fawn and pant over the next release of their favorite genre. We're all guilty of it. Developers are strapped to the wings of their respective publishers and forced to place the opinions of their fans higher than their own creative visions. Because of this, gaming has not yet formed its own unique identity. The familiarity of the current state of gaming creates a cushion to act as a buffer zone to shield those beautiful fetishists from the harsh realities that are happening around them. In short, don't complain about lack of innovation because you probably helped things get this way, however "this way" may be.

These days, whenever a developer takes an initiative to do things their own way, they are scolded and shunned by the greater gaming community for breaking convention. Metroid Prime doesn't play like every other First-person game I've played? Fuck it then, it's a gimmick and not worth my time. The latest Zelda remains unchanged since its days on the Super Nintendo? Give it ten out of ten and call it a day. We ate it all up 15 years ago because games were new things back then, but the time has come that they are no longer new and their bag of tricks needs replacing.

My words may seem harsh, but thankfully, they

do not represent everybody. I can't claim to speak for everybody either, least of all the fine people of this fine publication, but I wouldn't be surprised if a few of them agree with me. These words are targeted at the hardcore – the self-appointed gaming elite, because they have been playing the longest, or at least that's what they'd have us believe, and they should have seen this by now and known better. I don't mean to sound angry or vengeful, but I can see that the casual and hardcore all play games for the same reason; they show us things we have never seen before. That's a wonderful thing, for us to be in here on the ground floor of this burgeoning new medium and at the dawn of a new century, no less. Yet I still see so much untapped potential, so many new ideas held back by those afraid of risking financial failure. I played *Doom*, then *Doom 2*, and then the ironically named *Final Doom*. What if a developer said, "After this second game we're ending the series and trying something different." People – gamers – would scream and shriek for that developer's blood for taking away their cherished generic characters and reheated game mechanics. The people want what they want, even if it's not always for the best, and the publishers are only too happy to give it to them.

Inferno (Out of the frying pan...)

I apologize if the truth is painful. The video game medium hasn't really found itself because it hasn't made itself accessible to everyone like other mediums have. The industry has become inclusive and incestuous in the worst way, which has allowed it to become backed into the corner under the threat of legislation. I predict that this legislation will be enacted for reasons of political gain, making it almost wholly ineffective at keeping games out of the hands of minors, but I must admit that just a little censorship might be a good thing. Federal restriction on game content could be just the cudgel needed to make the medium, and the industry itself, grow up a bit. Right now games are mostly "just toys," and don't have a whole lot to say. The ones that do, either get noticed and are revered and called "art" or whatever, or they just fade away into obscurity because they were too unlike everything else that was out at the time. To publishers though, most games are merely seen as units to be moved, checks to be cashed, money in the bank, and all that corporate jazz. They are product, and in this world where bottom lines are the bottom line, it's hard to say something new and different without stepping on some money hungry suit's toes. The other problem is that we as gamers don't really have any sort of language to discourse about games with. We're still stuck in the mindset of them being toys; we don't really see the potential. Why is there more internet chatter about superficial things like weapon counts, graphical effects, or the technology used to create a game than the psychological aspects on the player that happen when we're actually playing the games? Why is there such a heavy focus on previews and hyping unreleased games when we could actually be studying the games that we have now?

I'm going to go out on a limb here and state that I believe it's because most gamers don't actually love games - they love the idea of games. This is not to mean that they are not authentic in their love – no, I am sure every last one of them, myself included, are purebred, red-blooded gamers of the highest order. It's just that they like what a game suggests rather than what it actually has to say, and this becomes a problem when trying to examine what it is saying. When the first issue of this magazine came out, people were asking us why we didn't cover more games that weren't even out yet. Well, I mean, they aren't out yet! What is there to cover on a game you don't know anything about? These aren't movies. We can't come to solid conclusions about things by picking up bits here and there from tabloid magazines and attempting to put the pieces

together. The fact of the matter is that you can only really know about a game once you've played it. People were asking why we didn't preview games so we could be the first to bring them that precious information. Gamers are in love with the idea of their next gaming savior coming out in the near future, or to use a better analogy, it is like waiting for Christmas. We all remember how the run-up to Christmas was a lot more exciting and tense than the actual Christmas day. But a game isn't about release in the same way that a wonderful holiday orgasm is, a game isn't saying anything until it's in someone's hands being played.

At the end of the day, innovation will not be won by whining to game companies that there isn't enough of it these days. Our mission begins with how people perceive games, and the best place to start before convincing anyone else that our little hobby is worthwhile is with our own perceptions about the medium. Don't fret over Hillary Clinton; she's just buffering her resume like any other politician. And certainly don't flip out about whatever little piece of preview hype you read on the internet. Forget Xbox 360 for a minute. We are the true next generation, and videogames are our literature. It is up to us to shift the needed paradigms, to understand games ourselves so that it will be easier for those who do not to come to an understanding. Otherwise, I guess you could say that we're all doomed. 🖳

The Happiest Time of My Life

Chrono Trigger - SNES, PS1
-Pat Miller

This story starts with Allen Seol, one of my best friends, and I sitting down on a metal bench in the shade of a strip mall in Albany, CA. We were talking on the afternoon of my twentieth birthday, and as it was my twentieth birthday, we hadn't felt particularly compelled to be productive during the day. But, as it was my TWEN-TIETH birthday and not my twenty-first, we weren't feeling compelled to drink. So we split a pot brownie between us and wandered back from UC Berkeley to his hometown to revisit our old haunts.

We had been sitting on the bench for about half an hour, intermittently eating snacks we had picked up earlier from the local Ranch 99 and tracing, in wonder-fully-stoned fascination, our progress through the day. We started at a Korean restaurant in Berkeley (BBQ chicken), then his house (an old pot brownie and a jug of milk), Barnes and Noble (a Snickers Marathon energy bar and the rest of the milk), Pacific East Mall (snacks and curry

horn pastries from the supermarket), and finally El Cerrito Plaza (the rest of the snacks). Eat, chill, eat some more - we had discovered the meaning of life. Then, in the midst of our eager attempts to plan other places to chill and eat (which would later turn out to be Fat Slice Pizza and then a friend's house), Allen sat back and said to me in a mo-ment of complete lucidity,

"You know, playing CHRONO TRIGGER was the happi-est time of my life."

I leaned back and pondered that. It was fucking genius. I told him so, and then wrote it down on the only handy piece of paper- an old paycheck-less envelope (the contents of which would eventually prove to be worth even less than the envelope itself, as it bounced and cost me $7 in return fees) that would later be used to contain our future revelations, like WHOA, THAT DUDE LOOKS LIKE RON JEREMY, or OH MY GOD, THE YAN-CAN-COOK RESTAU-RANT HAS TURNED INTO A PANDA EXPRESS - and thought, you know, he's right.

I played CHRONO TRIGGER for the first time back in sixth grade. Things were looking up back then; I had just entered middle school after a tortuously long fifth grade, Clinton was still in office but not sleeping with interns, and I had just discovered Smashing Pumpkins and Sublime, who were, to a young me with a newly awakened musical consciousness, instrumental to weathering the storm of teenybopper crap that invaded the airwaves. Life was good back then, when I could live the simple life of a nerdy kid concerned only with hanging out with his friends and playing lots and lots of computer games. I remember with clarity the day I begged my dad to drive me down to

Toys-'R'-Us so I could purchase it with eighty dollars of my own birthday money, though I can't for the life of me recall how I had heard of the game or what drove me so passionately to buy it. I don't try that hard to remember, but perhaps what was crucial to my *Chrono Trigger* story was the fact that I had just come out of an intense, five-month-long love affair with *Final Fantasy VI*.

My experience with role-playing games had begun in my oh-so-impressionable fourth grade years, when I discovered *Lufia & The Fortress of Doom* amid those same Toys-'R'-Us SNES game aisles. *Lufia* taught me how to play a role-playing game in its most basic form; I learned about experience levels, spells, HP and MP, random encounters, save points and boss fights. It was *Lufia* that introduced me to the RPG Plot in all its plot-twisted glory, and it was *Lufia* that inspired me as a little kid to jump gleefully into the experience level treadmill in search of spiffy new spells. *Final Fantasy VI* built on this, instilling in my young breast a love of party customization, of Relics, Espers and Skills, and a fascination with a world held together by an unparalleled amount of characters. It taught me about pain one day when I acknowledged bitter defeat against Wrexsoul, in Cyan's World of Ruin side-quest, and forced myself to start over from scratch. All of this paved the way for *Chrono Trigger*, which was, for all intents and purposes, the culmination of my modern console role-playing game experience.

Chrono Trigger begins by doing everything a normal role-playing game does, and doing it in the most perfect way possible. All the traditional trappings of a role-playing game are here, achieved in such a sublime manner that you cannot help but be convinced that the

team behind it really knows games. Take the character design, for example. Our hero character is bold, gallant, and brave. He is also completely mute; nevertheless the events of the game manage to convey in him weaknesses that seem appropriately human. His best friend impresses upon us a strong sense of loyalty and dedication to her friends, and his romantic lead embodies a devil-may-care, youthful enthusiasm that is equally infectious to the in-game party as it was to me. The characters are designed in perfect balance; they are plentiful enough to maintain the feeling of a truly expansive world, but small enough that the omission of any one of them, even the non-player characters, would make the world of *Chrono Trigger* feel incomplete. This unparalleled purpose of design even found its way into *CT*'s raw game mechanics; things like Techs and Magic, introduced to the genre long ago as a basic method of articulating character difference, feel completely natural with the Dual and Triple Tech system. Even traditional clichés like random monster encounters, which feel contrived in every other game, are hand-crafted in *Chrono Trigger*; unlike *Final Fantasy VI*, every fight you get into in *Chrono Trigger*, from enemy arrangement to the location of the fight, is personally designed. It felt like every battle was arranged just for *you*, and what the *CT* team realized was that going through the trouble of doing this genuinely eliminates most of the frustration jaded RPG gamers will direct at the idea of the random encounter. It's like *Chrono Trigger* cares.

All this isn't what makes *Chrono Trigger* special, though; it's merely the icing on the cake. The real facet that sets *CT* apart is the literary intent with which the game has been constructed. *CT* is not merely a story; it is the modern, video game evolution from a story a la *Lufia* to a full-blown fable designed to invoke a much deeper moral than those of Aesop. The time-travel, the motley cast of characters and the complex intertwining of fates among people all across the *CT* world; this is not just a gimmick. What Horii and the rest of the *CT* team did so well was to use a mish-mash of scenarios among all kinds of people - including a princess, a geeky inventor girl, a mute modern-day samurai, a prehistoric cave-girl, a robot and an anthropomorphic frog-knight - to communicate the existence of a common human nature that is persistent despite class, race, and, of course, time. It is the denial of this fundamental human property that you fight against,

and as you come to blows against Magus and his henchmen, Reptites, rogue robots, corrupt regimes, and all sorts of other foes, you will find that it is inevitably a share in this human spark that redeems them. The game gets you used to the fact that your actions can affect others early on in the beginning Millenial Fair scenario, and rewards you for doing well in ways that games have never been sensitive to before in order to prepare you for the responsibility of changing the future for the better.

Chrono Trigger tells a story of a team of teenagers, united with people across time and culture by virtue of their humanity, with the power to change anything in the past, present, or future, and it is through the active participation in this story that the reader is imbued with this amazing sense of optimism. And looking back on the potential impact it had on me as an impressionable adolescent boy - man, it's some powerful stuff. *Lufia* teaches you to beware your childhood friends, lest they be unholy super-demons who have plagued mankind for generations; *Chrono Trigger* teaches us that even mere kids can

change the future by fighting for humanity.

I'm sure that Allen and I aren't the only ones who feel that *Chrono Trigger* was the happiest time of our lives. Gamers and reviewers have loved the game for years and will undoubtedly continue to love it for many more, in whatever incarnation it reappears over time. It is not enough to hail *CT* as an incredible game for technical merits alone. What it does is finally achieve the goal that role-playing games have been working towards since the original *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy*; that is, to tell a story with a moral that is uniquely affected by the design conventions of the medium, rather than one that is artificially extended by such conventions. It is *Chrono Trigger*'s flawless capacity to truly involve the player in a human - albeit 16-bit - world and push them to make it better that makes it both the stuff of Top Ten lists and stoned Zen moments alike; *Chrono Trigger* succeeds with a basic, timeless story of humanity that crosses all boundaries, and with it comes the chance to surreptitiously instill a seed of optimism in the player that very well could change our own future. [TGQ]

Reason #3: Analysis

-Tim McGowan

It was in an American Literature class my freshman year of college. The professor, who I had nicknamed "Squeekybobo" after an elf in a web comic I no longer read, asked the class to divide into groups of two, choose a piece of "literature" (intended in the broadest sense possible, meaning it could include non-written forms), and give a presentation on it. I was on a postmodern kick at the time, so I asked one other person in the class if he was open-minded enough to do a videogame. I assured him we could get away with it – that it would be great, even. He consented, and I told the prof. that our literature-of-choice was a Super Nintendo game called EARTHBOUND. "Great!" he exclaimed. "I was hoping someone would pick a videogame."

I didn't actually own the game. I had to show video clips of it in class, so I went about it in the most absurd way possible: I recorded several videos of the game on an emulator, re-recorded these with a video-capturing program, encoded them to a much-reduced size, burned them to a CD, played the CD on my Dreamcast with some fancy Dreamcast video-playing program, and recorded them from there to a VHS cassette. It worked, and I was able to present EARTHBOUND in a choppy, ugly form. I explained to the class its postmodernity, both in the way it differed from traditional RPGs and in the way it relates to postmodern literature. After the presentation, a beautiful girl in the class – who was far too girlish for me to call a woman – told me, "That was interesting. You know, I usually consider videogames to be kind of juvenile, but now I

think there might be something there."

I felt, for the first time in my hobby, validated. I felt like there was a reason for me to play, like all those lectures from parents about how I spent too much time in front of the TV were, in fact, completely wrong, like my encyclopedic knowledge of ridiculous trivia – absurd things I had memorized, like lines of dialogue or the contents of specific treasure chests – might be worth something some day, like I wasn't a complete weirdo. I immediately returned to my room, wrote down my own theories on EARTHBOUND in something resembling an essay, and put it on the internet for all to see. Lo and behold, people agreed with me, and many found the piece to be well-written and informative.

A post somewhere on the internet, probably lost to time, revealed what was wrong with that attitude. To paraphrase, it said, "Analyzing videogames is a trick we do. We could just as easily analyze a Coke can." It's the truth. Playing videogames does not in any way validate my existence. More importantly, writing about videogames does not in any way validate their existence. Rather, it's writing, analyzing, and presenting that validate my own existence. It makes me feel good inside to simply write and to know that what I write resounds with others. A passion, call it.

When people see my room, it's clear that I like videogames: consoles piled on each other, paper Mr. Saturns on my monitor, wires and games scattered about, etc. I've fallen into the habit of justifying myself by explaining, "I only play games if I can find something to write about them. Otherwise, I put them down." The fact is that videogames are, in fact, currently juvenile, and what

little meaning can be found in them requires uncommon perception, perhaps even pedantry. Yet, I am a pedant, a nerd with obsessive tendencies and little social motivation. I don't have a lot else to turn to in life; I game for fear of running out of other things to write on. I'll likely quit one day, when I've found myself a job that allows me to do the same for my even greater passion: economics. Until then, I have some bullets to dodge. 🎲

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Since nobody but the most thorough readers look at this text anyway I'll take this area to explain the meaning of our title The Gamer's Quarter. Some people mistakingly call us The Gamer's Quarterly, and, while our title is partially in reference to our frequency, it's not quite the only meaning. You see, a Quarter is also a type of currency often used during the late 20th century in public video gaming receptacles called "arcade machines." These were the precursors to home video games and many of our staff still have fond memories of them. The third and final meaning of The Gamer's Quarter is in reference to our staff, who, like the knights of yore, often refer to ourselves as "The Gamer's Quarter." Now that you know the meaning of our title, please delve inside and discover the supple nectar of our words. For you see, The Gamer's Quarter is more than just a title. It's a way of life.