THE GAMER'S QUARTER

WWW.GAMERSQUARTER.COM

Q3
2006

6

Table of Contents

From the Editor

Issue Overhaul
By Matthew Williamson

You may notice right from the (very lovely) cover that we have once again done an entire overhaul of the magazine. This should be the final format thanks to the selfless efforts of the amazing Benjamin Rivers. So now that things seem done with this issue I can finally get back to playing *Steambot Chronicles,* something I have been trying to do for a couple of weeks.

The last three months have been exciting for the magazine. You will get more detail about it in the comic section as told by Jonathan "Persona-Sama" Kim, but a fair amount of *The Gamer's Quarter* team got together at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, and those that couldn't make it were there in spirit. E3 itself was good as well, but the team finally coming together was really the highlight.

As seen at the show, the future of games is headed in so many directions. Some companies are focusing on innovative ways to play games, others are focusing on optimizing the way that games are currently played, and even more are focusing on both. With all the hardware in the headlines right now, it is fairly difficult to look at anything specifically about games themselves. The games just seem to be an extension of the machine they are attached to or an excuse for the price tag toted. Now I just wish I could get a handle on the games themselves and see if they are trying to expand in the way they connect with the player.

Not all E3 was about new and fresh ideas though: if you wandered into the lonely and quiet Kentia Hall you would find yourself knee-deep in classic gaming. The History of Video Games exhibit took up most of the center of the hall and ranged from arcade greats to console abnormalities, and everything in between. I really wish that I had more time to spend there, as it feels like all I have been doing lately is exploring older and classic games. It is always refreshing to see that an industry that seems to always seem to be moving forward is also remembering their past and displaying it with pride.

I am almost done living in a hotel after ten months. I have realized that I play too many games, or not enough. When I came to the hotel, I had only a handful of games and a bunch of systems, but I have come to accumulate a collection of current-system games while expanding on my older consoles. Now I just have to worry about how to move them all one thousand miles. All things considered, I am far more excited to see my wife than play games in a proper setting. 🎮

Staff

A Medium of Moments

Mobile Gaming
By Matthew Collier

The Buggles once sang in the 1970s about the video format killing the radio star. All in all, they were right. Television soap operas overtook traditional radio dramas and destroyed an entire genre that many men and women sweated blood and tears over. However, one genre, starting out as some pixels on a monochrome screen, has the potential not to destroy, but save another genre dear to us.

Mobile gaming can save classic game design.

To start off, let's have some history. The first game to grace the screens of mobile phones was a black-and-white version of the seminal classic *Snake*. It was built into the Nokia 6110 phone and was *Snake*'s simplest incarnation (as if *Snake* could be that complicated). You control an ever-growing line moving constantly around the screen, collecting dots that lengthen you and trying not to crash into a wall or yourself, both of which end the game. Food for thought: why would we automatically interpret a line of pixels as a snake? Why not a worm? Guess we're still not over that whole Garden of Eden thing. Simple, monochrome games like this became standards on many phones without color screens—something Nokia

also introduced in 2001. These were games like *Falling Numbers*—where you would dial your keypad to correspond with numbers falling from the top of the screen to the bottom—and classic, recognizable games like blackjack and poker.

The technical development of the games improved dramatically with the introduction of the J2ME Java Runtime Environment. J2ME allowed most anyone to make a Java application for a cell phone. Later on, the more powerful Binary Runtime Environment for Wireless (BREW) was developed, further pushing the envelope. With more memory and colors than before, mobile gaming could be more sophisticated than ever before. The quick development of technology and resources for mobile gaming is interesting. It's twenty years of game design crammed into ten. It's seeing what would happen if you gave game designers in the '80s current hardware and told them to go nuts.

Mobile gaming is a rapidly growing industry. Business Week cites a study by Screen Digest reporting that in 2010 the revenue from mobile-game downloads will be nearly $8.4 billion. The unique aspect of the market is that you simply can't go out and buy a game for your cell phone like you can with your Nintendo DS or Sony PSP. In order to purchase a game you want, your carrier has to have

it in their list, making carrier relationships vital to the developers. But how do the companies advertise these games? I recently observed an ad for *Doom RPG* on GameFAQs and rarely I'll see an advertisement in an industry magazine, but other than this, when is the last time you ever saw an ad for a mobile game? Usually all a carrier provides is a small description, maybe a screenshot, and a price tag. This adds an inherent element of danger to downloads, because at up to $9.00 a game, the price can add up quickly for games that you may later find to suck. The interesting thing though, is that the sales curve for mobile games is almost the opposite of console games. Whereas most console games are advertised and marketed so that as many people will get it at launch as possible, most mobile games catch on slowly and end up progressively selling better not because of any direct marketing, but because of word of mouth.

I recently talked to Taline Augereau, a market researcher at Genplay. Genplay has developed several in-house games for mobile phones, as well as several ports of popular Namco classics like *Galaga*. It's Taline's opinion that while the market for the games is on the rise, mobile gaming will never be more than a simple distraction, incapable of any sort of artistic expression. Maybe we'll never see a *Silent Hill* or a *Xenogears* on a cell phone, but is this a bad thing?

Right now, if I open my phone, within five movements of my thumb, several games are available to me. I can play *Orcs & Elves* (a fantasy-themed role-playing game built on the *Doom RPG* engine), Bejeweled (a puzzler that's seen huge success in the market), *Megaman, Galaga, Tetris, Ghosts 'n Goblins, Doom RPG*, and *Afterburner II*. I can load up these games
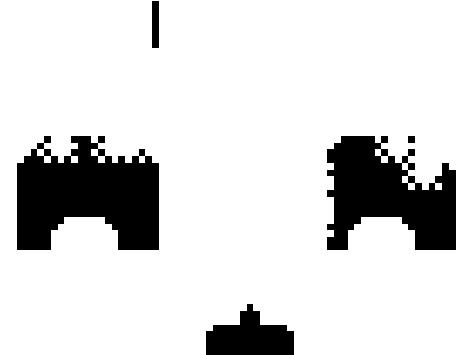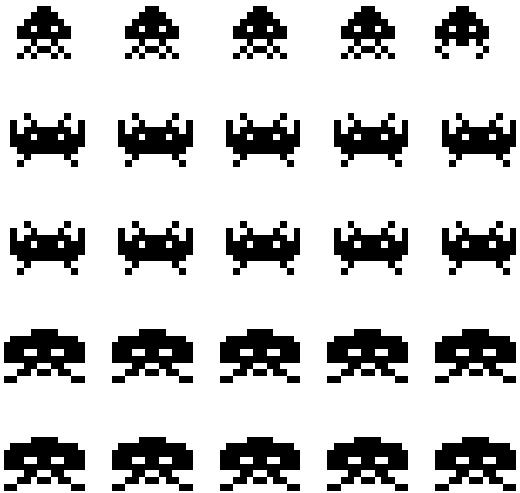
at any point without the need to change out cartridges or CDs. Whether it be while I'm waiting in line somewhere, riding in a car with a friend, or if I'm just simply bored, I can open my phone up, go to my games and play something for a moment. Moment is the key word here. Moments are what mobile games were made for. I can play Tetris just long enough to get a tetris. I can clear the first level of *Ghosts 'n Goblins.* I can shoot down ten planes in *Afterburner II.* It's this ability to play for a moment, and then stop without any obligation to continue, that makes mobile gaming so attractive to me. I'm the sort of person that will pop in a shoot-'em-up like Ikaruga, play until I've lost one credit, and quit. I'll put in *Resident Evil* and see how far I can get before I get tired and give up, never stopping to save

development, both the pros and the cons. He brings up the point that, generally, the budget for mobile games is quite small and this limits what you can accomplish and how long you can spend on the project. Carmack observes a paradox in that the technology is only going to improve, but the budgets are going to stay the same. To quote Carmack, "It will still wind up being like developing an Xbox title for $500,000." Though, is this really a bad thing? I see it as a major advantage to small companies wishing to break into a rapidly growing market. It's a chance for independent developers to get high-quality, innovative products to customers without a big corporate budget. In a lot of ways, I see the mobile gaming market as the Wild West of the games industry. Right now, it's a level playing field, and

having to worry about quality. It's going back to the old technique of brand loyalty, and as far as mobile gaming goes, it works to an extent. The problem is that it places limits on innovation, something that really doesn't help in the long run. Sure, you can make an action game, but it better have a Marvel Comics superhero in it! Want to make that racing game? Better base it on *The Fast and the Furious!* The market is full of ports of classic games and playable versions of current movies and hit television shows. With Jamdat—one of the major players in the mobile games industry—now owned by Electronic Arts, I can honestly only see this problem getting worse. But, mobile gaming can be much more, if only because of the inherent limitations of the format!

Carmack touches on this, but I really don't think he understands exactly what he's discovered. *Doom 3* was a perfect example of this. The visuals in *Doom 3* were amazing for the time, yes, but the major complaint from critics of the game was that the gameplay itself wasn't up to par. It was as if Carmack had been playing with Lincoln Logs for years, but then his parents bought him the shiniest, newest, most complicated set of Legos they could get. In the end, he just didn't know what to do with it all. They spent too much time focusing on visuals and not enough time figuring out how to make a solid shooter. But, if you play *Doom RPG*, you'll understand where he went wrong. Did he really need all that power and all the flashy visuals to make a good game?

When he was making *Doom RPG*, he realized quickly that he couldn't make a real-time 3-D engine, or even a ray caster like the one used in Doom, and have it run on the widest range of phones possible. What Carmack also realized is that

the gamepad on the phone itself—usually a tiny little directional pad—was not very fun to use with action-intensive games. So, what Carmack did was build the game around the way the player interacted with it; he made it turn-based. This not only allowed the game engine to run smoothly, it allowed the game to be more user-friendly and fun to play. I found out, with *Doom RPG,* that Carmack wasn't a bad game designer; he simply needed limitations.

Limitations make games great. Limitations keep you focused. *Metal Gear* was originally envisioned as an action game, but ended up focusing on being stealthy. This was not because that was the game Kojima wanted to make, but because the MSX couldn't handle lots of scrolling or a high number of on-screen sprites very well. In the end, these limitations caused *Metal Gear* to become something memorable and exciting, instead of just another run-and-gun. People still program amazing and beautiful games for Tim Sweeney's text-based masterpiece ZZT, even though the limitations on what you can do with it are horribly severe (think text-mode with a basic ASCII character set for graphics). Limitations force innovation, whether the designer wants it or not. Limitations made *Doom RPG* a better game than *Doom 3.*

Increasingly, games have become more complicated, placing more and more elements in when they're probably not needed. When I was a young lad, playing bootleg floppies on my Atari 800 8-bit computer, I didn't have cinema scenes; I had gameplay. I would slide in *Bruce Lee,* proceed to kick ninjas and sumo wrestlers in the face, turn the game off and go outside to throw a Frisbee or something. These games didn't have cut-scenes or even dialogue. Hell, most
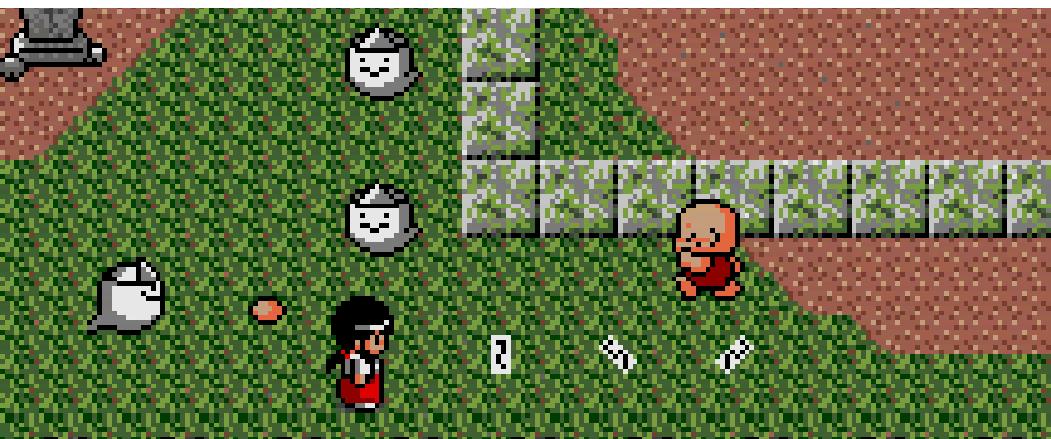
along the way. Needless to say, this has made playing many role-playing games quite hard. But with the games on my phone, there's no obligation to keep playing more than a few minutes.

John Carmack, of *Doom* fame, keeps a blog where he's posted several interesting observations about mobile gaming

any hotshot programmer has a chance to be a hero. Though, there's one problem.

Remember earlier when I said there was a major lack of advertising, and that downloading the games is a risk sometimes? To avert this, companies will use a movie tie-in or a recognized brand to sucker in curious customers, without

of them didn't even have proper endings. There were always more ninjas to kick. If the game ran out, well, you started over. Games were games, movies were movies, and books were books. I liked the simplicity of it all. Everything's become so complicated these days, what with all this line-blurring and all. Am I such a bad person to want to play a game, just to play a game?

It isn't a matter of old-school vs. new-school though. It's a matter of games focusing on what's really important. The limitations on time, budget, and technology in mobile games are preserving this simplicity. The idea that mobile gaming will only get more complicated and obfuscated as the technology evolves worries me. It makes me really hope that Carmack's prediction comes true, and that for the most part, the games will stay the same, just on more powerful hardware.

Even if the catalogs are currently full of hastily made ports of games I played as a kid, mobile gaming has the potential to rediscover a design methodology that's long been bogged down in unnecessary garbage. Is it any surprise that one the most downloaded game for cell phones is Tetris? Why would anyone rather play Nethack instead of *Final Fantasy X?* Nostalgia can't be the whole reason people enjoy Sonic the Hedgehog and don't enjoy Shadow the Hedgehog. There's got to be some reason why *Duck Hunt* is more fun for some people than *Time Crisis 3*. Too many designers have forgotten that there is beauty in simplicity, and power in restraint. Flash does not necessarily equal fun and bloom effects don't always make that level look better. As of yet, mobile gaming hasn't fulfilled what it possibly could on a design level. Ignacio Reyes, another Genplay employee has

some interesting views on the future of the medium. He suggested the possibility of using cameras built into phones to play certain games (imagine a Fatal Frame game played by using the phone's camera to take pictures of ghosts superimposed over the real world) and of having games that give players the opportunity to play and manage characters in online games such as *World of Warcraft* while on the move.

Doom RPG is a step in the right direction, even if the creators only vaguely understand what they've accomplished or where they were going. The possibility is there though. The bat is in the developer's hands; it's up to them to swing.

Mobile games may never make you shed a tear, or think deeply about life and the universe. Ironically, classic gaming is saving mobile gaming, while mobile gaming is saving classic games. These games will probably never be considered artful or moving. But this is the point I'm trying to make. Mobile games need to keep the designs of classic games in mind and not try to be something they're not. The moment is what mobile games are made for, and designers need to keep this in mind. As Augereau put it so well, games played on your phone are "just a certain pastime for those boring moments."

And you know what? I wouldn't have it any other way. 🎮

Break time!

I WISH LEON WOULD SAVE ME... FROM THESE LOAD TIMES.

2006

The N-Gage is Dead;
Long Live the N-Gage

Nokia—N-Gage
By Wes Ehrlichman

Part I: The History of the N-Gage

In November of 2005, Antti Vasara, Nokia's vice president for corporate strategy, made the announcement that "N-Gage is still being sold, but it was not a success in the sense of developing a new category," effectively rendering Nokia's entry into the games market dead. No gamer anywhere was surprised by this news. The system had been around for two years and they had only sold two million of the projected six million systems. To call it a failure would be an understatement. To most, the N-Gage was dead on arrival, spent two zombified years digging its grave, and then jumped in it when the aforementioned announcement was made. A funny event followed this announcement, though; almost as if someone important at Nokia's games division was sick on the day that the memo was sent out, Nokia continued to support their device. Throughout late 2005 and early this year, Nokia released several brand-new games, with more to follow. I was intrigued when I noticed this was happening. I've never met a gamer that was able to take the N-Gage very seriously, but maybe Nokia themselves

were. Could it be possible that they were spending all of this money and all of this time trying to figure out exactly what it was that gamers want, making costly misstep after costly misstep nearly the entire way?

When this thought hit me, I decided to buy a second-hand N-Gage to see if the system was ever actually worth owning. The results have been "interesting." But before I get into that, let's take a deeper look at what went wrong.

Actually, I lied. Let's look at what went right before we get into the bad stuff. Contrary to popular belief, the N-Gage actually did do a few things correctly. At the time of its release, it was extremely powerful by handheld standards. With enough effort on the developer's part, the N-Gage could accurately emulate games from the Playstation generation. The device's form itself solved several of the problems that continue to plague cell-phone games by simply coming closer to resembling a videogame-controller layout, and doing so without removing the standard ten-button cell-phone keypad. Despite the large number of buttons, the system did a pretty good job of relieving confusion by elevating the two main action buttons and keeping non-game-related buttons to the edges of the button field. It was also the first videogame system to feature wireless

multiplayer over the Bluetooth standard, and the system could communicate through more than just the phone by allowing you to check your e-mail or do instant messaging, with the potential to some day use these features in games. The original N-Gage also doubled as an audio player, allowing you to play MP3 or AAC music files on your phone, or even record your own from the built-in FM radio. It also had all of the standard cell-phone features such as a calendar, alarm, and access to the World Wide Web. It was a powerful device with pretty much any feature a cell-phone user would want at the time.

It's also worth noting that the packaging for N-Gage games was phenomenal. Every game featured a color instruction book, a two-sided poster, and a sturdy case that looked like a DVD case but was half the height. Within the case was room for two games and another, even smaller, plastic case that was included with each game and could be removed and used to carry up to four games or memory cards. Most cell-phone games don't come with any packaging at all, so it was nice to know that Nokia took

very seriously the fact that their games were a physical product which you could buy in stores. Unfortunately, packaging is small in the grand scheme of things, and this wasn't enough to make up for some of the other issues that the N-Gage had.

With the good out of the way, let's look at what went wrong. Better get comfortable though, because other than being a powerful game device and fairly well-rounded cell phone, the answer to that question is: "pretty much everything." For a phone that was meant to combine a cell phone and a game machine, the N-Gage had at least one important detail of each of these functions deeply flawed. When used as a cell phone, users were made to look like complete idiots by holding the device up to their heads on its side like a taco. Using the device to play games wasn't much better, as when players wanted to switch games they were required to take the battery out, swap games, and wait for the device to power up again before they could start playing again. The odd way of holding the phone was particularly painful for Nokia, and mockery of the N-Gage actually became a minor

internet fad when the website Sidetalkin' launched. This site showcased hundreds of people holding absurd objects up to the side of their head at odd angles as if using them to talk on the phone.

These weren't the only problems with the device though. The screen was

situations a chore. It also didn't help that despite having so many buttons, some important functions such as volume control were delegated to in-game option screens, making stealth play during business meetings near impossible.

As a cell phone, the system didn't

had been expecting Nokia to launch the system at $199, so it surprised everyone when Nokia announced that when the system hit shelves on October 7th, 2003, it would retail for $299. This price was far above expectations, and unfortunately, not much was shown at the expo to

awareness. A huge audience of people now knew what the N-Gage was, and the Nokia name meant an abundance of coverage from both gaming and technological media. A lot of coverage doesn't guarantee good coverage though, and although it was clear Nokia had spent a
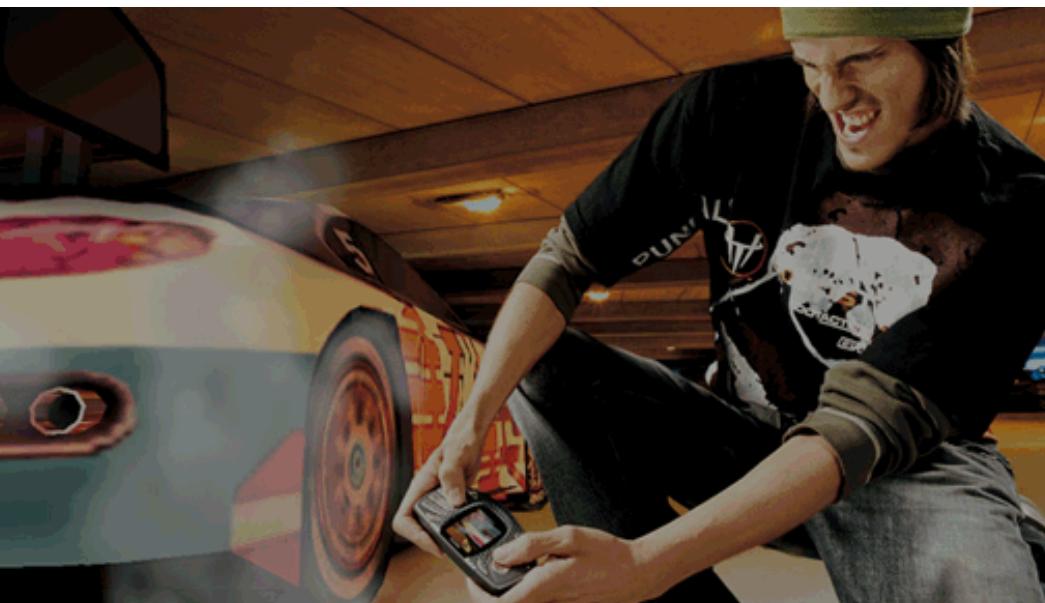
vertically oriented, which can be good for some puzzle games and scrolling shooters, but bad for nearly every other genre. Developers learned to make do, but some of the early games suffered greatly because of it. *Sonic N,* for example, added horizontal bars at the top and bottom of the screen, reducing the already-small screen to an even more difficult-to-see size. Also, despite being well placed, the number of buttons was another issue. It made sense for a phone to have a full ten-key number pad, but the N-Gage had twenty-one buttons, and as a gaming device, this made finding the right buttons to press in different

fare much better. The screen wasn't as bright and crisp as it could have been, and while the talk time was comparable to cell-phone standards at the time, playing a game for longer than a few minutes would reduce the battery considerably. It quickly became obvious to all that the system was a jack of all trades, master of none. But as with all consumer electronics, this can be forgiven if the price is right.

In May of 2003 at the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo, Nokia revealed much of their remaining plans for the system—including the price—and not all was good news. Major gaming websites

justify that price. Games were set to run anywhere from $30–40 a piece, which was a little on the high end, but much closer to what was expected. Interest continued to fade.

Further complicating things was Sony's announcement at the same event that they also had plans to enter the handheld arena. This meant that Nokia would have not only Nintendo's Game Boy Advance, the reigning champ of the handheld arena, to deal with, but also a new console by the number one home-console manufacturer in the world.

Despite these setbacks, E3 provided Nokia with one important benefit: brand

large amount of money advertising the N-Gage, their ads didn't always get the point across. Many of the posters and brochures distributed at E3 were openly mocked by the gaming community. One particular ad displayed a guy in his twenties kneeling down near a skateboard and a NASCAR car, holding his N-Gage in a way that makes it look like he's either really getting into the game he's playing, or trying his hardest to keep the console as far away as possible. Mike Krahulik, from popular gaming webcomic *Penny Arcade,* responded to this advertisement in a public news post by asking, "Is this supposed to make me

want to buy your pile of shit phone? Am I supposed to relate to this jackass? Is that a gamer? What the fuck is wrong with his face?" This began a streak of webcomics in which *Penny Arcade* would make fun of nearly every wrong move Nokia made.

Feeling the overall gamer apathy when E3 ended, Nokia went on the offensive and publicly attacked not only Nintendo, but also Nintendo gamers. In a Dow Jones article, Ilkka Raiskinen, head of Nokia's entertainment division was quoted as saying, "Game Boy is for ten-year-olds. If you're twenty or twenty-five years old, it's probably not a good idea to draw a Game Boy out of your pocket on a Friday night in a public place." This comment quickly spread throughout gaming news networks not only because it established that Nokia had no clue who their audience was, but also because it established who they felt their audience had been in the first place. Prior to this comment, the N-Gage had been marketed as a cell phone that doubled as a game machine instead of a game machine that doubled as a cell phone. By establishing that they felt their competition

was Nintendo rather than cell-phone manufacturers such as Motorola, Samsung, and Sony-Ericsson, Nokia raised the expectations of the gaming community. It's likely that this fact hurt their business much more than insulting their customers had. When viewed as a phone that plays games, the N-Gage was actually pretty impressive; but as a game machine that doubles as a phone, it wasn't quite up to snuff.

On October 7th, 2003, the system finally launched. Despite the strong product awareness brought by both widespread marketing and internet mockery, the system launched to sales that are rumored to be below five thousand units. I was working at Gamestop at the time of release, and I can say from my experience that interest was extremely low. We had a total of two sales in our entire district the morning it was released. The game selection and sales were just as pitiful. Not a single original title was available at launch, and several of their games were, ironically after Raiskinen's comments, ports of Game Boy Advance games. Unlike other

systems, the N-Gage is still a perfectly viable purchase without any games, and many customers were content without buying any.

Two weeks after the unit launched, on October 23, 2003, Gamestop and Electronics Boutique stores everywhere reduced the price of the N-Gage by $100, making the price $199.99. This price tag was much more rational, but dropping the system's cost so drastically early in the system's lifespan didn't do much to reinforce people's faith in the N-Gage. Even worse, the price drop didn't improve sales by much at all, and early adopters who had at this point spent $100 extra to have the system a few weeks ahead of time felt betrayed by Nokia.

So what could they have done better? The easy answer is that they should have done the inverse of everything listed above, but really there's more to it than that. The question remains whether the concept of a cell phone and gaming device in one is flawed. I don't believe it is, but I don't think there's any doubt that the two need to be handled a bit differently than how Nokia handled the N-Gage. For convergence to work, the device needs to exceed or at least meet the standards of all the products the device is meant to combine. In the N-Gage's case, it did not. Convergence should save the customer money by utilizing the parts of the products that overlap. The N-Gage was portable, had an LCD screen, played music, and had a powerful processor, all of which are present in both portable gaming systems and mobile phones. Using these parts of the N-Gage for both functions may have saved Nokia money, but their flaw was that they didn't pass these savings on to the customer.

Gamers often say, "It's all about

the games," but as a company that's primarily focused on hardware, Nokia must not have understood this. Their biggest failure—the one without which they may have been able to make the device a success—was the lack of a single game at or near launch that didn't have an alternative, better version on another system. It wasn't just a lack of a killer app that did the N-Gage in; it was the lack of any unique applications at all. The system launched with a lineup consisting of nothing but ports of existing console and handheld games. *Pandemonium, Tony Hawk,* and *Tomb Raider* were all ports of Playstation games, *Sonic N* and *Super Monkey Ball* were ports of GBA versions of these games, and *Puzzle Bobble VS,* and *Puyo Pop* were half-assed original versions of games that had already appeared on virtually every other console imaginable. Launching with even a single game that Nokia could point to as representing the N-Gage's unique experience would have helped them immensely.

Worse yet, without any original games or characters to focus on, their website and marketing materials focused on *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft as their unofficial mascot. Lara's original game was seven years old when it arrived on the N-Gage, and after several mediocre sequels on the original Playstation and a nearly unanimous bashing of her four-month-old Playstation 2 debut, Lara had lost nearly all of her appeal. In some ways Lara Croft did make a good mascot for the N-Gage as her latter games represent how a company that's out of touch with what its customers want can destroy something with a lot of potential.

It's difficult to blame the lack of games exclusively. It's likely that more games may have come along if Nokia had solved
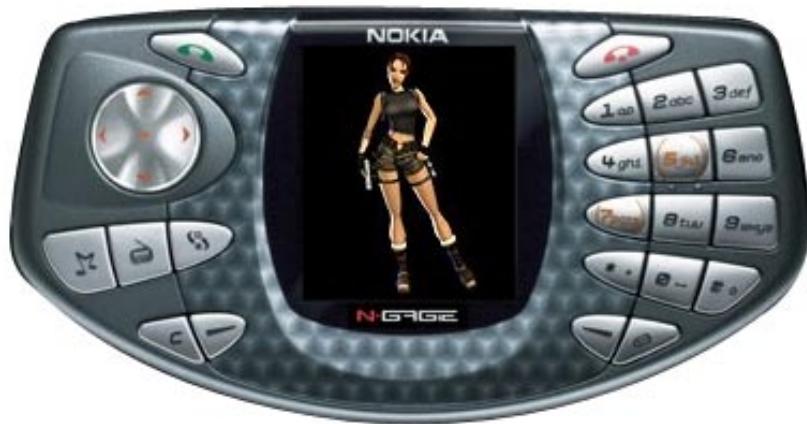
the obvious hardware issues prior to launch and gotten a decent installed user base. It's not always a good idea to listen to gamer opinion when releasing a game or game console, but in this case Nokia could have benefited from responding to their critics. Side talkin' and removing the battery to change games were complained about as early as March 2003, when developers and US Press first got their hands on the system at the Game Developers' Conference. If

that fixed nearly every aspect of their ill-fated system: the N-Gage QD. With this release, the design was modified so that the player was no longer forced to remove the battery in order to change game discs, and, much to the chagrin of side talkers everywhere, the phone could now be held like a normal phone. They also reduced the size, making the outer edge and buttons rubberized and more durable in the process. This updated design wasn't all pluses though, Nokia

With this cheaper-to-manufacture device the cost of the system was also reduced. Offering rebates for new cell-phone contracts was explicitly forbidden by Nokia prior to the release of the QD—perhaps as a way to make the device more appealing for standard game stores to stock—but with the release of the QD, Nokia actively pushed service-contract rebates, which would bring the device's cost down to $99 from the standard $199 if taken advantage of.

The QD also brought with it the N-Gage's most unique feature, the N-Gage Arena. The Arena was Nokia's network for playing N-Gage games online. In order to start up the service they actually bought Sega.com, a force that had been instrumental in bringing the Dreamcast online just a few years prior. Nokia very clearly took the Arena seriously, and ended up creating a service very similar to Xbox Live; with friends lists, online rankings and tournaments, game demos, chat, and message boards all accessible directly from the phone twenty-four hours a day. This was Nokia's greatest achievement yet, but few games took advantage of it right away.

With its lower price and vast hardware improvements Nokia's system sales improved. In September of 2004, they sold their millionth device; far from the six million they estimated, but much better than the five thousand systems sold at launch. Improved hardware alone would not be enough to turn around the system's successes. They would need better games. The platform continued to receive nothing but ports of games from other systems right up until the release of the QD. Thankfully, around the time the QD hit shelves, Nokia began to release internally designed games that seemed tailor-made for the system. It is unknown

whether the influx of new titles was by design or by lack of developer support, but during the N-Gage's second year, Nokia finally began creating games that couldn't be found or wouldn't be possible on other handheld platforms, and some of them were surprisingly good.

Shortly after their millionth system sold, the N-Gage had its biggest influx of games yet. In November of 2004, eight new N-Gage games were released: *Call of Duty; Requiem of Hell; Pocket Kingdom: Own the World; The Elder Scrolls Travels: Shadowkey; Asphalt: Urban GT; Fifa Soccer 2005; Colin McRae Rally 2005;* and *Pathway to Glory*. This marked the first time that Nokia showed a clear focus on original games, and some of these games, *Pathway to Glor*y in particular, were actually very good.

Finally realizing that "if you build it they will come" only works for baseball stadiums, Nokia began to show off their renewed focus on quality to people who could get the word out, sending advance copies of the new device and its upcoming games to a broader range of major magazines and websites. Sites like *Penny Arcade,* who seemed to have done nothing but mock the system relentlessly from the beginning, were given a chance to see how the N-Gage's faults had been rectified. *Penny Arcade*'s Jerry Holkins summed up the marked change in competency in his news post for November 26, 2004: "Are they finally figuring something out? That they have created a platform with strengths and weaknesses, and that development can accentuate one of those and downplay the other? I'll be God damned."

Nokia had finally weeded out all of their mistakes and the N-Gage seemed to be doing everything right. Unfortunately, November 2004 also marked the US

Nokia had listened to the criticisms that arose here they would have saved a lot of money and ridicule, but instead they chose to wait until it was obvious that these things were affecting sales to do something about them.

On July 26, 2004, less than a year after the original N-Gage's introduction, Nokia released a revised version of the N-Gage

also removed some of the less used and more costly features, such as the FM radio, the MP3 player/recorder, and stereo output from the device's speakers. Strangely, despite removing the radio and music player buttons, an "accept" button was added, reducing the number buttons on the QD to a total of twenty instead of the original's twenty-one.

release of the Nintendo DS and the Japanese release of Sony's PSP. Nokia's competition was heating up just as they had established that they were ready to be taken seriously. Then more than ever, it would have paid for Nokia to have marketed the machine as a game console with cell-phone features rather than a cell phone that plays the best games. They could compete at least technologically with their previous rival, the Game Boy Advance, but the DS and the rapidly approaching PSP were much more powerful. Gamers shopping for cell phones were not tempted to get an N-Gage because it was seen as inferior to these devices, while non-gamers shopping for cell phones weren't tempted to get it because it was viewed as a phone for gamers.

The system continued to sell sporadically over the next year, bolstered by intermittent releases of games such as *King of Fighters: Extreme; X-Men*

Legends; Falcom's *Xanadu Next;* and a graphically impressive *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*. Some of the games released during this period were also on other systems, but unlike past ports, these were the best portable versions of the games available. They actually took advantage of the system's features while downplaying its faults. In other efforts to promote the system and the Arena service, Nokia began to offer free copies of the game *Snake,* a 3-D enhanced, next-generation version of the game that everyone played on their TI-83 calculators in high school. Despite its shallow, thumbpad-only gameplay (or perhaps because of it), the game worked extremely well on the device. It was the perfect type of game to play at places where people often break out their cell phones to play games, and the game received rave reviews because of it. Unfortunately, at this point in the system's life, too many mistakes had been made and the damage had been done. The PSP, DS, and Game Boy Advance were all doing so well that any good news Nokia had about its system ended up getting lost in the shuffle.

And thus when David went up against the giant Goliath, he was trampled to death under his mighty feet. With its final and most important retail support gone, the most unique titles of the N-Gage's entire lifespan—titles such as *Glimmerati; System Rush; Catan; Rifts: Promise of Power; X-Men Legends 2; One; Mile High Pinball; High Seize;* and *Pathway to Glory: Ikusa Islands*—were released for sale through online sites only and barely found an audience at all. Every single one of these games was released between the months of August and October of 2005, with many of them falling in November, the same

month of Antti Vasara's announcement that the device's retail life was over. This must have been the point that it became painfully obvious to Nokia that no matter how much work they put into making the system worthwhile it was never going to take off.

Part II: With the N-Gage Dead, My Interest Was Finally Piqued

It is through the N-Gage's final games, *Catan* specifically, that my desire to own one—rather than simply following the odd history of its lifespan—was sparked. I've always been interested in the boardgame *Settlers of Catan,* but I had never had the chance to play it. I first learned about the game while working at BradyGames one summer during college. One of the editors, Ken Schmitt, would spend much of his downtime playing an online-enabled DOS version of the game. When I came into his office to watch him play, the strange hexagon-covered grid and screen full of menus would stare back at me, appearing as a complicated statistics problem just begging to be solved. I couldn't understand a single thing that was going on, and I barely had any idea what the point of the game was, but I knew that certain pieces needed to go to certain places so that certain numbers were larger than other numbers, and I desperately wanted to know what those pieces and numbers meant. As I watched the screen, baffled by the numbered menus he was selecting from, he informed about the game's history. The game he was playing was an adaptation of a German boardgame that he played a lot in college. *Settlers of Catan* haa a huge following in the geek underground, and the version he was playing was an unofficial fan adaptation. By that point,

I was extremely interested in the game, but at the time I knew no one else who would have been willing to play it with me, and I wasn't quite compelled enough to learn how to play the game by myself, so I quickly filed it in the back of my mind where its memory waited to be sparked again.

That spark came, oddly enough, at the Tokyo Game Show in 2002. Capcom had bought the rights to bring the game to Japan, and were releasing it as both a board game and an online-enabled Playstation 2 version (the disc was free, but there was a monthly fee to play it). To help make the game appeal to Japanese customers, they had hired Susumu Matsushita, the cover artist of the number one gaming magazine in Japan, *Famitsu,* to do the artwork of the in-game characters. At the show, I received a cardboard approximation of the game board, along with a sheet of plastic houses and a page of instructions. It was all in Japanese so I couldn't read it, but I knew that since one of my favorite Japanese companies had bought the rights to the game, it had to be something special. I waited and waited for a US release of the videogame to come, but the it was destined to stay in Japan.

With one exception: the N-Gage version.

The one and only N-Gage game ever to be released by Capcom also happens to be the only version of *Settlers of Catan* to ever appear on in America on a videogame platform. The online playable N-Gage version used the same cute Susumu Matsushita artwork as the Japanese release, and from the screenshots it was apparent that the game was as full of numbers and menus as ever. These screenshots were enough to
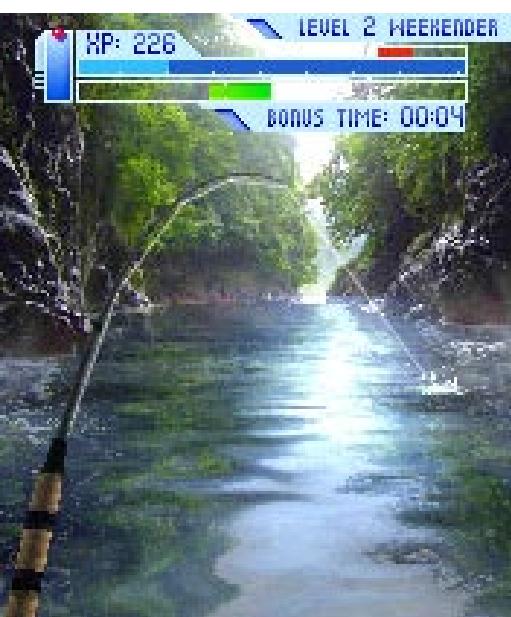
inspire me to begin my search for an N-Gage and its games.

To tackle this mission, I set off to the local GameStop, the only store in which I'd ever seen N-Gage games being sold. After reminding the employees for the thousandth time that I'm not interested in selling back my used games, I wandered over to the N-Gage bin. There was no *Catan* to be found, but I was able to find most of the N-Gage's library for just $6.99 per game. As I sifted through the bin, one of the employees walked over to me.

"You got an N-Gage yet?" he said.

"No, not yet, but I've been looking around for one," I said.

"I hate it."

"What?" I said, confused.

"That system is garbage," he said.

"So you've played it?" I asked.

"Yeah man. It's garbage," he said, sure of himself.

"Well yeah, the system itself may suck, but isn't it all about the games?" was my response. "So, do you have any systems in?"

"No, and I wouldn't sell one to you if we did," he said.

Even though I didn't have a device yet, I ended up buying *Pathway to Glory*; T*he Elder Scrolls Travels: Shadowkey;* and *Pocket Kingdom,* partially just to spite the employee. I had the employee check in their tracking system for *Catan* and discovered that Gamestop had never carried it. They had stopped carrying new N-Gage games shortly before *Catan* was released, so continuing my search there was futile. With Gamestop out of the picture, I knew the only place I'd be able to find *Catan* was the internet—or so I thought. Amazon, eBay, and Froogle had all returned no results, and most major online retailers didn't even have any N-Gage games at all. I did end up purchasing a system from eBay, but without *Catan* my mission would be a failure. I guess when the N-Gage died, it did its best to leave no traces of its remains. Having given up the hope that I would actually be able to buy a copy of *Catan*, I ended up calling in a favor from a friend who works at a major gaming website. He was able to send me a copy of the game as well as several other late N-Gage games.

Later that week when my system arrived, I could finally see if the N-Gage's bad reputation was truly deserved. It turns out that my suspicions were right and the system was far from terrible. It certainly has its share of bad games, but that much I had known. As expected, the games that understand and take advantage of the N-Gage's strengths are extremely good. *Pathway to Glory* is the best military strategy game I've played since *Advance Wars,* and *Pocket Kingdom* is the type of game that works perfectly on mobile. Surprisingly, the *Elder Scrolls* game was the most disappointing, but that's mostly because the graphics try to push the system almost too far, and as a result the engine chugs along a bit too slowly for my liking.

My other package of games arrived later, including the legendary (at least in my eyes) *Catan*. After all of that build-up, it turns out that I really don't like it that much. I enjoyed trying to figure out how to play it, but now that I understand all of the numbers I don't feel like I have any reason to keep playing. Thankfully, the other games he sent were much better. *Rifts: Promise of Power* is a great mix of American-style role playing with Final *Fantasy Tactics*-style battles, and High *Seize,* a pirate game by the people who made *Pathway to Glory*, is also excellent. He also sent the *Pathway to Glory* sequel, Ikusa Islands, which is every bit as addictive as the original. So the system didn't turn out to be that bad after all. Consider me an N-Gage fan.

Part III: Talking to Nokia

With the N-Gage mostly dead, and no real reason to continue supporting their system, it was strange to see that their booth at E3 had actually grown in size this year. I made it a point to speak with one of their marketing people to find out why.

The Gamer's Quarter: I don't think enough people have looked at the recent N-Gage games.

Nokia: What we've found is that, even in the community today, you see that you have a lot of dedicated fanbase. They like the games, but not everybody wanted a cell phone that looked like a gamer's device. The hardcore, a lot of them carry the iPod and then the PSP as a dedicated machine, so now what we're doing is taking N-Gage games and releasing them on a variety of phones. Our phones are quite high-end, and we have different models. When we launch in the first half of next year, there will be approximately five to seven devices in that product portfolio that the gamer will be able to go out and purchase and actually have the ability to play games on.

Here are our estimates for next year with our sales of devices. The platform launch should be about fifty million devices by the end of next year. So that opens up our games to many more people. The other problem we've found is that when people buy mobile games, there's a bit of a fragmentation problem. Some of the games you can only get from your carrier, some of the games you can only get online.

TGQ: I've found that finding games is a very difficult part of playing mobile games because you've got to wade through everything.

Nokia: What we've developed is a play application that's embedded on every device that we ship, and it allows you to buy, manage, and share all of your games. You can invite friends via a friends list or you can compare games. It's very similar to the [Xbox] Live kind of environment that you've got on the console side. So you can purchase a game for a day. Purchase it for three days, for a week, or purchase it outright.

TGQ: Is the old N-Gage related to the new N-Gage at all, or is it mainly a brand of

first party games? Are you still going to purchase games in the store or … ?

Nokia: No, the first N-Gage was very directed at retail. We learned a lot of lessons from that. Now we have this play application embedded on the phones. If you look at all the women that play Snake and how addictive that was, you'll see that they play a lot of embedded games. So if we have, say, fifty million sales at the end of next year, we can embed an application on there and carefully design it so that one click will buy the game. And there will be an over-the-air distribution that would be like a two-to-three-meg file size. See, the experience that I'm thinking of—and that Nokia is thinking of—is if you're on the road, you can buy the game right there and get it. Or you can check in—this particular phone, the N-91, will link to my music. You can buy the game, transfer the game to my phone. My phone immediately knows how to install it, set it up, and register it.

TGQ: What did you think when Bill Gates got on the floor at the Microsoft conference and said that mobile phones are going to have your Xbox Live friends list and all of the Live features? Is that your competition now?

Nokia: Could be. He's going in the right direction. You want to take everything with you. Not speaking as a Nokia employee, I'm a 360 fanatic. If I could have an application on my phone that kept all my friends with me and say, "Hey I'm gonna be home at 5:00, and we'll be able to hook up at this time," or somebody texts me, one of my friends, and says, "A new Oblivion pack is released, gotta get it tonight," and he's in a completely different time zone or something, I'm totally

open to that. And that's where we're going too. With our mobile application, we're now connected to the PC as well, so I mean it's all about just managing the games and what he talked about.

TGQ: I thought part of the focus of the original N-Gage was to try to alleviate some of the problems with mobile-phone games. It looks like, with these phones, you have are moving back in the opposite direction. Let's take the issue with the controls, for example. It's harder to design games when they've got to accommodate specific phone layouts.

Nokia: I don't think we're being handicapped in any way by the devices. We're not saying, "We're developing our game based on this medium, and we can't have complexity or any of that nature." A few of our devices on the road map, in the long run, and even in the short run, will be optimized for gaming. This one [pointing to the N-91] is optimized for music, as you can see. You see, at any time I can play, stop … We will have phones like that in the product line. It's a matter of choice. From our feedback, we've seen that a lot of people didn't buy the N-Gage because they didn't want to be known as a gamer. But they still game, and they still want to have the cool phones that slide out or do whatever.

TGQ: It seems like the N-Gage's failure was mainly due to the marketing and positioning as opposed to the virtues of the system. It seemed to be positioned as something for gamers. Rather than as a cell phone that played games, it was positioned as a game system that doubled as a cell phone. Switching that up, just that alone, would have helped immensely with that perception.

Nokia: The positioning was and still is: it's a phone for gamers; if you're a gamer, buy this phone. Now there are a lot of people that game. Like myself, I consider myself a hardcore gamer, I don't necessarily have to have the widescreen landscape because I still want all of the other features of my phone: the Wi-Fi, the pictures, the music. Just like with all of our devices, each one will be targeted at a specific segment. So it all goes back to the original question, "Well, what is N-Gage?" Is N-Gage a device? Is N-Gage games? That brand that we've invested in is the experience. The N-Gage experience is a quality game. Above Java, above what you've experienced before, all of those headaches you've had with purchasing your content.

TGQ: So is this new direction for the N-Gage kind of a direct response to the feedback that—a lot of people have said lately that there's just a huge number of mobile games. There's so many that the only way to know what to buy is to base it on a license, and you're not buying them for the experience. You're not netting the hardcore gamers with the licenses. You're getting the sale of that game, and that's it. By building the N-Gage brand are you trying to theoretically become something like the Nintendo of handhelds, where people buy a game regardless, just because they know it's quality?

Nokia: That's what we want. Any game that we develop first-party—and third-party content as well—should be of quality because of the tools they have. If you look at N-Gage's history, the majority of our games have scored pretty well—the ones that we've really pushed. When you take *Pathway to Glory* and such, each of those have their own dedicated

fanbase. We're not just going to take a recent movie license and just put it on the phone. There's got to be something about the game that makes it fun and addictive.

TGQ: There's a big difference in how you can price a physical product versus a digital download because the digital download feels a lot more temporary than a physical product in terms of ownership. Paying more than $10 is hard to justify to yourself when you're on your phone, so how are you going to price things?

Nokia: We've done pricing studies, and I've seen some of the numbers. It varies per region. Since Nokia's a global company, games typically have to be lower priced in Asia/Pacific. In Europe, people are willing to pay a little more, and in the USA—actually some of the games, you know, I bought Skipping Stone the other day, I think it was from a European company, for $5. I know what I'm getting. Skipping Stone is a Java experience—one button and pretty simple. So, OK, that was $5, that's what people are willing to pay now. I think some of the other games go for $6.99 or $7.99 USA. That's what people are paying for that kind of content. We're looking at the pricing model now. How much development goes into these games? How comprehensive are they? And if the customer's not willing to pay a certain amount that they may deem too high, can we offer them a smaller amount to …

TGQ: Episodic content kinda thing?

Nokia: Exactly. Well, certainly that's in our road map for add-on packs and bits and pieces. I don't have the figures on Oblivion in terms of their horse armor or the quarry quests but certainly I bought

them, and I know a lot of other people that did.

TGQ: You bought the horse armor?
Nokia: Not the horse armor!

TGQ: I don't know anybody who …

Nokia: Actually, I did buy the horse armor. If people actually like the game, they're willing to pay for the experience.

TGQ: I bought Zuma for $10, but it has nothing to do with how deep it was. It was because it was $10. I wouldn't have paid any more than that. If you're going to price things more than that, it's probably something that you're going to have to move the market into.

Nokia: One way we might price things is this. Let's say you have this fishing game, and you really enjoyed Costa Rica, and you had a blast, and you're power level-ing, you hit that sector gate that says, Ok, we're taking you to Scotland—a level we're working on right now is Loch Ness, right? So you hit that sector gate and that little red dot says, "Aww, gee, you don't have this pack yet, do you want it?" You know, maybe they're willing to pay $4–5 for that because they know the experi-ence, and they know that they've been playing on the plane, the bus, wherever. That's why we're doing a lot of investiga-tion into the pricing.

TGQ: That's a good way to do it, to kind of sneak an extra dollar here or there.

Nokia: Well you know, it isn't really sneaking, you're spending …

TGQ: Well no, obviously if they're going to get to the point where they need more

content, then they liked the game well enough to pay for it.

Nokia: But you're right, we have to move that price point. We can't just say, "OK, here's Java poker for $5; we're going to price ours at $8."

TGQ: And it's in 3-D, and it's really nice, but you'd have to get across that it has all of these nice features by letting them try it.

Nokia: And we both know that free trials really drive a lot of full purchases. You want to try it first.

It all comes down to quality. Your first point was, you know, everybody just does movie licenses—you've got Paris Hilton doing *Jewel Jam,* you've got all these other titles, but whether we develop High Seize or *Pathway to Glory*, or you know, the games that we're working on, we've got a lot of experience designing for mobile, and we're picking the right developers. We're offering them the right toolsets to make games that are

good. And a huge advantage is knowing what phones are coming next. Our devel-opers already know what's coming next so they can start planning for that.

So that's the big picture. But yeah, I think you're going to be excited. It's going to be interesting. The N-Gage community itself, it wants to live on and it is active. But by taking it outside of this realm—I think there's a lot of people out there that are purchasing very simple games on their phones, and a lot of people are making money, and we want to reach those people as well and sort of say, "Hey, N-Gage quality is something to believe in." You know any game that you get on our platform is going to be pretty solid.

.   .   .   .   .   .

Our talk ended with that, and he took me around the booth, showing me an in-engine movie of the next-generation N-Gage version of the fighting game, *One*. It looks good, really good, but looking at the phones on the floor, I don't think there was a single one that had a button configuration that would make it possible to play a full-featured fighting game other than the N-Gage. The next game he showed me was a Wild West game with big-headed characters. It had pretty backgrounds and nice explosions, but the stylized characters looked really out of place on the realistic western backgrounds, so I wasn't all that impressed. The final next-gen game he demonstrated was an unnamed FPS which showed off some awesome lighting effects, superb graphics, and a smooth frame rate. It was probably the most impressive mobile graphics that I had ever seen, but again, when I think about playing that on anything with a standard

cell-phone button layout, I'm turned off. More than anything else, these games made me feel that moving away from being a "phone for gamers" might be a step backward in playability from the current N-Gage design.

Before leaving, he led me over to what may go down as the definitive game for the current N-Gage, *Shadow-Born*. It is a unique mixture of an RPG, virtual pet, and dungeon-crawling adventure game. What makes it distinct is the way the different parts of the game interact with the standard cell-phone features of the N-Gage. The game is meant to interact with you just as much as you interact with it and in order to create a more immersive experience it will actually send e-mails, text messages, and set alarms for you when you're not playing. *Shadow-Born* has the likelihood to fully realize the potential of the convergence between cell phone and game console that the N-Gage made possible but never followed through on. It's a shame that it also has the potential to be the last game developed primarily for the N-Gage device.

Even if they sell fewer than a hundred copies of *Shadow-Born* to current N-Gage users, it won't matter. The mistakes that Nokia has made with the N-Gage and the lessons they've learned have helped them get to the point where they can produce the games they're publishing now, and whether gamers liked the original N-Gage or not, fifty million devices sold by the end of the next year is a whole lot of cell phones. It's likely that the next phone some of us buy will have some form of the N-Gage on it, and thanks to everything Nokia's failures have taught them, most of the games should actually be good.

Medium Possibilities

The Music of *Double Dragon 2*
By Ash and Dan Pringle

The debate about whether videogames are "art" is a tired one for most people. Artists generally don't care about videogames, and videogamers generally don't care about art, and so discussion between the two fields is fairly frustrated. But, the question remains: Is it possible that a good videogame might be more than just a well-crafted piece of entertainment? Setting aside "art," let's first just look at what videogames may be capable of creatively. In order to better understand this question let's look at a creative element of a videogame, at the music of the NES classic *Double Dragon 2*.

We are hardly music experts. We've deconstructed and covered the songs of *DD2* on real instruments, but our music credentials hardly stretch beyond this. The point here is not to give a detailed examination of the music of *DD2,* but, rather, to better understand how music fits into the overall design of a videogame, so that one may better understand how videogames compare to other mediums.

On a first listen, the music of *DD2,* and probably the music of most old NES games, sounds almost whimsically simple. But with a bit of examination, one

realizes that these silly tunes are often more involved than one might initially think. Structurally, almost every song in *DD2* involves what are essentially two guitar tracks, a bass track, and a drum track.[1] Just like many songs you might hear on the radio, these four "instruments" perform the same functions as their real counterparts. The parallels are rather astonishing when you first realize it; the "bass" lays down the low end root notes in a consistent rhythm, over which the second "guitar" sometimes plays a more melodically noticeable rhythm, and the drums tie everything together with a consistent beat, complete with a bass drum, cymbal accents and a solid snare beat. The "lead guitar" often takes on double duty, functioning as both the "vocals" of a track, when it plays the melodies of the main verses, and as the actual lead guitar, when it plays the solos and riffs that we would normally associate with a lead guitar. All of it adds together to make a song, so, structurally, *DD2* has all the ingredients required to make just about any song (notes, rhythms, and "instruments" to play them), demonstrating that videogames have available to them the basic tools required for making just about any music.

Beyond the basic song structure of the music of *DD2* is the actual song composition. There are many musical

components that could be studied, but for brevity's sake, let's just focus on one: harmony. Harmony is essentially two or more different notes played at the same time. A guitar chord is a harmony. But beyond chords, harmony is rarely used to full effect in most popular songs. Harmonies are difficult to compose, and as such, instrumental harmonies are often avoided in most pop and rock songs.[2] The amazing thing about *DD2*'s music is that many songs employ a double instrument harmony throughout the entire song, often in very complex scales! Whole songs are composed from a sort of double-guitar harmony, where both "guitars" play complimentary harmonies throughout the entire song. This trick is used to great effect in *DD2*, and some of *DD2*'s songs are among the most memorable from the NES era. The intro track is forever recognizable, and the music of the final boss (for those that reached that far) is stirring; it sets a mood one would not think possible in such an old game. This sort of music is difficult to compose, and hard to play live. In some ways, the music of *DD2*

does things that might not even be considered by some live performers. So, the music of *DD2* demonstrates not only that videogames have the basic tools available to potentially compose just about any music, but also that complex and interesting tunes have been composed in videogames. Presumably, an analogy could be pushed to the other artistic aspects of videogames, such as the visuals and storytelling, to show that videogames have at their disposal the tools to make complex and interesting works in these fields as well. But, this article clearly does not have the space to discuss anything more than music.

Despite these facts, music in videogames is still limited. First of all, the sound technology of videogames limits its potential. For example, the music of *DD2* is nothing more than blips and bloops. Structurally, just about any note or combination of notes is available, but the tone and sound quality of those notes is very limited by the technology, and as such, the music often can't reach its full potential. Many cover bands nowadays have realized this, and have begun


---

1 For any synth nerds out there, the two guitar tracks are square synth waveforms, the bass is a triangle waveform, and the drum track is a very strange noise waveform.
2 To my knowledge, the first rock band to make real use of instrumental harmonies, specifically guitar harmonies, was Thin Lizzy. Many metal bands employ the trick as well.

to reinterpret and reconstitute many videogame songs with live instruments. Of course, modern videogames have much better sound quality, but the point still stands; even the best of videogame music can never match up to a live band.

More importantly, the music of videogames is limited by the structure of videogames themselves. In the case of *DD2* and many videogames, the songs must often effectively avoid having a beginning and an end, since they must loop throughout the level. Without a beginning or an end, the music is nothing more than a clip of sound, relegating it to the background. There are other specific limitations to videogame music, but the important point is this: videogame music must conform to the limitations and requirements of the game first and foremost, not to the music itself. The music of a videogame must reinforce the experience for the player, not simply be good music; and certain musical freedoms must be restricted in order to make the music work within the game. Structurally, videogame music can never be as complex as a complete song or composition.

So, at least one aspect of videogames, the music, would seem to be limited in its breadth and potential. Presumably, another analogy could be made with the other creative aspects of videogames. The visuals can never be as complex or as deep as a painting because the player must play in this visual space, and certain important objects and pieces of scenery have to take on functional importance, limiting the artist's choices about how these parts of the game can look. Also, the story must not become too involved, or the writer risks limiting the player's interactivity with the game; unexpected changes in plot that would normally

be fine in a movie or novel often seem forced and out of the player's control in a videogame, ruining the experience.

So, the argument can be made that videogames naturally limit the individual aspects that make the game up, such as the musical, visual and narrative. But, is this necessarily a bad thing? There is another medium that shares these same limitations: comics.

In comics, the visuals and writing are restricted by the form of comics; the writing must generally be simple and to the point in order to avoid distracting the reader from the action on the page, and the visuals must be divided into panels and simplified in order to give emphasis to characters and objects that are most important. Similarly, a videogame's visuals, story and music are restricted by gameplay; all three must avoid being too complex or intricate, so as not to get in the way of the player's experience with playing the game.

Comics, like videogames, have traditionally had trouble establishing themselves as a legitimate form of expression. Just like videogames, they were considered children's entertainment, not worthy of the attention of

mature readers. But, in recent years the status of comics has steadily increased, to the point where many comics and graphic novels are now considered modern classics. Of course, nothing significant about the form or structure of comics has changed this time; rather, it was the opinions of the critics that changed, as they came to realize that comics are in fact a medium capable of telling stories and conveying messages just as meaningful and enthralling as any novel, film or painting. Many had to realize that comics were not merely the combination of drawings that were more limited than paintings and writing that was more limited than novels, but instead a unique medium all its own. Comics add together limited aspects of many mediums to make an experience that is unique to comics. If the visuals were too involved, or the writing too involved, the comic would actually suffer; comics benefit from having limited writing and visuals by combining them to make something that is impossible with just one of the aspects. A comic can tell a story in a way that neither a movie nor book ever could.[3]

We would argue that videogames are similar to comics, in that they add together limited visuals, narrative, story, and images to make something that would be impossible in any other medium. Rather than create stories that are different from any other medium, as comics do, they create an experience that is different from any other medium. The narrative, writing, visuals, sound, and music may be limited compared to other art forms, but they combine to together to make a gameplay experience

that is something that no other art form can ever achieve. The art is in the combination of these elements, however limited they are. One could go even further and say that they must be limited, in order to make a good videogame. In this way, videogames should be understood as their own medium. We cannot compare videogames to paintings or musical compositions or writings, because it would be a mistake. Just as comics have been misunderstood as juvenile and limited art forms, inferior to the individual art forms that they are composed of, so too have videogames. But, so too should videogames not be viewed as an amalgam of artistic works inferior to their respective types, but as a medium unto itself, with its own degree of quality and its own possibilities, separate from other mediums. In this sense, a good videogame can be considered a good videogame, and also a good piece of art. ▣

---

3 Scott McCloud talks about this better than we ever could in *Understanding Comics*.

Console Identity

Sega—SMS, GEN, GMG, SCD, SAT, SDC
By Heather Campbell

I don't remember elementary school. What I retain from my childhood is a record of my actions without memory of my motives. I can *recall* doing things—joining the basketball team, going to the library, watching *Moonlighting*—but I have no access to the philosophy of my youth. I think that's because I wasn't yet conscious.

In fact, I don't think any kid is really self-aware. Consciousness is a difficult and constant self-examination. It's not just knowledge of one's surroundings; it's a sapience, a processing of experiences, an understanding that one exists. I would argue that you can't appreciate that you exist until you can fathom that you will die, and children are rarely aware that they're dying.

When I got my first game console, I had just turned eight years old. It was 1986, and I was still unconscious. My parents chose the Sega Master System because my father believed in investing in "superior technologies," regardless of their market share. Habitual early adopters, we got a CD player in '85. Or, to put it another, less flattering way: my family owned three Betamax machines.

And a Betamax camcorder.

I was the only person I knew who had a Master System. Of course, I went to a very small school in Chicago: my fourth-grade class had a total of nine kids. So, sure, I wasn't casting the widest net, but considering that Nintendo had a 90% market share, it's not a surprise that I didn't have Sega friends. Truth is, my school was so small I didn't really have any friends. With only nine people in my class, I was the entire geek clique.

Still, a couple kids had Nintendo. And while they were stomping their first goomba, I was slicing through enemies as Hayato of *Kenseiden*. Other kids collected the Triforce; I was Wonder Boy in *Monster Land*. I even got the rare, shutter-based 3-D glasses. I had a decade of atomic bomb nightmares thanks to *Missile Defense 3-D*. And Ronald Reagan.

I'm not writing about these titles to come off as an elitist douchebag. Quite the opposite: the Sega Master System was not a badge of honor. Playing Ghost House did not make me cool. The Master System was a small forgotten village, and its games were irrelevant folklore. Even now, I have a few friends who grew up casually playing video games—they know Mario and Zelda, and maybe a few of them remember Pit. But none of them know who the hell Opa-Opa is.

By 1989, though I had tried Nintendo at my cousin's house, I had become a Sega loyalist by habit. I was still unconscious.

I didn't prefer Sega over Nintendo—I was simply more familiar with the brand. So, when the Genesis came out, it was time to upgrade. The Game Boy was released to great fanfare, but I lugged around a Game Gear, dutifully replacing the batteries every six hours. My Game Gear even let me play my old Master System games, and the thick, ergonomic edges of my Sega portable were tucked into my back-pack when I entered High School in 1992.

Sometime around the start of freshman year, I began to form what I

consider to be my personal identity. I became aware of a constant, infrequently changing self. My actions took on a considerable weight; doing was not just a question of choice, but also of repercussion. It probably had a lot to do with being made fun of all the time. I had a really terrible haircut.

I'll bet that other kids became self-aware earlier. Regardless, for me, it wasn't until High School that I became sensitive to the timeline of my own thoughts. And as I became conscious—as I developed my ability to judge and feel and perceive—as I grew aware that I, and everyone else, was dying, I received a Sega CD for my fourteenth birthday.

My affair with Sega was long past the stage of familiarity. When I asked for a Sega CD for my birthday (and as the reward for another year of straight As), it was not because it was just another Sega product. Sega's consoles meant something to me now. This shelf of black boxes—the Master System, the Game Gear and the Genesis—represented seclusion and isolation. When I asked for a Sega CD, I wasn't just upgrading. I was choosing my console identity. Genesis had become a common household system, but I was asking for something special, solitary, and secret. I was asking to be alone. To be left alone.

I unwrapped my Sega CD in the fall of '92. The Chicago autumn was cold and dark, and my double-pane windows still let in a draft. I shoved my television behind my bed, and tucked all my games underneath the frame. I had physically cut myself off from the world and

fashioned a fort where I could retreat to play uninterrupted. When the system was hooked up, and the evening had set in, I pressed Power, and was met with my first ever console boot screen. Before me, the Sega CD logo floated in space, and my loneliness was given a visual metaphor. I spent ten minutes with that screen, anxious to drop in *Sol Feace*, but quieted by this graphic solitude. It was like Sega knew—the satellite logo was my lonesome affirmation.

Sega CD games were all atypically lonely fare. *Ecco the Dolphin,* one of the Genesis's flagship titles, was given new levels and a Redbook soundtrack for its Sega CD incarnation. A game already miserably desperate (you play as the only dolphin left in the sea, and one gamepad button is dedicated to a cry for help), *Ecco* was rendered almost unbearable with a lush, muted, high-fidelity score. *Out of this World* was given an unappre-

ciated epilogue on Sega's new machine; in *Heart of the Alien,* you become an awkward pale behemoth, desperate to save an injured friend, only to lose him in the final minutes of the game. Broader fare, like the licensed *Bram Stoker's Dracula,* was slow and desolate, due in part to the use of full motion video to populate its barren landscapes. Even Sonic was forsaken on Sega CD: a year earlier, Sonic was given a sidekick, Miles "Tails" Prower, in the Genesis game Sonic 2. Tails was absent, however, in *Sonic CD,* and the animals Sonic had once struggled to save were replaced with flowers. Sonic was completely on his own.

As high school dragged on, and the full inelegance of young adulthood set in, I sought out polish and refinement in the game worlds of my Sega CD. In an effort to find a place uncluttered by insecurity, I became aware of game design. Soon, I wasn't just seeking out obstacles with

my avatar—I was appreciating their placement and pace. Music cues weren't just the background noise of a level; they were compositions, timed to heighten tension. When I played *Sonic CD* in the winter of '93, I appreciated Sonic in a whole new way. He wasn't just running, he was animated, each frame a graceful choice.

Sega CD games were deliberate: the power of the CD system had to be bottle-necked through the Genesis. Loading times were often placed mid-action (as in the pause before finishing moves in both Eternal Champions and *Mortal Kombat*); these strange shortcomings seemed to mirror the anxiety of my own consciousness. For the first time in any game I had played, there was a hesitation in the action, as if the conflict itself was racked with doubt.

I got my next game system, a Saturn, in the summer of 1995. But coming into consciousness with my Sega CD meant that all further consoles would be described by how they were Not Like Sega CD. Every controller was foreign in my hands—they were strange varia-tions on the six-button, nine-pin Genesis gamepad. Anything that came on a cartridge was antiquated—the sound quality alone would damn a title. Even the time it took to physically drop a game into the machine was a kind of quality. The original Sega CD had a mechanized loading tray—the Saturn, Dreamcast, Playstation, and Gamecube did not. It wasn't until the PS2 that someone got it right again—and they even made that system black.

Sega CD was a turning point, both for myself and for Sega. After the triumph of the Genesis, Sega stumbled through systems before finally bowing out of the hardware race altogether. Perhaps it was a failure of character: future Sega machines would try to embrace the market with gimmicky controllers, hardware add-ons, and even a coat of white paint on their formerly all-black catalogue. Unable to retain a brand consistency like Nintendo, incapable of capturing the mainstream market like Sony, Sega struggled to define who they were until the very end.

Ironically, there was no hardware developer that defined me more than Sega. The Sega CD helped me embrace loneliness—the quiet whir of its single-speed drive is a melancholy comfort few understand. Games that no one knew became my secret mythology—they taught me that you don't always have to share stories to appreciate them. And whenever I get overwhelmed, I have a place to which I can retreat: a citadel built behind a bed, where a blue logo shines deep in space. A place where I can be myself, alone. 🎮

Crossing the Boobicon

The Physics of Heavenly Bodies
By M. O'Connor

I'm sick of crossing the Boobicon just to play a goddamn videogame.

I never would have bought *Sin Episodes 1: Emergence* had I seen the cover art in a store. Had I paid more attention to Steam's advertising I probably would have eventually figured out that something was amiss. I can't in good conscience say it's either disgusting or degrading, except maybe to the audience it expects to impress. It's not even tasteless. The art lacks imagination another perky young sidekick in improbable clothing gives you a permanently impish glance. More importantly, it is a high-heeled panty-shot of a kick to the head that just screams, "Wow, that's lazy."

This is part of a larger cultural current, one that is conspiring to make the female breast boring. It is depraved in its attempts to wrest from us one of the most inspiring manifestations of physical beauty and grace found in nature. It gives life-nurturing food to newborns and holds up camisoles. It is a tactile joy and an aesthetic marvel, and the erosion of its manifest mystery by a craven cadre of art directors throughout nerd-driven creative industries is nothing less than a conceptual Original Sin.

The female form is a perfectly reasonable artistic endeavor, a natural collection of shapes that draws the eye and intrigues the senses. Making it a dull, plastic caricature is a farce that lacks any sense of self-awareness. At least the *Dead Or Alive* franchise knows it's the world of Russ Meyers seen through the thin sleeve of an orientalist kimono. Emergence doesn't have enough humor or intelligence to aspire to '70s sexploitation flick status, content to remain a late night feature that's been edited for "sexual content and mature situations."

And it's not alone in its failure to appreciate the sorry state of human representation. Realism and videogames rarely meet, even in passing; realistic male leads are about as rare as realistic female leads, unless men with forty-inch chests and eight-inch quads are your idea of realismo. Our avatars and enemies live in largely fantastical worlds of improbable events and diminished consequences, and should not be expected to provide role models, much less model roles. One (wo)man against the world doesn't leave much room for the ample or obese, unless you're playing a Coney Island hot dog eating contest RPG. An alien invasion would likely find a whole lot of people losing a lot of weight right quickly, either by getting into fighting shape or dropping the poundage by

rotting in the sun. Then again, even the most physically fit young man would never be able to carry nine guns and a belt-load of grenades, so focusing on appropriate content (within the context of a largely absurd medium) is probably the best we can do for the time being.

I also don't know whether such art truly scars young minds with unrealistic and exceptionally shallow expectations; I doubt they carry that much importance in light of the blazing sun of biology (and the far dimmer solar flare of cultural instruction). I cannot speak for women, but the internal monologue of the

teenage male seems to occupy a similar space as bad psychedelic art, despite containing far more fucking than fractals. Continuing to live in these mental spaces as one grows up seems to be the marker of a wrong turn at Albuquerque. (This isn't limited to conventions of potheads or game players; the annual WFMU Record Fair contains a similar sense of haughty specialization, sexual desperation, and nerd-stink, though there's no cosplaying.)

But this is not a moral complaint, despite these choices having some impact upon our lives, at least as far as
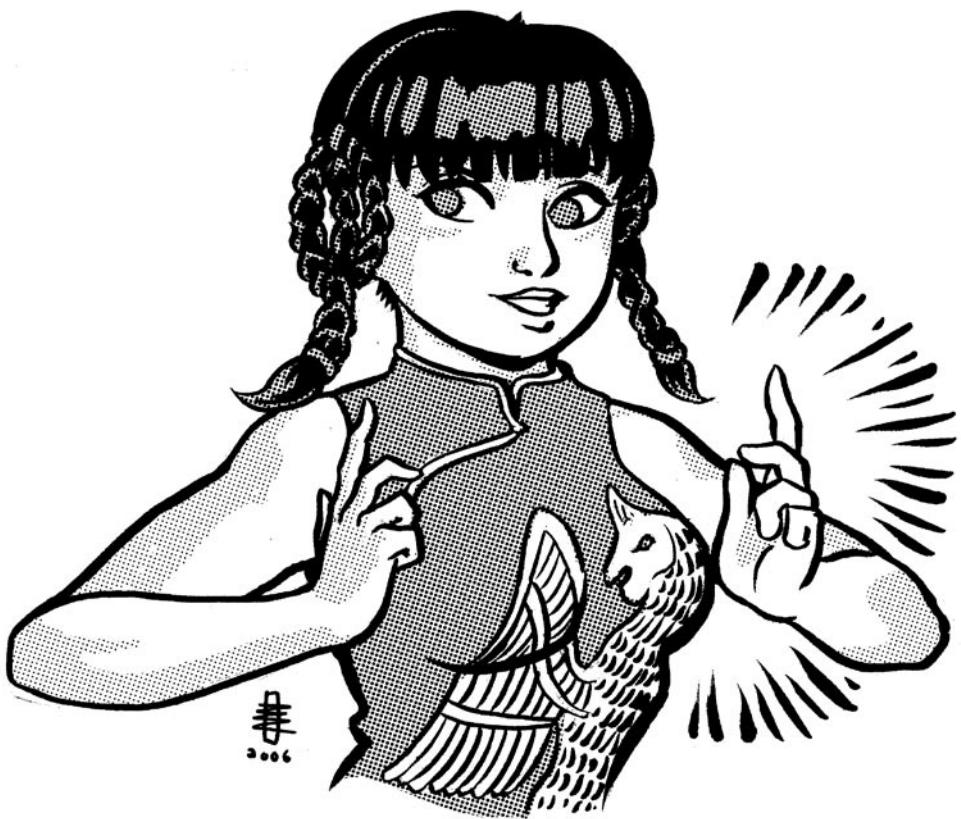
game-store browsing goes. The legions of tie-dyed stoners who make up the public face of the legalization movement help the War on Some Drugs by providing a conveniently icky strawman. Those folks who care about the War on Some Games as Art should be similarly concerned about the halter-top-and-short-shorts-totally-boobtastic-ninja-warrior-chick. She casts a swollen, conical shadow over the memeplex driven by those who wish the form were held (and would hold itself) in higher regard.

A brief pause to convey an obvious point: I really like female breasts. They make New York City summers bearable through their comforting lilt. And I'm not alone; according to the internet, boobs are a big deal. Why, there are 98,500 hits when Googling "gazongas" alone. Wikipedia offers well over 100 synonyms, from "ta-tas" to "chesticles." And though most never get past the shallow end of the CollegeHumor.com laugh pool, they do indicate a general attitude of aching obsession, if not envious awe. Female breasts are a natural stop sign for people interested in such signals, and they carry cultural and social implications even for those who have no sexual investment in their hypnotic sway.

Obviously, a lifetime ban on the female form rendered in absurd clothing and dimensions would have separated me from many classics, like *Darklands* (whose atrocious boxart is supplemented by one of the best game manuals ever printed) or Arena, the first *Elder Scrolls* game.

Despite this, every step through a game store hears my soul cry out, "Stop demeaning my cuddlemuffins!" My sexist possessiveness which some women find absolutely adorable, by the way is at least engaging the problem at hand,

in some sense. Surely not everyone went to art school solely to draw 36-24-36 leather spacesuits? And stepping outside of my infantile landscape, the contextually realistic appearances of Alyx from Half-Life 2 doesn't break the fourth wall; the game would have been far poorer and the franchise would deserve less respect had she the *Need for Speed*-style yellow biker halter set of Emergence's female sidekick. To consider the wreckage Emergence's giant-breasted antagonist would have on this masterpiece is heart wrenching, and I am thankful Valve is not like Ritual

Entertainment.[1] (To be fair, this applies to far more than just character design; it also includes level design, sound design, scripting, voice acting, animation, the box art and the readme files.)

One solution would be to start providing players with big-boned foils. Artists could indulge their deepest desires for death-defying double-Ds and

gamers would be treated to a new kind of heroine — a perky young sidekick in improbable clothing who gives a sultry, come-hither stare between bites of pie. I guarantee a plus-sized *Rumble Roses* would destroy sales records, gorging on a market that's already a few sizes too small. 🎮

---

1 That some enterprising young designer-in-training has no doubt created a "Sexxxy Alyxxx mod for *HL 2* is one of those sad facts I don't care to confirm or even think about, regardless of context; as a rapidly-aging curmudgeon, I find myself wondering why good old-fashioned pornography just isn't enough for kids these days.
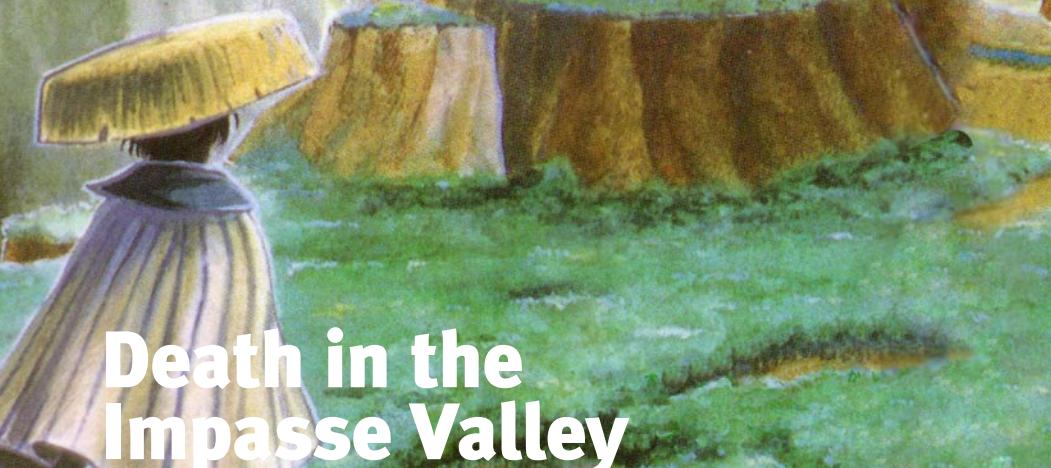
Death in the Impasse Valley

Fushigi no Dungeon 2:
Furai no Shiren—SNES
By Ancil Anthropy

A man stands on a small hill, a brief pause in what has been a long journey. The path runs from his feet down into a forest, and beyond the forest he can see the ridge of a mountain. And beyond that, a sheer rock wall rises from a curtain of mist, and rises until it stops at an unnaturally level ridge.

The valley is called Impasse Valley, and the edifice which rises from it like a fist is called Table Mountain, and it is the object of the man's quest. He adjusts his broad rain hat and steps down from the hill, toward the trees, a white weasel following at his heels. The rain hat is a gift from a friend now dead. So is the quest.

Legend speaks of a great golden condor that once soared over the valley, bringing fortune to its inhabitants. Where the condor roosts, says the legend, is a golden city, gleaming with splendor and ancient treasure the "Land of the Sun." The condor has not been sighted in many years. The condor's perch is Table Mountain.

The man is called Shiren, and this is the beginning of *Furai no Shiren,* released in 1995 for the Super Famicom by ChunSoft.

Furai no Shiren, or "Shiren the Wanderer," is the second entry in ChunSoft's *Fushigi no Dungeon* series. *Fushi gi no Dungeon* is often translated "Mysterious Dungeon," and refers to the nature of the mines and caverns Shiren will traverse in his journey to the heights of Table Mountain. What is mysterious about them is that every time a treasure-seeker called a "wanderer" by the inhabitants of the valley embarks on the path to the Land of the Sun, he will find that the path has changed. Different rooms, different passages, different treasures and monsters.

A randomly generated dungeon. Shiren is, at its heart, a roguelike game. "Roguelike" refers to the early 1980s UNIX game *Rogue,* which generates random dungeons composed of text characters through which players navigate, locating tools and treasures and fighting monsters. The game has a long and proud lineage on the PC—*Moria, Angband, Ancient Domains of Mysteries* and *NetHack*—but a very small one on videogame consoles.

This might be because roguelikes fill their random dungeons with a large variety of encounters, items and keystrokes. *NetHack* has a huge vocabulary of player actions; each key on the keyboard performing at least two duties. For example, a lowercase "w" is "wield (a

weapon)," while a capital "W" is "Wear (a piece of armor)." Without this great multiplicity of options available to the player, most random dungeons in console games feel bland without much to do in the dungeon, its randomness renders it uninteresting.

The *Fushigi no Dungeon* games are the exception. Though their library of usable tools, of actions to perform with them, and of monsters to use them on is more limited than their PC equivalents, the vast amount of absurd situations the games' logic allows the player to get into and out of makes the games unmistakably roguish.

Many of the games in the series are cloaked in licenses Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy,* Namco's *Druaga,* and more recently Nintendo's *Pokemon* and Square-Enix's *Dragon Quest VIII.* That's not the first time a game has worn the Dragon Quest franchise—the first *Fushigi no Dungeon* game follows *Dragon Warrior IV*'s merchant Taloon as he plunders a mysterious dungeon to bring back goods for his store.

But *Shiren* is where *Fushigi no Dungeon* is allowed to shine uncloaked, and it gleams. *Shiren*'s adventure takes place deep within the backroads of a mythical Japan, a place of sunken forests and wooden-plank bridges balanced precariously over quiet streams, a country of villages cut from forests of bamboo. Where PC roguelikes are often mosaics of text characters, the Super Famicom world of *Shiren* is lush. It breathes.

It sings. *Shiren*'s soundtrack conveys much of the emotion of the quest, sometimes playful, sometimes brash. Sometimes it is silent but for the quiet rushing of a stream. It grows moody and introspective. *Shiren*'s dungeon is a

quest, not just a dungeon, and the music grows graver the closer Shiren comes to Table Mountain and to his destiny.

The game diverges from other, muter roguelikes in other ways. The game understands that the a roguelike game, with its lack of saves and its unavoidable sense of consequence, is played by rushing into the dungeon, dying, and learning from one's death. In a PC roguelike, death would mean rolling a new character and starting a new quest. When Shiren is slain, he loses all his experience and items and returns to the start of the path. But along the path are villages and towns, and those towns contain people and relationships that persist past Shiren's death. The more the player plays, the more those relationships develop, the more allies the player gains, the more formidable Shiren will be on the next attempt.

And there will be many, many attempts. True to its nature as a roguelike game, death lurks around every corner. The items and monsters, coupled with the game's relentless logic, provide a variety of unexpected situations for one to find oneself in, and an inexperienced player will not see a way out the first time.

The path through Impasse Valley is littered with the bodies of players who were ambushed by situations they were unprepared for. My own save file is up to over fifty tries at the trek through the Valley–fifty journeys that ended, sooner or later, in a situation that was over my head. Death, a trip back to the Valley Inn on floor one, and then I march on again, my tools gone but armed, perhaps, with the knowledge that blocking a Brownie's arrows with another monster is a bad idea.

In March of 2006, the game was fan-translated into English by translation

group Aeon Genesis, and since then the Gamer's Quarter message board has rapidly accumulated tales of death and woe in the mists surrounding Table Mountain. Here are some stories from the brave, the doomed, the readers of *The Gamer's Quarter.*

. . . . . .

I was at some sort of river-fording, being swarmed by those little Brownie guys with arrows. As I made a break for the exit, one stepped in front of another's line of fire and was killed, granting the shooter a level up. I took another step and it happened again, turning the cute little guy into some sort of arrow-firing tank, which fired and killed me on my fifth step, dealing 150% of my maximum HP worth of damage.
–*Eric "dark steve" Trageser*

I was on level two of the dungeon in the forest, and I was doing pretty well, except for the cursed shield I was carrying. I pretty much thought I was invincible;

those Mamals were like ants beneath my feet.

Right before the entrance to dungeon level 3, I stepped on a hidden switch. Apparently it made a bunch of traps appear *all over* the dungeon floor. I was four steps to the exit, so I thought I would be okay, but then a spring came up and launched me to the other side of the level.

I did make it back to the exit, but I had fallen asleep a few times with a monster hitting me, got my food rotten, had three boulders fall on me, and right before I got to the exit I was told that some gas switch was triggered and "everything looks weird!" I didn't think much of it (previous trap locations looked like flowers) because I thought it would wear off when I got to the next floor.

It didn't, but I didn't realize that at first. I went to floor 3, saw a group of (what I thought were!) three girls, and soon found out that the arrows they were firing were hitting me. I turned to attack them but by the time I finished up on the first and was heading to the second "girl,"

I was dead. So the lesson here is that women are very dangerous monsters indeed.
–*Christopher "TOLLMASTER" Bruso*

Death on floor 25.

Literally, I was killed by Death on floor 25. Three of them. Just as well I guess, I was at 4% satiation and out of anything particularly useful.

My partner [O-Ryu, a blinding witch] got separated and was killed somewhere in the mines, and for the last 8 floors or so I had been moving for the exits as quickly as possible. Once I hit 25, however, which is a system of wooden bridges over a ravine, there was no more running. Death flies through "walls" (over open space, but same thing here) and moves at double speed. Scrolls were ineffective, as they're limited by room, and though I managed to disable 2 or 3 of them with a well-placed Confuse, it didn't take long for a fresh group to zero in. Utterly hopeless.
–*Eric "dark steve" Trageser*

This stupid death is actually O-Ryu's.

Stepping into the marsh surrounding Table Mountain, I was quickly surrounded by an Absorber Larva and a Sabre Gator, who were taking turns bapping me. Being the quick-witted person she is, O-Ryu blinded the Gator. I took a step back, and the Absorber followed me—right in front of the Gator. The blind Gator attacked what was in front of it, and the Absorber went splat. Earning the Gator a level up.

Unable to see, the beast lumbered about looking for something to kill. And O-Ryu, bless her sweet heart, gave it a smack. The creature turned to her, claws lifted.

Splat.
–*Ancil "dessgeega" Anthropy*

Once, as I was wandering around in the mines, I came across a lost little girl named Surara. Being the gentleman that I am, I agreed to escort this girl home. As we traversed the mines, we came across an enemy I've never encountered before, a Flame Priest. I put the girl behind me and struck the demon with my sword twice. Sadly, it counter-attacked, and my heavy shield could not withstand its blows. As a last-minute effort, I tossed my only "Genocide" scroll I crafted from a blank piece of paper and a suggestion by a traveling fortune teller. Unfortunately, the demon's flames burnt the scroll before it hit it and it attacked me again viciously. I was down to my last legs so I tried once more to strike the demon, and then it happened. The little girl, in a fit of fear and confusion, punched me. I keeled over and died.

The moral of the story?

Don't rescue lost little girls or something.
–*Raphael "sushi_d" Valenzuela*

Is hating your brother so bad? Am I really the other sandal to the pair?

I was getting hungry on the 6th level and ate a rice ball. Then my brother started to get hungry and refused to move until I fed him one. I had no more. Is it evil to leave him there to die? He was punching me instead of the enemy, earlier. I ran into a rice ball later and threw it at him. I realized that this may not have been the best idea because he died shortly thereafter, and I was left to wander the woods hungry.

I have not seen Summit Town in a long time.
–*Matthew "ShaperMC" Williamson*

Your Mileage May Vary

Videogame Transportation
By Marc Spraragen

I was lucky enough to grow up near a small but beautiful countryside, and I was often found roving around the fields and woods, looking for wildlife and other interesting sights – an abandoned play fort in the woods, or a greened-over tennis court near a lake. At the same time I was even more excited to explore adventure and RPG videogame worlds. I, or my blocky little representative, would roam for hours through the low-res castles of Atari's *Adventure.* As I wandered, I found myself using some inventive modes of transportation. The "pocket shortcut" bridge was my favorite traveling companion; with its help, I could warp between screens, and eventually stumble onto the key to the Easter Egg room. I also remember zipping around in what was likely the strangest flying machine ever: I'd get eaten by a dragon, who was in turn picked up by the bat. Then, I could reach out of the dragon's stomach, grab the bat, and move all three of us at high speed.

As exploration games became more sophisticated, the domains they presented grew bigger and richer. This was a generally desirable, even scarily seductive, trend – especially for someone who confuses his self with an onscreen sprite. However, even the most lush scenery only holds its mystique for a limited time, and there were not always modes of transportation available to skip scenes or otherwise break the tedium. Moving around in *Zork* was typically done one room at a time; to read an earlier paragraph in this article in a similar manner might have you scanning backwards word by word until you came to the part you wanted to re-read.

Forcing the player to revisit older areas became more of a schlep when graphical adventure games were born, and the load/run times of their graphics and animations were added to the equation. I enjoyed much of *Myst,* but it required much shuttling through familiar hyper-cards. This lessened not only the beauty of the scenes, but even some of the "aha" of solving their puzzles. *Riven* and other sequels added "zip mode," enabling the player to return more quickly to previously visited screens. Other adventures, like the aptly named The Longest Journey, employed a convenient run mode for the character. However, the sprite never ran quite fast enough for me. I can understand limiting movement to normal human speed; simply warping around might break the atmosphere of the game. The goal would be to reach a compromise – don't let conventions unnecessarily constrain the transportation, and don't let the transport break the story. The standard solution for adventure games is the trusty map that allows immediate movement to significant places around the world. Gabriel Knight, in *Sins of the Fathers,* "realistically" strolled through New Orleans, and yet could use the map to essentially teleport to the church from Dr. John's voodoo shop, without taking me out of the story.

In RPGs, the magic map approach can get a little trickier, as the "one screen, one scene" of straightforward adventure games doesn't apply as strongly. The map in the *Final Fantasy* series could get your character quickly from one hot spot to the next, but once there, it was time for a lot of walking. No turning into a magical ball of light and zipping past the astonished merchants. That was really a shame, because some of those towns had a Tardis thing going; map dots on the outside, immense sub-worlds on the inside. A compromise, seen in *Baldur's Gate,* allowed players to set a "destination point" on a town or dungeon map. Characters would, with luck, automatically run to it. This kept the game moving more quickly without much additional contrivance.

More innovative solutions to transportation issues in RPGs were often seen when the entire game world was on the same size scale. The *Ultima* series was one of the first to allow multiple and interchangeable modes of movement (foot, horseback, ship, hot air balloon, etc.) throughout the game. The *Legend of Zelda* series made getting around easier with multiple, well-integrated transportation modes that were fun in their own right. Not just a convenience, riding Epona the horse was a highlight of *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask,* as was sailing on "The King of Red Lions" in *Wind Waker. Ocarina* went even further by giving the younger Link limited movement abilities, so that it felt that much more empowering when he finally became his older self.

In a typical RPG, the more advanced transportation modes become accessible as the game is completed. This seems natural, to signify and demonstrate the character's or party's growing power, and also to facilitate wider-range exploration and the completion of side quests. Conversely, when these powers are stripped away, as in the obligatory "go directly to jail" chapter, you'd feel grounded at an almost visceral level. Better transportation as you progress means, essentially, that the world shrinks as you grow, *Katamari Damacy* style.

Ideally, transportation modes in exploration videogames should allow the freedom to move at the varying speeds of thought, and also be a cool element of gameplay. Shall I walk, or take the mind-bending vacuum tubes? Ride the horse or call the owl? Make a slow-paced, fine-tuned search through the alley, or a quick helicopter trip to headquarters? Multiple – and well-integrated – modes of transportation make a game world smaller or larger at will, and also more interesting to explore. And as the hero, you should get a kickin' ride.

THE THEME OF THIS YEAR'S E3 WAS "REVISION." AND, TO BE EXPECTED, NOTHING WAS REVISED AT ALL.

Persona goes to E3 2006

MYSTIC QUEST

ERIC-JON RÖSSEL WAUGH "ADERACK"

JONATHAN KIM "PERSONA"

MATHEW KUMAR "AERISDEAD"

MARIEL CARTWRIGHT "KINUKO"

JOHN GREEN "THAT BOX"

ANDREW TOUPS "MR. TOUPS"

I COULDN'T GET INTO ANY PRE-E3 PRESS CONFERENCES THIS YEAR BECAUSE THEY ALL REQUIRED R.S.V.P.ING AND SCREENING WEEKS BEFOREHAND.

IT SEEMS COMPANIES WANTED TO CUT BACK ON THE NUMBER OF UNINFLUENTIAL PEOPLE THAT SNUCK INTO THESE EVENTS. BUT IN THE END, IT ONLY HURT THE COMPANIES - OUT OF EVERYONE IN MY PARTY, ONLY MATT WAS INVITED TO REPORT ON THE KONAMI CONFERENCE.

THE REST OF US HAD NOTHING TO DO.

This game makes me forget there's a giant pole next to my face!

and how!

SO WE PLAYED A $10 PS1 GAME THAT TOUPS BOUGHT FROM RITE-AID.

TO LET MEMBERS OF THE MEDIA GET HANDS-ON TIME WITH GAMES BEFORE THE GENERAL CROWD, E3 ALLOWED PRESS MEMBERS TO REGISTER FOR A SPECIAL BADGE THAT LET THEM COME IN THREE HOURS EARLIER THAN EVERYONE ELSE ON OPENING DAY.

THE ONLY PROBLEM WAS THE PRE-REGISTRATION PROCESS WAS SO BOTCHED THAT MOST OF THE PEOPLE THAT TRIED TO REGISTER EARLY FAILED TO.

I'M A REEEEL GAME JOURNALIST!

MAT AND THATBOX MADE IT IN THOUGH.

ANOTHER REVISION THAT STARTED A WAVE OF INTERNET CONTROVERSY: THAT E3 WAS NO LONGER GOING TO HAVE BOOTH BABES PRESENT ON THE SHOW FLOORS.

I WAS HAPPY TO HEAR THIS NEWS. IT WAS A SURE SIGN OF CHANGE - THAT THE EXPO WAS GOING TO BE MORE PROFESSIONAL FROM NOW ON.

...IT TURNED OUT THAT I HEARD WRONG.

b... but it was my childhood dream to see one...

Your dreams are stupid.

E3 WASN'T BANNING THE BOOTH BABES THEMSELVES - THEY WERE PENALIZING SEXUALLY PROMISCUOUS CLOTHING ON THE MODELS, THAT'S ALL.

SO, AS USUAL, THE HALLS WERE FILLED WITH PLENTY OF WOMEN IN SKIMPY OUTFITS DOING MINDLESS THINGS.

THE BEST EXAMPLE WAS THE UBI-SOFT BOOTH:

THEY HAD TWO GIRLS STAND ON PODIUMS ALL DAY, DOING NOTHING BUT STRIKE SEXY POSES AS A GIANT SCREEN SHOWCASED PEOPLE BLOWING UP.

THE GIRLS' EYES WERE COMPLETELY DEVOID OF LIFE. THEY WERE LOCKED WITH THE THOUSAND-YARD STARE AS THEIR BODIES MECHANICALLY SHIFTED FROM ONE SEXY POSE TO THE NEXT.

BUT THE RETARDED SHOWCASING OF WOMEN DIDN'T END THERE. RIGHT OUTSIDE THE CONVENTION CENTER WERE A GROUP OF PROTESTERS CARRYING SIGNS THAT DEMANDED THE END TO BOOTH BABES AT THE CONVENTION.

EXCEPT THAT THEY WERE ALL OBVIOUSLY BOOTH BABES THEMSELVES, HIRED FOR SOME STUPID PROMOTION.

THEY LOOKED JUST AS BORED AS THE WOMEN INSIDE DID.

My childhood dream is ruined.

Your childhood is stupid.

These girls are so... ugly.

BOOTH BABES ASIDE, THE LAST BOTCHED PART OF E3 THIS YEAR WAS THE SECURITY. TO PREVENT FRAUDULENT COPIES OF BADGES FROM GOING AROUND, THE SECURITY OF THE CONVENTION WAS VERY STRICT ABOUT REISSUING COPIES OF BADGES TO PEOPLE WHO CLAIMED TO HAVE LOST THEIRS, CHARGING UP TO $500 FOR REPLACEMENTS.

HOWEVER, WHEN OUR REAL GAMES JOURNALIST, MAT, LOST HIS BADGE, HE HAD NO WAY OF GETTING A NEW ONE SHORT OF USING POLITICAL BLACKMAIL.

I'm sorry, "sir."

GODDAMMIT, MAN!! I'M NOT HERE FOR FUN! MY SALARY DEPENDS ON THIS! CAN'T YOU UNDERSTAND?!

FOR THE HD ERA!

THIS YEAR'S E3 WAS A TIME OF CHANGE. A TIME OF NEW WAVES. A TIME..

RRAAAAAA AAAAAHHHHHHH!!!

*PS3 shown actual size

SONY HAD SEVERAL PS3 UNITS OUT ON DISPLAY BEHING ROTATING GLASS PILLARS. THEY LOOKED LIKE BLINGED OUT BETA PLAYERS OR SOMETHING ALONG THE LINES OF AN 80'S TECHNOLOGIST'S FETISH COME TRUE.

THE ACTUAL UNITS PLAYING GAMES ON THE FLOOR WERE THE SIZE OF NORMAL PCS THOUGH.

It's larger than four of my hands put together!

I want to rub it against my body.

ROLLING ALONG WITH ALL THE OTHER AMAZING ANNOUNCEMENTS OF THE PS3, THE PS3 CONTROLLER WAS SHOWN FOR THE FIRST TIME!

IT WAS A PS2 DUAL SHOCK CONTROLLER MINUS THE RUMBLE FEATURES. BUT WITH NEW ANALOG TRIGGERS REPLACING THE L2/R2 BUTTONS AND A GYROSCOPTIC SENSOR! AND A BIG SHINY BUTTON IN THE CENTER THAT OPENS UP THE MEDIA CENTER OR SOMETHING.

ALL IT NEEDS NOW IS A TOUCH SCREEN, A MICROPHONE, A VMU SLOT, AND A NEOGEO POCKET COLOR D-STICK TO MAKE IT COMPLETE!

ALONG WITH A WIRELESS CONTROLLER, A 60 GIGABYTE HARD DRIVE AND THE AMAZING UNIT ITSELF, THE TOTAL PRICE ADDS UP TO A VERY AFFORDABLE SIX HUNDRED DOLLARS (NOT INCLUDING TAX)!

fun fun extra panel!
FOR THE SAME PRICE OF A PS3, YOU COULD ALSO GET:
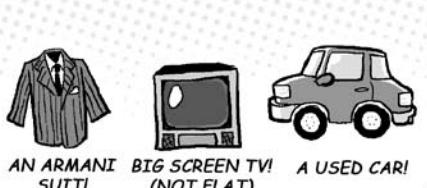
AN ARMANI SUIT!

BIG SCREEN TV! (NOT FLAT)

A USED CAR!

869 SNICKERS BARS!

11 NIGHTS AT THE EXCALIBUR HOTEL, LAS VEGAS!

A PS2, XBOX GAMECUBE, AND A DS LITE!

AND SO, THE FIRST HD-ERA GAME I PLAYED WAS MY FAVORITE HEDGEHOG AND YOUR'S:

SONIC THE HEDGEHOG!!

THIS YEAR MARKS SONIC'S 15TH ANNIVERSARY. FROM HIS ROOTS IN THE 1991 MEGA DRIVE GAME "SONIC THE HEDGEHOG" TO THE NEW PS3 AND XBOX360 GAME, "SONIC THE HEDGEHOG," SONIC IS READY TO SHOW THIS YEAR IS HIS! (HE'LL ALSO BE APPEARING IN AN INCREDIBLY BANAL PSP GAME AND A BEAUTIFUL BUT SHALLOW Wii GAME LATER THIS YEAR TOO!)

OH YES!!
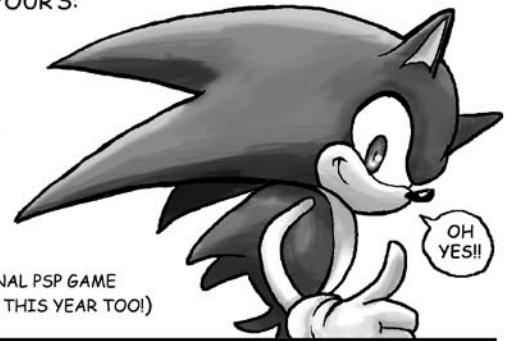
YOU CAN REALLY FEEL TAKASHI IIZUKA'S INFLUENCE IN THIS NEW SONIC GAME JUST FROM THE WAY SONIC MOVES..

GUH!

WHYYYYYY?!?

PARTICULARLY HOW SONIC CLIPS RIGHT THOROUGH THE GROUND WHEN YOU RUN INTO A WALL OR HOW THE WHOLE GAME FREEZES WHEN YOU BOUNCE ON A ROPE MORE THAN THREE TIMES.

AND THE WAY HE CAPTURES SONIC'S SENSE OF SPEED IS SO AMAZING! WHEN RUNNING THROUGH AREAS WITH LOTS OF DETAILS AND ENEMIES, THE GAME SLOWS DOWN INCREDIBLY! THIS CAN ONLY BE THOUGHT UP OF BY THE SAME MAN WHO HAS TAKEN SONIC AND MADE SUCH REMARKABLE TITLES SUCH AS SONIC HEROES AND SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG! IT'S LITTLE TOUCHES LIKE THIS THAT REALLY TELL ME THAT SONIC IS NOW IN INCREDIBLY CAPABLE HANDS.

BUT MOST OF ALL, I LOVE HOW IIZUKA IS REALLY CHANNELING THE FEEL OF SONIC. PARTICULARLY SONIC ADVENTURE 1. COMPLETELY. IT'S LIKE THEY RIPPED THE GAME ENGINE RIGHT OUT OF ADVENTURE AND USED IT AGAIN. FOR THE THIRD TIME.

THE BEST PART IS, HE'S GOT THE GALL TO PACKAGE THIS ALL UP AS THE NEW "SONIC THE HEDGEHOG." EXCEPT YOU ALSO HAVE TO PLAY AS SHADOW AND A NEW PSYCHIC HEDGEHOG NAMED SILVER THAT'S A TIME TRAVELLER OF SOME SORT.

Your clothes. Give them to me.

G.T.A.!!

HD REVOLUTION!!

(TO BE FAIR, THE GAME IS ONLY ABOUT 40% COMPLETE. ALSO, THE XBOX360 VERSION PLAYS MORE SMOOTHLY THAN THE PS3 DOES AT THIS POINT. REGARDLESS, KNOWING HOW SONIC TEAM HAS BEEN HANDLING SONIC LATELY, I HAVE NO FAITH IN THE FINAL RESULTS.)

SO, ANYWAY, THE REAL STAR OF THIS YEAR'S E3 WAS NINTENDO'S LITTLE CONSOLE:

Wii (iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii...)
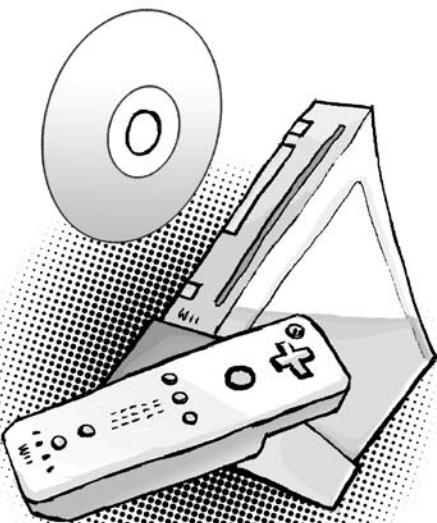
NINTENDO HID THE Wii IN A SECRET AREA LOCATED IN THE HEART OF THEIR GIANT BOOTH IN WEST HALL. THE QUEUE TO SEE IT WAS ANYWHERE FROM ONE TO THREE HOURS LONG BUT IT WAS WORTH IT!

ONCE INSIDE, THERE WERE VARIOUS AREAS TO PLAY THE Wii. SOME WERE SETUP LIKE LIVING ROOMS SO THAT YOU COULD EMULATE PLAYING IT AT HOME. MOST WERE LIKE TRADTIONAL STAND-UP KIOSKS THOUGH. ALL OF THEM HAD LINES THAT TOOK HOURS DEPENDING ON THE POPULARITY OF THE TITLE. THE TRADE-OFF BETWEEN THE TWO WAS THAT THE KIOSKS ALLOW YOU TO PLAY THROUGH THE ENTIRE DEMO WHEREAS THE LIVING ROOM ONLY LET YOU PLAY FOR A FEW MINUTES.

MARIEL AND I WERE WATCHING TWO REPORTERS PLAY SOME Wii TENIS WHEN THE BOOTH GIRL IN CHARGE SUDDENLY TURNED TO US AND ASKED US IF WE WANTED TO PLAY. I WAS KIND OF SURPRISED BECAUSE THERE WAS SOME SORT OF LINE ALREADY THERE, BUT I SUPPOSE THE BOOTH GIRL WANTED TO SEE PEOPLE OTHER THAN HAIRY, SWEATY GUYS TO PLAY.
AND SO WE PLAYED.

PLAYING THE Wii WAS THE MOST NATURAL THING IN THE WORLD.

ONCE THE Wii-MOTE WAS IN MY HAND AND THE BOOTH GIRL INSTRUCTED US ON WHAT TO DO, IT WAS LIKE SECOND NATURE. THE MORE YOU TRIED TO EMULATE REALITY, THE EASIER THE GAME WAS. IT WASN'T SOME ABSTRACTION OF THE TENNIS, IT WAS YOU SWINGING A RACKET TO HIT A TENNIS BALL BACK. THE CAPABILITY OF THE Wii-MOTE WAS AMAZING.

ALL THE POSSIBILITES OF THE Wii JUST BECAME MORE AND MORE APPARENT AFTER PLAYING MORE OF ITS GAMES, ESPECIALLY THE NEW WARIO WARE GAME!

LIKE PREVIOUS WARIO WARE GAMES, THE Wii VERSION HAD YOU PLAYING A JUMBLE OF MINI-GAMES EXCEPT NOW THEY WEREN'T BASED ON FINDING THE OBJECTIVE OF EACH GAME AND ACCOMPLISHING THEM, THEY WERE NOW ABOUT BEING GIVEN A TASK AND FIGURING OUT HOW TO EMULATE THEM USING THE Wii-MOTE. ACTIVITIES RANGED FROM:

PUTTING THE Wii-MOTE ON MY HEAD AND SQUATTING

PUTTING IT TO THE SIDE AND DRAWING IT LIKE A KATANA

BALANCING IT ON MY HAND TO GUIDE A BALL INTO A HOLE

AND GRIPPING IT LIKE A STEERING WHEEL.

BUT NOT EVERYTHING WAS BEAUTIFUL IN Wii LAND. ONE OVERLY HYPED TITLE IN PARTICULAR WAS JUST SO DISMALLY BAD THAT IT DESERVED ITS OWN COMIC PAGE. THIS GAME WAS CALLED:

RED STEEL

WOAH..!

SPURRED ON BY TOUPS' LOGIC THAT "WE SHOULD PLAY ONE BIG NAME TITLE BEFORE WE LEAVE," WE STOOD IN LINE TO TRY OUT RED STEEL, UBI-SOFT'S FIRST PERSON SHOOTER FOR THE Wii. THE LINE ENDED UP TAKING AN HOUR, NOT TO MENTION I WAS CUT OFF BY SOMEONE "IMPORTANT" RIGHT BEFORE MY TURN, AND IT ENDED UP JUST BEING THE BIGGEST PILE OF CRAP EVER*.

(*EXCEPT TO TOUPS BECAUSE HE GOT SLOSHED WHILE WE WERE WAITING IN LINE BEFORE WE EVEN ENTERED THE Wii AREA.)

THE GAME PRETTY MUCH FELT LIKE A GENERIC PC FPS TACKED ON WITH Wii FUNCTIONALITY. THE "NUNCHAKU" ANALOG STICK SERVED AS THE "WASD" MOVEMENT WHILE THE Wii-MOTE WAS BASICALLY THE MOUSE'S CROSSHAIR. WHEN COMPARED TO THE REST OF THE Wii'S GAMES, RED STEEL PRETTY MUCH FELT UNINTUITIVE AND INCREDIBLY VIDEOGAMEY.
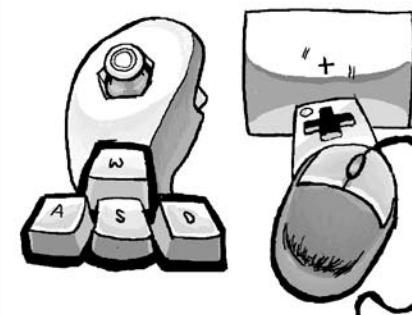
FOR EXAMPLE, TO OPEN DOORS, YOU HAD TO STAND IN FRONT OF THEM AND THEN SHAKE THE NUNCHAKU VIGOROUSLY.

WHAT IS THAT? IS THAT HOW FRENCH PEOPLE OPEN DOORS? AT LEAST DO SOMETHING SOMETHING SENSIBLE LIKE TURN THE Wii-MOTE AS IF YOU WERE TURNING THE KNOB OR SOMETHING. IN THE METROID PRIME DEMO, YOU OPENED DOORS BY GRABBING ON TO A LATCH, PULLING IT OUT, TURNING IT, AND THEN PUSHING IT BACK IN. THAT'S AT LEAST SOMEWHAT MORE REALISTIC THAN A GUY VIGOROUSLY SHAKING HIS LEFT FIST UP AND DOWN ANYWAY.

BASICALLY, INSTEAD OF THINKING OF INTUITIVE CONTROL SCHEMES THAT SIMULATE WHAT A PERSON WOULD REALLY BE DOING IN SUCH SITUATIONS, EVERYTHING WAS DEGENERATED INTO VIDEO GAME ABSTRACTIONS IN RED STEEL.

AND ISN'T THAT PRECISELY WHAT THE Wii WAS TRYING TO CHANGE ABOUT VIDEO GAMES?

INSTEAD OF SIMULATING A BATTLE OF TWO MEN CLASHING SWORDS AND BEING LIMITED TO ONLY SLASHING HORITZONTALLY OR VERTICALLY AND DOING RIDICULOUS MOTIONS TO GUARD, WHY NOT SIMULATE A REAL SWORD'S MOVEMENT INSTEAD?

DON'T MAKE THE PLAYER PUSH A BUTTON TO DUCK! WHY NOT MAKE THE PLAYER DUCK WITH THE Wii-MOTE INSTEAD?

OPEN, DAMN YOU!

I MEAN, WHAT ARE YOU REALLY TRYING TO DO WITH THIS GAME, UBI-SOFT? I MEAN, THE WHOLE SCENARIO'S A JOKE - EVERY PERSON YOU KILL IS EITHER AN HONORABLE SAMURAI IN A TEA GARDEN OR A DIRTY YAKUZA IN A FLORESCENT HOLLWOOD JAPAN. MEANWHILE, THE GAME MECHANICS ARE RIPPED RIGHT OUT OF A GENERIC BARGAIN BIN FPS TITLE.

LET'S BE HONEST:
YOU'RE NOT AIMING FOR A GENERAL MARKET AT ALL.

YOUR TRUE INTENT IS TO MAKE EVERY FPS PLAYER VIOLENTLY DISCRIMINATE JAPANESE PEOPLE.

AND OPEN DOORS BY RIGOROUSLY PUMPING THEIR LEFT HAND.

I'M ON TO YOU.

LOOKING BACK ON E3,
BEYOND THE FLASHING DISPLAYS AND SOULLESS BOOTH BABES,
AWAY FROM THE CITYBLOCK DESTROYING GIRTH OF THE HD REVOLUTION,
AND NOWHERE IN SIGHT OF THE SPIRITED Wii,
MY FAVORITE MOMENT WAS WHEN
TEAM GAMER'S QUARTER HAD A DINNER AT
OROCHAN RAMEN ON WEDNESDAY NIGHT.

TALKING WITH EVERYONE,
LAUGHING WHILE SHARING STORIES UNDER THE STARLESS GRAY SKY
REMINDED ME AGAIN THAT THE IMPORTANT PART OF GAMING
WASN'T THE GAMES, THE GIGABYTES, OR THE CONTROLLERS
BUT THE PEOPLE.

SHARING EXPERIENCES, VALUING RELATIONSHIPS,
AND ENJOYING LIFE AND A COMMON INTEREST
IS WHAT'S IMPORTANT.
AND TO BE ABLE TO SHARE THAT
THROUGH A MAGAZINE LIKE THIS
IS WORTH SO MUCH MORE
THAN 869 SNICKERS BARS,
11 NIGHTS AT THE
EXCALIBUR, OR
A PS3.

Break time!

E3 Survival Guide

Los Angeles, 2006
By Andrew Toups

As I sat in the media-registration line the day before E3 started in the Los Angeles Convention Center, unsure of whether or not my credentials would be approved, I tried to think about what I'd do if I were denied entry. I eventually decided that I'd spend the rest of the week at strip clubs playing (or trying to play) my Nintendo DS. The experience couldn't be too far removed from how E3 actually was, although I imagine the "Wii line" wouldn't have been as bad.

E3 is a funny thing. For many gamers, the weeks leading up to E3 are a time of great anticipation, filled with exciting announcements and dramatic revelations about their favorite game franchises and consoles. But for the rest of us who actually have to go to the conference, it's often a different story. The sobering reality of the E3 conference is that it's actually kind of a drag. Once the glow of playing games that no one else will get to play for another few months wears off, you realize that most of the games on the show floor either suck, are boring rehashes of popular games, or are at such an early stage in development as to be basically unplayable. More often than not, the only interesting-looking games are shown in trailers or are absent entirely from the floor, and when they are there, the noise and commotion make them impossible to enjoy.

This isn't to say that E3 isn't worth attending; merely that the amount of bullshit one must endure to do anything worthwhile is prohibitively high. It wasn't until the third day of the conference, as I reached the hour-and-a-half mark waiting in line to play the Wii, that the solution hit me like a brick with a lemon wrapped round it: get drunk. If you've ever been to a dance club where they play shitty techno music, body odor from people sweating permeates the air, and you can't see or hear a thing thanks to the bright lights and terrible music, then you know why most of the people there are drunk. By the same token, putting a few cold ones down before braving the conference is probably the best advice I can give you. One thing though: be sure to BYOB. The house bar is criminally overpriced.

Hard Drive Optional

E3 Survival Guide
By Heather Campbell

Driving in Los Angeles is easy. Simply remember a few key tips to arrive at any destination:

1. Look up your destination on Google Maps. Map out a route, and print a copy. Crumple up your map, and put it in your car.

2. Do not go to sleep. LA rush hour begins at 5:30 a.m., so many drivers head out earlier, at 3:00 a.m. This creates a second, "soft" rush. To beat this rush, you must leave your house no later than midnight (which will sometimes coincide with the evening rush hour).

3. Roll down your window and throw your crumpled map at the construction site which blocks your route. Improvise a new route. Suggested paths include: sidewalks, parks, and kindergarten classrooms.

4. When the police begin to chase you, try to out-run them. Regardless of visible helicopters and squad cars, all Los Angeles drivers must believe they can outrun the police.

5. Abandon your car and retreat to the subway.

6. There is no subway.

7. Return to the car after the cops begin to chase someone else. Drive to your location. You will be four hours late.

8. Park your car. You may choose:
 a. A lot, for 40 dollars.
 b. A parking meter.

9. If you choose a parking meter, approach the nearest meter attendent and humbly ask for your parking ticket in advance.

10. Before entering E3, take one last look at your rental car. It will be gone when you want to go home. Enjoy flagging down a cab.

11. There are no cabs. 🎮

How to Get Back Into E3

E3 Survival Guide
By Mathew Kumar

The ESA made a number of changes to E3 this year, the most covered and celebrated/reviled was the new rule against too much exposed flesh (the "No Booth Babe" rule). This was probably their best idea, even if it didn't stop women dressing in incredibly tight latex (they're fully covered, you see). For media specifically, however, the ESA had a slew of new rules, mostly related to accreditation, thanks to their (quite good idea) of setting aside a morning of the show for pre-registered media. In particular, for online media they required a business license. For any blaggers[1] particularly intent on going, it's a trivial thing to get, but it'd be easier to just fake up a bunch of credentials from any local print media (not that I condone such a thing; the less people hogging machines with badges that say "Managing Director, *Financial Times"* the better).

The one rule that is genuinely a problem, however, is that if your badge is lost or stolen, they will not, under any circumstances, issue you a new one.

I learned this the hard way.

. . . .

Now, as soon as you lose your badge, consider yourself back at square one. To the ESA you are, no matter what or who you actually are, a blagger, and the first rule of being a blagger at E3 is to never talk to anyone at the media help desk. Especially if they're from the ESA. They will not, under any circumstances, help you. Indeed, what they will do is hinder you. I found myself, for a period of hours, debating with a woman who claimed to be "second in command to Doug Lowenstien himself" that, despite being a fairly well-known journalist (hey! I've been slagged off on an industry insider's blog!) writing for a show sponsor, I hadn't gone outside and sold my badge for $1500.

One major flaw in her argument is that practically anyone at all can buy a badge for $300 as a general attendee, and the first thing they'll tell you to do is to go and do that. So, if you were a crummy badge salesman spoiling it for the rest of us, by their statement, you'd stand to make a profit of $1200 and still be able to attend E3. In which case, why would you bother talking to the ESA in the first place? And why do they accept this? The easiest way to avoid this reasoning:

Just Re-Register with a Different Publication

It's entirely possible that in the future they'll close this loophole, but if you write for more than one publication just re-register with your second credentials, ensuring you're dealing with someone you haven't already dealt with/been seen by.

This is, without a doubt, the easiest option, one which at least one person I know proved to work. And if you feel any pangs of guilt about deceiving them, well, it's their rules forcing you to do this, as you're trying to write coverage of the show, right? Coverage they wouldn't get unless you blagged. Everybody wins. If this option doesn't work:

Wear a Suit

The number one rule of any blagger is look professional. If you already are a professional (as I'd hope), you should have brought one suit to E3 with you anyway.

The more expensive and professional the suit, the better, because a dude in an expensive suit, he must have a reason to be where he is and be doing what he's doing, right? So make sure you're walking with purpose, acting like you know where you're going or what you're doing. Using your nice suit, there are several techniques available to attempt to get into the show.

Timeshare a Pass

Have two other friends or co-workers at E3? The door staff don't pay any real attention, so simply allow your two friends to enter the show, and wait for one to leave the show with both passes and hand off one to you, so you can go back inside (with a badge) and return it to the original badge owner. Do all of this out of sight, natch.

Use Last Year's Pass

If you have it, this is worth a shot. The door staff doesn't pay attention, and if you still have your badge holder (possible!), it's unlikely they'll notice the difference. This is only problematic if they're scanning badges, which is rare as it slows down the crowds.

Wear your lanyard anyway

If you can't follow any of these other options, the best option is to simply wear your lanyard (or one of the spare ones you'll undoubtedly have picked up when you were in the show) around your neck and tuck the end away into your inside jacket pocket, as if you were keeping your badge in your pocket. If you're walking with purpose, there's a good chance you won't be stopped, particularly if you attach yourself to any other large groups of people who are being let into the show as a group or overwhelming the door staff. This is by far the riskiest option, however. If you ever are stopped by anyone, don't patronize, don't bully your way out of it—just ask to speak to a higher up. This is usually too much trouble for most, so be sure to take their picture and name, and let them know you'll be taking the matter to higher places. You can try walking in, letting them know if they attempt to touch you, you'll sue them with all your power, but in general this is the most high-risk option available to the blagger.

. . . . . .

Honestly? I don't want you to have to use any of these techniques if you happen to have lost your badge. But they're all available, and you may have to, as long as the ESA treats journalists who have lost their badges as criminals, guilty with no chance of proving innocence, with a rule that does nothing but punish the unlucky. 🎮

1   Blagger (British Slang) noun
  1. A person who obtains by wheedling or cadging ("blagging"), as in, "she blagged free tickets from her mate".
  2. Any person at a trade show who has no actual right to be there. History: of unknown origin
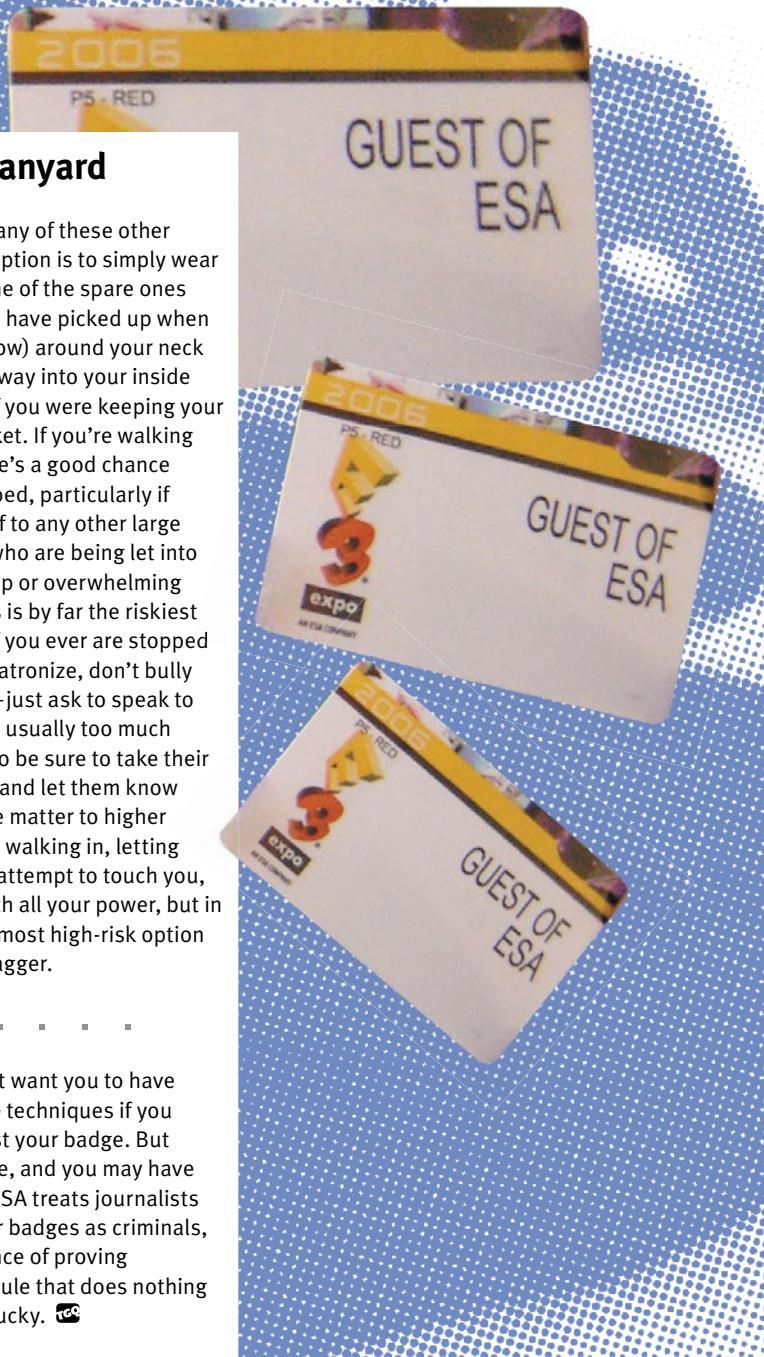
E3: Unwrapped

E3 Survival Guide
By Colin Booth

I reckon there's any number of reasons your standard two-by-four nerd doesn't ever go to E3. Ignorance is by far the most popular.

When the phrase "not open to the general public" is thrown around, 95 percent of the riffraff shuffle off, hoping to avoid inevitable failure. Another 4 percent either have a reason to be at E3, or are smart enough to realize any monkey can get in for the right price. Of them, maybe one-eighth actually might bother to go. I'm a liberal-arts major, so I don't rightly know what that translates to in numerical terms; it's a lot of nerds.

For those that do go and either are or aren't part of some caravan forsaken by God (IGN, Gamespot, timid Gamestop employees, most any website's staff), the financial burden of transportation, food, and roof-over-head status can be a thick trouble. Los Angeles prices, for those caught unawares and unprepared, burn pockets like summer love. My aim—hope—is to learn you something. To impart this knowledge to you and, God willing, save you at least a couple dollars on your next excursion to that three-day electronic holocaust in California.

First: set goals for yourself. Not a budget—the term "budget" is too "grown-up" for anything E3 is going to involve.

Set aside $40. That should be more than enough to cover food for the week. The $40 is not to be touched within the confines of the convention center. There isn't a thing in the whole building you need money for. Relax.

That money goes toward what you can't get for free outside the show and what you can't steal inside it. A good goal to have would be to try and spend only $20 for the whole trip. That might seem unrealistic; I assure you it's very manageable.

If you're in town before the show starts, do whatever you can to get into the pre-show press events. (How to get in there is whole other story unto itself.) Sony and Konami are the sweet spots. This year, Sony rolled out guacamole and Konami's catering was 87 percent vegetarian—both with open bars. Microsoft is a little easier to get into; the spread (and the presentation) is usually a little underwhelming, though.

Also: attend whatever parties you are invited to in the evenings, if you can stand it. This might be difficult if you are obligated to cover the event in some capacity following the show, or easily fall prey to fatigue. Still, it's worth attending these parties to get something in your stomach and to maybe walk away with a

snazzy gift bearing the company's logo (thus transforming something normal into something "RARE") you may later sell on eBay, to further recoup expenses of the trip.

This approach to getting by might come off desperate to some. In fact, it is desperate. It's an approach for the desperate.

Make sure you keep an eye out for survival. The media lounge offers free lunches, and a number of companies offer breakfast-looking pastries for the asking.

And if I see you pay for a bottled drink in that place, I will fuck you. I will fuck you up.

Besides being the easiest item to "borrow" from the cafés, bottled water is given away free by most disreputable companies, along with soda or coffee. Worse comes to worst you'll have to walk outside and grab one of the bottles of Mountain Dew the eXtreme promotional workers are handing out by their eXtreme gReen trucks.

Next: before we go any further, I should like to state for the record that it takes a certain malleability of morals to walk away from the LA Convention Center those days in May with the same experience of any person who came in, pockets lined with fifties.

I'm straight up talking about stealing, folks.

Stealing food from E3 might seem like the most reckless thing one can do; might even seem like risking a cross-country trip to save a few dollars—I assure you, the risk is minimal and the benefits obvious.

(If you have money to throw around, you probably don't need this advice. In fact, the writer would appreciate you not use it if you don't have to—it's for those

on the fringe. Well, those in need, at the very least.)

There are two major eateries in the LA convention center—the Compass Café and the Galaxy—each offering a range of impossibly priced fast-food, including: pizza, burgers, sandwiches (panini and otherwise), sushi, and salads.

If you are familiar with the geography of the Center, you are probably reading that last paragraph cockeyed, thinking about where you might have eaten during your trip.

There are scattered eateries and miserable food vendors littered around the area; these places are slighted by the wise. You didn't come to E3 for $8 tacos. Stick to the Galaxy and the Compass if you want to eat without paying.

Perspective: Keep yours. Bear in mind that there are a few thousand people swarming the food areas at any given time. Security doesn't have any presence to speak of, and they stick out like crayon-purple warts anyway. And, really, with the prices they're charging, if you're not stealing from them, they're stealing from you. That's how it is.

The technique to taking food is as such: act lost.

Most people look lost, so you're not going to draw attention. And do this alone.

Standing in an atrocious line over half an hour long is well worth whatever's at the end; no real incentive in paying $11 for a bad garden salad once you've waited that long. You take your food, you walk around (maybe ask someone where to find the straws, forks, salad dressing, et cetera), look frustrated and defeated, and walk right past the registers. Walk right out the entrance, if you're so inclined. It doesn't matter; no one is going to stop you.
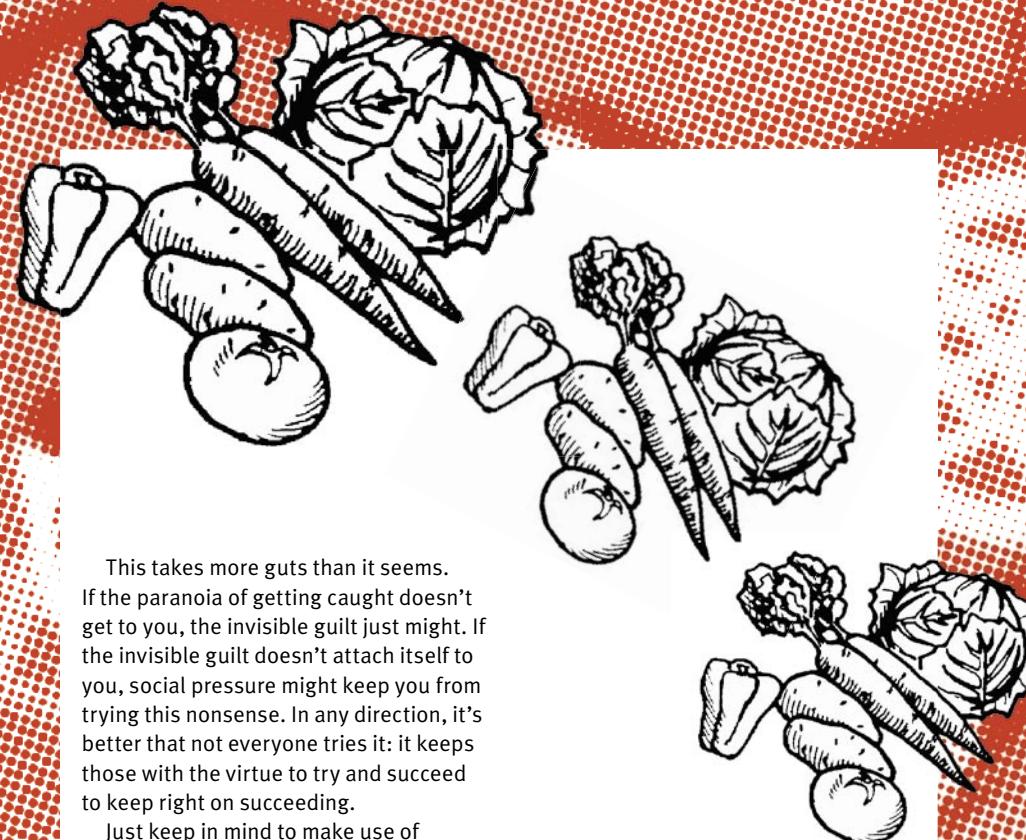
This takes more guts than it seems. If the paranoia of getting caught doesn't get to you, the invisible guilt just might. If the invisible guilt doesn't attach itself to you, social pressure might keep you from trying this nonsense. In any direction, it's better that not everyone tries it: it keeps those with the virtue to try and succeed to keep right on succeeding.

Just keep in mind to make use of these tactics at the above-mentioned eateries only.

A lack of options: there won't always be a safe alternative to arriving at food without payment. There will be the occasion you are left with no recourse— you'll need to buy food. If all the pieces fall together, and you're a resourceful bugger who's followed my instructions to a fault, you shouldn't be paying for more than one or two meals by yourself. Either of them will be in the morning or at night.

I suggest Mexican food for both. Hole-in-the-wall Mexican places serve excellent food on the cheap. A bean burrito is as powerful an opening to a day of E3 as it is a conclusion.

If you're looking for a less criminal/ interesting way of surviving E3, I don't have a lot of answers for you. Starvation is a popular rockstar-videogame-journalist option, while a box of granola bars will get you by, I guess. The latter comes off lame as hell, though.

Of course, the author (me) doesn't take responsibility for the hijinks of readers. He will, however, revel in them. If you follow my advice, there should be no issue. Depending on your level of involvement within the industry, some of the above feats may be more doable than others; keeping an open mind, acting "as if," and exuding limitless confidence will get you what you need for the show, no doubt. Where there's a want to survive, there's a way. [tgq]

Drinks Are on Keith

Intellivision Party—E3
By Matthew Williamson

The first evening of E3 was doomed: we were separated from the rest of our group, the party had been abandoned by others, and the drinks were overpriced. Though the party was for Intellivision, a quick look around revealed a lack of Intellivision games; *Guitar Hero* and *Street Fighter II* were played by small groups of people on couches, and dance music was pumping though the speakers.

We needed to get out. Or at least get someplace with cheaper drinks.

I sat outside trying to find a ride or another party. When nothing worked out, I joined Wes, who had been schmoozing it up with lovely Intellivision flack Melisa Glasberg. We had just been granted an interview with Keith Robinson, cofounder of the most recent resurrection of Intellivision, and its current president. Wes had also managed to score some free drinks. Once we were suitably inebriated, we proceeded upstairs, past small gatherings of gamers fragging one another and into the VIP room where Keith was waiting with more drinks in hand.

Keith began what he lovingly called a "grandpappy story." In the third grade, he took a field trip to the Museum of Science and Industry, where he saw an electrical tic-tac-toe machine. It had relays that would light up the display on a backlit screen made of glass. His description sounded familiar; I asked him if the machine he was talking about was called the WOPR. He responded that, indeed, the real-life gaming monstrosity was the reason that he became a lifelong pacifist; it taught him that the only way to win was not to play. It also inspired a lifelong passion for electronic games.

In high school, he was in a computer club run by his geometry teacher. These computers used a punch-card programming system, in a language called Fortran Four. In 1973, dinosaurs roamed the earth, and girls who wanted a career for life were taught how to be keypunch operators. Keith would send his coding sheets to be turned into keypunched cards to be fed to the computer. Weeks later he would get back the results (generally a printout covered with errors), make small changes to a card or two, and start the process over.

After a bit of smooth talking and arm-twisting, a PDP-5 computer was donated to the computer club. No longer needing punch cards, the computer used a programming language called FOCAL. As Keith put it, "It wasn't even good enough for BASIC!" The first thing he did on this multi-thousand-dollar machine? Create a game.

Keith Roberts may have programmed blackjack on more computers than possibly anyone. In college when he got his first Apple computer kit, on a microfiche machine at a local library, he has written and rewritten blackjack as a rogue programmer all over Southern California.

In fiddling around with these machines, he fell in love with programming and computers. When the opportunity came to work at Mattel, he had ten years of programming experience. Keith was pulling inspiration from the Odyssey and Fairchild Channel F, which were being advertised on TV, and Computer Space which was in arcades. But to him, none of these games were true computer games: they were all hardwired.

As Keith sees it, the real turning point came when Taito put a microprocessor into *Western Gun* (released in the United States by Midway as *Gun Fight*). This shift from hardware to software marked the moment when videogames as we know them became possible. This is an important point in the history of Intellivision, one where Keith seems to be permanently entrenched. Even in the games being played at the party below, you can see where his interests have stayed.

Nowadays, according to Intellivision, the market is overlooking something: the arcade game. After the videogame crash of 1983/84, game development moved to computers, and computers could save progress. Before that, programmers had to develop games you could sit down and play—you would have a high score when you were done, and even that would go away when the cabinet was turned off. When consoles came back, programmers were used to incorporating saving, so there were now longer-form, more complicated games. Though there is room for both, the industry has stuck with the long-form game.
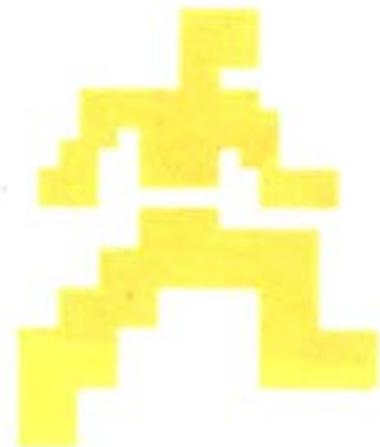
Intellivision still believes that the arcade-style game is feasible in the United States. The newer games from Intellivision have come to integrate high scores, saves, and even vibration. While they are currently focusing on direct-to-TV games, they have been following and looking into the Wii Virtual Console, as well as Xbox Live Arcade. Still, even with future plans in place, they are having growing pains.

The drinks were starting to go empty, and the evening was winding on. As unprepared as we'd initially been for the interview, things were falling into place. Keith was beginning to let out some interesting information. For example, he knew that the DS was the platform for their next collection release. An *Intellivision Lives!* collection for the DS was developed in-house in April '05, but when they went looking for a partnership, all the publishers said that the DS would only have one Christmas before the PSP killed it. So now there is a finished, developed game sitting on a shelf that can't find a publisher, and Intellivision is out in the cold.

Developing an emulator for Intellivision games for the Mac and PC is exceptionally cheap. But as Keith told
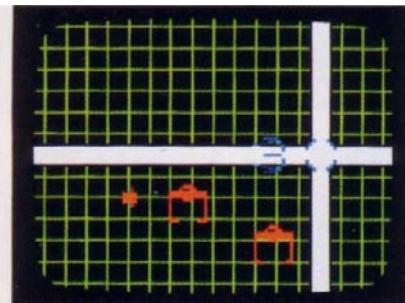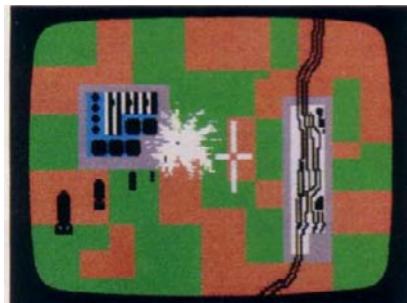
us, "Sony won't allow you to release a game unless you show off the graphics." This means that you end up paying the most money for the interface. After some finagling, Sony agreed to an Intellivision release with a 3-D interactive arcade as the games menu. Without that, they could have released the game dirt cheap and made quite the profit.

But is there even a point to releasing games on a console if you can just download them for free and play them on your computer? Intellivision controls this by releasing the original ROMs from their own website. Searching on the internet reveals that most bootleg ROM sites will link to the Intellivision homepage, where you can get them free. Intellivision knows that when you come out with products with packaging, people want them. They give you something to unwrap under the Christmas tree. And Keith had found the truth about copy protection, that you still won't sell those bootlegs that people download.

Perhaps we were getting off topic. The drinks were direly low by this point, and the conversation was drifting off to iPods and downloading movies. I needed to steer the conversation back on course, towards a topic that would score us more drinks: "So how healthy is Intellivision right now?"

If they can sell the Nintendo DS version of *Intellivision Lives,* they'll be extremely healthy; nearly four hundred thousand dollars was invested in that development project. It is currently just about impossible to self-publish the game. And while they are confident that, if they got a publisher, everyone would make money, the publishers want to see big numbers. Even though Intellivision knows they can sell 150 thousand titles, the publishers want a five-hundred-thousand seller.

So Intellivision is shifting their demographic. In the '80s, Mattel spent a lot of money telling kids that the Intellivision home console was "the closest thing to the real thing." Riding the wave that Mattel Electronics started twenty-six years ago, Intellivision is now aiming at those kids' kids. The direct-to-TV game is what they hope to hit them with. These consoles-in-controllers include not only the old versions of the games, but graphical overhauls of some. They're hoping to get these products into the hands of 5–12 year olds.
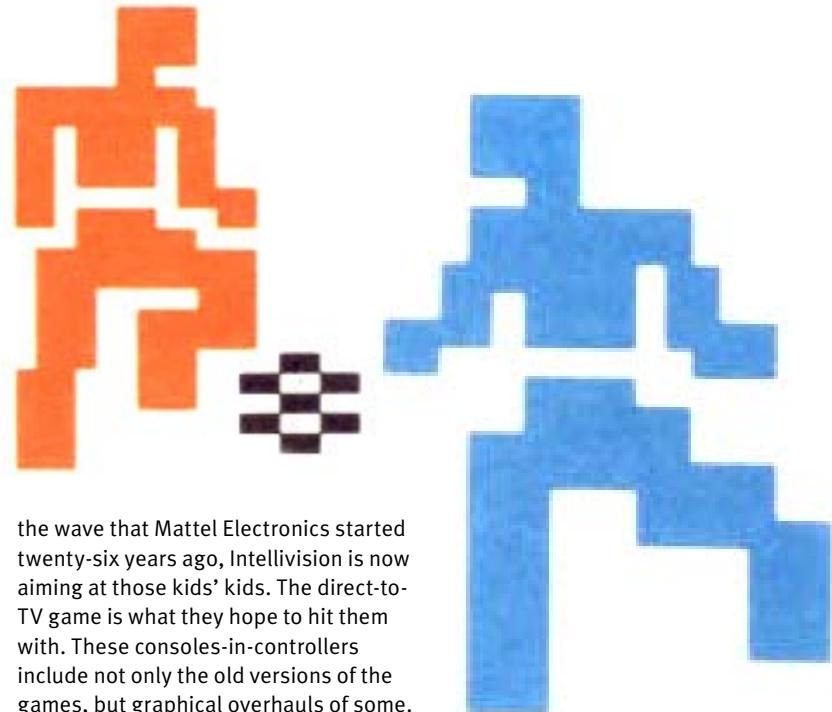
Still, you can only repackage and resell the same game a certain number of times. With all the troubles that Intellivision has gone through with console releases in the past, they hope now to migrate mainly to the computer for future releases of their classics. If games come out for next-generation systems, they will most likely be full remakes with new graphics and updated gameplay. So don't expect to see the pixelated running man anytime soon on a future console.

And games aren't the only things Intellivision is working on right now. "The generation creating the art, media, and music of today don't remember a time when videogames didn't exist," says Keith. He's decided to support that generation with Intellivision Music, which has signed the artist 8-Bit Weapon. On top of that, Intellivision Gear has been created to jump on the boat of retro-gaming apparel.

Gradually, we noticed the music getting quieter and people trying to bid Keith farewell. The conversation had been long and so had the day. My shoulders hurt from carrying around my laptop, and my eyes were beginning to close from alcohol. We still had two blue tickets left to redeem for free drinks. Packing up our things, we thanked Keith Robinson for his time only to find out that it was too late: the bar had already closed. 🎮

---

1   "Vibration in *Astro Smash* is evil!" Courtesy of the Intellivision 100, the hardest of hardcore Intellivision fanclubs.

Mechanical Donkeys

M.U.L.E—A800, C64, NES, PC
By John Szczepaniak

M.U.L.E. was one of the greatest games developed before the 1984 crash. Initially released for the Atari 800, it was ported to several systems, including the Commodore 64 and Nintendo Entertainment System. Its simple yet perfectly formed gameplay is still a joy to experience with other players. Despite not pumping out millions of polygons or a licensed soundtrack, it can still hold its own against modern games, at least in terms of raw multiplayer fun. This is both a promise and challenge to the readers of *The Gamer's Quarter:* find two friends, or kidnap some locals, and play at least one simultaneous three-player game—a full twelve rounds. Four players is best, but three will do. Once the basics have been learned, I guarantee you will have some of the best and most intense multiplayer gaming of your life, right up there with *Saturn Bomberman, Super Monkey Ball,* and even *Halo.*

The game at its most basic involves grabbing plots of land, equipping a *M.U.L.E.* (Multiple-Use Labor Element) with one of four industries (food, energy, and two types of mining), and then setting it to work. After some produce has been harvested, you and the other players buy, sell, and generally trade with each other and the store. The goal of course is to have enough produce to ensure the efficient running of your little plots, and also sell enough to eventually become the richest of those playing, and then be crowned the winner at the end of twelve rounds. It works better in practice, and is very easy to learn. The beauty of it comes from the wheeling and dealing that goes on between each player, which is why you need some friends.

Wishing to prove to people the above claims—some will think I'm exaggerating, but I assure you, I am not—I wrote a four-page feature on the development of *M.U.L.E.*, for another magazine. In doing so, I also pulled in a few favours I had with industry insiders I knew in order to get the contact details of the original team. Dan Bunten, the leader behind the group, underwent surgery to change genders and became Dani Bunten. She sadly passed away in 1998 due to lung cancer. There is an excellent memorial found on the website Anticlockwise (*http://www.anticlockwise.com/dani*).

But I did manage to track down Joe Ybarra (formerly a producer at Electonric Arts), Trip Hawkins (EA's founder), and Jim Rushing (who is still with EA). I also got in contact with Ted H. Cashion, who worked on the project. They all very kindly answered many questions and agreed to phone interviews, which

I later transcribed.

Sadly, out of more than seven thousand words that I acquired through these interviews, less than a thousand were used in the article. Having read these energetic and emotional stories, I felt guilty at not being able to publish them in their entirety. I also felt that it would be wrong of me to simply lock away the micro cassettes and leave the transcriptions to degrade on my hard drive. So here I present to the readers of *The Gamer's Quarter* the full interviews I conducted, containing the personal views of the people who helped make *M.U.L.E.* what it is.

Not only do they cover the making of *M.U.L.E.*, but they also speak about the early days of Electronic Arts, and of the development atmosphere of the early 1980s. It was truly a different time, with different attitudes; and anyone who is even remotely interested in the history of American videogames should find the following anecdotes to be incredibly interesting. Read them and remember, these are a part of your gaming history.

Joe Ybarra
Having gone to great lengths acquiring his details, I first contacted Joe Ybarra, formerly a producer at EA (one of their very first producers, in fact), and currently "Vice President of Product Development" at Cheyenne Mountain Entertainment. I phoned him at his office, and he kindly spent time answering questions.
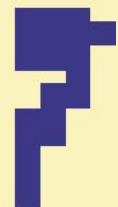
TGQ: Can you tell me about your involvement with the development of *M.U.L.E.* and the core team of four?

Ybarra: OK. Well, let's see, how can I explain this? At the time when we built *M.U.L.E.*, it was one of the first projects we started up at Electronic Arts. And at that time, we were still inventing the concept of what a producer does. Up until that point, in the history of our industry there were no producers. So essentially what I was doing, as part of being a producer for any of the teams, but particularly Ozark Softscape, was to essentially … my party role was liaison between publisher and developer. But I also had to pitch in and do whatever was necessary to help the developer work out whatever issues that came up. Financial, scheduling, procedural, resources, design, whatever. So, essentially what I needed to do was just be involved in the project at a very intimate level.

TGQ: Did you have much creative design input regarding *M.U.L.E.*?

Ybarra: I actually did have quite a bit of design input. In fact, a lot of the issues that we discussed before we even began the design of *M.U.L.E.*, were things that Dan and I spent a fair amount of time, along with Trip, talking through the idea of … starting from the premise that the only real successful game that was based on money has been *Monopoly.* In that regard, there were a lot of elements of

board games that we wanted to make sure that we incorporated into the design of *M.U.L.E.* And of course at the time when we were building *M.U.L.E.*, we didn't know it was going to be called *M.U.L.E.* In fact we had no idea what this game was going to be like. What we had was a template, with the work that Dan had done between Cartels and Cutthroats, and then another product that he had done, that had an auction system in it that was not dissimilar from *M.U.L.E.* We could look at those two products and ask what do we want to do with a game that was essentially a financial game.

Trip brought into the equation … one of the things he really wanted to embody was some fundamental teaching and training principals. So he made a significant contribution in that area. And then in my area, because of the orientation towards the board gaming world and various different other elements, I contributed things like the additional map screens and the whole concept of how the map would work. We needed to have some kind of a play field that the players engaged in, so they actually have a visual and tactile representation of where they were. That's what Monopoly does for you—you've got the board, the counters; you move around in a big circle, buying houses; and there's a lot of tactile relationship there.

Dan came up with the idea of about how that screen would actually functionally work, and of course it was his work that created the underlying economics system. If you're a player then you're aware of the fact of that, the way that the [unintelligible] in there is done in a very orderly and systemic way. Those were all contributions that Dan made. Otherwise, that was the area that I wanted to make sure got in there.

As well as the chance of "community chest" cards. There were random events that came up in that game, and that was another component that we wanted to make sure got embodied in there.

Beyond that, I think a lot of where my contribution came in, in the creative process, was essentially helping really playtest and tune this thing. I probably personally invested about between two hundred and four hundred hours of gameplay on *M.U.L.E.*, just helping make sure the thing played correctly. Between that and actually just taking the builds, providing criticisms where appropriate, and accolades where appropriate, that was kind of my bit.

TGQ: What was some of the reactions to Dan's belief that the future of gaming was multiplayer? Was there any resistance?

Ybarra: Well, there was resistance from the standpoint that at the time—we're talking about the early '80s—there wasn't really any marketplace or vehicle for us to support really core multiplayer play, other than in the consoles themselves. As you'll know, the Atari computer system had the ability to take four joysticks. While the Commodore with some jury-rigging could support four players as well. So within that context, we clearly had no objection whatsoever to supporting multiplayer play. I think the real question became later on in the evolution of both Electronic Arts, and that led eventually to *Modem Wars*. And *Modem Wars* was the type of product, as well as *Robot Rascals,* were we would try and address the concept of multiplayer play by doing so in an environment that was not going to require us to do something like we would see in a modern MMO now. Again, bear in mind, at the

time when *Modem Wars* was built, the penetration of modems and connectivity in computers was very low. It was only being done by the hardcore customers. And even the hardcore customers would only do it because they were most likely doing it as part of the work they did. Since it was not something you would expect the customers to have.

Nevertheless, the point is that we always felt that, at some level, games are about interacting with other people. We talked about that, actually, in the original business plan for Electronic Arts, about how we felt that at some level we wanted to create products that would encourage people to interact with one another. This was wonderfully easy to do at the time.

TGQ: Rumour about the sequel in the early '90s, and additions of combat? Can you comment?

Ybarra: No I can't, because all of these events transpired after I left EA. I would only see Dan sporadically, so I never found about the existence of this product until well after it had been cancelled.

TGQ: Did the Wampus come about because of the old computer game Hunt the Wumpus?

Ybarra: It was.

TGQ: Despite the different spellings?

Ybarra: The spelling was different, but the concept was exactly the same.

TGQ: Do you have any personal message or thoughts regarding the game?

Ybarra: Sure! *M.U.L.E.* was a rather interesting product in the portfolio of

EA, because in many respects it really exemplified the values that we really wanted the company to be perceived as. From the standpoint that it wasn't a game that was catering to violence, that it was a game that had lots of underlying training and educational value, it was just a heck of a lot of fun, and it was highly accessible. One of our mottos at the beginning of EA was that products needed to be "simple, hot and deep." That was sort of a credo that we had in product development. And *M.U.L.E.* really exemplified all of those elements. Of being simple to play; it was very hot in that it was exciting; and then deep because the more you played it the more you began to realize how much depth there actually was in the simulation. So to that extent, I think *M.U.L.E.*, for many years actually at EA, really did serve as a philosophic model for us.

I think that another thing that was really interesting about *M.U.L.E.* was that *M.U.L.E.* really helped us legitimize our company in the eyes of the people that were very conservative—and in particular, I'm describing the investors and the original capitalization of the company, as well as various other people including other employees and the other developers too. I think the fact that we were publishing a game like *M.U.L.E.* really made the development community feel like EA was an environment that would support the creative processes and would take risks. It allowed us to do things that people had not done before. For many years, that was very much the case with EA. Some of the final products that I got to work on at EA were all very experimental. Products that I think had never been done like that before. In fact, that's the reason why EA Sports even exists now, because of the work we did

on *One on One* and *John Madden Football* particularly, and then *Skate or Die* afterwards, and other products that came out in the late '80s and '90s.

I also want to say that Dan was tremendously respected in the company. More than just respect, I think he had the love of most everybody there as well. His character and the nature of the way he interacted with people, and again the values that he represented, I think we all just felt very special at having that relationship with Dan, and the rest of the team. I really enjoyed my time with Dan. I think one of the more interesting points in my career was, after we completed *Heart of Africa,* it became pretty deeply obvious that the relationship that Dan and I had as producer and developer was coming to a close. Because there was no real growth going on for either one of us. I felt for me personally that working with Dan, although it was really immensely enjoyable, that we had pretty much plumbed the creative process between the two of us. From that point of view, I think he wanted to find out what it was like to work with somebody else and experiment in areas that I had no interest in. So that was sort of a parting of the ways between the two of us.

It kind of reinforces my thinking about how closely in parallel a development team—and the process of creating games—is very much like rock-and-roll bands. In the sense that you've got all these disparate, different instruments and players working together to create a common thing. And that it's extremely difficult to sustain the energy and enthusiasm and excitement for a really long period of time. I guess Dan and I worked together for … what, about four years I guess? Something in that neighbourhood. It was great, we did some really amazing

stuff together. But the time had come for the end for us, and then he was, in turn, produced by David who worked with him on *Robot Rascals.*

TGQ: Can I quote you from the tribute site? There are some good anecdotes.

Ybarra: Absolutely. Go for it. By all means, do so.

Another interesting anecdote that … I'll never forget this, because of the impact, starting a new company like EA, building a new product with all these different developers, and then inventing the processes—it was a very funny time. I remember that early spring, after January, February, March … because we started *M.U.L.E.* roughly in the November of '81. Or was it '82? I guess it's '82. And we launched the product, I believe it was May 23 of '83. So the entire development cycle for that product was six months. Right about the mid-point of the product, when we were starting to get first playable, that was when I started my several-hundred-hour journey of testing this game. I can remember many nights I would come home from work and fire up the Atari 800 and sit down with my, at the time, two-year-old daughter on my lap holding the joystick that didn't work, while I was holding the joystick that did work, testing this game. And I'd probably get eight or ten games in at night, and I would do that for two or three or four months actually, trying to work out all the kinks in the product.

By the way, at that time in the history of EA, we had no testers. In fact we had no assistance—we didn't have anything! So producers had to do everything. I tested my own products; I built my own masters; I did all the disk-duplication work; I did all the copy-protection; I did the whole nine

yards! If it was associated with getting the product manufactured, the producers did all the work. I remember a lot of nights there staying up until one or two o'clock in the morning playing *M.U.L.E.* and thinking, "Wow, this game is good!" It was a lot of fun. And then thinking to myself, "Gee, I wish the AI would do this." So I took notes and took them along to Dan, and say "If you do these kinds of things at this point in the game, this is what happens." He would take parts of those notes, and a couple of days later I'd get a new build and be back in that main chair back with my daughter on my lap, once again testing this thing and checking to see if it worked. More often than not, it did. That was a really special time.

What I've told people over the years of EA was—it was my personal opinion, and I'm not sure if this is a true statement anymore, but it certainly was at the time—that I thought that *M.U.L.E.* was the most-playtested and best-balanced game that EA would produce for many, many, many years. And that was simply because there were lots of people that really loved that game, and put a lot of love and attention into that thing, and really knew what they were doing. Because of that, we could make really insightful comments about how the AI was working, or how different code elements were working, and so on and so forth, that really made the development process a lot easier for both sides. So I was really proud of that project. But I think I may've mentioned somewhere in that article there, that the best product I did with Dan was the one we would do next, *Seven Cities of Gold.* And of all the projects I worked on at EA, that was my favourite.
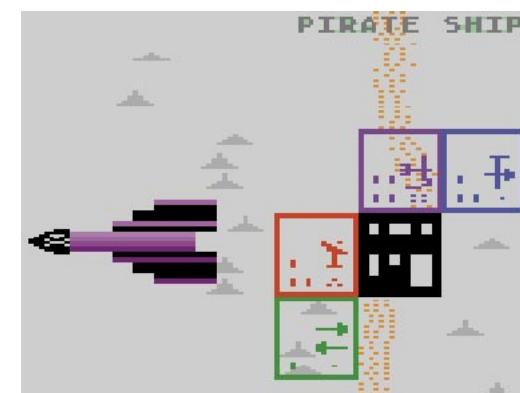
TGQ: It certainly showed, all the hard work you put into *M.U.L.E.* Twenty years later people are still playing it.

Ybarra: Yeah! I'm, just shocked about that. [laughing] I don't understand it. Yeah, I just don't get it. Hopefully someday there will be some people grown up now that never saw *M.U.L.E.*, will get to play it.

TGQ: Yes! Hopefully! There'll be a four-page article on it. It'll hopefully get more people interested. If I need any more info, I'll e-mail some questions.

Ybarra: Very good.

TGQ: Thank you for your time.

Ybarra: Thank you, and good luck with your article, and thank you for calling and talking about *M.U.L.E.*

TGQ: No problem, thank you very much.

Trip Hawkins

The next interview was done by e-mail, with Trip Hawkins of Digital Chocolate, who was the founder of EA, and the one who tracked down Dani in order to have *M.U.L.E.* made. While his answers are more formal (since they were pre-written), they are still incredibly fascinating, and they reveal a lot about both *M.U.L.E.* and the foundation of EA.
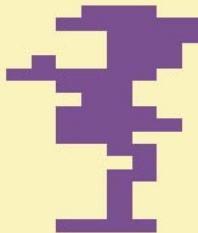
TGQ: Tell us about your involvement with the development team of *M.U.L.E.*: Dan and Bill Bunten, Jim Rushing, and Alan Watson. What were they like to work with?

Trip Hawkins: In 1980, I became one of the founding board members of Strategic Simulations Inc. This was one of the first computer game companies, and in 1981 they published a game called Cartels and Cutthroats that was a business simulator that I loved. When I founded EA, I went to Joel Billings of SSI and asked him if I could buy out his rights in C&C so I could make a new and improved version. He declined. So, I figured out who had made C&C and found Dan Bunten's name. I tracked him down in Arkansas and asked him if he was interested in having me fund an entirely new game with him that would try to be a more consumer-oriented simulation with a different theme. I had specific direction on user interface, player choices, degree of difficulty, and also how the rules of economics were to be implemented. I also ended up writing the manual because I understood intimately how the game worked and was capable of writing for mass consumers. Dan agreed with all of that, and he got his group together that became Ozark Softscape, and they came up with the concept of the robotic *M.U.L.E.* on the sci-fi planet. They

got their inspiration for the look of the *M.U.L.E.* from the Imperial Walkers that had debuted in the second Star Wars film that had come out a few years before. The *M.U.L.E.* was cute, and the theme song that introduced the game is one of the all-time best. This became one of the first EA development contracts that I put together in the fall of 1982. These guys were truly among the nicest people I have known. Very good people, down to earth, unpretentious, while also being very creative and technical and professional. Bill was a very sociable guy who was fun to hang out with, but his contributions were minimal as he did not have a technical background or relevant experience. Alan was a quiet and solid technical guy. Jim was more of a management type and eventually took that track in the industry, working with EA for many years. Dan was the key designer, key programmer, and the leader of the group. Dan had a background, I believe, in architecture so he knew how to organize and plan a software system. He was a good leader because he had the right values. He cared about people and was very kind, and had a big personal commitment to innovation, technical quality, and using games to promote social interaction and learning. Of course this was many years before Dan became Dani.

TGQ: You mentioned designing how the economic principles were used in the game, could you elaborate on this?

Hawkins: The key principles were supply and demand and how they affect pricing; economies of scale and how they affect output and costs; the learning-curve theory of production and how it increases efficiency at a certain rate based on experience. In the game, one of the great strategies was to organize a way to control the market for Smithore by dominating production while withholding supply from the market. This would drive the price way up. We also increased the marginal rate of return as your experience of producing a certain ore went up. This gave you an incentive, like a real business, to specialize in certain areas and become the leader. The game had an innovative mechanic for the market-place of buyers and sellers, where you literally walked up or down the screen to set your price, and if you intersected with another party, it would initiate trading. They presented all of these elements very cleverly.

TGQ: How many months did development take? Were there any hiccups?

Hawkins: The project began around October 1982 and was finished in May 1983 for the Atari 800, becoming one of the games that were part of EA's first product launch. Other versions came later for platforms including Commodore 64, IBM PC, and Sega. IBM paid us to make a version for PC Jr.

TGQ: Everything is very well balanced, how seriously was playtesting taken back in the day? Did the team really spend thirty-five hundred hours playing the game?

Hawkins: We did take testing seriously, and it was organized as an official department of the company very early on. Mark Lewis and Chris Wilson were the first testers hired by the company. Mark went on to become a VP at EA. Chris has been in the industry ever since and is now a manager of testing at Microsoft. Is the thirty-five hundred number from the liner notes? If so, it is probably tongue in cheek and a wild guess. But the truth is, of course there was a ton of testing! This was one of our first games and it was fun to play, so it got "tested" a lot.

TGQ: How did the Wampus come about?

Hawkins: Ozark came up with that one, but I'm not sure who deserves credit. As you know, there had been a popular text game on timeshare computers called, "Catch the Wumpus." I thought the way they implemented this in *M.U.L.E.* was ingenious, and it was a lot of fun. It became one of the industry's first examples of a "nice touch." That is, something that did not have to be done, but that was done anyway, in order to enhance the value of the play experience and give the customer something extra. Game reviewers would spot these things and say, "Another nice touch that adds to the quality and innovation is…"

TGQ: How well did it sell, relatively speaking? Did you have any inclination that more than two decades later it would still be receiving praise and page dedication in modern publications?

Hawkins: Commercially, *M.U.L.E.* bombed. It sold only twenty thousand copies. The album cover and name were confusing and failed to explain the beauty of the game. It won more awards

than any other EA game, including Game of the Year in Japan! But hardly anyone bought it. We sold many more units of the next Ozark game, *The Seven Cities of Gold*. And many more copies of early titles like *Hard Hat Mack* and *Pinball Construction Set*. We were all very disappointed that the public couldn't fathom *M.U.L.E.*, because all of the developers and employees and critics thought it was the cat's meow. This all contributed to *M.U.L.E.* becoming such a cult classic.

TGQ: Do you have any personal message or thoughts regarding the game, or anything related?

Hawkins: The vision I had for the industry was games like *M.U.L.E.* and *Madden,* games that are really fun, but satisfy my ethos of "simple, hot, and deep." My idea was that consumers would learn at the same time they are having fun,

because they are thinking and getting their neurotransmitter connections made, but also because the topics and subject matter are worth learning about. And the games were high quality in terms of usability and professional execution, so they succeeded in their purpose. You cannot play *M.U.L.E.* without inadvertently learning as much as a college Economics 101 course would teach you. And you understand football much better if you play *Madden*. However, what is disappointing is how consumer interest moved towards the exercising of our testosterone, and towards property licenses that leave less room for innovation. So, if you wanted to present a topic like economics today, the producers today would put it in a Harry Potter game and would include shooting and fighting. Personally, I have a higher opinion of humanity and aspire to help people reach for that higher level.
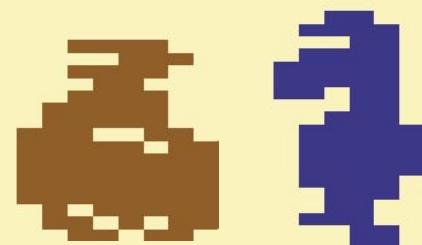
Jim Rushing: I joined EA as an employee in 1989. I was in the Redwood Shores Studio for sixteen years in a variety of positions: programmer, producer, technical director, director of development. I'm currently in EA University creating leadership training programs for development directors and producers (and still doing a little programming on the side).

I believe that the rights to *M.U.L.E.* are owned by Dan Bunten's estate, although I can't say with any certainty. Dan may have assigned the rights to EA during the aborted Genesis version. When I left Ozark, Dan bought my interest in the product, and as the others left, he became the sole owner of the property.

TGQ: Tell me a little about your role in development, and that of Dan(i) Bunten, Bill Bunten, and Alan Watson. I've heard you were the programmer, and according to Trip Hawkins, "more of a management type."

Rushing: There were four partners in Ozark Softscape: Dan Bunten, Bill Bunten, Alan Watson, and me. We all did various jobs, and each wore several hats in the company, as you can imagine. Dan—was the creative force and creative genius of the company. He was also a very good programmer. Alan—all art and

graphics design and some programming. Jim—programming and implementation design. Bill—creative design, gameplay tuning, and business aspects of the company, no programming.

I met Bill in graduate school, and he introduced me to Dan. Dan and I immediately hit it off. Dan was writing a business-simulator game called *Cartels and Cutthroats* for SSI. Bill and I were his first testers. We would all meet up at Dan's house in the evenings and play the latest version of the game. By the time I had finished school, EA was getting started, and they contacted Dan to do a game. Trip had played *Cartels* and had loved it. Dan decided to quit his job as an industrial engineer and go full-time into gaming. I joined him shortly thereafter. We met Alan through mutual friends. Bill kept his full-time job as a directors of parks for the City of Little Rock and worked with us in the evenings and weekends, etc.

Trip was probably referring to my strength being more technical and management-related rather than in the creative-design arena. Although Dan was the driving creative force, we had regular design meetings where we all were able to express our opinions and ideas on the design. I was quite strong in implementation design, however.

We all know Dan was a genius … I feel

very fortunate to have worked with him.

TGQ: I've read that *M.U.L.E.* took several initial incarnations. Was anything left out of the final game?

Rushing: We can discuss more on phone, but … Trivia:

- Working title of the game was "Planet Pioneers."
- The "planet" Irata was "Atari" spelled backwards.
- *M.U.L.E.* came from the concept of the old Wild West (circa 1800's where you could strike your fortune with "forty acres and a M.U.L.E."
- Also influenced by a Robert Heinlein science-fiction story.
- The Wampus was a tribute to the very ancient Hunt the Wumpus game in BASIC that we played when we were learning programming.

TGQ: Can you tell us about Broadmoor Lake and Slick Willy's bar, and their connection to the game?

Rushing: The international headquarters of Ozark Softscape was a house we rented in a residential neighborhood in Little Rock, Arkansas. We each took a bedroom as our individual office. The house was great because it was quiet, had a huge refrigerator, couches, bean-bag chairs, etc. It was a very creative environment for us. As the game was being developed, the house was a perfect place to focus group parties. We would setup up multiple games in the den and living room of the house and have our friends play and give feedback. Broadmoor Lake was a small lake that was across the street from the house. When we were looking for inspiration,

or just wanted to take a break, we would hike around the lake, sit under the trees, skip rocks on the lake, etc … .

    Slick Willy's was a sports bar in Little Rock. It was close to the main Post Office, so when we would make a milestone delivery to EA, we would go over to Slick's and celebrate. They had arcade games and pinball, foosball, etc. And beer :) Just a place to hang out and relax after crunching to make a milestone.

.   .   .   .   .   .

He then kindly provided me with his cell phone number, and we spoke as he was driving someone to their destination. An interesting conversation, since he came across as very human and shared many personal anecdotes, despite working at EA; a company with a reputation for having a, shall we say, different outlook on things. While I can't comment on what EA is really like, I can say that all its employees whom I have spoken to have been helpful, friendly, open, and above all passionate about videogames.

TGQ: Good morning … Do you have a few free minutes to discuss things?

Rushing: I do. Unfortunately you're going to have to bear with me, I'm dropping someone off right now.

TGQ: Oh, I'm terribly sorry about that.

Rushing: No, that's not a problem, it's just that you're going to be hearing a lot of other, ah, noises. If that's OK.

TGQ: No, that's OK, you've already answered quite a lot via e-mail. So I thought I'd ask for some elaboration on some things.

Rushing: Sure.

TGQ: I've read some reports that in the early '90s a sequel to *M.U.L.E.* was called off by Dani Bunten due to someone at EA wanting to add combat to the formula. Can you comment on this?

Rushing: Er, yeah. It's um … I don't want to get too deep into that. But basically, this was around the Sega Genesis period. I don't know, at the time I wasn't involved with it. I was at EA at the time, but was involved in other projects. And so I don't really know what transpired. So I don't really know if I should comment on what either Dan was feeling or what EA was feeling. But my understanding is that project just didn't work out because Dan and EA could not come to terms on the creative side. They couldn't come to an agreement. On the creative side. But I would be careful about positioning it, that it was because of weapons or things like that. I just don't know for sure.

TGQ: Can you comment on what development was like? I've spoken with Trip Hawkins and Joseph Ybarra on what the business side was like, and I was wondering if you had any personal anecdotes?

Rushing: Oh, well … there were just so many. It was a really interesting, innovative and exciting time, for me personally, and I think for the gaming industry as a whole. You know, that was back when a team of four people could actually make a game that a lot of people wanted to play.

TGQ: So you had a lot of personal creative freedom?

Rushing: Yes! For the most part. Of course, once we began working with EA, Joe Ybarra was our producer, and he was very much staying in touch with us throughout the development, and would fly out to Arkansas occasionally, although he didn't really drive the creative. But he was there offering suggestions and was a great sounding board for his interpretation of what the greater market was and what would resonate with them. And Joe was a big game player, so he came with a wealth of experience about playing games, and what he thought was going to work well with the audience.

TGQ: You were the programmer on the project?

Rushing: Well, yes, if you're going to put labels on people. Like I said in my e-mail, we all contributed to different parts. Like my, I guess you could call it my "day contribution," was the auction sequence. I designed it and programmed it. But, everyone … you know, we had these design sessions, so again, there were only four of us right? And we would sit around the table and just talk about the game. Everyone would have ideas, and contribute ideas. Undoubtedly Dan was the creative genius. I wouldn't want to take any of that away from Dan. I think he really was a genius. Hold on one moment…

   [Speaks to passenger]

   I would never want to take anything like that away from Dan. He really was the genius behind the whole thing. But, having said that, it was very democratic in the sense that, if I or Bill or someone came up with a good idea, and the group thought it was a good idea, we would do that. It was just a very tight, trusting group of four guys, as you can imagine.

And because we rented a house, and it was a very laid-back kind of environment … It was a little bit like a fraternity, if you can imagine, and we would have people over there all the time, playing our games. And we would be working on them during the day, and then we would have people over in the evening to play, and it was such an environment that could make those turn-arounds in a day. So we could get the feedback from the previous day, and we could incorporate that and then have people back over the next night. So it was just a really fun and exciting time.

TGQ: Fascinating stuff, I like the sound of all that. You also told me some trivia in the e-mails? Like the working title was "Planet Pioneers."

Rushing: That was the working title for a long time, yeah.
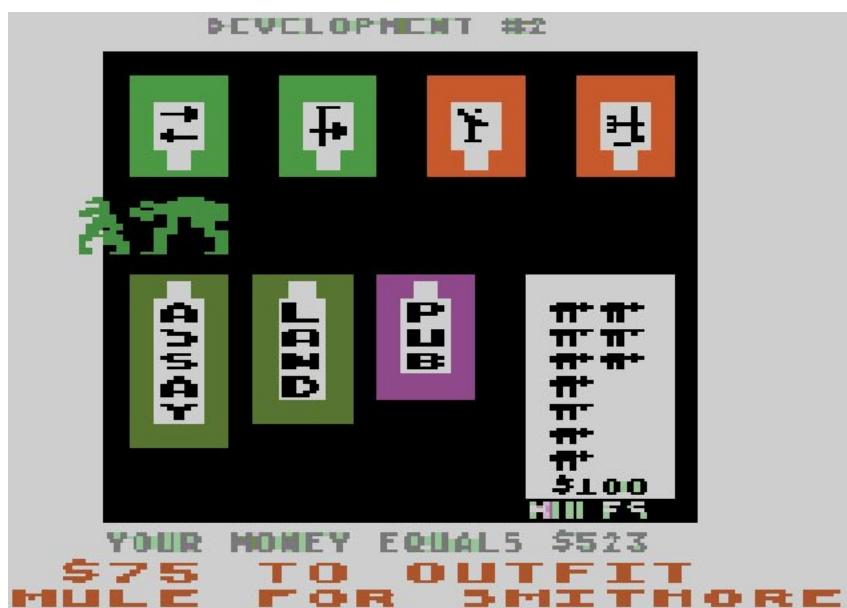
TGQ: Were there any things that you wanted to include but were unable to?

Rushing: Wow, you know … I think that the little bit about the magic of *M.U.L.E.*, you know … and there has been so much discussion and everything on the net, and there have been these sort of tribute sites, and people have tried to design "*M.U.L.E.* 2.0," and so on, and they come up with a lot of good features and everything, but, I don't know … There's something that to me just says the simplicity of the original *M.U.L.E.* is hard to beat. And I think we did have some stuff that we couldn't get to, obviously every game development team does—so there's either things that they wanted to do that just wouldn't work at all, and they had to set aside. Or the kind of strain being such that there just wasn't time to finish everything. But to tell you the truth, I can't really think of anything large that we were not able to do, or that we

had to set aside. We were pretty happy with the game. I'll just kind of leave it at that, I guess.

TGQ: Do you have any personal message or thoughts regarding the game you'd like to add?

Rushing: Well, I would just say, like I said in my e-mail, I feel really fortunate to have been a partner and to have worked with Dan Bunten. He was such a cool person on so many different levels, and he really, really had a passion for gaming, and he had such a great innate sense of what was fun. And I will just always remember the years that I spent with Dan, both through the EA period and before. Because I worked with him for about a year before we connected with EA. And you know, he had his own demons, obviously, but he was just such a cool person on so many different levels, and for me it was a very magical point in my life. I had just gotten out of school, so there was a little bit of the fraternity still going on, we were doing something brand new, something exciting, something a little bit out of the mainstream. I remember my parents being horrified that I didn't go and get a real job after school, right, and was going off and doing this computer gaming. They were … I mean my father was just, like, disgusted, and practically ready to give up on me. You know, but it was something that I felt I wanted to do, and it was just so exciting and brand new, and were just … And you know, it was small enough so that we could get stuff done, and there wasn't a lot of politics, and EA was brand new at the time, and EA brought a lot of really cool things to us as well. Working with Joe Ybarra was great, he was a really good producer for us.

And EA brought a lot of the infrastructure that we didn't have, so they had some technical resources that we relied on, and some things like that. I dunno, I guess for me it was just a long time ago, but it was also a very magical time for me.

TGQ: That all sounds good. I think I have enough information here along with the e-mails to supplement the article. Thank you very much for your time.

Rushing: Oh, you're quite welcome. Any time. I am flattered that you contacted me and wanted to do an article on *M.U.L.E.* It's still a good game.

TGQ: Well, more than twenty years later, people are still playing it.

Rushing: I know! I was very intrigued by that link I sent to you on the network. I have actually not had the time to download that, and to try and play it. But it looks quite interesting, and I sent the link around to a couple of people, and they were very, very interested, and they thought it was a great idea to bring some of the older games back to a wider audience.

TGQ: I had a look at it.. [Explains emulators.] … Which is why I asked about the rights to the game. Because I was contemplating the idea of "what if *M.U.L.E.* was available on Xbox Live Arcade," multiplayer.

Rushing: Oh yes.

TGQ: Like *Joust* or *Gauntlet*. I was actually thinking of mentioning it in the article.

Rushing: You know, I think recently, your interest, and with this thing that

showed up on the net, there are a couple of people that are interested. In fact, the new executive producer for *The Sims,* his name is Rod Humble. He's from the UK actually, and he is a *M.U.L.E.* fanatic, and is very much thinking around in his head right now, how can we do something like that. But again, everyone asks about the rights to *M.U.L.E.*, and it's a little bit murky, I think. Someone would need to get an attorney to really dig down and try and understand that. We were one of the original contracts that EA wrote, and I don't know if you know this bit of trivia also. As it turns out, the launch for EA, I think they launched six titles when they first came out, that initial launch. I think it was six. But anyway, *M.U.L.E.* was SKU number one. And it was just luck of the draw because there was six that were coming out at the same time. But *M.U.L.E.* ended up being SKU number one for EA.

But anyway, what I was going to say is … I was part of the original contract for the game, and it was a very early contract for EA, and it was really unclear how the rights were going to live on. When I left the company, I sold my portion back to Dan. I think the other guys did also. So as far as I know, Dan ended up being the sole owner of the property. However, when the Genesis *M.U.L.E.* project was underway, Dan was starting to get sick. And I think there was some kind of a temporary transfer of rights to get the product done. Or something like that. But I'm not sure. But I believe that eventually the rights came back to Dan's estate. So I would imagine, if I was going to guess, I would guess that Dan's estate is still the owner of the rights.

TGQ: That's very interesting. And it certainly bears thinking about.

Rushing: It does. Ok, well, anyway, thank you very much, it's been a pleasure talking with you, and I hope I've been a help.

TGQ: You've been a great help; I'm honoured to have been able to speak to a member of EA and one of the original team members.

Rushing: So, I have to know, what did Trip and what did Joe have to say?

TGQ: Actually both were very complimentary of the whole group, and of Dan; and Joe said something along the lines of, it was one of the most interesting points in his career, and feels very lucky to have worked with the original team of four. Both had very, very nice things to say.

Rushing: Terrific. They're really good people, both of them.

TGQ: Anyway, I hate to cut and run like this, but … thank you very much! And I'll e-mail you at a later date regarding the progress of the article.

Rushing: That would be great, thank you very much.

TGQ: Thanks, bye.

Rushing: Ok, b'bye.

Ted H. Cashion

I also spoke with Ted H Cashion, via e-mail, as he was connected to the project and knew several of the people behind it. His e-mail is interesting, since it highlights just how much things have changed, and how far people have moved on since those innocent days in the early 1980s.
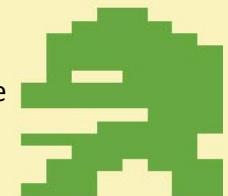
Ted H. Cashion: Hi, John.

Your e-mail brought back many memories. I definitely remember the development of *M.U.L.E.*, as well as *Seven Cities of Gold*. All this took place in Little Rock, AR back in the '80s. At that time, there was a very active Apple-computer-users group, The Apple Addicts. Dan served as the first president. By the time he went through the operation, we had drifted apart—computer clubs were no longer in vogue, and our paths seldom crossed. Also, I moved away from Little Rock in 1996, and have lost touch with all of the club members you mentioned.

I don't recall Joe Ybarra, but not all of Dan's company hung around the club meetings, which, by the way, were frequently held at the house where Ozark Softscape officed as Dan's games gained prominence. Have no idea where Bill is, but last I knew of he worked for the City of Little Rock Parks and Recreation Department. I vaguely recall Jim Rushing, remembering Alan Watson better as he also worked in a stereo store in Little Rock that I frequented.

Basically, the computer club supplied Dan with a great group of game testers. We would have some knock-down games of *M.U.L.E.* I even bought an Atari so I could play *M.U.L.E.* As you know, Dan was way ahead of his time in terms of multi-player and online gameplay.

It's been a long time, but there was a span of years where a bunch of us spent a lot of time together—testing games, fantasizing about how computers would evolve ("one day you'll have a megabyte of RAM …") over pitchers of beer. Glad to hear you're doing an article, and I'd like to help as much as possible, because Dan was a true visionary—I'd like to see him/her remembered properly.

Dan/Dani was way ahead of his/her time. A pioneer in multiplayer online gaming, he/she was way ahead of the rest of us, and is owed a debt of gratitude by the entire computer/videogaming industry.

Thanks for contacting me!
Ted H. Cashion
Memphis, TN

A Broken Robot at the End of the World

Planetarian: The Reverie of a Little Planet—PC
By Chris "GSL" St.Louis

When I finished *Planetarian: The Reverie of a Little Planet,* I cried. I sat at my computer for a good ten minutes composing myself before finally clicking out of the ending theme and closing the program. *Planetarian* was engaging and moving in a way that no game I've played before or since could possibly be; that the extent of my involvement with the title consisted of clicking from one line of text to the next is an testament to the power of story.

Perhaps you've heard of the obscure games known as visual novels. A staple of Japanese PC gaming since the late 1980's, visual novels defy classification as easily as they seem to defy integration into the gaming mainstream. But ask a few non-Japanese fan, and odds are you won't even get a consistent answer on what they should be called. A frothing anime fan would insist on referring to them as *bishojo* games, from the Japanese for "pretty girl." The self-professed otaku would possibly call them *ren'ai,* romanized Japanese that literally means "love game." An average gamer may call them adventure games or inter-active fiction, searching for the closest analogue outside of Japan. And the

utterly uneducated might just lump every title under the heading of hentai after hearing about the common occurrence of adult content in the genre.

I'm most fond of "visual novel." These games in the genre play like the Choose Your Own Adventure novels many of us enjoyed in our youth. You read through lines of story and dialogue, pausing occasionally to choose a particular response or line of action which later results in different narratives and endings. In most visual novels, the branches coincide with the pursuit of one of the many heroines of the game. And yes, some of them do culminate in a steamy (and sometimes slightly depraved) encounter with the chosen lady.

But to focus on these qualities is to do a great injustice to visual novels as a whole. A large number of titles are for all ages, and the true joy of visual novels comes not from the well-drawn and possibly cute (if that's your scene) manga-style ladies, but from the writing itself. By the time you reach one ending, you've read enough damned good text to fill a small novella, and that's not taking into account the three or more other storylines still left to be played through.

At some point, visual novelists realized that they could weave a highly involving and emotional story into the more super-

ficial goal of living happily ever after with the lady of the player's choice. When the cuteness subsides, the power of the writing takes hold; friends die or are otherwise irretrievably lost to you, and gentle souls are crushed ruthlessly and permanently.

. . . . . .

I was a little hesitant when I first downloaded and played *Planetarian*'s trial demo. At the time, I knew of the visual novels as 'those hentai games' and dismissed them all accordingly. Besides, they were all in Japanese. I can't quite remember how I stumbled across the project page for the English translation of *Planetarian*, but I was magnanimous enough to suspend my misconceptions and read through the translator's comments. It was billed as a short visual novel with maybe five hours of total playtime, absolutely no adult content, and the sort of post-apocalyptic setting

I just love to see in recreational fiction. What the hell, I thought.

Right off the bat, *Planetarian* smashed through all of my general-izations. A careless reviewer would hasten to christen the game's direction 'postmodern', a catchall used ad nauseam to describe anything that doesn't jibe with traditional standards. *Planetarian* is actually a work of minimalism in a field rife with predictable conventions. Instead of pursuing a harem of doe-eyed lovelies in a high school, the player attempts to tolerate—not woo—a slightly batty robot living in an abandoned planetarium. There are no branching storylines and no multiple endings. In fact, there's no user inter-action whatsoever beyond advancing the text. *Planetarian* is a short story that will take the speediest reader at most 5 hours to plow through, but it's 5 hours well worth the meager price of admission.

The story paints a world without any possibility of hope or redemption. Humanity's incessant consumption of natural resources sparked a final, destructive war where chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons were used with abandon, leaving the earth permanently poisoned and the skies permanently dripping with caustic, toxic rain. Major cities were sealed within giant sarcophagi in an attempt to contain the biological and chemical destruction wreaked during the destruction.

Years later, humanity is on the verge of extinction. The earth is barren, with the global ecosystem in ruins on account of the deadly rain. Time has destroyed the barriers surrounding major cities and neutralized the biological threats. Solitary nomads known as Junkers scour the ruins for food, tools, weapons, and prewar luxury items like cigarettes and

liquor. But the spoils do not come without risk: automated tanks and drones patrol the cities—the sole combatants in a war with no humans left to fight it—and it's never in a Junker's best interest to work with—or be a meat shield for—another Junker.

The protagonist—an unnamed Junker with little left in the way of hope or optimism—has found the remains of a sealed city from the war that bears no signs of investigation by other Junkers and so might still remain unplundered. But once inside, he is chased by the robotic war machines that still patrol the streets and is forced to take refuge in the planetarium of an abandoned department store. The planetarium isn't entirely uninhabited, however; the Junker discovers Reverie, a robot in charge of greeting guests, and the device known as Miss Jana, a circa-1940 planetarium projector fallen into disrepair.

Reverie seems to have more than her fair share of short circuits as well. She seems unable to come to grips with the idea that the human race is nearly all but extinct and highly unlikely to ever visit the planetarium again. She cheerfully refers to the Junker as "Mr. Customer," and irritates him to no end with chatter. Despite this, the Junker has something of a change of heart and decides to oversee the repairs of Miss Jana, reasoning that even a babbling robot is better than evading mindless autom-atons set to "kill."

The story remains cute and amusing until about the halfway point, where the writing—and translation—really shines. Miss Jana is repaired, but it drains the remaining power in the building's generators. Reverie reveals that she is only active for one week of the entire year, and then will soon shut down in

order to recharge her batteries. But with the building's power depleted, there's nothing to recharge from. And as nice as the planetarium is, it contains neither food nor supplies to sustain the human Junker.

From the beginning, the game provides subtle foreshadowing—the entire city ought to be without power, and the Junker entered the city for the express reason of procuring rations and tools—but you are still met with anxiety when the pair decide to brave the mech patrols and caustic rain to escape from the doomed city. The heart-wrenching climax is a Voight-Kampf test; only an android could hold back his tears. But it-also invokes a feeling of, "Oh God, I should have seen this coming from way back!" The author scatters small clues throughout the story, producing the vague unease that grows as the story winds on. Only at the end of the tale do you fully grasp the minimalist essence of *Planetarian*: a game stripped of all the trappings of what constitutes a game in our minds until there is only the story left, and the emotion created through our participation.

Yes, participation. We as readers play the game just as we would with a controller firmly in hand, only instead of the victory and gratification of high scores or the slaying of demonic hordes, we receive for our troubles a beautiful, moving, and even cautionary tale worth at least five "epic" cinematic RPGs. And this is a claim I do not make lightly.

．　．　．　．　．　．

Like almost every visual novel, *Planetarian* is written entirely in Japanese. However, the translation group Insani has translated both the free demo and the full game into English (and done an amazing job). Their website, for more information on the game, is *http://Planetarian.insani.org*.

The full version of *Planetarian* was initially released only as a web download as part of the Kinetic Novel series published by Visual Art's. At ¥1050 (approximately $9.00–$10.50, depending on exchange rates), the game is an amazing bargain. Insani's site walks prospective buyers through the relatively painless process of purchasing and activating the title through the Japanese-only website. For those who wish to try the product first, a translated demo is available for free download from Insani's site.

We at the *The Gamer's Quarter* strongly encourage you to purchase the title, rather than pirating it. Regardless of your views on digital rights, $10 is hardly a devastating amount. Both the Japanese game and its English translation are labors of love more than anything else, and for the creators of the game to not receive due compensation for their work is an obscenity of the worst possible sort. ◼

Worship the Glitch

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion—WIN, X360
By M. O'Connor

I was very impressed by the typed note (on Bethesda letterhead) that accompanied the 3.5" floppy I received in the mail. The disk held the latest patch for *Arena*, the first *Elder Scrolls* game. I had written a letter to the company complaining about a game-killing bug in the main quest and the terrible instability. The person who wrote back apologized for the problems I was having and said they hoped the patch would clear up whatever happened to be broken. If I recall, I only had one or two crashes per hour versus the dozens before the patch. By modern standards, it was an atrocious mess, but for an open-ended PC title from the early '90s, it was par for the course.

I don't remember if I ever finished the game—I don't believe I did—but I do remember the creepy early-3D graphics and alien sandbox filled with cardboard cutouts of characters to be slain and projected upon. While not the truly massive world of *Daggerfall*—an ambitious follow-up that managed to be both more open-ended and more plastic than its predecessor—it was certainly large enough and free enough to sustain a kind of love.

Oblivion is the first *Elder Scrolls* game that isn't mostly broken straight out of the box. In eighty hours of play, I had three crashes to the desktop and one video-driver-related freeze. It's a ratio I can live with. This miraculous mean was maintained despite adding a pile of potentially exciting problems with their "Radiant AI" system. It's not perfect, but it is interesting and somewhat effective most of the time. It is also slightly broken, mostly in enjoyable—or at least entertaining—ways.

When *Oblivion* hit, the official *Elder Scrolls* forums were aflame with the sort of fury that is only possible with the jilted expectations of juveniles. That many of these juveniles were in their late 30s is, of course, one of the great tragedies of our age.

Oblivion is the first *Elder Scrolls* game to be released with any sense of polish. It is nowhere near the buggy, insane mess of *Daggerfall* or the cold brown world of *Morrowind*.

The polish has enraged people. These games have an unexpected depth; no one recounts the big plot points of the main quest in an *ES* game, and if they do, it's as a part of a larger story about what happened on their journey. These stories are often filled with strange glitches, bugs, and loops; prodded by player abuse, this exotic freedom is a hook of tremendous emotional importance. The *Elder Scrolls* series has always been

broken in some way, and catastrophic bugs line the trenches of its history. Abuse of loopholes—and modifications to repair or expand them—helped make it one of the more popular PC RPG franchises of the past decade. The official construction sets ensured an extended life for the series when its technical overreach would have killed lesser titles; *Morrowind*'s many graphical updates are a must-have for anyone attempting to crack open the series. The series inspired people to strip it down for the better.

The "official" titles in the series have steadily filled in the blanks of the political and social world of Tamriel that was first painted onto the now-flat environment of *Arena*. Game content in book form has been absorbed into the larger story of The *Elder Scrolls*, even if it only exists to serve as a backdrop to your character's adventures. *Oblivion*'s polish enrages people because by painting in these gaps, Bethesda has started to back away from the unique qualities players once used to make emotional connections.

Xboxification Sucks, but What Are You Going to Do, Open Your Own Design Studio and Development House, Negotiate Sweet Deals with Publishers and Take the World by Storm?

Oblivion is still an extremely open-ended game compared to its peers, though the wake of *Grand Theft Auto* and *World of Warcraft* has revealed an audience more than willing to invest time and money into playgrounds with relaxed rules of engagement. A decade's time hasn't broken the feel of the series, but it has narrowed options. It certainly hasn't been neutered

(or spayed) like *Deus Ex,* an ambitious world followed up by a weak and flawed title that failed to capture the spirit of the original.

PC games have always been hit-or-miss affairs due to a lack of standards. With certain companies, especially those who took technological chances, problems were part of the cost of entry into their worlds. Origin did its best to make sure each title it released was more complicated and expansive than the last; running them now is even more difficult in many cases. The golden age of the 1990s created the world to come, in which the term "dumbing down" would be used to describe any move from perceived complexity to perceived accessibility. *Ultima VIII* was Xboxifaction before the Xbox—the closing of a larger world in favor of something quite more linear.[1]

Dual-platform development does create significant hurdles. It also gives a company the opportunity to hook a whole slew of new customers. *Morrowind*'s adaptation to the Xbox created an entirely new fanbase for a game, one worlds away from its console brethren. The Japanese RPG model that dominates does not allow meandering away from the plot beyond sub-quests and item collection. It certainly doesn't entertain such blasphemy as ignoring the central plot entirely; after all, there are fathers to hate, giant robots to drive, orphanage alumni reunions, and, more to the point, God ain't gonna kill himself. The chance to write your own story is a rare thing in the console world—but all the manic teenagers on the internet, foibles notwithstanding, are generally going to do a better job than the cookie-cutter geniuses at Square-Enix. You own the story; you have deep directorial control over what happens next. Even if what's "next" just means climbing more guild hierarchies or rearranging the contents of an adopted home. Earlier installments featured hooks like *Daggerfall*'s banks and real-estate market, as well as a slew of dress-up opportunities—the rise of personal webpages saw public demonstrations of virtual finery and fine living

that later installments have not yet come close to matching (though a project to create unique textures for all of the books in *Oblivion* is a nice start).

But depth is a tricky thing, and so "dumbing down" gets another turn on the whipping post. *Oblivion* features fast travel, quest markers and for-pay plugins. Ugly or not, some of these changes make for a faster and more streamlined experience; it may be dumb, but some of us have to go to work, pay bills, and generally get on with life. If being able to drop back in and out of the world and accomplish some quests without having to take detailed notes is stupid, so be it.

And what a strange notion that really is, at the bottom of the spittle and vinegar. Tying intelligence to play, no matter how complex, is a good way to crush the fun out of something.

And What about That Whole Oblivion Thing? You Know, the Game?

Voice acting is a difficult thing to do correctly. Some folks know how to do it well, but most are lost in a mysterious world of ham and cheese; "so bad it's good" has been destroyed by "so bad it's hard to ignore" and the occasional "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani!" *Morrowind* was no great champion in this regard, using far too few actors, none of whom possessed anything resembling range. *Oblivion* uses many of the same people but expands the amount of spoken lines to cover nearly every bit of text in the game. It is absolutely maddening to have to listen to dialogue that was generally not very interesting

as text; hearing the same stories about mudcrabs from dozens of bystanders holding their own plastic conversations just plain breaks your spine.

But the game itself? It is streamlined, but it is also not a betrayal. Combat is now engaging all the time, and not just for the first twenty levels until you become a walking tank. Its technical flaws are few, especially considering the lineage from which it emerged. Out of more than eighty hours, perhaps twenty were spent on the main quest—the rest went into doing the same things one does in an *Elder Scrolls* title, seeing just what you can get away with.

Don't listen to the crazed jackals, for they are too absorbed in their own image—reflected from the pit of the glitch that spawned them—to understand they stagger about in someone else's dream. 🎮

---

1 *Ultima IX* was more of a debacle than an offering, because it was so broken, technically and spiritually. By the time it was fixed, no one cared what it had to say at the closing of what had become the most ambitious series to ever grace a computer screen.

In on the Auction

A Letter to SCEA
By Marco Michilli

In my employ at EB Games this past holiday season, I was privileged to be on the front lines in the eternal life-or-death battle of selling videogames and videogame accessories. It was no secret that after the launch of the Xbox 360 on November 22, it was not only hard for Microsoft to meet demand for the people that preordered the system, but also street sales. Tight quantities and a high buzz helped sell the 360, but also damaged the chances for customers that honestly wanted one. All too often the systems would end up on eBay, fetching prices two or even three times the manufacturer's suggested retail price. When not in stock, we – the loyal employees – would be accused of buying them and selling them ourselves, even though that is clearly not allowed in our store policy. I'm sure some people at some stores did so, but most of the Xbox 360 systems sold on eBay were placed there by your everyday average customer.

Occasionally, some of our customers would not accuse us, but they would go on to talk about the 360 auctions on eBay ending at $1200 or $2000 as if we weren't aware of them. I would jokingly tell them that Bill Gates was buying them and keeping the demand artificially inflated over $1000, so as to make the $300 or $400 price tag in stores seem cheap by comparison. This wasn't true to the best of my knowledge. The people winning the auctions wanted the 360 and couldn't find it in stores. With the holidays or birthdays coming up soon, paying so much is quite understandable. People can be impatient, desperate or simply too lazy to see any other solution.

My issue isn't with the poor suckers that were trapped in this commercial joke of fair game, but the countless and faceless 360 resellers – some professional, some amateur. It's happened since before eBay, but on a smaller level. Back then, it was restricted to newspaper ads offering $400 Tickle-me Elmos, $200 Furbys and $700 Nintendo 64s. As eBay and other similar sites offer their services on a global scale, the number available increases almost as fast as the consumer demand. This demand was perpetuated by the many customers that would buy a 360 with the specific intent of selling it on eBay. As far as get-rich-quick schemes go, it was easy to do and returned high profits, higher than those the game stores and even Microsoft were making per system sale.

So as the Playstation 3 nears on the horizon, all the opportunists will be waiting in line and have their preorders ready, same as in 2005, 2001, 2000, 1996, 1992 and so on. I hope you, Sony, can agree this creates a large problem, as every PS3 sold for $1000 is $500 in profit (per system!) for some opportunist. With a small $5000 investment and a maxed-out credit card, the $10,000 return (minus shipping costs and eBay fees) is enough to buy twenty more systems to sell. Or nineteen more if the shameless profiteer keeps one for him/her/their self. Selling those nineteen systems brings in $19,000 and after the credit card is paid off the individual is now $14,000 – and one Playstation 3 – richer.

And 100 percent profit is a very modest number. Currently, the Playstation 2 is the market dominator. Well over one hundred million Playstation 2 systems have been shipped worldwide, with no clear schedule to stop production. Even with an MSRP of $499 or $599, the number of people signing up for preorders on the Playstation 3 or saving so they can buy them at some midnight launch is already impressive. The same high demand and low availability will no doubt create another eBay gold rush. Another bottleneck for real Playstation 3 seekers to crawl or get squeezed through. One thousand, two thousand, maybe even three thousand dollars?

Regardless of the launch numbers you may have planned, there will no doubt be a shortage nationwide. That cannot be helped, unless you have an extra ten million systems sitting around that you haven't told anyone about. What can be prevented or maybe even stopped are the terrible practices of these PS3 kidnappers. These villains are buying systems that they don't want and ransoming them off to the highest bidder. I honestly see these eBay scavengers as a problem that can be fixed with my very simple and modern proposal to your fine and open-minded company. An honest and thought-out plea for a more sensible method of ensuring not only that your loyal gaming customers get a PS3 this holiday season, but they are paying for the true market value of the system.

The proposal? Have an official Sony auction website specifically designed for the Playstation 3 launch. Every PS3 sold for the launch will be auctioned off, no exceptions. Assuming there will be 500 thousand systems for North America for the launch window from November 17th to, let's say, December 23rd. That's thirty-eight days, a little over five weeks. So at roughly 100 thousand units per week, that gives a number close to 14,285 per day. The daily sales should be near 6 thousand units before 6 p.m. (Pacific time) and 8 thousand units for the 6 p.m. to 12 a.m., the peak auction times after a business day. The remaining 300 systems would be put aside to cover defects, giveaways, warranties, contests and other such causes. Have a few auctions with proceeds that go to popular charities. Discounts can be given – say, free shipping for certain states in certain auctions. Include free games or extra controllers if auctions go over $1000. As long as there is a steady, reliable supply of Playstation 3 systems on your auction's website, the number bought and listed on eBay will be low.

If you should choose to offer none to the brick-and-mortar game stores and larger electronic retailers, I really don't think they would put up too much of an argument, seeing as how they have traditionally made a very low profit per system sold. Furthermore, the actual cost of building a system might be paid off completely with some sales. No auction would go for less than $500 or $600 ever, especially if you allow for no preorders, even through your own website. Why offer a preorder to little Timmy Gamerstein for $600 when his parents might pay twice that? And so what if they don't? There are millions of other parents standing behind them, hovering over their computers waiting for a chance to bid on their children's happiness; millions of technophiles wanting a less-costly Blu-ray movie player; millions of PSP owners looking for the shiny new fix.

The benefits, mentioned and unmentioned, would greatly outweigh the cost for creating such a site and informing the public. Such a bold and radical plan would fetch a few interviews in magazines both videogame related and unrelated. An online-only approach would be both revolutionary and very progressive. The Sony image would become faster, sleeker, and even more powerful. Newspaper ads, internet ads, and movie ads should already be in the budget, right? Use these to inform and educate how the public should plan on getting a PS3 this fall.

Sadly, I cannot say I don't see any objections to the whole matter. Not everyone has internet access or credit cards. But they really aren't the "target PS3 audience," in my opinion – they aren't the people who would pay $500 or $600 and have HD televisions. Some might say this would raise the price of the system out of anyone's reach. But if that were true, then who's winning the auctions? Also, there is a slight possibility of some parties winning PS3s at lower prices and selling them on eBay when the demand was greater, making the PS3 in to something like a videogame bond. However, if the website and sales are successful and go off without any problems, the dependable and trusted Sony will still get more per system auction instead of "Games4Less56" on eBay.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is to strike while the iron is hot. Holidays, new Playstation system, Internet auctions – these come together to create the perfect storm of consumer frenzy. Wasting this opportunity on the hundreds of thousands of systems coming out could mean hundreds of millions of dollars lost. If 250 thousand systems were sold at $500 and 250 thousand systems sold at $600 (averaging $550 per system), the total would be $275 million. If 100 thousand systems were respectively sold at $650, $700, $800, $900 and $1000, the total would be $400 million. That's a difference of $125 million US dollars, well worth the financial investment of the website.

Finally, Sony, I'll take this quick moment to openly admit that I'm only guessing these really low estimates and assuming 500 thousand systems for the launch. You have the real market analysts, databases and resources to prove me sort of right or completely wrong. 🎮
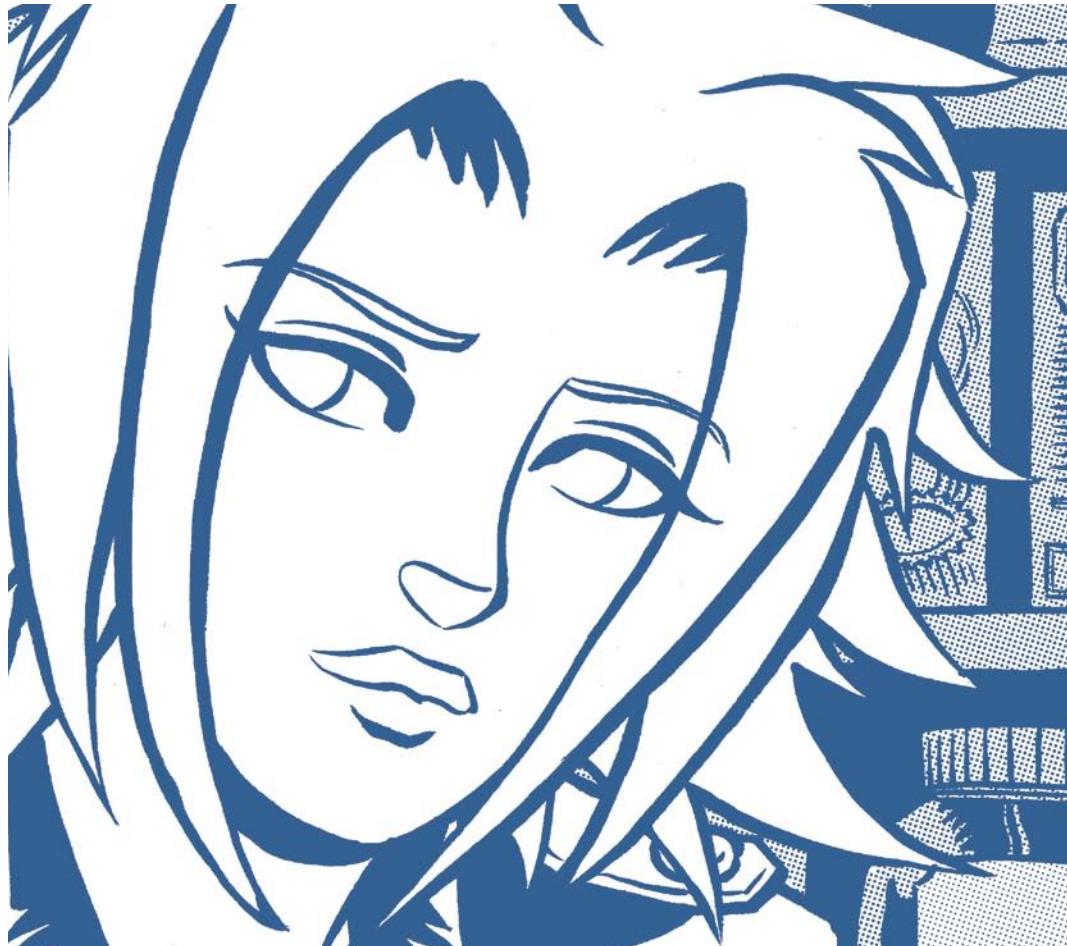
empty words

A Brief Note on Pacing in Videogames

The Soul of Wit
By J. R. Freeman

Maybe you've heard the argument before: "I spent fifty bucks on this? It didn't even last more than ten hours!" We often see the popular argument that most discerning gamers expect a certain amount of game for their dollar—or bang for their buck, if you will. Oftentimes in these discussions, the issue of videogame length pops up. "How long is too long?" and "what is the ideal length for a game?" are frequent questions. However, discussing the length of a game ignores the greater issue. The issue being that it's not how long a game is, but how well it's paced.

Any sort of entertainment, not just videogames, relies on good pacing. For books and movies, it's how well the story is paced; for videogames (since they often don't rely that heavily on the story element), it's a bit more nebulous. Story-heavy games need to have enough interesting characters, plot twists, etc., to keep things from feeling too stale too soon. It's why RPGs like *Dragon Quest VIII* don't need to rely so much on the gameplay aspect; they're showing us new things happening constantly on a regular basis. While *Dragon Quest VIII* itself might not have anything new at all to offer us in terms of gameplay, it is one of the most well-paced RPGs you'll find simply because the story is told and revealed at a tight, steady clip without too much room left open for distraction.

However, like I said, story isn't everything with videogames. In the beginning, videogames didn't even have stories. At best, they had a brief plot synopsis. Most of them were level-based too, divided up into short playable chunks, which made it easier to play to a certain point and then stop. Good gameplay pacing involves showing us new things constantly to keep our interest, either by slowly giving us access to better power-ups and abilities as in *Metroid* or by giving us a constant sense of progression via new environments with harder and harder enemy types, like we see most recently in *God of War* (a game that has excellent pacing, the sense that you're always moving and seeing and doing new things).

Now, there is often a divide between the story aspects of a game and the actual gameplay. This is the case for most games, but occasionally the two manage to team up for just the right combination. The Metal Gear Solid series, for instance, manages to have a story that is as fun to follow as the actual gameplay surrounding it. Ideally, all videogames would have the right amount of both (particularly without removing the player from gameplay via a cutscene, but that's a discussion I'll leave for another day), but this isn't an ideal world, and we have to pick and choose our battles. It's left up to the player to decide: Am I playing this game to see how the story plays out, or am I just trying to blow stuff up and have a good time?

When the issue of "did I get my money's worth with this game?" comes up, I see that the discussion is often dominated by game length, or options of how much content is available to the player (either through new levels, widgets to collect, minigames, power-ups, etc.), which isn't the same as pacing. Good pacing can happen in a long game as well as a short game. In fact, it's the matter of pacing that decides how well we like a game, more often than not.

Chrono Trigger isn't the perfect length, it just has really good pacing. Those hours fly by when you're having fun, don't they? There is no perfect game length, only perfect game pacing. How often we see and do new things in the course of our playtime determines how well it is paced. Well-paced games give us a sense of constant discovery and progression; while badly paced games make us feel bored. A number of things contribute to good and bad pacing, but a prime example is the environment, the actual space we play in. So, pacing in the videogame sense means how often or not often we find ourselves seeing and doing new things in the game space, which ties into our sense of progression through the game as a whole.

For example, *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* is a tightly designed action/adventure game that takes an average player around seven or eight hours to beat. It doesn't feel too short or too long because the sections of fighting are balanced enough with the sections of platforming that we don't notice the length of the game until after it's over and we look up at the clock on our dressers and computer desks. *Halo 2,* on the other hand, has poor pacing; at what feels like the halfway point of the game, it is over and the credits are rolling. Whether this was an intentional move on Bungie's part or not is beside the point, because the ending came out of nowhere and was unexpected. And yet *Halo 2* is slightly longer than *Prince of Persia,* despite it feeling much shorter to the average person playing. Pacing can make or break even the greatest games out there. (I've mentioned game length here a bit, but only to distinguish it from pacing. Length in a game is merely the amount of time it takes to beat it. As I

mentioned above, pacing can make a short game feel longer than it is and vice versa.)

Now, open-ended "sandbox" games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Oblivion* are a bit of a different beast, but only at face value. What they do is simply offer the player the choice to create their own pacing. These games offer up a host of things to do in their worlds, but it mostly just boils down to two options: Do I feel like advancing the story right now or do I feel like exploring the world? In these games, there is still a clear divide between the story aspect and the gameplay aspect, despite how well integrated the two may be. At the end of the day you're making the choice to either advance in the game or just screw around.

Portable games, like those on cell phones and the DS, are perfectly paced because they are designed for on-the-go playing. Short, punchy, and to the point

is the definition of perfect videogame pacing. Yet this does not necessarily exclude longer games from the pacing club. The *Half-Life* games are around twenty hours in length and feature the best examples of pacing in a videogame that we as gamers have probably encountered in all our years of playing. It manages to marry its story to its gameplay completely and in a way that is transparent to the player. It isn't broken up by cutscenes but truncated by various scripted events. In between fighting off Combine soldiers and solving physics-based puzzles, we encounter various characters that explain the happenings in the story and gently prod us along to our next destination. The sense of progress manages to keep up with the scope of the game, and since there is only ever one true, yet not immediately apparent, "path" through each area, we never get lost or have a chance to get bored with what we're doing. The player is never

walking on foot for too long before they encounter an area that requires a vehicle, one provided up front and in the greater context of the story of course, to advance with what they're doing. Despite all of this, the *Half-Life* games still manage to stay close to the point and tell the story they're trying to tell while guiding us through each scenario and giving us new options with which to be engaged.

Pacing is more and more important in this modern era of game design because we, people who have been playing games for years, are growing up and moving on with our lives and do not have eighty hours to spare towards a single game anymore. It's largely the reason I've given up on the RPG genre, aside from a few specific titles. I simply don't have the time to waste plodding through repetitive, careless game design and mediocre story points to get to the good stuff. I prefer games that only take up ten to twenty hours apiece, because if the pacing is all in place and the design is tight I have the incentive to go back and play through the experience the game provides me multiple times.

The larger gaming community doesn't immediately recognize the issue of pacing, but it should; for our sake and for the sake of the hard-working developers and designers that toil long hours to bring us the rich experiences of escapism we so crave. 🎮

Untold Tales of the Arcade

Stand-Up Role-Playing Games
By Francesco-Alessio Ursini

I have played a lot of games in my life; some of them good, some of them bad. I also have played a lot of RPGs, of the dice-and-paper variety. You probably know the deal, as you have surely had the experience of playing some of them (or knowing someone who played them), like *Advanced Dungeon & Dragons, MERP,* or perhaps one of the 3485.5 handbook-laden things with tons of useless rules to decide that, yes, you hit that poor ogre and killed it.

Most of the RPGs I played were set in fantasy worlds, full of obnoxious things like magic, mystic powers, and other insane ideas that can appeal to nerdy boys. Right now I'm 27 going 28, so I can sit back and relax when thinking about it, but back in my teen years, I was seriously convinced that a true scientific nerd should despise anything remotely irrational like spells, ogres, and the usual fantasy stuff. At some point, I started having sex and thus growing up; I also realized that, no, at least for the moment, quantum phasers are a bit impossible. Just a bit. Hence, they are also fantasy, in

the broad sense of the word.

In the meanwhile, though, I also played a few fantasy games. A beloved of mine remains *Gaiapolis,* of which I talked at some length in the last installment of this column. Other games came dangerously luring me into the perverse lands of myth and imagination, even prompting me to read such reactionary books and stories as Elric of Melniboné" and "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath."

In any case, I confess, shamelessly even, that I wandered around magical lands while playing arcade games. What's worse, I enjoyed it, as most of the titles I played offered not only spells, orcs and scantily clad fairies[1], but also nifty game mechanics, interesting challenges and lovely graphics. Well, not all the time (*Nastar Warrior* anyone?), but often they defined worlds of wonder in which my young, excessively creative mind could wander freely.

The Wars of Rastania
There was once a young man with a long mane and a fine broadsword, who decided to beat the shit out of the poor monsters and mythical creatures who went around ravaging his beloved

lands. If you think you've read this plot somewhere else, you're right—Taito decided to make a platformer/beat-'em-up/hack-and-slash action game set in the lands of Cimmeria and featuring Conan. However, since they didn't want to pay royalties, they changed the names and wisely avoided to make explicit references to Howard's works, and thus they created the rather cool game *Rastan.*

Now, it's probably sketchy that they tried to avoid royalties issues, but this type of thing really doesn't bother me, to be honest. When I was a kid, after all, I cared about games and gaming: find a new game in my uncle's beloved arcade, put a coin in the slot, and be magically transported into new lands of wonder, might, and magic.

If you have read *Conan* stories, you would probably know that Conan himself is tall, very athletic and bronze-skinned because of his healthy life in the open fields chasing down all kinds of dangers. The Taito character is a faithful rendition, and he prompted me somehow to discover the world of wonder behind Howard's creation. At the same time, I played with some gusto the not-so-good-looking, but simplistically fun *Rastan,* identifying myself, somehow, with the sword-wielding sprite.

Rastan is a very simple game, and I have enjoyed its simplicity since its very first publication. Most of the gameplay is hacking things, possibly in a quick sequence, so that more special items (gems for points and power-ups of various kinds) can be triggered. There are various platform elements, as jumping around from ledge to ledge (possibly with the right tempo to avoid various killing devices), not to mention the boss battles, which are all pretty easy if a player learns a very simple trick (i.e., the correct
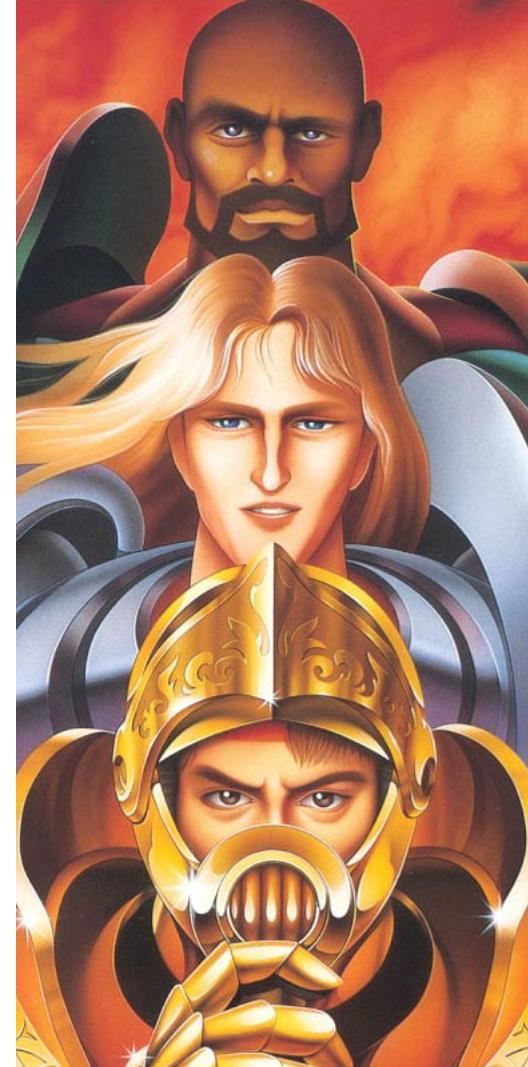
routine of jumping slashes, which are worth two hits, and thus four hits with the double-edged axe).

On the other hand, *Conan* is also a rather simple type of narrative, as I discovered back then. Conan's adventures are quests, and Conan is basically a reckless fighter who wanders around his world, trying to get as much as he can for himself. Gifted with a good sense of humour and various skills (unlike Ahnold's portrayal, he is actually very knowledgeable and can read and write various languages, and he's also

---

1 For the most part. It was published in 1987, the year of his majesty *Rainbow Islands,* and many other titles were also heavily score-driven. However, they were a minority, unlike in modern arcades.

a very able thief), he has a number of adventures before becoming the king of Aquilonia.

Back in those days, though, I only cared about slashing around enemies. The game itself is so linear that, in some sense, I found in its gameplay the same happy and melancholic atmosphere found in Howard's novels. There's really no more depth of gaming beyond the right hack and the well-timed jump, exactly as there is no more depth in the adventures of Conan beyond the struggle of a man to become a sort of benign Nazi, while stealing things and killing people at random, and all for personal profit. If score-driven gameplay is some sort of nutty philosophy of gaming, then *Rastan* represented, even in a time of score-light games[2], a simple and honest feast of destruction and linear fun—no more than a sprite-based illusion, but real enough for *Rastan* to slay, love, and be content.

This is also one of the first titles on which I could resort to my father's help for tips and tricks: the three pillars that emerge from pits (or from lakes of fire, or other cutesy deathtraps) were one of my fiercest problems, back in those days, with respect to jumping at the right time. My father, once he saw me lose a couple of lives in a desperate attempt to get past the first occurrence of this simple (but tricky) obstacle, told me to leave the joystick to him and let him show me how to get the jumps right. Not only that, but he revealed to me the awesome jumping-slash-that-does-twice-damage technique, a great and magnificent classic of barbarian gameplay (or simply a useful trick for bosses). In a nutshell, he taught me wise lessons of life and gameplay, indeed!

Rastan II (or *Nastar Warriors* or just *Nastar*), on the other hand, was rubbish. OK, even today, I find it oddly interesting. The main reason is its music; the second, flabbergastingly enough, is its design. While the animations are honestly crap, there is something about the rough and barbaric design and the lunar, distant landscapes that still capture me. And when I was a kid, I couldn't but adore the main theme and its hypnotic ability

to evoke the bizarre world of Rastania. The boss theme, with its classy epicness, conjured a sense of impeding doom (blatantly destroyed by the ultra-cheesy bosses, I should add).

The ending theme, with its sad, dramatic crescendo, always captured my overtly romantic side, evoking melancholic musings upon exhausting journeys. The final part makes me think, every single time I hear it, that the second chapter of the wars of Rastania are simply a showcase for the beautiful songs by Zuntata masters Yack and OGR. For the rest of the game, though, I can only wonder how weird I was as a kid that I was willing to learn a game just to listen to its final theme!

Two Things That Distinguish the Human Soul

There is a beautiful Renaissance rondo in the *Cadash* OST. It's a simple theme done in the style of 15th century music, the kind you often hear in those movies about knights and dames, with a rhythm not unlike the a waltz. There is a speaker, probably an actor in his sixties, that recites: "Oooh, Justice and Peace, the two things that distinguish human soul from the depths of Hades," or something similar. And then the song starts, with its elegant tempo. I can't think of a game that evokes so many memories as *Cadash*. You too, while reading this name, have probably already gone back to those wonderful days full of shiny adventures in the kingdom of Deerzar.

Except that Deerzar is not really a shiny, cutesy fantasy world. Cadash is a pretty gory game, with violent colours and bizarre monsters—a bit like the designers were high on something dangerous while drawing the sprites and reading, with all likeliness, "The Call of Cthlhu" instead of some *D&D*-ish adventure. After a short tour in the lovely kingdom of Deerzar, we go down in the first dungeon—my first dungeon ever, actually.

The memories are still vivid: an intrepid ninja throwing shurikens against giant anthropomorphic pigs, while an

---

2 Clearly a metaphor of yuppies and neo-cons.

epic theme played in the background. I was awestruck from the first second, I think. The whole concept of playing and leveling up was not exactly new, but as a kid, I wasn't particularly fond of *Gauntlet* or of Western games in general.

But *Cadash,* if anything, was a pretty Western-like game from Taito; and at the same time, it was a Japanese-esque approach to the *D&D* theme. Aside from

order to cross the final barrier to the castle of Baarogue, you need to avenge the memory of a good man, slain by thieves allied with the creatures of darkness, while finding a way to talk with his animal friend, faithfully waiting for you.

Cadash represented, for many of us, the naïve beauty of the first fantasy adventures, of the first heroic sword-

the obvious addition of an (unbalanced) ninja character, it featured some of the typical aspects of Japanese fantasy games, like a focus on hack-and-slash mechanics (because after all we're talking arcade here, dammit!), while at the same time building stages with some quest-like plots to follow.

Stages 3 and 4, captured me with the idea that the poor inhabitants had to hide from the monsters invading their lands. The fourth stage especially—going down the viscerae of Earth, entering the dreadful world of the undead[3], crossing a river of flames—still captures me. In

and-sorcery dreams. At the same time, it was the first arcade adventure in the proper sense of the word. Many of us, the generation that grew up and played arcade games in the '80s, still have fond memories for the kingdom of Deerzar and its longing for justice and peace. As trite as the ingredients were, it was a sort of dream come true.

But, as I learned, happy endings only exist in Western games, most of the time. Once I discovered how to finally get out of the maze of the undead and its gory secrets, the castle of Baarogue was waiting for me. I still remember the

first time I read the dialogue with the princess: "Ah? My father is still alive?" A plot twist, the intuition that something more sinister was going on. And then, the discovery that the mysterious bolted door at the very beginning of the game leads you to the main throne room, where the king is revealed to be Baarogue himself, a powerful dragon with two heads.

The princess asks us, after we have saved the kingdom, to remain and rebuild its former glory. But we have to go, in search of further adventures—a picture of her beautiful face while the credits roll.

Round, because Everyone Is Treated the Same

There is simply no human being on Earth, provided a heart, that can despise the Arthurian cycle. While I refrain to make any exercise of literary critique, its representation of early Renaissance worlds, disguised as a quasi-mythological England after the fall of the Roman Empire, has been the dream material of countless kids around the Western world. Celtic folklore, European castles, grassy places, adultery—this story has them all. And, since at the same time I was playing the absolutely beautiful *Pendragon* RPG[4], the story of king Arthur, the heir of Uther of Pendragon, enthralled me like a siren's chant.

At the same time, Capcom launched a rather interesting and original beat-'em-up, which introduced a rather complicated scoring system and captured, in a

magical way, this world of wonder. I can't really think of a place at the time that didn't have this gem. Everyone liked it, and I can still remember the queues to play and battle in the name of the round table.

Knights of The Round is not the standard scrolling beat-'em-up by Capcom: the gameplay is a bit more varied as the three heroes (Arthur, Percival, and the adulterous Lancelot) start their quest for the Holy Grail and fight a number of improbable enemies along the road.

Aside from these particulars, the game is about the long spring and summer afternoons spent with many, many friends (the only other game that could attract crowds to compel my uncle to get more than one cabinet was *Street Fighter II*). All were fighting for the cause of justice against the cruel enemies (and the tricky game engine) that menaced the lands of Britannia. Many coins were thrown away trying to battle away the hordes of Garibaldi, often with my trusted friend Pierluigi (a.k.a. Bob), while dreams of mysterious ladies in lakes pervaded our first *Pendragon* campaigns.[5]

Aside the strong parallel with my RPG-based formative years, *Knights of The Round* was also a story of friendship: with Bob mainly, although neither of us has ever fooled around with the other's girlfriends. (Maybe because he never liked mine, I think.) But aside from the merry jokes, we cemented our friendship by this shared experience, growing up to

---

3 *Pendragon* was first published by Chaosium, but is now owned by White Wolf. Together with *Ars Magica,* it flawlessly captures the spirit of mythical Middle Ages. It is still stuff that makes me shiver nowadays, but if you want to play something fantasy, these are the two tabletop RPGs you should really try out.
4 While I'm on the subject, I never understood why the final boss was named Garibaldi, a historical figure of Italy's unification into a single state.

share each other's joys and delusions, before and after our gaming sessions, while at the same time swinging swords in the name of the Holy Grail.

Recently, with my uncle's arcade gone and the memories of epic battles of knighthood faded away, my friend Bob and I had an occasion to talk about things past. It was one of those melancholic

. . . . . .

I have played a lot of games in my life—some of them set in imaginary places that are, nowadays, far away from my mental landscape. And still, I visit them, paying homage to the man (the kid and teenager, actually) that I was—with a bittersweet smile of melancholy,

Break time!

evenings in which we would brood about merry days of youth and innocence, of cheesy sessions of RPGs, of sweaty battles on *Knights of The Round* and a handful of other titles we played in tandem. We were at my place, the fire by our side, too much wine and meat in our bellies, and we decided to play again that game, thanks to MAME. For a moment, years seemed to disappear, once again battling in the name of the once and future king. Again, we wondered at the utter stupidity of last boss's name, and we admired Capcom's gem of gameplay and design, filled with wonder and perils

wondering who was the other self that played those games in amazement, while roaming on the plains of Pendragon's reign, or sighing at the sight of the beatiful sunsets over the valley of L'Aquila.

There are still other stories of wonders and perils to be told, though. But we will visit them in the next installment of Untold Tales. ▪
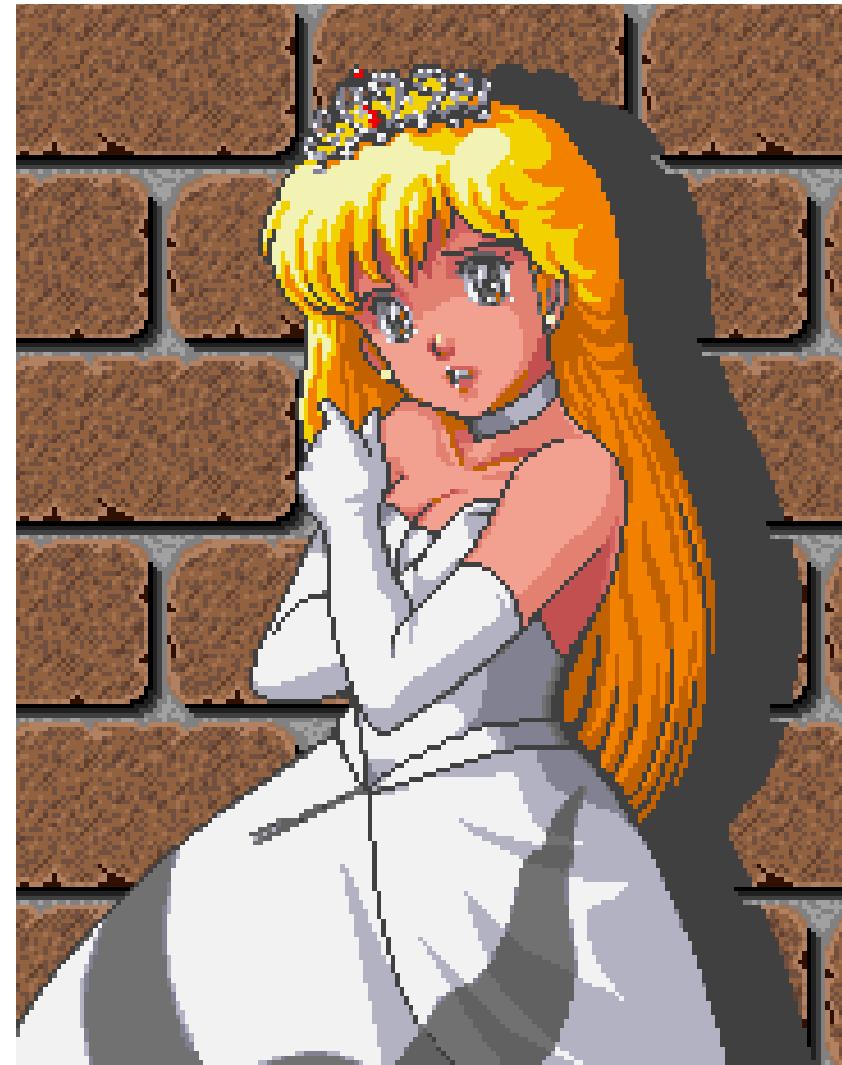
Stay Awhile, Stay Forever!

Further Adventures in ihe British Games Press
By Paul Lilly

DISCLAIMER: The following is fiction, with fictional people doing fictional things. If it happens to bear a striking similarity to actual events that occurred in Britain throughout 2005, that still doesn't necessarily mean it is based on or was influenced by those events. All similarities to those events, or people, is purely coincidental. No, really, mate; trust us on this one. You can trust us, right? We're not like the others, man. We're your friends.

Chapter 1: In the Beginning There Was Hope

I fell into writing quite by accident. It was near the end of November 2004, and my college days were behind me. I was idly larking about, spending the dosh I'd earned running a small arcade that summer. With a sense of nihilism, I waited as life passed me by, playing too many videogames at a local social club ("60 Frames per Second"), occasionally contributing lengthy essays to the group's reading sessions. My original dream of joining the games industry and becoming head of a development team— an auteur with absolute control to bring my grand visions to fruition—had slowly faded. I resigned myself to a downgraded dream; perhaps I could pass as someone who writes about games if I could not actually make them?

On cold Saturday nights, members of 60 Frames per Second would gather in a smoke-filled basement to play *Advance Wars* and *Halo,* drink several bottles of gin (or any other spirit-based elixir), and publicly read aloud various games-based essays. (This was before the large influx of such work on the internet and in places like *The Gamer's Quarter.*)

This is where I first met Fontleroy Bumblebry, an Elliot Gould look-alike with a thick Mario moustache and a worrying sense of bravado to his mannerisms. This was the same Bumblebry you were introduced to in my last adventure in this magazine's pages.[1] Bumblebry would scout out gaming dens of iniquity, looking for high-quality tournament players, long-forgotten coders, illicit warez, or a decent hack writer to publish in the pages of his many games rags. He was first put onto my work by his superior, a man I know only as Beets. My essay on that fateful evening was "Socio-Economic Implications of Nintendo's Pricing in China." A little pretentious perhaps, but it was all part of the collective's drunken atmosphere. Bumblebry liked the work though, and so he introduced himself.

Looking back, it's here where the threads of my life started to unravel.

"'Ello mate, that's some good work. Pukka-like, know what I mean? Anyways, my boss, right? The old geezer told me to keep an eye out for that. How would you like to be famous, mate? We'd like to use your work."

Neither of us realized the utter chaos that would ensue, or how much I'd be exploited, once I had said yes.

"Sure, sounds like a jolly good laugh, old chap! I've never been in a printed publication. Cor! You're from that syndicate of bookazines, Lofty Writers Incorporated, right?"

"Spot on, mate. We can't offer you money, you understand." He poured us each a double gin before continuing. "But," I leaned closer on the table we occupied, straining to hear what was whispered next, "I can give you some of the latest games releases, to trade in for a few bob. My boss, old Mr. Beets, says it needs to be expanded, like. Reckon you can put a little meat on the bones, mate?"

I agreed that I would expand the feature, and that it would be handed in soon, for no actual payment other than "getting a few games out of it." I was a fool, but I dare any man in a similar position to not be charmed by the prestige of being printed. Their business, after all, is to persuade people of things. Only the most skilled wordsmiths could have convinced the masses to buy *Driv3r.*[2] When the work was finished, I took the train to Lofty Towers in Wrothendelshire, the home of the Lofty Writers syndicate. I walked up steps to Bumblebry's office above a fish 'n' chippy, and slammed the papers down on his desk. He assured me that it would be published within the fortnight and that my payment would be delivered soon after.

I left, feeling exhilarated. To celebrate, I walked into the nearest indie shop and picked up an import copy of *Katamari Damacy.* The Prince of All Cosmos's ever-expanding collection of detritus would prove a powerful metaphor for the disastrous problems that would later cling to me.

Chapter 2: Now They Own You

A week later, I was lying on the mattress that covered a section of floor in my small unkempt apartment. Beneath the squalor, my phone rang out; it was Bumblebry. "'Ello, mate, how's it goin'? Mr. Beets 'ad a look at your piece, that thing on the ecobolical prices guff. He rather liked it. He wants another one. Can you manage something by next Tuesday?"

I was hung over, but understood what he said. "Yeah, I think. Wait a minute, when the hell are you going to pay me for the first article? Can't you pay with, you know, money?"

"Relax mate, good things come to those who write, or some bollocks. It's me small budget, give us time.

---

1   The article in question was "Soldier of Lost Fortune" in *TGQ*#3.
2   *Driv3r*gate was a situation in the UK where a certain magazine publisher was "allegedly" bribed to give *Driv3r* an incredibly high score, despite the majority of other magazines giving it only a three out of ten. To further worsen matters, development staff "allegedly" infiltrated gaming forums as "plants" and began promoting the game as if they were normal consumers who had bought and enjoyed the game. Googling the word "Driv3rgate" should provide further info we would get sued for printing.

man, and I believed that it would lead to good things. Could I have possibly been more wrong? The work was handed in but it took a further month before there was any payment, and it was only delivered after a rather heated phone call. Upper management requested my services again, but time had made me cynical (though sadly, as I'd soon learn, not cynical enough). This time, I demanded proper monetary payment. The boss, the ephemeral Beets, deigned to give me a contract. It defiled nearly all of my rights, for a particle of a pittance. Lofty Writers would own the work, own all universal and inter-dimensional rights to it, indefinitely and without question. I showed a fellow gamer the contract, and he made a humorous analogy about African workers on cotton plantations. I thought it was rather appropriate, though rather unquotable here.

Bumblebry sympathetically explained, "Listen mate, it's out of my hands. We all have to accept it—I do, other writers do—everyone accepts it. Management see us as expendable. Stop thinking you're so important, the Syndicate doesn't care. And watch yourself. Your arrogancy is getting noticed, and they don't like it, mate." Clearly, trying to change things was futile. It was a case of like it or lump it.

The contract, which purely protected them regarding the rights to anything produced, was eventually signed and my work continued. It was during this time that the sad events of my last article came to pass. That article finishes with a quote from *Doctor Faustus* about how the Devil seeks companions in woe. Then I added, "I certainly never ended up in hell like Faustus did." Perhaps I spoke too soon.

I started to notice glaring and painfully inept errors being added to my work. Like anyone would, I complained bitterly. When you readers condemn sloppy writing, you must realize the blame does not always lie with us writers! Scads of personal time and energy are put into those features, and into double-checking every sentence until they are fine-tuned to perfection. To have some barmy copy girl make sow's ears out of my silk purses was unforgivable. For the record, let me now state categorically that it was most definitely not I who wrote any of the following:

- Kojima wears women's clothes.
- Capcom invented cheese, in 1973.
- J Allard keeps an army of cuddly monkeys in his giant forehead.

So incensed was I at one point, that I stormed into the company office during a meeting and aggressively demanded a full retraction and apology. By this point, Bumblebry's superior, Mr. Beets, had been replaced with a baby-faced gentleman known as Jimmy; he snapped his fingers, and two Karnov-like oafs dragged me from the office.

Bumblebry took me aside to explain some things, pleading with me to stay calm. "You can't do that, mate! Jimmy will flip out now. You know what he told me? That you're unprofessional and should be sacked. But me, I like you kid, really I do. If it wasn't for your old mate Bumblebry, you'd never get another gig in games again. I smoothed things over for ya! Blindin', hey?"

I was tempted to argue the point of her sloppy work and question why management hadn't sacked her yet, but I decided not to. There was no polite way to question whether management were "getting their leg over with the bird," so to speak, so the issue was dropped.

What could I do? I had become dependent on the money (supplemented by a weekend job at the local goat farm; never let it be said that games writers aren't willing to suffer for their art). Plus the publicity had become addictive. Despite the hanging around for sparse commissions, and the budget problems, and the fact that other desperate wannabe writers were offering their services to the Syndicate for less, it was a doomed ship this rat could not abandon. I lit a cigarette, and onwards to hell I sailed.

Chapter 3: Between the Devil and the Dark Side

To expand my opportunities, I began looking further afield for freelancing opportunities, both online and off. With enough sticky fingers in enough jam jars, life might be easier. I was introduced to Jack Moon; he knew of my work for Bumblebry and wished to get a foot in the door of Lofty Towers. His goal was to "go career" with this writing malarkey; and while trying to join the Syndicate, he was also offering his skills to other companies, like Steinerman Enterprises and their flagship mag *Healthy Consoles*. We exchanged information, and I

I'll send you double the amount of games. Promise."

I was still too gripped by the euphoria of seeing my name in print to argue. "Sure thing. How about an exposé on the underground Xbox hacker scene?"

"Sounds brill, mate, get on it."

I was eager to appease my new masters, and I slaved for many an hour to harvest the words. But I was a patient

3 I first tried to freelance for Geeq magazine at Delorean Publishing (the UK's market leaders), but the arrogant vagabonds are so enamoured with themselves you're lucky if they don't spit on you as they pass by. I phoned them and got through to their very Swedish editor. He said that writers like myself would "soil the sublime decadence of such an ostentatious publication," and he hung up. The rumours about Geeq were true—they'd suffocated on their own pseudo-intellectuality for so long, that they'd all gone bonkers. Perhaps it was for the best, since there had been tales that, despite Delorean paying well, they were often late.

began making preparations to try infiltrating Steinerman's empire, and other publishers too.[3]

When I casually mentioned all this to Bumblebry, he was less than enthusiastic about my new plans, especially since these publishers were directly competing against him. "No way mate, they're my main rivals. The Dark Side. I'd have to stop using you if you went with them."

"But it's in my contract, I can freelance for anyone!"

"We shouldn't even be having this conversation. How do I know you're not a spy?"

The conversation was going nowhere, so I hung up and I continued my trek to join Steinerman's small federation. I dialed their office and started my pitch. I reached their main editor, a gentleman named Rodge. He was a hardworking chap and quite likeable, even if he gave off an air of ignoring everyone and was difficult to get answers from.

"Hi, Rodge. This is Rodge, right?"
" … "
"I want to freelance for your games mag, I've made some good contacts and can hook you up with some exclusive content. Can I write for you?"
" … "
"You want an early copy of Bethesda's Oblivion? I can hook the mag up with that."
" … You can write for us … "
"How much do you pay?"
" … 25 notes per page … 1000 words a page … No contract … "

It was a fairly common deal for UK magazines, low wages for high profits. But the lack of contract sweetened things. It meant I would retain all the rights to my work, useful for my soon-to-be-compiled autobiography, Gilding the Lilly. My answer was swift, "Sure thing.

I'll have the work handed in next week."
" … "

I like to think that some hours later Rodge responded into a then-dead telephone with confirmation.

Work on all sides continued: visiting conventions, writing reviews with forty-

percent-complete betas, accepting "special donations," extorting interviews, and living like a beggar. Finally, my debut in Steinerman Enterprises's *Healthy Consoles* hit the newsstands.

I was in an arcade hustling some foreigners on *Street Fighter III* when my mobile began vibrating. It was Bumblebry. "You cheeky sod, this is just typical! You promised me, and only me, that I could have the article on breast-feeding gamers, and now I see *Healthy Consoles* is running it!"

"Calm down, geezer. You were taking too long to commission me for work. Budget restraints, remember? A man does not live on gin alone; I had to go elsewhere."

"You scoundrel! We're through! Through, you hear me? I'm never having you write for me again!" He hung up in tears.

Mere minutes later my phone went off during a critical parry. It was the man who loved to hate me, Fontleroy Bumblebry.

"Look mate, I think you've learned your lesson. But no more mischievously giving your best work to other people, ok? You give me your best work, and I'll make sure the commissions come regularly. I'm not about to be bested by Steinerman's cohorts, you hear, mate? Now run along, you cheeky chappy."

"So the Japanese-booth-babe article is set for next week?"

"Yeah, lovely jubbly."
"Brill, cheerio."
"No worries, mate."

I had joined the dark side, lost my position and then made it back into good graces. Fontleroy was a good man, and I understood his concerns about me writing elsewhere. He too was struggling in this cutthroat industry, trying to juggle life and work; trying to keep it together.

Chapter 4: Bad Vibrations All Around Us

When I was working for *Healthy Consoles*, I met Brock, another *HC* writer, whose Speccy-filled hole of an apartment would come to be a weekly meeting place for freelancers. Jack Moon was there, having successfully wedged himself into Steinerman and Lofty Writers. There was also a bloated Jamaican we called Tom Hotdog. I disliked him immediately and immensely. Tom was also a long-time freelancer, for both Rodge and Bumblebry, and he would incessantly natter about how important he was, how he knew all the right people on a first-name basis. He did have a definite skill for finding the juiciest gaming gossip, with even more inside contacts than Brock, but his arrogance was detestable.

Brock's home was a headquarters from which to launch successful writing campaigns against the hordes of available publications.

We gave the impression of a united front, an almost union-like ironclad that scoured publishing's high seas as writers-for-hire, but behind the façade, things were markedly different. At first, we shared ideas and opportunities with each other, to avoid clashes and help our fellow man. However, an ominous under-current began to form around who would and would not be commissioned for work.

Communication between the writers broke down; distrust formed; accusations were cast. One rogue had been secretly working for a publisher without telling the group. I accused him of plagiarism—and worse, being a traitor to the party. Things got heated; Brock pulled out his father's World War II pistol. With an antique sidearm pressed against his sweaty temple, our traitor revealed that, in actual fact, he'd been quietly

informing select others in the group of his shady gigs. His "borrowing" techniques were suddenly unimportant—he wasn't a traitor to the union; our socialist solidarity had balkanized.

Tom Hotdog revealed that he was leaving to start a private project. It was to be a writing society, and he needed our help—but not all of our help. "Ya, mon, I will be needing me some writers. But I need only those with good mojo. Ya dig?"

Brock was first to respond, "I'm there, mate, you know, I'd love to work for you."

"And I be thinking the boy Moon might be useful too. You in, Moon?" Of course old Moon was only too keen to be in.

But when I and other writers inquired, Tom's attitude changed. "No mon, I don't be needing you. I can't be dealing with those of you who have different views to me! This won't be a freelance free-for-all; only I will choose who gets to write for my society! We will be doing it my way for a change. No more will I freelance for Rodge or Bumblebry, I be following my own orders now!" He said this with a maniacal laugh that made his bloated jowls wobble so furiously, I thought that E. Honda had somehow crawled beneath his skin.

He then regaled us with the kinds of stories his writing society would cover. It turned out to be incredibly old electrical junk. "First, mon, I will be covering electric toasters. Electric toasters that run Linux. And then, I will cover greater electronic items than mere children's games. I will cover Hoovers, Sedgewicks from 1968, and coal powered stirrups from before the war! That also be running Linux—running it very well!"

While the tribe of freelance monkeys bickered over their plight, I had a job interview. The vacancy was for an editor

at a recently opened publisher named Philanthropy. I was finally about to make the jump to full-time career writer. No more delayed paychecks, I thought, soon I would be getting a monthly wage: the princely amount of £8000 per year (less than half the national average).

Chapter 5: The Joker with Two Faces

I had been on assignment in the East when the email came through. The only way back for an interview given at short notice was three days on the Siberian express, and then a cargo plane back to England.

The white cliffs below us had a haunting beauty to them from above. I yearned to be free of this chase; why did I continue to dig myself deeper by continuing to write?

"I must be insane," I said to myself at the time.

The interview took place in a town called Bottomsdown (where Philanthropy was situated), which is only 40-minutes' drive from Wrothendelshire. After a few libations to perk up the soul, I made my way to the interview. It was conducted by Beets, Bumblebry's old boss from the Syndicate; he had jumped ship over to this new venture. He knew my work, and I felt confident of success.

The interview was standard fare, too many personal questions about nothing much. Something must have worked, since he said he was so pleased with this first interview that I would have a second one in only four hours! Just enough time for some bubble and squeak, I thought.

But lunch would have to wait; Bumblebry's new boss, Jimmy (the same man who had me thrown out of his office), showed up and bundled me into his car. "Mate! Fontleroy said you'd be here today! I need to see you, my boss Yeager too, really fast like!"

Obviously the impromptu meeting was about work, so we began our high-speed journey to Wrothendelshire. Normally a 40-minute trip, we made it between the two cities in 15, though not without some mishaps. "Grab the wheel, geezer!"

he demanded with such authority that I did so immediately. Without hesitation, Jimmy undid his trousers and began peeing out the window of the speeding car. I finally had proof of the old stereotype that everyone in senior management was a heavy drinker—I'll be perfect for senior management, I thought!

When we arrived, our first docking station was not Lofty Towers but a pub, our heavy fuel being Singapore slings with mescal on the side. With a worm wriggling in his mouth, Jimmy explained the situation: Bumblebry would soon be leaving his job for a place that was less amoral. Perhaps he meant an assassins' guild? Regardless, they had a vacancy, and they wanted to see me.

Once inside the Towers, it was half a dozen security checkpoints (complete with armed guards) before we reached the Syndicate's inner sanctum. Jimmy said he desperately wanted me to stay in the Wrothendelshire region so that when Bumblebry scarpered, I could jump right in, take over his old job, and ensure the gears stayed greased. Jimmy was very insistent, which made me nervous. I had horrified visions of being chained to a desk if I remained in his presence too long. Still, it felt great to be wanted, even if that feeling was based on a devil's deception.

Jimmy introduced me to Yeager, a large man of some importance whose scar riddled body resembled that of the bear-wrestling Zangief, and Yeager introduced me to the bar in the basement of Lofty Towers. It's a fact of life that most deals are lubricated with as much drink as humanly possible, and sometimes more—PR-sponsored cocaine parties are all the rage among upper management. Or so I've heard. That day, our libations

would be a heady concoction they described only as "grog," which Yeager promised would be as strong as the corrosive cocktail offered to Guybrush Threepwood.

Yeager explained that Philanthropy were offering me a bad deal on pay and benefits, their business practices were poor, their future plans were diabolical, and then he said something about someone's mother. Typical trash-talking about the competition was my guess, but it left me unsettled. He also said that he wanted me at Lofty Writers, employed full-time, on any publication, in order to take over from Bumblebry. As my head began swimming, the situation grew surreal. Yeager began explaining all of his business plans: *Perfect Dark*

Zero novels, 360 faceplates, even skin from Miyamoto's inner thigh (stealthily acquired by ninjas) were all to be given away free as cover mounts.

The claims grew wilder as the grog grew scarcer. Yeager grabbed me by the shirt and moistly shouted in my face, "We've had a big staff hiring session! We've two spots left! You wanna write for one of our mags, maaate? We got *Revolution Regularly* or *NEC Bimonthly* to choose from! I love you, maaate!"

Once I had pulled myself away and wiped the spittle from my face, we returned to the office and he handed me two free mags. I was to read them, come to a conclusion, and get back to him ASAP. The clock read nearly four o'clock, time to head back to Philanthropy. On the way, I pondered for but a brief second: had there been an ulterior motive to the free drinks? Did Jimmy and Yeager perhaps want me drunk at my second interview?

At Philanthropy, things went terribly. Beets had decided to bring the company CEO in to also ask questions during the second interview. He kept silent most of the time, while glaring ominously and drinking some variety of frothing cocktail. Beets asked if I could adjust to full-time office life. I was nervous and so couldn't help but make some jokes.

"Things should be fine," I said, slurring only slightly, "but I'll miss wearing my Mario and Luigi pyjamas all day while writing!"

Nobody in the room laughed. I knew things were over. The interview ended, and I was escorted out from their offices.

I schlepped back home, made my decision about writing for *NEC Bimonthly* for Lofty Writers, and phoned Yeager to confirm. He said he'd get back to me within forty-eight hours with confir-

mation of a position. Forty-eight hours later, there was still no reply, though Philanthropy had already informed me that I was unsuccessful in my application. With my options running out, I desperately pestered Bumblebry about Yeager's decision. For three days straight, he said the same thing, that Yeager was still deciding. Why was there no contact? Had it all merely been a ruse? Why did everyone feel the need to raise my hopes before dashing them against the rocks?

I waited until two in the morning before phoning again. "Bumblebry? It's me. Did Yeager just phone you?"

"What? No, mate."

"So you haven't heard from Yeager?"

"No."

"So, who did phone you?"

"No one. It's blooming 2 a.m.!"

"Oh, it's just … I'm standing outside Lofty Towers, and his office light is still on."

"What the bloody heck are you doing back in Wrothendelshire?"

"I … don't know … " was my answer, after which he hung up.

So there I was, left without work, without pay, and without hope. I realised it was a lost cause; there had likely been no writing vacancies to begin with. There I was, sitting in ashes and scraping my boils with a broken clay pot. There was only one word on my mind in that time of anguish: Job.

Chapter 6: Rome Burns

Back in Brock's river boat (we'd downgraded from an apartment due to costs), the situation had become dire. A while back, payment from the Steinerman corporation had started coming in late, and just before my Bottomsdown/ Wrothendelshire adventure, it started not turning up at all. After being reassured via e-mail on a daily basis that it would soon arrive, I decided to phone the *Healthy Consoles* head office. We managed to get through to Rodge, whose previous laconic nature changed dramatically.

"Look, look, look, I know I said yesterday that things would be fine, and the day before yesterday that things would be fine, and, well, all of last week too that things would be fine, and I'm sure it must seem like I'm lying, but it's Management; Management's just not keeping me informed. But this time, this time I mean it: next week payment will

be authorized for all of you. Just please, *please,* don't stop the flow of work." He sounded like a man kept in the dark, lied to by his superiors. But we were men unable to buy shoes (let alone DSes) for our children.

We knew that Steinerman's kingdom was about to, to use a British phrase, "go tits up in a ditch." But we were a little late. Work is pitched and accepted, a month later it's handed in, a month later it's published, and then only a month after that could we, in theory, get paid. We were owed four months of wages before coming to the startling conclusion

that our dreams had bit-rotted into nothingness.

While I was drunkenly shuttling between doomed interviews, Brock and the others had been digging up infor-mation on our maleficent benefactors. They came up with a top-secret plan

known as "The Blitzkrieg." It was clear that *Healthy Consoles* had become very unhealthy. We were never going to get our money; we'd pulled our copyright permissions a week earlier with no results—we needed to strike them hard. Hurt them enough, we theorized, and they'd be forced to pay us the many thousands of pounds they owed. None of us had anything more to lose, we grimly thought.

Mr. Moon, in particular, had become consumed by a terrifying, malevolent insanity and thirst for revenge. His seemingly incessant diatribes reminded me of videogame villains over the years: Thanatos, Kefka, Sephiroth, and countless other broken souls. He had, after all, lost more than most. While I was owed seven grand, Moon was owed twice that. He had reason to be angry. Then again, so did we all! And we weren't

the only wronged parties, they were lying to subscribers, as well. Old Rodge had written a pleading editorial for further yearly subscriptions to be taken out, even though Brock had gained inside info that the magazine would cease production in only three months. We were desperate to warn people that the writers were not being paid and that their subscriptions would never be honored.

The Blitzkrieg involved revealing the full scandal being perpetrated by Steinerman and his underlings, making damned sure that everyone heard about it. First we would reveal the truth via as many internet forums as possible. Then we would personally visit and inform each and every group that advertised with Steinerman, while also contacting the printing factory he hired and informing them of the lack of funds. Finally, we would contact no less than one hundred and fifty different news publications (we'd compiled a list) and reveal the full scandal of events. The situation was about to go global; we believed we could fell this giant.

Precisely one minute and forty-eight seconds after going public on the forums, our topics were deleted and we had a frantic phone call from Rodge. Everyone gathered around the phone:

"Jesus H. Christ, chaps! We had to remove what you were saying, you could have ended everything! The building has literally ground to a halt, everyone has stopped work and is standing by their desks listening to me make this call. Steinerman is pissing himself with rage, and everyone is pleading with you guys to stop. Please, I'm begging you. We need more time … "

Can you guess what we did next, readers? Yes, that's right! We believed his lies and stopped our attack!

Two days later Steinerman grabbed everything he could from the company, filed for bankruptcy, and then moved to Rio de Janeiro. There was no more damage to be done, and it was too late to stop people subscribing. We cursed ourselves for giving them time to make their escape.

Our bad luck did not end there sadly. Once Steinerman had filed for bankruptcy, he sold all his company assets back to himself for mere pennies at a time; when you are both buyer and seller in the same transaction, why bother haggling over high prices? He owned several companies, all of which were of the "Ltd." variety,[4] which meant it was perfectly legal for one company to incur a filthy great bloody mountain of debt, finally go bankrupt, and then sell (for a *Singstar* song) all of its assets to another company owned by the exact same person! We couldn't even request compensation from the debt collectors, since we were unsecured creditors and there wasn't even enough money to pay those who had been secured! We were left with nothing. If one person exemplifies the repugnant ability for man to stoop to ever new lows of inhumanity, then Steinerman is that vile person. The total amount of debt incurred by his enterprises, which was then simply written off, topped the one-hundred-million-pound mark, and included everyone from a Nigerian postman right through to the British government. The old MPs didn't bother me, but I felt really sorry for that poor postman—how would

---

4   That's "LLC" for you Yanks.

he ever afford a PS3 for his kids now?

When we tried to publicly reveal these new events, we were threatened by an army of lawyers with gagging orders. When we tried to contest gags, we were informed that it was perfectly and wonderfully legal for a company to do such things in this magnificently capitalist world of ours. Thank God Communist Russia never took over during the Cold War, since, Heaven forbid, old Steinerman might not have been able to run away to Brazil. Brock even managed to get hold of his home phone number, and started publicly releasing it to all the cheated subscribers. A few of them went as far as phoning and demanding retribution. The lawyers returned, and Brock, like a coward, backed down and stopped giving it out. We never heard directly from Steinerman again after that, though apparently his other companies which bought his original assets are doing well, his sex change was a success, and his mansion in Rio de Janeiro (filled with muscled *Chou Aniki* doubles) is said to be wonderfully comfortable and incredibly ostentatious. Or should I be saying her mansion?

Afterwards, our situation was made even worse when all the other magazines our group freelanced for informed us that we had been blacklisted because of the public revelations on the forums. No one wants to hire loose cannons or trouble makers, and so none of us would likely get work in the near future. We had stood against the system, and now we were paying the price for defying our overlord masters. They were quite clear, we would learn to love their whips or we would learn to seek other avenues of employment.

Chapter 7: Every Lining Has Its Holes

With our HP reduced to critical levels, we needed a new a project to keep occupied with. In a hasty meeting at Brock's place, our group of now-unemployed freelancers decided to create a videogame. We did write about them, after all, and we had years of gaming experience. Surely we could come up with something fresh? The game would chronicle the events of our lives as freelancers over the last eight or so months. Almost like a UK version of *Segagaga*, except about games writing instead of Sega's business practices. We would write, draw, compose, and program our way through it, hoping to make enough money to offset the many debts we had all incurred, totalling somewhere close to one hundred thousand pounds.

Over the coming months, as we philosophised and ate instant ramen out of our shoes in Brock's sweat-drenched abode, struggling to complete our game, Steinerman secretly set about selling *Healthy Consoles* to Philanthropy for a cool million pounds (not even five bob of this went to the unpaid freelancers!). The magazine was to make a return (helmed by Bumblebry himself), but Philanthropy would not be responsible for any debts.

At first we rejoiced, believing that at last there was hope. We never wanted to admit it, but the game project was doomed to failure; we'd barely scrapped together enough money to cover costs. But alas, in order to work for Philanthropy, we would have to freely sign over the thousands, and thousands, and thousands of pounds' worth of work that we had never been paid for. They would also indefinitely own the rights to all future work; these were tough

contracts, make no mistake. Millions of words about thousands of games, products designed to bring happiness to people, and we were engulfed by our own sorrow. Steinerman profited from it, and now others would too.

Philanthropy contracts were drafted, but we were all reluctant to sign. It's not easy being told you have to give away nearly a year's worth of work which you'd never been paid for, just to earn some cheap change on the side. But they were clear: you don't sign, you don't work. And we all knew that if we didn't work, we wouldn't eat. How many hours of our lives had we lost on this quest? Levelling up, buying equipment, and forming parties, only to complete a dungeon and find it devoid of treasure? There was no reward in this world of flesh and bone.

It was a tough decision. But while I may have been mistrustful of management, I trusted Bumblebry. And so I eventually signed the contracts. Sometimes a man needs his whiskey more than he needs his rights.

Philanthropy assured us that as things progressed, as the corporation expanded, there would be full-time jobs for some of us; we became paranoid that another had secretly gained employment. Philanthropy promised change, a new way of doing things, yet things were precisely the same as they had been. Those at the top dictated what would be written and how and by whom. The contracts at Philanthropy were terrible, worse than at any other place which utilized the printed word. I felt trapped, unable to wake from the Orwellian nightmare.

Soon after we had shed our first drops of blood on the reborn *Healthy Consoles*, the Lofty Writers Syndicate began to disintegrate, falling into disarray and

exploding in a shower of hellish flame. This second company collapsing meant that again, several months' worth of writing wages had been lost. In trying to divide our work over as many publications as possible, in theory protecting our investment, we were again hit hard when another publisher died.

One of Brock's contacts would later explain how the Syndicate came to crash. It had been sold to another, larger corporation, who intended to use the magazines to stay afloat. The cash from that sale was used to found Philanthropy, and when the Syndicate finally sank, Philanthropy swooped in for the choicest remains. But just like Steinerman's collapse, they didn't transfer over any of the freelancer debts.

I had to laugh to myself; the bullshit piled up so fast, you needed wings to stay above it. The freelancers lost out a second time. Above these problems though, the one who remained a rock and ever helpful was Bumblebry; despite his faults, I grew to like more than anyone else. Like myself, he was a good man put into difficult situations.

"It's just business," everyone likes to tell me. This doesn't comfort me though. I like to take comfort in the fact that, being only mortal, someday I will finally be freed from such things.

Which brings us to the end of my epic chronicle. Sorry if you were expecting more, readers. Many things, so many, many things have happened over the past 18 months, but there is only so much I can cover (without getting sued). Until next time, long live the corruption-free reins of *The Gamer's Quarter!* TGQ

Why Game?

Reason #5 Scoring Culture
By Franco Rando

It's a little over a year since I started with *The Gamer's Quarter* and, in one way or another, I'm pretty sure that most of you have become acquainted with my personal gaming microcosm.

If you don't, let's briefly recap: I grew up, video-ludically speaking, in my uncle's arcade. This, in turn, means that most of the games that I played – and still play, as I never shifted the axis in my gaming tastes – are typically arcade. "Arcade" encompasses a rather broad formula – *OutRun, Puyo Puyo* and *R-Type* are all arcade games, but also very different from each other. However, they have one basic fundamental element in common, which can be labeled "gameplay."

The sense of "gameplay," in this case, is defined by a number of common traits: relatively short length, one credit per play, and simple mechanics which are usually simple to understand (the time of watching a demo, or an attract mode), and usually hard to master.

Why?

Most of the time, when you play an arcade game (especially in these modern times of great complexity) there is one aspect that can be eviscerated to its most incredible depths. Maybe I'm exagger-

ating, but I will carefully build up my point in order to let you understand the point of view I'm trying to make yours.

The arcade world, while still going strong and seeing a lot of changes, found its new form at the beginning of the second half of the eighties. Some guys at Taito had this brilliant idea of making a rather complex game with cute characters, and gameplay that was even more centered around the idea of scoring a lot of points – even more than their preceding titles. You know this game; it's *Bubble Bobble,* and it marked an explosion in the field of score-centric arcade games.

Arcade gaming, since its very beginnings, was about challenges. Things changed a bit with the coming of his majesty *Street Fighter II* and his twin in puzzle stardom, *Puyo Puyo.* If the challenges were about who was the best virtuosic player, now things have changed: let's compete one against the other, and see who the best player in a direct confrontation is.

In the meanwhile, normal one-player games like shmups were undergoing a radical process of innovation. It became a question of taking an engine and discovering all of its nuances, the ultimate challenge in problem-solving. Anyone who appreciated intellectual challenges and bright colours saw the beginning of a

long and complex evolutionary process, through which arcade games became a lifestyle: every one of us likes problem-solving, especially if it is hidden under shiny bitmap graphics and is perfectly futile, as having the best score in the arcade can be.

Finally, gaming is about development, of the player and of the game medium as well; countless hours and countless players have dissected engines down to the very bytes of code, trying to find out what lies behind the fireballs and rank increase and all the things we see on screen. A brief description of what is going on doesn't suffice; we want the inner secrets of the game, its Promethean flame, to be stolen from the god programmers, and indeed we steal it, because nothing is sacred, if the price is getting first place on the ranking chart.

Decades and more have passed, with ultimate players performing ultimate runs, dissecting engines whose richness is at the same time the phylogenetic result of decades of other games. Other experiences, other challenges have been discovered, often redefining the game and its limits, imposed by the programmers and rewritten by the players, and evolving, literally, by the virtue of being more than the sum of its parts. In a nutshell, arcade gaming has evolved beyond the simple few

mechanics of the beginnings, as players demanded more and programmers gave more.

Why gaming, then? Better: why arcade gaming, then?

Gaming is a good way to get good scores, and good scores are obtained, like in other good activities of life, by practice and critical thinking. It gives us a tool to compare ourselves with others, seeing who's better at solving a problem via getting a better score. It gives us a tool to compare ourselves with ourselves, seeing if we can improve day by day, a very satisfying activity when in the right frame of mind. It also gives us a tool to compare ourselves with the history of gaming, and how ideas and proposals for games evolved, and how our comprehension of them evolved with them.

Why game? Because thinking, learning and improving is fun, as we always knew by playing arcade games in the arcades. Not only that, but you can do it at your own pace, if everything else fails. You simply sit down and decide to learn or discover or experiment something, the price is just a coin, and the reward is what we have mentioned so far. Most of the time, instead, life is about paying huge tributes for small mistakes, running around to meet stressing deadlines or waiting for ages in order to get rather modest retributions. Gaming, then, makes wrong things right, something that can't be said, alas, of most of the other possible experiences of life, in one way or another.

See you on the high-score charts, then. 🎮

The Future of Gaming Is in the Palm of your Hand. Let Us Read It.

Handhelds and cell phones, joysticks and gamepads, all of them leave their footprints on the lines of destiny written on your palm. *The Gamer's Quarter,* now resting in your hands, can read these signs. Your Head Line is long but fragmented – you see the appeal of epic games with sweeping, but adaptive narratives. But your Heart Line is short and deep – you still lust for ephemeral games that are simple but passionate. Your Life Line is gently curved – your history has been shaped by joys and innovations. But your Fate Line is forked – what will be in generations to come is uncertain. Read on, and let *The Gamer's Quarter* reveal your past, your present, and your future.