

# THE GAMER'S QUARTER

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# From the Editor

# Staff

### Era and Time

By Matthew Williamson

This issue is the end of an era. Not of the magazine exactly, but of gaming. The Xbox 360 is already upon us and both Nintendo's Wii and Sony's Playstation 3 will be available by the next issue. These are the final days of the current generation.

It's strange to think that in just a short time, everything now current will be "last-gen" technology. Whether it's the interface or the graphics, they will be labeled "last-gen" very shortly. It feels strange because gaming seems to be the only medium so fixated on technology, and yet it's also the most connected to it.

We will finally be downloading older games onto newer consoles. Technically we already have been with Xbox Live arcade, but Microsoft doesn't have the history of a company like Nintendo. So like books, films, and music, games now have an accessible history, even if the companies offering the history don't have a full grasp on it.

In this issue, the *Gamer's Quarter* team looks at gaming—past, future, and where we stand at the present. The modern history of games is important, and to ignore it leaves many of us treading the same water until we drown and ignore games all together.

This is the first time—and probably the last—that I will use this section of the magazine to ask you, our patrons, for support. If you are reading this section you obviously enjoy the magazine and what we do for it. If you didn't know before, the entire staff is comprised of volunteers who work many long hours with no compensation. If you have been reading for a while you will know that we have taken many strides to improve quality and many exceptionally talented people have volunteered to help.

If you are reading this in print while lounging on a couch (or toilet), tell your friends, e-mail your buddies, post on your blog—but get the word out on what you think. If you're reading the digital copy of this and you have been for a while, take a look in your Paypal account and see if you have a few dollars left to purchase the print version. If not, send your friends over for a free read—if we've done our job, they'll thank you, and maybe get their own hard copy.

Next issue will be our eighth, marking nearly two years of work. Since we launched, we have been featured on MTV.com, Gamasutra, Game Set Watch, Slashdot, Kotaku, and Joystiq. But we don't have an advertising budget, and our voices only go so far. So if you like what you have been reading—or even if you despise us for it—start the next generation by telling someone about us.

### Editor In Chief:

Matthew "ShaperMC" Williamson  
[shapermc@gamersquarter.com](mailto:shapermc@gamersquarter.com)

### Managing Editor:

"Super" Wes Ehrlichman  
[superwes@gamersquarter.com](mailto:superwes@gamersquarter.com)

### Associate Editor:

Ancil "dessaegga" Anthropy  
[dessaegga@gamersquarter.com](mailto:dessaegga@gamersquarter.com)

### Assistant Editor:

M. "dhex" O'Connor  
[dhex@gamersquarter.com](mailto:dhex@gamersquarter.com)

### Copy Chief:

Tony "Tablesaw" Delgado  
[tablesaw@gamersquarter.com](mailto:tablesaw@gamersquarter.com)

### Editorial Staff:

Heather "Faithless" Campbell  
[faithless@gamersquarter.com](mailto:faithless@gamersquarter.com)

J. R. "Mr. Mechanical" Freeman  
[mr\\_mechanical@gamersquarter.com](mailto:mr_mechanical@gamersquarter.com)

Amandeep "ajutla" Jutla  
[ajutla@gamersquarter.com](mailto:ajutla@gamersquarter.com)

Tim "Swimmy" McGowan  
[swimmy@gamersquarter.com](mailto:swimmy@gamersquarter.com)

Jeremy "ApM" Penner  
[ApM@gamersquarter.com](mailto:ApM@gamersquarter.com)

Sergei "Seryogin" Servianov  
[seryogin@gamersquarter.com](mailto:seryogin@gamersquarter.com)

Andrew "Mister" Toups  
[mistertoups@gamersquarter.com](mailto:mistertoups@gamersquarter.com)

Francesco-Alessio "Randorama" Ursini  
[randorama@gamersquarter.com](mailto:randorama@gamersquarter.com)

### Staff Artists:

Mariel "Kinuko" Cartwright  
[kinuko@gamersquarter.com](mailto:kinuko@gamersquarter.com)

Jonathan "Persona-Sama" Kim  
[persona-sama@gamersquarter.com](mailto:persona-sama@gamersquarter.com)

Benjamin "Lestrade" Rivers  
[lestrade@gamersquarter.com](mailto:lestrade@gamersquarter.com)

### Cover Art:

Max Martin  
[maxmart@gmail.com](mailto:maxmart@gmail.com)

### Cover Art Color:

Jonathan "Persona-Sama" Kim  
[persona-sama@gamersquarter.com](mailto:persona-sama@gamersquarter.com)

### Contributing Writers:

Matthew "Mr. Apol" Collier  
Craig Dore

Erica L. Van Ostrand  
John "Rud13" Overton  
Chris St. Louis  
Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

### Contributing Editors:

Angela McInnis

### Page Layout & Design:

Ancil "dessaegga" Anthropy  
Benjamin "Lestrade" Rivers  
Matthew "ShaperMC" Williamson

### Website Design & Layout:

"Super" Wes Ehrlichman

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# Breaking the Law of Miyamoto

*Super Mario Bros.* — NES  
By Jeremy Penner

Google for the phrase “Law of Miyamoto” and you will come across the following definition: “The Law of Miyamoto states that, early on, a game must show a player something he cannot do.” Lies! *Super Mario Bros.*, Miyamoto’s seminal exploration game, not only breaks this “law,” it in fact is designed in precisely the opposite way. For every kind of secret embedded in the game, there is a place where the level is designed to compel you to discover it. This place always shows up after the first occurrence of that secret. *Super Mario Bros.* shows the player things he could have been doing all along.

This is something few people noticed, because of the playground effect. The playground effect is simple—*Super Mario Bros.* was so popular that you probably had friends demonstrating how to get to the warp zone before you learned to jump that first goomba. Kids couldn’t keep their damn mouths shut. More often than not, the game didn’t show you its own secrets like it wanted to—other people did.

## The Structure

Thanks to the magic of the Internet, I was able to quickly dig up maps of every level of the game.<sup>1</sup> Poring over them, I found the following structure to the level design:

- For the first four or five worlds, systematically introduce the player to all of the kinds of secrets that the game possesses.
- After that, start turning up the difficulty a bit.
- In world 8, crank it way up.

More interestingly:

- It is possible to complete the game without going down a single pipe or finding a single hidden brick—you could just progress from left to right without discovering a single secret.
- For every kind of secret, there is a spot where the level design practically begs the player to discover it.
- That spot is never the first occurrence of that kind of secret.

You could conceivably make the case that the puzzle dungeons don’t follow this pattern, but then, they’re not secrets—you have to solve them to progress.

## Pipes

Pipes are the ultimate Super Mario secret made obvious. Everybody knows you can go down pipes; it’s part of what gives *Super Mario Bros.* its identity. They’re also perhaps one of the most rewarding, taking the player to secret rooms hidden underground. And yet, it’s possible to complete the game without going down a single (vertical) pipe. The manual does not even mention the possibility.

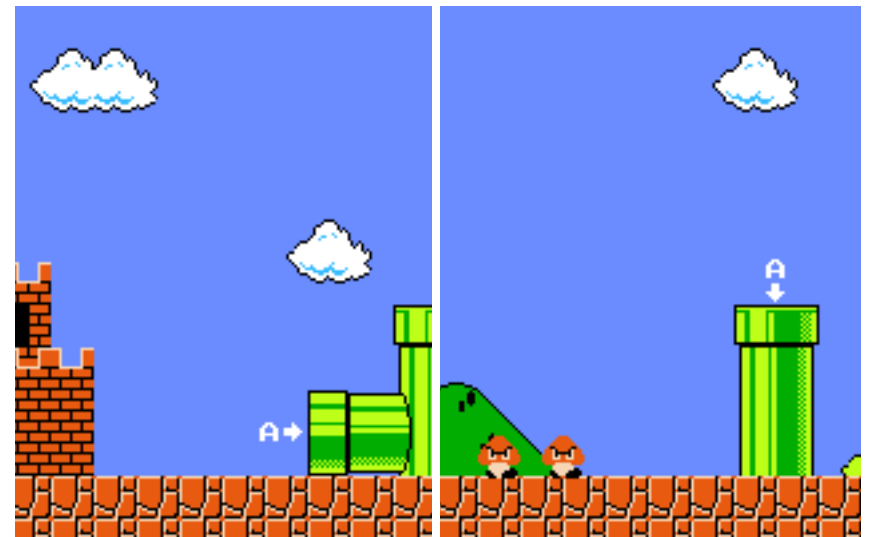
The game hits the player over the head with this one, with a short cutscene at the beginning of world 1-2 where Mario enters a pipe and heads underground. There’s obviously something up with those pipes, and indeed, if you take that knowledge back to the beginning, you find that the fourth pipe of the game takes you to a coin room and lets you skip most of the first level.

## Stuff Hidden in Bricks

The flashy question blocks are obvious “secrets” by their very nature, if not by the fact that the demo depicts Mario hitting one in the first five seconds. The regular brick-type blocks are easily discovered to be breakable in the beginning, too.

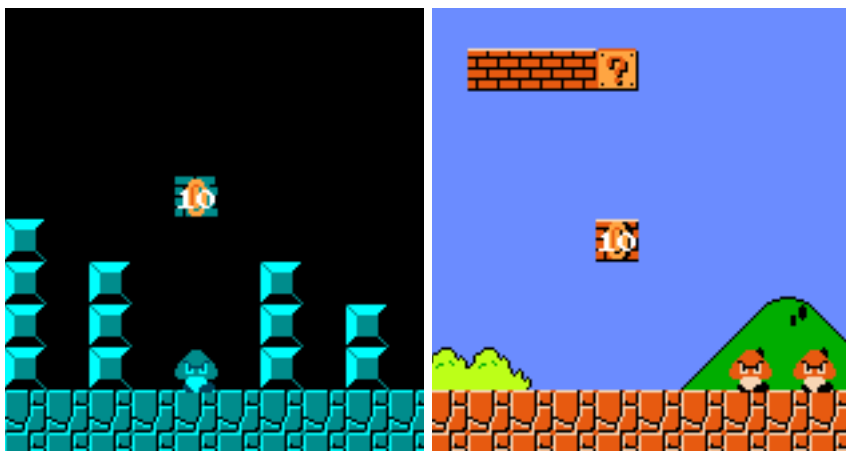
It’s not until world 1-2 that the player is likely to discover that stuff can be hidden in them. That brick above the goomba is just begging to be smashed. The brick in world 1-1 is pretty suspicious too, but it at least has a plausible reason for being there—to get high enough to hit the question block.

I’ll grant that it’s potentially even more likely that the player would, in their clumsy inexperience, hit the brick they were trying to land on top of. Either way, the game is quick to demonstrate that bricks aren’t just for breaking.



**Pipes.** Left: First obvious occurrence (world 1-2); Right: First occurrence (world 1-1)

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the fine folks at The Mushroom Kingdom, [http://www.themushroomkingdom.net/smb\\_breakdown.shtml](http://www.themushroomkingdom.net/smb_breakdown.shtml). Thanks, guys!



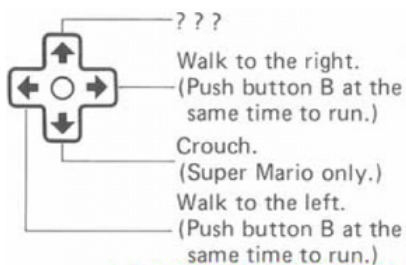
**Stuff Hidden in Bricks.** Left: *First obvious occurrence (world 1-2);*  
Right: *First occurrence (world 1-1)*

The gossip at the time wasn't that there were coins in that brick, of course. It was that in the arcade version, the goomba had become a turtle, and so you'd better have secured yourself a fire flower if you wanted to collect those coins. If you hadn't discovered that there were coins hidden in that brick, you were hopeless.

## Beanstalks

I count beanstalks as their own secret, even though they're always hidden in blocks, for a number of reasons. The game doesn't go out of its way to show you a beanstalk until world 3, for one. The lengthy coin-in-the-sky bonus levels that the beanstalks lead to are one of the most delightful surprises that *Super Mario Bros.* has to offer, for another.

Mostly, though, I want an excuse to



point out this diagram from the manual:

How wonderfully ominous is that? Up on the D-pad has no purpose in the game besides to climb up beanstalks, but the manual doesn't want to give away the fact that they exist.

The obvious beanstalk in world 3-1 gets bonus points for being especially difficult to get to. You just know there's something good wedged in between those two rows of bricks, because they're so freakin' hard to get between.

## Welcome to Warp Zone

This is the one that really fascinates me. The actual pattern of play generally went like this:

- Someone showed you the warp zone in world 1-2.
- You immediately warped as far ahead as you could (world 4), and tried the same trick in world 4-2.
- You got a crummy single-world warp to 5-1 that barely helped you out at all.

But it's clear from the maps, and from the general pattern, that it was intended that the world 4-2 warp zone was the one that would show the player how to warp

ahead to world 4 in future games.

If you are Big Mario on top of that pipe in world 4-2, there is no way you will not try to break the bricks above your head and jump into the score area. You'll clearly bump your head and fall to your death if you try to jump straight to the exit. You can hug the pipe and jump to the exit from the little platform beside it, but you're likely to try and clear a space for your head.

Give it a try sometime, it's not immediately obvious from the screenshot, but there's plenty of room to jump on top of the bricks and go for a jog to the warp zone. You are clearly meant to discover this.

This is perhaps one area where the playground effect really worked in SMB's favor. If it had been obvious that you were meant to discover warp zones, they would not have been nearly as effective. With the added element of mystery, that I'm-not-really-supposed-to-have-found-this

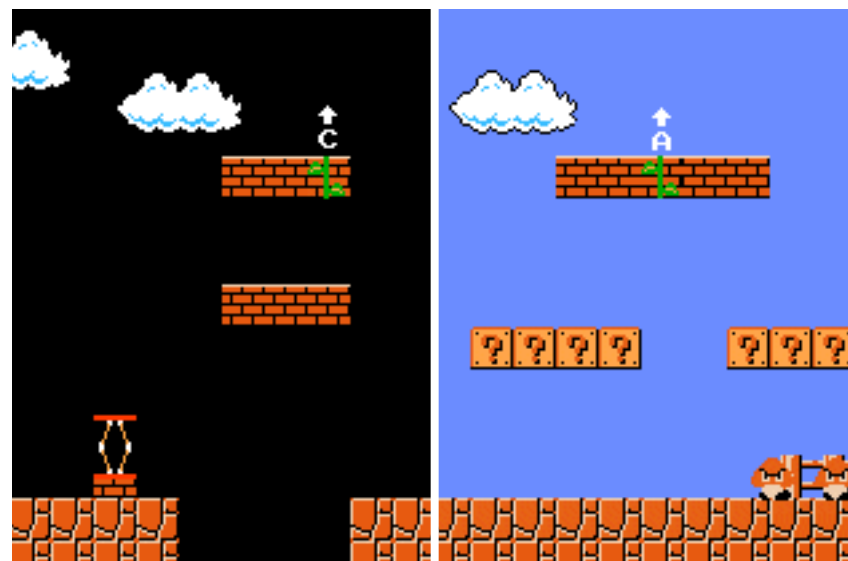
feeling, warp zones allow the player to feel completely in control, that they were manipulating the system.

## Invisibricks

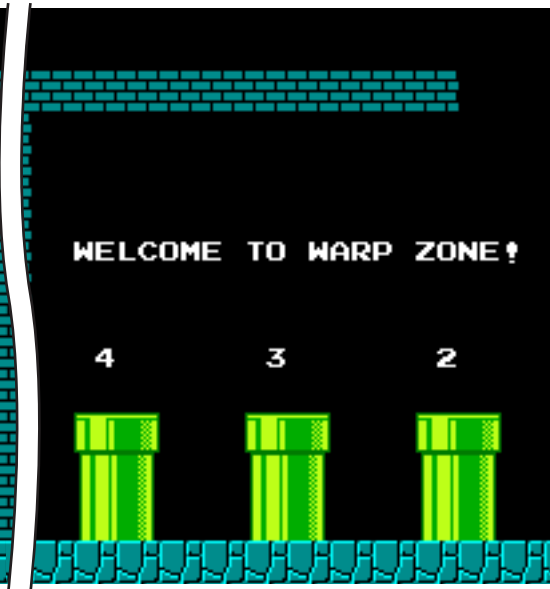
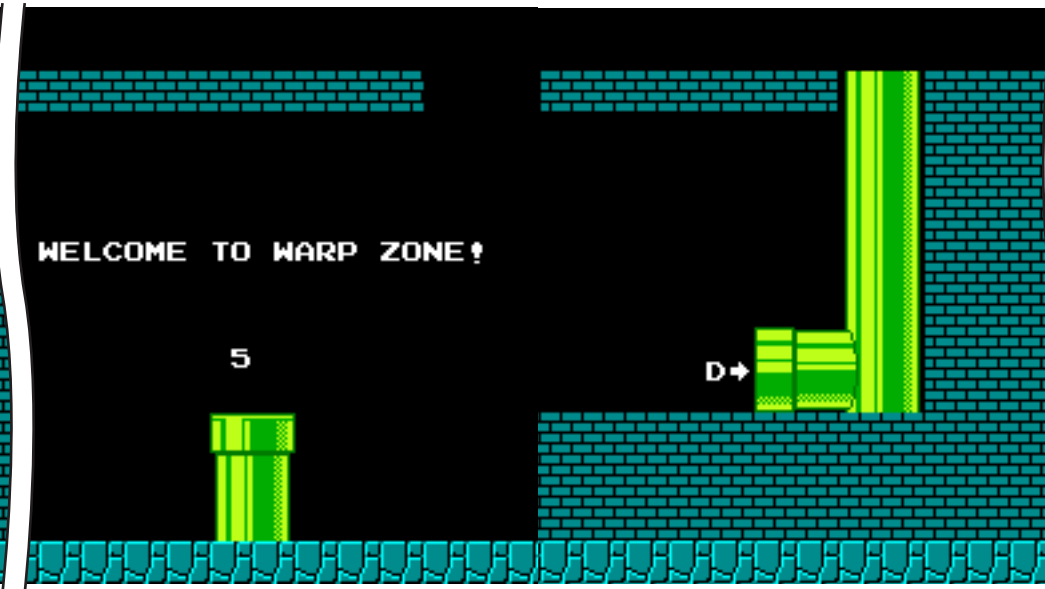
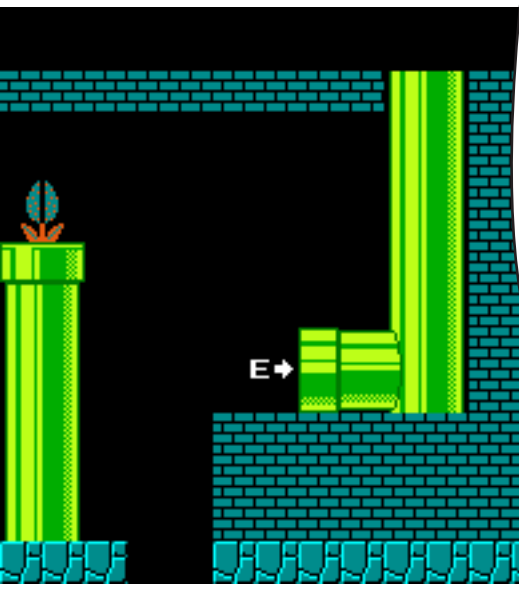
Invisible bricks—spaces in the world that you pass right through unless you hit them from the right angle—are perhaps the easiest thing to overlook. They're also the last secret that the game reveals for you.

Perhaps their hiding place in world 5-1 is not nearly as obvious as the coins-in-irregular-bricks back in world 1-1, but by this point it should be looking mighty suspicious.

I still remember being shown the 1-up mushroom hidden in world 1-1, in a spot that I had either skipped past using a pipe or else completely missed countless times before. I was astounded that the game could have hidden something like that under my nose for so long. Now, of course, I never miss it.



**Beanstalks.** Left: *First obvious occurrence (world 3-1);*  
Right: *First occurrence (world 2-1)*



**Invisibricks.** Left: First obvious occurrence (world 5-1);  
Right: First occurrence (world 1-1)

**Welcome to Warp Zone.** Top Left: First obvious occurrence (world 4-2);  
Top Right: First occurrence (world 1-2)

Interestingly, the “real” warp zone in world 4-2 requires you to find a handful of invisible bricks in order to reach an out-of-the-way brick hiding a beanstalk. You can only warp to the end of the game once you’ve discovered every kind of secret the game has to offer. With the lack of much interesting going on from world 5 to world 7, and the difficulty turned up dramatically in world 8 from world 7, it seems likely that the player was even expected to start warping to the end of the game, once they had discovered these secrets.

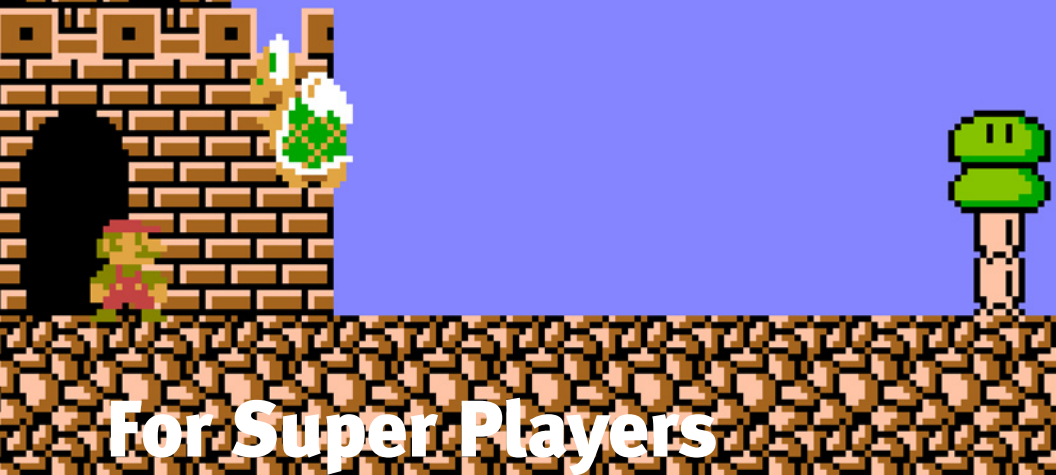
## Thank You Mario! The Kingdom Is Saved!

It’s easy to lose sight of just how groundbreaking *Super Mario Bros.* really was; just four years prior, Miyamoto’s programmers were grumbling about the amount of work involved in having to code three different levels into Donkey Kong. Even though we may have thought we’d outsmarted them, the game’s innovative design choices clearly worked. None of the

glut of imitators that followed figured out how to seduce the player into exploring every nook and cranny of their worlds quite like *SMB* did.

We were meant to search for and discover wondrous hidden things, and we did. We were meant to play those first levels over and over, refining our technique to collect the most interesting secrets along the way, and we did. We were meant to think that we were pulling one over on the game when we used a warp zone, like maybe other people never found them and had to beat the game the “right” way, and we did.

It’s easy to think that the playground effect was a bad thing; that it obscured the moments of discovery that the designers had so painstakingly put into the game. But really, *Super Mario Bros.* doesn’t care how you find its secrets. It just does a damn good job of making sure that you do. 🍄



# For Super Players

**Super Mario Bros. 2—FDS (SNES, GBC)**  
By Ancil Anthropy

One first notices the clouds: they've been given eyes and little, knowing smirks. One may notice that the familiar hills and bushes are gone, replaced by mushrooms and trees. These are minor edits, though—background details—and would not look out of place in the original *Super Mario Bros.* Most of the graphics remain unchanged from that game. Perhaps the most obvious edit is that the ground tiles have been changed from cracked bricks to a more anarchic pebble texture. This is our first hint that Mario is standing on a new world.

We start the game the only way we can: we run Mario to the right. He encounters a series of flashing blocks and probes them with his fist. Sure enough, a mushroom pops out and slides to the right. We have Mario give chase and grab it. Mario leaps into the air and falls off the screen, dead.

This is *Super Mario Bros. 2* on the Famicom Disk System.<sup>1</sup> It is the sequel to Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros.* and a magic looking glass to a world where things behave a bit differently than they ought. Our first encounter with the strange new principles of this world has been the poison mushroom. Wearing the same sprite but in a sickly brown-purple, it behaves the same as Mario's trusted power-up, but to touch it means death. To get a real power-up in that first stage

requires the player to locate a secret block, and then hit a second block to bump the mushroom out of its little box and into Mario's hands.

The bump mechanism existed in the original game, as a carry-over from the *Mario Bros.* arcade game, but the game never called for the use of the technique. Most often it functioned as a way to accidentally knock your prize out of your reach. *Super Mario Bros. 2* incorporates it into its level design. The second stage—a parody of that scene in the first game's stage 1—2 where a too-tall Mario can bust through the ceiling to get through—requires the use of the running slide, another technique that was never obligatory in the first game, where it was more of a fix to keep the player from getting trapped inside a wall.


*Super Mario Bros. 2* is perhaps not a sequel so much as it is a continuation of the first game—it assumes the player has completed the original, and can in fact do so with relative ease. It requires an intimate understanding of the game's physics to complete. Understandable, since the game was designed not by the director of the first game—Shigeru Miyamoto—but by its programmer, Takashi Tezuka, while Miyamoto was busy with *Doki Doki Panic*, which would be localized as America's *Super Mario Bros. 2*.

The game carries on from *Super Mario Bros.*'s world 8 not only in difficulty but in

its wild deconstruction of the gameworld. World 8's castle features spinning bars of flame in an underwater moat. *Super Mario Bros. 2* puts blooper squids in the air and Koopa turtles underwater. Springs send Mario flying off the screen, warps lead backwards, and piranha plants emerge even when Mario is next to a pipe. There are upside-down pipes, with upside-down piranhas. The game plays—at times cruelly—off the player's preconceptions of how *Super Mario Bros.* should play.<sup>2</sup>

It is the level design that really sets this game apart from its predecessor whose engine it shares. The familiar elements of *Super Mario Bros.* are rearranged almost into puzzles. There are stages that, like some of the original's more sinister castles, loop forever until the player finds the right pipe to go down. There's a stage that ends that ends in a sheer, solid wall—the player needs to locate invisible blocks to scale it. And there are many jumps that can only be taken at full speed, with little space to build one's speed up.

The game is really about momentum—creating it and, more crucially, maintaining it. Stages need to be played with the B button held down. To hesitate is to let Mario's momentum evaporate. The 2-player game has been replaced with an option to play as Luigi, who jumps higher but slides far when he tries to brake, often into enemies and pits. The moral is to never stop running.

In some ways it is the perfect sequel, taking the principles and mechanics of the first game and honing them to the sharpest and most rigorous execution, exhausting all possibilities of the game's engine and physics. But most sequels do not look like *Super Mario Bros. 2*—America's *Super Mario Bros. 2* does not look like *Super Mario Bros. 2*. This is because the game admits precious few. It is inaccessible to those who have not played the original, or to those who have only casually played the original. It is not for everyone. It is a game for those who seek perfection. 



- 1 The game would later appear on Super Mario All-Stars (for the Super Famicom/SNES) as The Lost Levels and on the Gameboy Color's Super Mario Bros. DX as "Super Mario Bros. For Super Players." Both of these versions lose the game's unique graphics, and feature save options that make it too easy to plow through the game. A rare Famicom Mini re-release for the Gameboy Advance looks just like the original (barring sprite compression), and only saves every four stages, preserving more of the challenge of playing through the game.
- 2 "Fantasy World", or world 9—accessible only to players who finish the game without warping—contains an outdoor castle, complete with lava, firebars and a hammer—throwing Bowser. It is one of the most elusive and spectacular sights in the Mario series.



# Play a Friend's New Super Mario Bros.

**New Super Mario Bros. — NDS**

By Wes Ehrlichman

Art by James Harvey

New Super Mario Bros. is Nintendo's attempt to recapture the feeling and enjoyment of the original NES Super Mario Bros.—a game that was released over twenty years ago. The result is an excellent game full of nostalgic fun, but its faults prevent it from achieving the status of a modern classic. Although the game's problems are minor and not without solution, every one stems from a reluctant adherence to modern game design. The problems lie in its save system and goals; the solution is to do something else you might find nostalgic: play the game on someone else's system.

Before I get into that, I have a bit of a confession to make: despite being an unabashed Nintendo fanboy for the entire 8-bit and over half of the 16-bit generations, I never owned a copy of Super Mario Bros. 2 or 3. It's hard to believe, knowing that these were the games that sat firmly inside everyone's NES at the time, but it's true. To this day I've never owned either one. Another confession: I've played both of those games to the extent that I can tell you where each 1-up, magic potion, warp whistle, magic P-wing and tanooki suit are located; hum every bar of music; and tell you the name of every Koopa Kid. I know these things because I played both games hundreds of times at other people's houses.

In the mid-to-late 80s, when the word "Nintendo" meant "videogames," Nintendo crafted an industry of strict third-party guidelines and well-planned customer manipulation. They controlled distribution of their games in order to ensure that the games were constantly in demand and did not drop in value. Nintendo wielded this control with an iron power-glove-clad fist, manipulating retailers by reducing the stock of the most popular games in stores that complained. Toys R Us's main competitor, Children's Palace, was put out of business when Nintendo refused to provide them with stock for the holiday season immediately following the release of Mario 3.

Nintendo's artificial manipulation of demand contributed to schoolyard politics. Kids who had the hard-to-find games received instant popularity, and their friends and classmates would make any excuse possible to visit the lucky kids' homes. Since I was nearly obsessed with games, despite only receiving them at Christmas and on my birthdays, I frequently visited my friends and tried to get them as interested as I was in the new games I had read about in Nintendo Power.

Because the time I spent playing most games was limited, I was forced to find the fastest ways to get through games. I would play the game at a friend's house, go home to research the best way to get through the part I had played, and then come back the next day ready to beat it. I read every magazine I could get my hands

on and quickly gained a reputation as the kid who knew hints and secrets. The NES Mario games were the pinnacle of secret-based design: warp zones, secret minus worlds, and countless unlimited life tricks allowed you to skip different parts of the games depending on how much time you had and what you wanted to see.

A secret-based design flows naturally from the lack of battery backup in early games. The secrets served a purpose: they were there to reduce the amount of replaying you would need to do. Without the ability to start where you left off when you last played, in order to finish the game, you were forced to either spend an abnormally long amount of time on the game in one sitting or learn the secrets and shortcuts. It wasn't long before everyone knew most of the secrets, and then it became a matter of choosing which stages you wanted to see on your way to the ending rather than just trying to speed through. Early Mario games encourage you to play the game quickly because you are intended to learn all of the secrets in order to maximize the number of stages you can skip. It's no coincidence that one of the first speed runs to become popular on the internet was an 11-minute Super Mario Bros. 3 completion.

When Super Mario World added the first save feature to the series it meant that you were no longer asked to make your way through the game in a single sitting. Using the overworld map, you could return to and replay any stage as many times as you wanted. Secrets and shortcuts morphed from a means of avoiding replay and discovery into the opposite. Rather than allowing you to avoid parts of the game, they now allowed you to see more of it. Super Mario 3 had an overworld map, but you couldn't return to stages that you had already beaten. Players had to keep moving toward their goal.

New Super Mario Bros. is stuck in a kind of limbo between Mario World and pre-Mario World design. There's a save

feature, warp zones that take you ahead a few stages instead of entire worlds, and, perhaps most tragically, an added explicit goal. The initial goal is the same as it always was—to get to the end of the stage—but New Super Mario Bros. adds an incentive to find three hidden coins in every stage. Although it may be technically possible to do this on the first playthrough, once you beat a level you're banned from returning to it until you complete the entire game at least once, meaning you'll need to come back later. There's a dichotomy of being constantly pushed forward while also being reminded that you need to go back. It's true that having an incentive to return to play each stage for 100% completion encourages replay, but in this case the replay exists for the sake of completion rather than improvement, which is never a good thing.

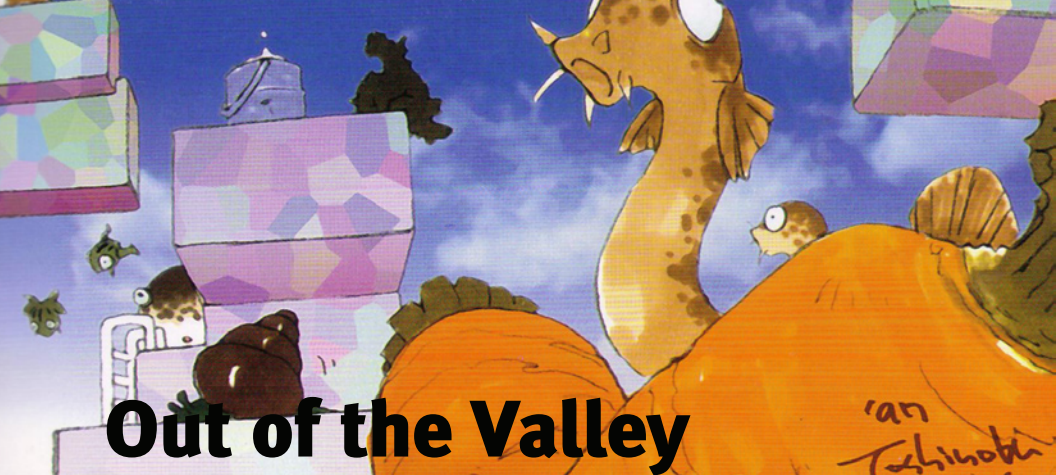
Not that there isn't reason for improvement. New Super Mario Bros. can be difficult, but because you can save every few stages, dying doesn't mean anything. In the older Mario games dying meant starting over from the beginning. In New Super Mario Bros. the worst that can happen is being sent back a few stages. After finishing the game you're encouraged to find secrets, but since you can go back to any stage as many times as you want, there's no real urgency—little risk in exchange for little reward.

The result is a game conflicted with itself. It tries hard to be a great game for the same reasons as the older Mario games, but gets stuck somewhere in the trappings of modern completionist design sensibilities that keep it from truly recreating the feeling of the older games.

There's still hope. If what I say is true, and the modern completionist design really holds the game back from being as enjoyable as it could be, the only solution is to artificially engineer some of the elements that made these experiences so great in the first place—by playing the game on friend's system. It may sound







# Out of the Valley

## Great Abstractions in Videogames

By Matthew Williamson

Art by Mariel Cartwright

So. Feelings are abstractions of emotional states, things that aren't even clear with the most precise of definitions. When all the memories of details fade, feelings are all that are left me—and over time, in certain pockets of my mind, this is what gaming has been reduced to. Yet today, with gaming's push towards realism for realism's sake, I find myself constantly staring into what Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori called the Uncanny Valley.

Coined in 1970, the term concerns the way humans respond to robots and other non-human anthropomorphic beings. It basically describes a gap in human response, whereby the more human something appears, the more faults we find in the depiction and therefore less empathetic we feel. When something is more stylized, however, our minds fill in the blanks, allowing the human qualities to shine through.

Long ago, in Industry terms, abstraction was the only way to survive. Blocks were arranged to best represent what the author intended. Sometimes this came through clearly, and people largely understood what the image on their screen represented. Other times a child would sit in his living room wondering why he was beating a duck on a wall with a stick.

Would the game be the better if the

child understood the stick was a sword and the duck was a dragon? These games were built up from layers of abstraction, both of what was represented on screen and of what it meant when the player was pressing buttons.

For some time, games have striven toward "photo-realistic" representation; they're sort of almost there. A while ago, at a party, I wandered into a room where a half dozen people were watching what I assumed was a boxing match: mildly intoxicated, fists-in-the-air cheering. I wasn't close to the TV and only could see part of the screen; when I approached, I realized that it was not a sporting event, but a match of *Fight Night* for the Xbox 360. It seems the Uncanny Valley lies in Louisiana.

As big a hit as they make at drunken parties, these games aren't like wine; as they age, they can only become worse. Once they lose the power to awe us with their sheer muscle, we can see them for what they are. When we watch *Independence Day*, we no longer think of the White House as a scale, exploding building—it's just a silly model. Throw the original *Splinter Cell* into the Xbox, and what we see isn't Sam Fisher; it's a bunch of semi-organic polygons that we know are intended to be him.

Then throw in the original *Super Mario Brothers* for the NES, and Mario is still Mario—not because he once looked realistic, but because he was always an abstract representation.

In the same boat is *Umihara Kawase*. On the Super Famicom it used sepia-colored photographic backgrounds, which emphasized just how far we were from realism. All the platforms are similarly-shaped and similarly-colored blocks. The tool at hand is a rubber fishing line with a hooked lure, used as a grappling hook. The enemies are all sea life, venturing from the water on two legs.

The protagonist is a young girl; the feeling the game imparts is the childlike joy of exploring a playground. You start off with the same skills that you will have through the entire game, never upgrading, never outwardly growing. The game's evolution is instead much as one develops in life.

When you begin, you don't understand how to properly move, or how to work things.

With more experience, the tone shifts from one of clumsy wandering to investigation, experimenting with how best to use your skills: jumping, climbing, swinging, and hanging. When you get your gyroscope working, the world becomes a playground to enjoy through whatever means comes to mind. It perfectly captures the youth-tide joy of monkey bars over a pit of sand.

With maturity comes speed and proficiency. You begin to reach higher than you dreamed and perform stunts that once looked impossible. You become a master of the environment presented you.

The sequel, *Umihara Kawase Shun* for the Playstation, builds on this feeling. The playground is new, and the mechanics less stiff. The levels are now even more abstract, capturing much of the distorted perspective of a child. Not only are the graphics and controls abstracted, so too are the emotions. The backgrounds are in color and photo-real, yet very pixilated.

For its part, the history of photography has a lot of parallels to that of videogames. Early on, before the medium had really developed its own set of

aesthetic criteria (much like the situation videogames are in now), contemporary art critics constantly put photography and its practitioners through the wringer. Baudelaire once wrote, "Our squalid society has rushed, Narcissus to a man, to gloat at its trivial image on a scrap of metal." Compare this to Roger Ebert's assertion, "Video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic." You can make the comparisons to *Umihara Kawase* on your own. However you do it, it's hard to overlook the irony.

*Umihara* existed during a time when its contemporaries were also fairly abstract, and yet it wasn't released in the United States. Crawling closer to our favorite Valley, we find games like *Killzone*, *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, and *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*. However strong your imagination, calling these photo-real is a bit of a stretch—and that's just on the surface. The underlying games serve to illustrate why it is that we have this idea that quality degrades over time, because they're anchored in these fleeting technological milestones instead of in the driving themes behind which the technology is supposed to be trying to represent. They base their appeal on something that ultimately doesn't really matter for its own sake and will by nature be outdated, rather than something primal that won't ever really change.

On the other hand, you've got games like *Killer 7*, *Psychonauts*, and *Ribbit King*—all strong examples of games that use abstraction to place the importance of theme over technology. Since the graphics aren't meant to be literally representational, and are meant only as a vague pointer, even extreme age and hardware degradation can't stop them from evoking exactly what they set out to





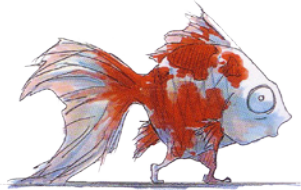
do.

*Killer 7*, in particular, is probably the only game that I can rely on to incite a heated argument nearly every time I bring it up. Whether I do so—be it at work, with friends, or on the Internet—I will almost always be met with disagreement. That’s not to say it’s always negative (“This game sucks!” “No, this game rocks!”), it’s just that whatever my interpretation of the events in the game and their execution, my view will differ from nearly anyone else’s. And so will everyone else’s from everyone else’s. It’s like the game manufactures conflict. And actually, that seems intentional.

See, you go all the way back to *Pong*, the most basic element of gaming is that you control the movement and direction of your on-screen avatar. *Killer 7* completely removes even this assumption by forcing you to hold a button to move forwards, as if you were on a one-dimensional rail. By taking a familiar abstraction and distilling it even further, the game is making what might, on a level, seem a rather obvious point: that videogames involve pressing buttons.

As a result, the controls become monotonous in their simplicity. Puzzles are simplified. The environments are both simplistic and grandly stylized. The story is confusing. The violence is shocking. And through it all, *Killer 7* stands out as one of the best, or at least most memorable, games of 2005. Keeping away from the distractions of *Uncanny Valley* makes transparent the already translucent elements tying the medium to its interface, allowing you to focus exclusively on piecing together the events and environments around you.

As a result, yes, the plot is scattered and confusing—though for my part, I like my convoluted. Recently my wife



and I squandered an entire day on David Lynch, from his early short films through *Eraserhead* to *Mulholland Drive*. After each film we spent a while discussing our feelings and impressions; what we thought the films were trying to say and how to interpret it. In *Eraserhead*, when Henry was left alone with his premature child, did you cry? Were you disgusted? Later on, I discovered that a friend had stopped watching the film about halfway through, from a mix of disgust and annoyance at the film’s “lack of plot.”

And that’s the big problem with *Killer 7*; what it offers isn’t what most people are looking for. The people who throw in a game to zone out, or kill time, or be amazed by the latest mipmapping, aren’t looking to be intentionally confused. By way of its transparency, many gamers were given their first opportunity to focus on what a videogame actually is, and how fairly meaningless the things are right now as a medium. It’s right there, in your face: games are anemic as hell, so what are you going to do about it?

With the way technology is zooming along, rarely do developers take the time—and nearly as rarely are they afforded it—to re-examine the basic underpinnings of the form. Their job isn’t to be philosophers; it’s just to get product out the door. As a result, *Madden* looks


momentarily amazing yet feels nothing like a real game of football. Of course it probably could, were someone to take the time to deduce it out from the ground up. That’s just not where the concerns lie, though.

Ideally, it probably should be. Current games have a gunked-up level of abstraction laid so thick that in most cases you already have to be in the fold to get anything out of them. Combine that with the march toward literal representation, and you’ve got a mess. You don’t have any subtlety, so nothing of substance can get communicated. If everything is shown, nothing is implied. If the old abstractions have become literal, there’s no push to look for new, more suitable ways to engage the player.

Emphasize abstraction, though, and steer clear of *Uncanny Valley*, and you’ve got plenty of room to instill emotion and significance, both in the worlds depicted and in the player’s interaction with them.



If a medium is, ultimately, a means to an end, the most effective end will be the most nuanced, the most internally complete.

The Valley is a bane to gaming more than a boon at this point, yet most gaming is heading in that direction and it doesn’t know why yet. We need to take a step back, remove ourselves from the context, and really take a look at things all over again. Some developers and production teams seem to understand all this, and they are most of the reason I ended up here writing in the first place. 



# To Be Frank

## Dead Rising—360

By Andrew Toups

You might have read some reviews of *Dead Rising* describing it as a sort of “mash-up” of different genres. You may have even heard your friends describe it as such. You doubtless read people posting on online forums, bitching about how the game is “unsatisfying” and “repetitive” as a “beat-’em-up,” or “disappointing” as a “horror game”. Fuck those people. Those people, who can only view the game as a combination of different genres, are worthless sods who lack imagination. *Dead Rising* is too good for those fuckers.

While incorporating elements from various genres, *Dead Rising* is not a game that seeks to exist within any one of those genres. Yes, there is an RPG-like leveling-up system; but the game does not strive to be an RPG; the leveling system only exists to keep the game from starting off to easy. Yes, you spend much of the game hitting things with blunt objects and your fists, yet the game does not strive to be a beat-’em-up; the combat is dead simple and only serves the purpose of adding tension and the constant risk of death as you move between objectives.<sup>1</sup> And yes, you will kill more zombies in a single playthrough of *Dead Rising* than even exist in every *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* game ever made combined, and yet the game does not strive to be a survival horror game; the goal of the game is not

to survive but to “discover the truth.” If it were a survival horror game, it would be the most boring survival horror game ever made. All you would need to do to survive is to stay on the helipad for 72 hours.

No, *Dead Rising* is none of these things, and comparing them to any of those genres is to entirely miss the point. *Dead Rising* is a game birthed and brought into this world as pure concept.

To put it another way: *Dead Rising* is a game about photojournalist Frank West trapped for 3 days in a shopping mall that’s just swarming with zombies. The game is not just “about” this in the sense that that’s the game’s premise. The game is *profoundly* about being a photojournalist trapped in a shopping mall for 3 days that’s just swarming with zombies. Compare this to, say, *Final Fight* which, while ostensibly a game about saving your girlfriend from a gang of thugs, is really a game about hitting transvestites with lead pipes. In *Dead Rising*, every element exists to serve the concept. There are no minigames. There are no distractions. There is nothing in the game which exists to simply be “fun.” Though the game embraces a sandbox style of play, no amount of screwing around ever escapes the game’s context. A rational explanation is never far away from even the most erratic behaviors that the player may have Frank perform.

If there is one game that you could compare *Dead Rising* to without being completely, moronically off the mark,<sup>2</sup> it

would be *Grand Theft Auto*. Though there are huge mechanical differences between the games, *Grand Theft Auto* shares the same conceptual purity as *Dead Rising*. In other words it’s the sort of game that isn’t particularly based on some abstract idea of “gameplay” but is instead based on a simple idea. To wit, in *Grand Theft Auto*, there is a single button devoted to the action of carjacking. Though the game features shooting, driving, and occasional drug use, the game can not be called a shooter, a racing game, or even a crime simulator. Instead, *Grand Theft Auto* simply asks the question, “What if you were in a city and could steal any car you wanted at any time?” Whatever sidequests, missions, and minigames entailed by the game generally explore that concept, or derive from it in some way.

The game then proceeds to strip away anything that would detract from that concept. *Grand Theft Auto*, then, cannot follow a strict, level-based linear design model because the carjacking concept simply doesn’t make sense in that context. The entire point of a carjacking is giving the player choice; and the only way for those choices to have any significance is to place them in an open, emergent world. Inserting any other arbitrary barriers or objectives would only dilute that concept.

*Grand Theft Auto* is a “sandbox” style game. *Dead Rising*, despite having “open” design sensibilities, is comparatively oppressive. The game is set on a strict time limit, and at least on the first few playthroughs, it is anything but a playground. It is possible to play *Grand Theft Auto* for hundreds of hours and never “beat” it. *Dead Rising*, on the other hand, can only be played for so

long without encountering one of the game’s multiple endings. *Grand Theft Auto* succeeds by setting the player free; *Dead Rising* succeeds by limiting the player.

*Grand Theft Auto* is notable for embodying just about everything good and bad about Western design philosophy. Like many other notable Western-designed games, the emergent behavior of the city and the variety of ways in which the player can interrupt it form the core of the game experience. It is a model based upon systems and AI routines; without them it would be nothing. Eastern design, by comparison dictates that objectives and conflict should be clearly laid out before the player, whose role is more passive.


*Dead Rising* exists in the uncomfortable and vast void between these two styles of design. *Grand Theft Auto*’s emergent system is robust and deep; *Dead Rising*’s is paper-thin and (quite literally) brain dead. Even the living NPCs have AI that makes me nostalgic for 1995. *Grand Theft Auto* gives players situations which are a complex combination of choice, random factors, and systematic events. *Dead Rising*’s situations are less emergent and more based upon carefully arranged set pieces and item layout, with the occasional scripted sequence. The game is non-Eastern because it relies on the player’s initiative and curiosity to be entertaining; but it is non-Western because the game experience is, at all times, very carefully controlled and limited.

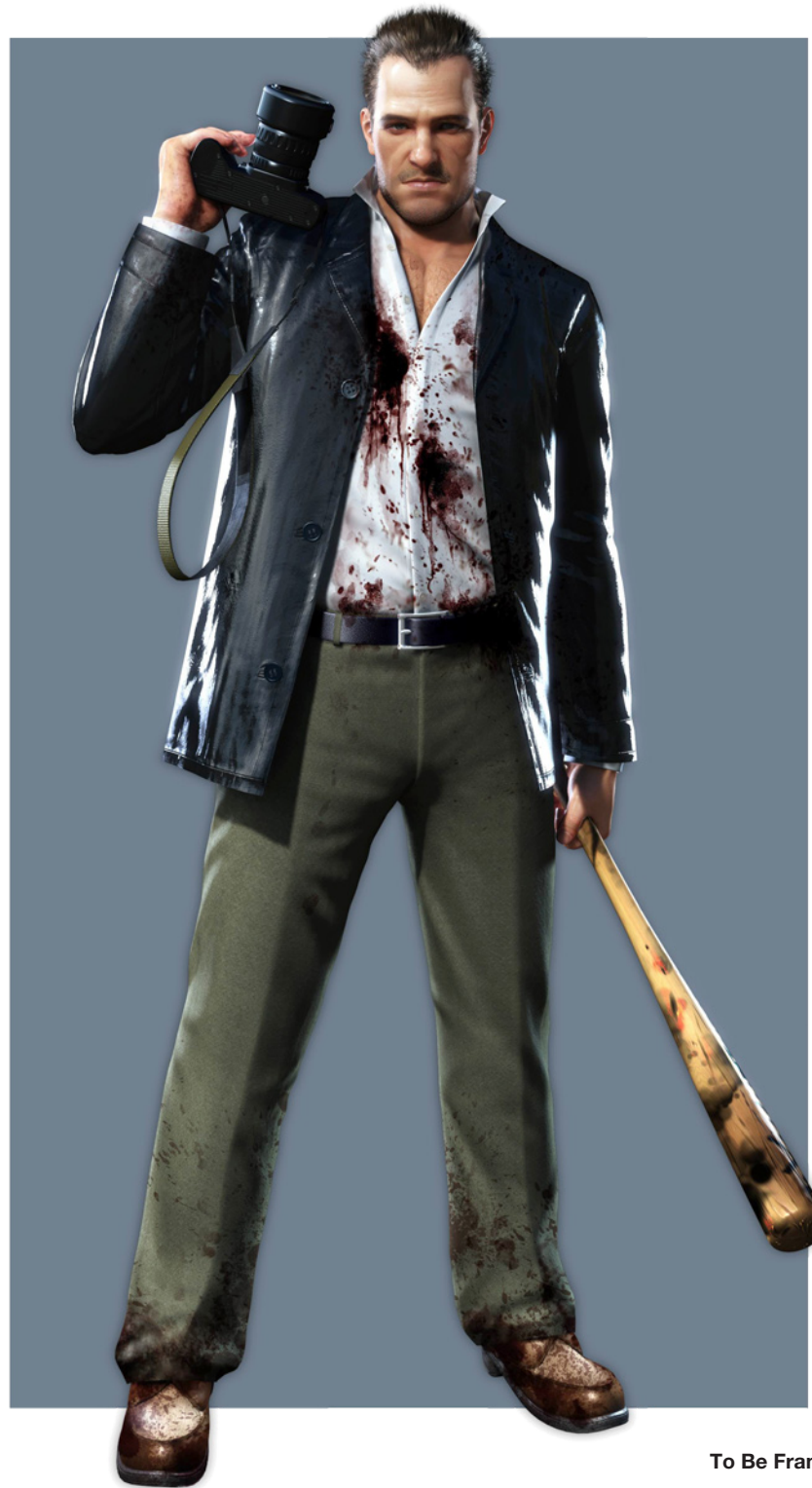
The consequence of *Grand Theft Auto*’s looseness is that one can never take the game very seriously. The premise of being a hardened gangsta in *San Andreas*, for instance, starts to feel pretty fucking

1 In beat-’em-ups, by comparison, the combat is the entire focus of the game, around which all other elements revolve.  
2 Okay, okay, aside from *Majors’s Mask*.

silly when, by the end of the game, you're flying through the countryside on a jetpack like the fucking Rocketeer or some shit. The consequence of *Dead Rising's* restrictiveness is that that for however many choices the game gives you, you never leave the role of Frank West, determined (if slightly deranged) photojournalist trying to get the scoop on the big zombie outbreak.

Does *Dead Rising* represent a paradigm shift in game design? It's not exactly unprecedented. Games such as those of the *Metal Gear Solid* franchise and Capcom's own *Resident Evil 4* have at the very least suggested what *Dead Rising* so elegantly achieves. But *Dead*

*Rising's* definitive statement is that it succeeds at having the grand scale and ambition of *Grand Theft Auto* while still being "serious". *Dead Rising*, of course, assumes the very slightly tongue-in-cheek style of a B-movie; but within its own established context, the game is serious. It is not a winking, nudging, barely-can-keep-itself-from-laughing joke (like *Grand Theft Auto*) and it is not a horribly-broken-yet-ostensibly-serious mess of game design (like *Oblivion*). No, *Dead Rising*, unlike those games, makes no compromises. It stays true to its concept to the bitter end. And it does all this while embracing the very ambitious principles of open-ended design. 





# The Unintended Horror

## Fear in Games

By Chris St. Louis

Art by Benjamin Rivers

Since the beginning of the gaming industry, developers have sought that which gamers are afraid of. From the demonic mansion of Capcom’s prototypical NES title *Sweet Home* to more recent offerings like *Silent Hill 4: The Room* or *Fatal Frame*, the gaming industry has made sure that we as gamers live in fear of zombies, dogs, zombie dogs, crows, mitochondria, assorted insects, abandoned mansions, disappeared novelists, our own daughters, and the Spanish.

Valid things to be afraid of, for sure, but rarely do these threats manifest themselves in tangible ways within our daily lives—outside of our consumption of videogames and campy horror movies, that is. We can lie awake in bed at night worrying if we have enough acid grenades stored in the nearest transdimensional storage locker all we want, but I can’t remember the last time I had to save the city from shambling hordes of the undead.

What these self-proclaimed horror titles rarely touch on are the latent fears and phobias accumulated by nearly every person through their lives, which are often entirely detached from the macabre and contrived stylings of typical horror entertainment. Let me humbly submit my own person as an example: I am horribly

acrophobic. High places—particularly ones in which I am separated from squishy death by a mere handrail or other futile illusion of safety—never cease to create in me a throat-constricting sensation of fear. I resign myself to certain death, even when I ascended that impossibly narrow, cramped stairway up to the crown in the Statue of Liberty, back when you could still climb up to the crown. That’s how much of a pansy I am.

Imagine, then, the combination of delight and sheer terror I felt staring into a bottomless chasm recently. Only instead of looking down from atop a tall building, I was watching my computer screen. More specifically, I was playing Lucasarts’s *Dark Forces II: Jedi Knight*, a title I’ve always enjoyed but never once played to completion. Now, *Jedi Knight* is by no means the most realistic or impressive first-person shooter on the market, but it was obviously designed by some sort of misanthropic acrophile. Not a single level is set on solid ground, and the player is frequently required to traverse narrow catwalks set stories above any sort of solid floor, assuming there is even a floor to be seen below.

It was just after crossing a metal beam barely wider than my character’s footprint, hundreds of feet above the surface of some alien planet, that I found myself leaning back from the monitor, taking a deep breath, and wiping my sweaty palms on the front of my jeans. This game, I

thought, has just made me feel like I was looking down from an actual building. That impressed me, the fact that this pixelated title from nine years ago could trigger a real reaction in yours truly.

Thinking back to the constant font of gaming memories that is my childhood, I remember a similar experience playing *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on the family NES. Published by Ultra Games (a “mirror label” set up by Konami to skirt Nintendo’s draconian publishing limit of five titles per licensee per year), the game was a bizarre amalgam of Ninja Turtles

and the strange enemies and scenarios one could only expect from the world of 8-bit: men made out of flame and eyeball spiders and the like.

The one thing about the game that vividly sticks in my mind is the second level, in which the dastardly Foot Clan has taken a cue from conventional terrorists and has decided to blow up a dam. Now, I’m not sure if the real life New York is kept from a watery end by some nameless dam (since the city’s at sea level, I’d assume it’s not much of a problem). I’m not even sure if this particular dam, in the game,



was threatening New York itself. But there was something urgent in the way April O’Neil commanded me: “Don’t let the Foot Clan blow up the dam!”

I had to fight, via my turtle avatar, down the dam’s three levels until finally reaching the cause of my fear. The Foot Clan apparently decided that installing bombs inside the dam structure was too easy, and instead they elected to place them—floating it seemed, in that 2-D world—in the water below the dam itself. My task was to swim through the watery depths and diffuse the bombs.

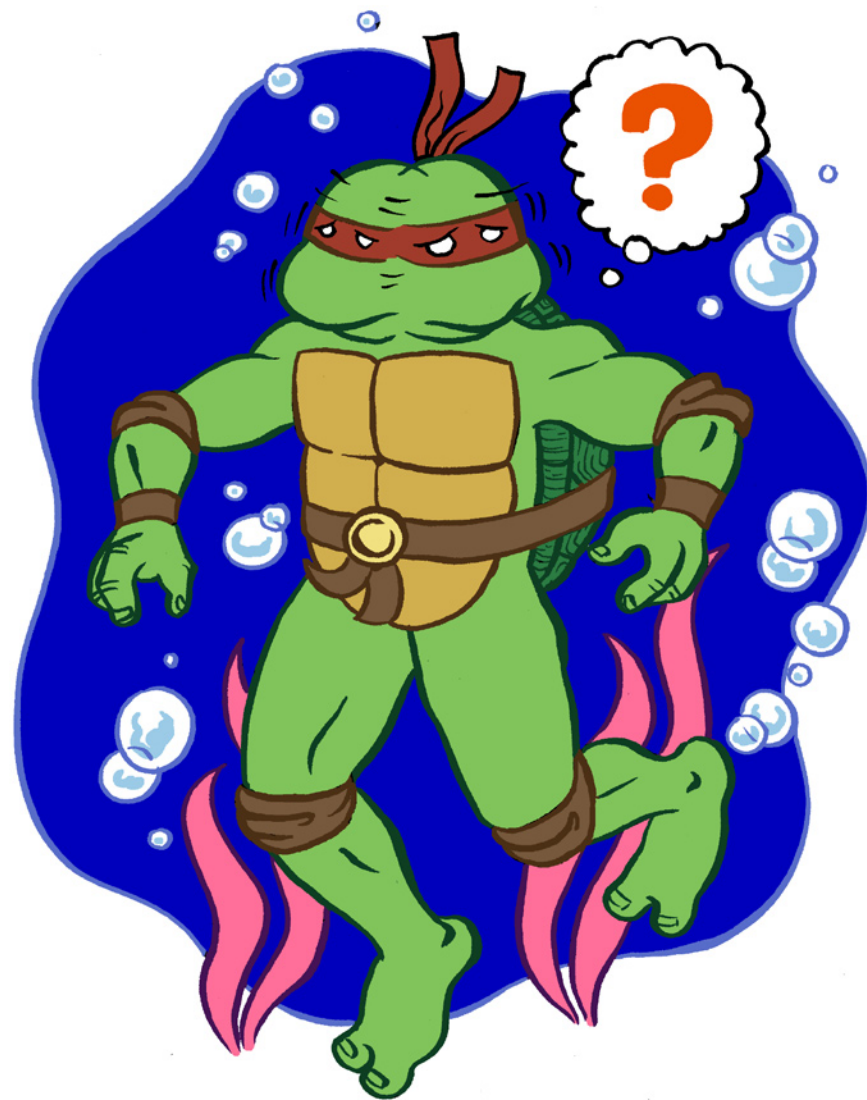
Unlike the rest of the ridiculously hard game, there were no actual enemies in the level, just a series of environmental hazards: electric weeds, rotating bars (reminiscent of the fire chains in *Super Mario Bros.*’s castles), and tentacle-weeds capable of devouring any turtles that ventured too close. The level featured a rudimentary “physics” system in that the player would drift about the screen in a manner which was obviously meant to mirror swimming through water, but which felt more like *Asteroids*. The tough controls, dastardly 2-minute time limit (with the player having to backtrack multiple times to find all the bombs), and liberal placement of said environmental hazards all left deep scars upon my preteen psyche.

I’m not afraid of water, and never have been, but this level managed to always fill me—pulse pounding and sweaty-palmed—with sheer terror. The horrible buzzing and screen strobe when my turtle invariably came in contact with electric weeds, the mounting intensity of the music as I struggled my way to a watery

grave (think of the “time’s running out” music from *SMB*, only more intense), and the panicked feeling of having no control over my avatar who had responded instantly to my every move just earlier in that level—it all created possibly the single most terrifying gaming experience of my life.

In the aftermath of my *Jedi Knight* discovery the other day, I wondered: wouldn’t it be something if developers could incorporate this sort of fear into a game? Something that preys on the existing phobias and psychological conditions of the player, rather than attempting to manufacture horror through fanciful and ultimately impractical contrivances? But even in asking that question, we know the idea is doomed to fail: each particular fear of this sort is ours alone. A game tailored to evoke paralyzing terror in an acrophobe such as myself could be a walk in the park to someone who, for example, holds a debilitating fear of being locked in bedroom closets.

The idea is completely impractical under the current paradigm of controller as input, monitor/speakers as feedback. This sort of thing would benefit most from that 1990’s vaporware concept we laughingly refer to as “virtual reality.” It’s a nice thought, though: games that would rely on the players’ experiences to evoke their own terrors. The contrivances of the horror industry are rapidly becoming old hat. 🐢





# Let Your Momma Sleep!

**Jet Set Radio — SDC**

By Francesco-Alessio Ursini

Art by Mariel Cartwright

Once upon a time, in a city called Tokyo-to, there were three kids spending their happy lives in blissfully useless actions, such as going around their turf and tagging it with their colourful graffiti. The GGs, as they were called, fought a battle to the last can of spray with their rivals the Love Shockers, the Poison Jam, and the Noise Tanks. In the meantime, they were also hunted by the corrupt police officer Kojima and the much shadier people of the Rhino Company, controlled by the mysterious and dangerous Gouji. Professor K, the captain of the pirate ship of FM waves known as Jet Set Radio, has been so kind to tell us this story of blissful lyrics and epic struggles.

*Jet Set Radio* is probably the most commercial game I have ever enjoyed. Designed as one of the launch titles for Dreamcast, it is one of the most innovative, creative, original, and funny titles that has never seen the light in the world of arcades, while at the same time being quite arcade-y in its gameplay. Among other things, it features one of the first examples of cel-shaded graphics, an absolutely awesome soundtrack, and one of the most inspired and faithful renditions of street life. If none of these elements mentioned so far makes you crack a smile, it has Professor K, the noisiest DJ ever heard in the hood!

I played the title for the first time on a cold day of winter, at the end of 2002. The title was already old, and in fact I bought it for a few euros off one of the many internet shops throwing away Dreamcast titles; the console was officially discontinued, so many excellent titles could be bought cheaply. In fact, I paid for my copy the incredible amount of six euros, including shipping. Not bad for a title that, nominally, was something featuring lame wannabe thugs going around doing graffiti with cheesy hip-hop songs and lame mechanics focusing on stupid skating tricks. Ack, I think I'm going to puke if I don't stop reminiscing about the huge pile of prejudices I had against this game!

For the first time, back in 2002, I was moving outside the utopia of arcade gaming. Well, not for the first time; when I was a kid, as you may know from earlier articles ("I Shoot Therefore I AM," *TGQ* #5), I had a few console "detours," mainly based on playing arcade spin-offs on consoles or arcade-like titles as *Castlevania*. However, I never really played true console titles, the ones involving things like collecting items, exploring worlds, and other scary mechanics that still make me shiver late at night, with goombas and secret passages of doom floating in my feverish nightmares.

*Jet Set Radio*, of all things, was recommended to me by a friend of mine who is the epitome of console gaming

and, more or less, "mainstream tastes." An avid fan of titles as *Winning Eleven*, *Halo* and all possible FPSes, not to mention every possible driving title ever produced,<sup>1</sup> he started bugging me when he discovered that I bought a Japanese Dreamcast. Since he also had a PAL one, he spent a few hundred hours trying to convince me that *Space Channel 5* and *Jet Set Radio* were some kind of mystic revelation of modern gaming, a spiritual experience to be revealed only to the DC's initiated souls.

To be honest, he also recommended other titles that were definitely beyond my gaming tastes, despite his desire to broaden my narrow mental landscape. *Tales of Phantasia*? Ack, I'd add. But well, I found *Space Channel 5* and *Jet Set Radio* for the grand sum of eleven euros, so why not? I spent the days after the purchase wondering what marvelous things I could have bought with eleven euros, instead of throwing them away with some silly console titles.<sup>2</sup> Almost scared of the incoming pack, I started wondering who I could resell the titles to.

"Don't worry, Francesco, you will adore the games, even if they are by no means arcade."

Guess what? My buddy was right. I will focus on *Jet Set Radio* for this article, leaving Ulala for future rants, but I easily claim that those have been the most well-spent eleven euros of my gaming life. Actually, I have also spent bigger or smaller amounts of money on other titles, but it would be difficult to top the fun-to-cost ratio associated to these two games. As trivial as it may sound, paying virtually nothing for hundred of hours of fun and

an everlasting discovery of other realm of entertainment, especially in a domain I thought devoid of any gaming pleasure, is somehow priceless and definitely a bliss.

*Jet Set Radio* has been, at the same time, one of my most traumatic gaming experiences ever. It may sound incredible, but I never played a 3-D first-person next-gen omg-plzkthx game before. I think I have broken at least four gamepads trying to grasp the principles of three dimensions as applied to videogaming. That I wasn't able to see what was behind my character, and the fact that I saw my character from behind puzzled me. What the hell? Let's see, it's a human character, so it must be a beat-'em-up-like title, so I should be able to see him from the side.

At some point, I think, I even had a slight sense of disorientation when moving around. I spent a few weeks dealing with vertigo problems every time I did acrobatic jumps, and getting confused because of the wacky camera angles. Or getting pissed off because of my inability to see what was beyond a wall.

Yeah, my first steps in 3-D sucked. I can picture people that grew up with *Doom*,<sup>3</sup> back in the days of 486 PCs and the likes, now laughing like madmen, wondering if I'm such an omg noob pwned by t3h 3D!!1! But yeah, I felt like crocodile forced to suddenly evolve and dive into the new and dangerous world of spheres, cylinders and triangles at once, in a sort of perverse *Flatland*. But, while my senses were confused and nauseated by this new environment, something else started to develop—a passion for the streets of Tokyo-to.

*Jet Set Radio* has one of the best settings ever seen in a game. Tokyo-to

1 Urban legends places him to be currently under the powerful spell of a certain MMORPG known as World of Warcraft, something absolutely not surprising, given its everlasting passion for such PC classics as Ultima.

2 Well, a pizza with a beer, coffee, ice cream and some appetizer, for instance.

3 The FPS, not the Ketsui's secret final boss.



is at once every possible idealization of anonymous places made “our turf.” The Shibuya-cho, Kogane-cho, and Benten-cho are all the anonymous blocks that made our own home, the place in which we can roam around in the sunlight (or the sunset, or the night) and surf in the wave of good vibes that come from Jet Set Radio. The feeling of being “boyz in the hood,” cruising on the magnetic skates at full speed, while doing 133t tricks and listening to the best songs on the radio.

*Jet Set Radio* is this and much more. None of the settings have been designed without rhyme or reason. The first thing that obviously shines through the game is the city. Every turf has its own unique spirit, may it be gritty industrial blocks, hyper-technological night locals, or happy and shiny suburbs. Then, all the songs fit marvelously the spirit of the single places: dancing vibes for the night, gritty grunge for the sunset, shiny funky for the sunlight. And then the design: the brilliant graffiti of “Haze” define, like a urban zen koan, the unique spirit of the game, the visual lyrics with which our heroes breathe life in the dead and drab metropolis of Tokyo-to.

And then there’s gameplay, of course. My traumatic experiences were washed away by the painful process of successfully mastering the art of grinding and jumping on my magnetic skates. After the weeks of frustration, the satori came in form discovering the infinite grinding techniques; all of a sudden, the static world surrounding my heroes became the fluid and dynamic context in which to discover new surfaces on which to jump (to gain momentum), or to grind (to get points for techniques), or to tag (to impose vitality and expression on drab and soulless concrete).

And then something changed, deep inside me. I realized that a mainstream game can be fun. Yes, I have just written the unwritable. The heavens are crumbling, shattered by the blasphemy of

my words, demons and angels are battling and...no, everything’s fine, as always.<sup>4</sup> My heretic comment, written by the “man that only plays obscure Japanese arcade games” (known also as “shmups,” if you don’t believe in some censorship on lexicon), will sound as completely surprising to some of the people that know me well. But, quoting some excellent lyrics from the recent past, I changed my mind and I need to thank Smilebit for this ability to finally grasp that sometimes, elitism is not entirely justified.

What we must say, though, is *Jet Set Radio* has no reason to envy some of the more exquisite arcade flavors. First, its gameplay is heavily score-oriented; grinding around can be very remunerative if you know your thing and you can exploit the entire world surrounding you. Any surfaces can be a source for points, and the more you learn on tricks and tips in the grinding dojo, the more grinding sources you become aware of. Again, gray walls of staticness become colourful ramps of dynamism, by the subtle ninja arts of the magnetic skate philosophy. Exactly like the Jurassic 5 rhyme says, we show you how to improvise, with the world of Tokyo-to as the ultimate playground.

Some prizes behind this process come in the form of new tools of expression. In the most exquisite vibe of console gaming, the most complex grinding tricks allow you to get the most hidden Smilebit icons, which in turn allow for new tags to be revealed in the safety of your refuge. A consummate arcade player should frown upon fun-tastic ideas like looking for the secret bonuses. But these have a reason behind them; show skillz in how you grind, and you’ll be able to get them. It’s about spending hours trying to find secret doors and other cheesy time-consuming activities.

And then the family gets bigger. Yeah, another consoley idea: beating characters and expanding the rosters. But then, some guys and gals are pretty cool, and at

some point you can get the one and only Combo. Straight out of the best old-skool turfs, with an almighty ghetto blaster as his faithful shining armour, Combo is, by definition, da man with da drizzle. There are not many characters as evocative as our big grandmaster flash warrior, in the realm of videogames. If style defines the aesthetics of a game and its world, then, in a simple picture (worth thousands words) Combo and Professor K celebrate the sublime, minimalist epics of the urban culture, with their excessive and flawless manifesto of ghetto wisdom.

Professor K and Combo represent just one good vibe in this world: before my eyes, I sometimes dream the world of Tokyo-to, its happy landscapes, cool slides, wacky inhabitants, and promises of incredible adventures. That’s because the game celebrates the urban settings as the new worlds of a peculiar kind of human, one that learns to dance and enjoy life in the new extended homes they have found in the concrete jungle. Tagging and skating become then the re-elaboration of limitations of the gray cages of concretes, of those ugly blocks made for existing, as new playgrounds for wise kids, and their zany persecutors, in a celebration of cities as made for *living*.

Sounds almost too good to be true? But that’s *Jet Set Radio* and its charm. Charm that made me spent over a hundred hours on this title, something that usually happens (or happened, I fear; times change.) when I decide to become a master of the engine and not just a fan. Getting all the graffiti and learning how to do infinites was just the first step. After completing the game, I focused on clearing it with all characters, and getting higher and higher scores, which involved entire sections cleared by doing a single

grind, much like chaining whole stages in games like *Mars Matrix*.<sup>5</sup> And then there are boss battles; boss battles, in this game, are pretty hardcore.

In a nutshell, it’s about tagging the adversary. They can’t tag you back (else, they would have been perfect), but the other bands will show up and define who’s the boss of the turf, after you’ve tagged their territory in their entirety. Once you win, it’s GG triumph all over Tokyo-to! And that’s where the story takes two different directions, my fellow urban friends: the original story went directly to the fight between you and the Rokkuku group. Afro-ninjas with rad hair start hunting down you and some mysterious record, while at the same time tagging the city with ugly rhino cubic symbols. Damn, and those rhinos look plumbers! Who could be so daft to have logo characters that look like plumbers?<sup>6</sup>

The grand battle renews the three turfs’ adventures by having your characters going around the whole districts in one crazy rush, while at the same time escaping from the shady thugs working from Rokkoku. That’s one hell of a battle, as those henchmen are actually tough, and the Benten-cho fight is the fiercest, with the goddamn flying troops being more aggressive than a rank-laden final stage of *Gradius*. The game starts putting up some serious challenges at this point, forcing you to learn how to deal with enemies and being quite careful about what you do.

And then there’s the *gaiden* variant.<sup>7</sup> The US/Euro version of the game was published somewhat later than the Japanese one, and Smilebit thought well to add a few stages to localize the game. These extra stages represented a rare case of serendipity, for me. As

4 Please notice the irony of such comment, as things are by no means fine, at the moment I’m writing, in many places of the world. As always, I’d add.

5 Takumi (supported by Capcom) (2000). Pretty hardcore shmup for the ones who like their games hard and challenging.



I discovered this localization quirk after a few enthusiastic chats with owners of the said localized versions, I decided in no time to hunt down *De la Jet Set Radio*, the Japanese reprint of the US version called *Jet Grind Radio*. Lo and behold, I discovered the secret variant story of Coin, Combo, and the charming Grind City.

Now, the extra part of the plot is indeed an extra part, pretty separable from the rest of the game. Does it matter? Hell no! Grind city and especially Grind City Square are the zen of grinding practice. While the Bantam Street stage represents flawlessly

the spirit of some '70s classics, like *The Warriors*, or any TV series set in New York, the best part about the new Grind City environment is its added challenges. Well, the US players probably were puzzled by having a couple of stages that were quite tougher than the following ones, for the ones who played *De la* as an added set, the grinding occasions on Grind Square were worth the rather bizarre patchwork made by Smilebit.

And there are the extra tunes. One masterpiece is "Recipe for the Perfect Afro": take any great funky song that

immediately teleports you back to the fab '70s, the Freak Brothers comics, *The Streets of San Francisco* TV series, and you just need to multiply by ten the coolness. Add Bantam Street, and you have all the coolest playgrounds we ever dreamt about. If this is not enough, there's also "Improvise"—"old skool," whatever it is, can't be much more flawlessly represented in this song, which also represents the spirit of hardcore grinding (as an expression of hardcore gaming). Smilebit promised a setting in which the player could learn, by mastering the skills, to improvise, as an expression of pure control of the tools offered by the game. Practice makes perfect, says the rule of the arcade: *Jet Set Radio* embodies this spirit with a flawless class that almost is embarrassing.

Time passes. The beautiful spring days left for the hot days of summer, and then autumn and winter came, with spring following them again. Years passed and those days in Tokyo-to and Grind City became, like all good things of the past, a pleasant memory. But still, I know that those beautiful days were well spent, honing the skills and discovering beauty in a place that I never thought as having such a virtue. After all, arcade is where it's at, no? No, I don't think anymore that if it's not something designed to squeeze my money, it is not good and just and worth playing.

People change, I'd add. Ugly experiences can be educative, indeed, but not as much as good experiences. Good experiences that were supposed to be bad, then, are nothing short of bliss. But "bad" and "good," as we have seen here, are just prejudices, if we don't really know

what lies about a façade. And the facades of *Jet Set Radio* unveiled pretty quickly the virtues of good gameplay. Good gameplay is nothing less and nothing more than an engine designed to be learned quickly and to be mastered infinitely. I pretend in my self-mocking snobbery that such an approach is exclusively arcade, and I am shameless in admitting it.

I was toying around with the ideas for this article, and decided that I needed some empirical footage to back up whatever claims I wanted to come up with. So, while burdened with many other works, I decided to fire up my ol' trusted DC in those rare moments of freedom. The powerful joyous screams of Professor K came out, born again, in the long and hot evenings of the lovely canals of Utrecht. The pseudo-prison revealed itself to be exactly like all the other places I lived in: knowledge and mastery of their virtues was the key to transform the place for existence to the place for life. It's just about quality, after all. Mainstream or hardcore, as long as a game works a charm, it fulfills its promise.

Ok, I'll never play a Madden game or anything with Lara Croft, let alone (gasp) any RPG. Sure, I'm not saying that they can't be fun (for someone else), but at least I accept, now that I'm older and wiser, that fun can be hidden even in "products for the masses." Many other stories could be told, of course, about these glorious days of vandalic and innocent joy: but I will save them for other days. Let us put a nice "end" title to this story, well knowing that, like professor K says:

"On the streets, there's no such thing as 'Theeee eeeend.'" 🎮

6 Hey, Sega started with the whole Nintendo parody, OK? I am innocent and bear no ill will to Nintendo, of course. But "Italian plumbers with moustaches" makes me shiver a bit.

7 "Side story" in Japanese: just to sound mildly more hardcore, eh.



# There's More to Gaming than Just Gaming

## Gaming in South Korea

By Erica L. Van Ostrand

Can you imagine meeting your future spouse online? Spending your life with a fellow gamer girl (or guy)? Is there such a thing? As many people in the United States take their soul-mate searches online to matchmaking websites and the like, more and more young people in South Korea are taking their searches to their local PC baangs (internet/gaming rooms). There are over twenty thousand PC baangs in South Korea, and in 2004, they generated sales of \$6 billion. JC Herz, a writer for *Wired*, visited PC baangs in Seoul, and wrote:

Singles are video-chatting in game rooms all over town. If they hit it off, the guy says something like, "I'm sitting at love seat number 47 at this particular PC baang, if you'd care to join me." If the girl is sufficiently intrigued, she hops on the subway or walks—nothing is more than 20 minutes away in central Seoul. She cruises by, checks him out, and if she likes the look of him in person she sits down, hoping the lighting and shading algorithms she used to enhance her features in the video chat don't make her seem unglamorous in person.<sup>1</sup>

Here in the United States, you walk into a LAN gaming center and see mostly

males, playing the latest PC game with their buddies or renting a television room to play an Xbox game on a big-screen plasma while sitting on super-comfy couches. These establishments are not social meccas where young men and women meet. And then there are those sometimes-lonely gamers who curl up in their favorite couch or office chair with all the comforts of home.

Thirty-three percent of all US households have a broadband connection. According to a 2005 Electronic Software Association poll of 1700 game-owning households, the average age of the US gamer is thirty-three. Action and sports are the best-selling videogame genres in the US; at the top of US videogame sales in 2005 were *Madden '06*, *Gran Turismo*, and *NCAA Football*.

In South Korea, seventeen million people are gamers, primarily twentysomething males. The best-selling videogames in South Korea are role-playing games, more specifically, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). The online games market in South Korea last year alone amounted to \$630 million. Eighty percent of all South Korean households have broadband access. Pearl Research, in a June 2006 study, predicted that the gaming market in South Korea will be \$2 billion by the end of 2007. South Korea's console market, currently valued at a mere \$160 million, pales in comparison. The top selling games in South Korea are

*Lineage*, *Kingdom Under Fire*, *Starcraft*, and *Warcraft 3*.

Why are there such differences in these statistics? First, the fundamental natures of our cultures are completely different. In 2005, *World of Warcraft* was the number-one-selling PC game in the United States. Part of *WoW*'s success is a result of our individually oriented culture. It is a game made for you to achieve your in-game goals individually. Only at the higher levels do you often play with others, signing your character up with a guild primarily to raid dungeons that require large groups. However, even that is ultimately oriented toward individual achievement—you search these dungeons in order to acquire better, more powerful gear for your own character.

In *World of Warcraft* and so many first-person shooters, Americans prefer playing games where they get to lead, where they have the chance to be the sole champion, the lone hero, the brave heroine. Even the biggest professional tournaments here in the United States are mostly one-on-one death matches.

South Koreans, on the other hand, are a group-oriented culture. They love *Lineage*, the most popular MMORPG. Usually, an entire clan meets at a PC baang convenient to all of them. They don't have to type in orders and commands; they just talk aloud to each other. In *Lineage*, you can be a ruler or a peasant. If you decide to be a peasant, you find a ruler to whom you will pledge loyalty, and for whom to fight. This type of play is virtually unheard of in the States.

There is a tendency in America toward easy, immediate, and convenient solutions. For us, consoles are a complete package—plug in a couple of cords, pop the disc in, and you are good to go shoot monsters to your heart's content. We hook them up to our televisions, to our surround-sound systems. We slouch on the couch, not a straight-backed chair. Consoles and console games are much

easier to install and play than PCs.

Setting up a brand new PC, or even just installing upgraded parts, can be daunting to the gamers who aren't so knowledgeable about computers. The lifespan of a gaming PC (or perhaps just one critical component) can be as little as a year or two, while consoles maintain a lifespan of about four years. Not only that, but PC games themselves can be nightmares in terms of compatibility and installation.

In 2005, console game sales topped \$6.06 billion. In the same year, US PC game sales topped \$953,000. The numbers speak for themselves: console gaming is more popular than PC in the United States.

But in South Korea, consoles were not generally available until recently. Korea had been occupied by Japan before World War II, and it developed a somewhat resentful relationship with Japan. For gamers, the lack of a favorable trade policy meant no Sega, no Nintendo, no Sony, but a strong preference for PCs and PC gaming.

Such an extreme gaming culture definitely has effects on society. The *Washington Post* claims that 2.4% of South Korea's population aged nine to thirty-nine is suffering from game addiction, and considers 10.2% more to be borderline cases. In 2005, ten people died from game-addiction-related causes. An Incheon couple left their four-month-old daughter alone at home for five hours to play *World of Warcraft*. While they were gone, the baby turned over on its stomach and died of suffocation. In August 2005, a twenty-eight-year-old Taegu man died after almost fifty consecutive hours spent gaming online.

Gamespot's John Anderson wrote:

A number of reasons are blamed for the rise of online gaming addiction in South Korea. They range from the longer amount of time needed to

finish extensive gaming objectives or story lines, to inexpensive internet access (averaging \$30 per month for household high-speed internet services) to a society used to living in small apartments or homes, trying to escape unfulfilling daily lifestyles.<sup>2</sup>

Anthony Faiola at the Washington Post claims that gaming addiction is so prominent in South Korea

in part because young people here suffer from acute stress as they face educational pressures said to far exceed those endured by their peers in other countries. It is not uncommon, for instance, for South Korean students to be forced by their parents into four to five hours of daily after-school tutoring. With drug abuse and teenage sex considered relatively rare in the socially conservative country, escape can be a hugely attractive outlet.<sup>3</sup>

Some gamers make a living out of it, however few those gamers are. The Korean Pro-Gamer Association, made up of 170 members, says that about 50 of its members make \$20 thousand to \$30 thousand per year, while fewer than 10 make \$100 thousand or more each year. The government is assisting the funding for construction of an e-sports stadium, the world's first, planned for completion in 2008.

By far the biggest competitions in South Korea are in *Starcraft*. The top *Starcraft* player makes over \$250,000 per year. These high-stakes players, unsurprisingly, get lots of media coverage. There are three television networks covering competitive gaming twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. For example, Ongamenet owns four studio facilities and ranks in the top twenty stations in South Korea. In Starleague, Ongamenet's three-month-long *Starcraft* tournament, the best players take home prizes of \$20 thousand, \$10 thousand, and \$6 thousand. Another of Ongamenet's year-long shows, Sky Proleague, consists of eleven *Starcraft* teams, eleven rounds, and a \$50 thousand prize. Attendance at the final match exceeds 120 thousand people.

The World Cyber Games is considered by some to be the Olympics of video games. It was inaugurated in Seoul in 2000. Gold medals can mean as much as \$50,000 for a team or player. Currently, the Games host players from sixty-seven nations.

Regardless of our differences, gaming has helped merge our cultural worlds on some levels. Perhaps hosting the World Cyber Games in Seattle next year will bring a bit of South Korean gaming culture to the United States. Despite all our differences, the internet allows us to come together and appreciate the one thing we do have in common: a love of gaming. 🎮



1 J.C. Herz, "The Bandwidth Capital of the World," *Wired*, August 2002, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/10.08/korea.html>.  
2 John Andersen, "Spot On: Korea reacts to increase in game addiction," *Gamespot*, September 12, 2005, [http://www.gamespot.com/news/2005/09/12/news\\_6132357.html](http://www.gamespot.com/news/2005/09/12/news_6132357.html).  
3 Anthony Faiola, "When Escape Seems Just a Mouse-Click Away," *Washington Post*, May 27, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/26/AR2006052601960.html>.



# Behind the Green Door

## ***The Xbox 360 Unlocked: The Real Story Behind Microsoft's Next-Generation Video Game Console—TXT***

By M. O'Connor

Topping 400 pages, *"The Xbox 360 Unlocked: The Real Story Behind Microsoft's Next-Generation Video Game Console"* is essentially pornography for tech enthusiasts. Dean Takahashi, a technology reporter for the *San Jose Mercury News*, presents a well-researched, if somewhat convoluted, picture that's surprisingly neutral in its treatment, never veering too far towards either cheerleader or doomsayer.

There are plenty of ways to write company profiles and document their processes and organizational cultures. The business press often focuses on economic details, but the people behind those details are often easier to follow through the ups and downs of a product's lifespan. Tech publications, since they're essentially catering to the consumer side of the business press, follow a similar tack, mixing broad narrative lines to give flavor to important—if dry—economic and technological events. Personalities are more personable than facts and figures, and the ever-changing statistics organize the trials and tribulations of dozens of people into a framework within which to understand their actions.

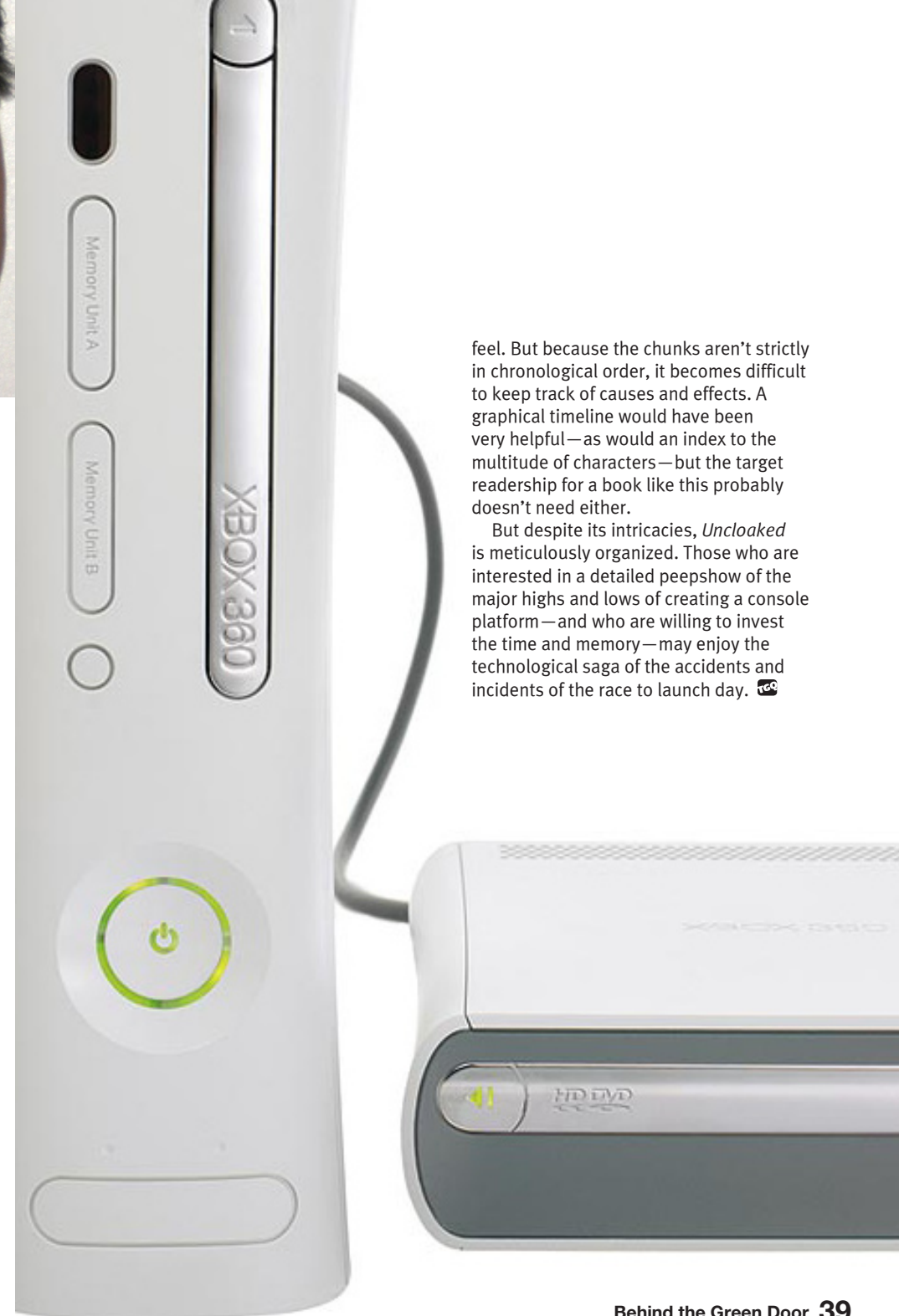
Following the Xbox 360 from its conception to a few months after launch, *Unlocked* takes this strategy to an extreme. Dozens of characters react, interact, and sometimes mess with each other in a blow-by-blow style that becomes completely impenetrable to a layperson. It's a techno-obsessed Dickens novel with too many characters to keep track of. Even documenting only the major players still means following dozens of people from hardware and software divisions both within and without Microsoft. Company politics and the breakneck pace of technological development push different characters into and out of and into the narrative spotlight.

Surprisingly little attention is paid to the marketing of the 360, and the investigation of Microsoft's distribution woes at the end of *Unlocked* sometimes takes a serious turn into an apologetica for what is otherwise an almost unremarkable story. If nothing else, the book's pace and attention to detail make a great derailment for the conspiracy-minded who assume anything Microsoft does—including their great retail bumbles—is prescribed by some grand Protocols of the Elders of Xbox.

The larger saga is broken into bite-sized chunks, which is great for being able to quickly locate specific incidents in the 360's life cycle and gives the book a serial

feel. But because the chunks aren't strictly in chronological order, it becomes difficult to keep track of causes and effects. A graphical timeline would have been very helpful—as would an index to the multitude of characters—but the target readership for a book like this probably doesn't need either.

But despite its intricacies, *Unlocked* is meticulously organized. Those who are interested in a detailed peepshow of the major highs and lows of creating a console platform—and who are willing to invest the time and memory—may enjoy the technological saga of the accidents and incidents of the race to launch day. 📺



# Dark Odyssey

## Sound Voyager – GBA

By Matthew Williamson

Have you heard? This summer, Nintendo released a series of games in Japan under the name *Bit Generations*.<sup>1</sup> These games shared a theme (and initially a name) of “Digitylish.” The name was meant to conjure simplicity: minimalistic graphics and streamlined gameplay. Based on preview media, many said the games were a throwback to the Atari and early NES eras, when backgrounds were black.

When my friend and helpful editor Wes Ehrlichman decided to import the entire library of *Bit Generations* games, I criticized him. I didn’t know what Nintendo was aiming for, but they seemed more like a series of lazy production efforts than real games. One night, he brought them over. After testing *Boundish* and *Dotstream*, I was vaguely intrigued, but nothing was really gripping me. *Sound Voyager* was one that I hadn’t really heard too much about, so I grabbed that from the pile next. Somewhere on a grid is a solid circle with pulsing orbital rings that plays music. You must center your avatar at the bottom of the screen so as to run into the sound when the screen finally scrolls you up to that point. After colliding with the object, the music it was playing permanently attaches itself to your background music.

It was simple. Too simple. In fact, I almost stopped playing.

I kept going though; I didn’t want Wes

to think that I wasn’t giving his new toys a fair chance. Slowly, the circles became more and more transparent, until I could no longer see them at all. I started to turn the Game Boy Advance in all directions, looking for some slight discoloration in the pixels, to no avail. I finally noticed that when I was close to lined up with the sound, the grid would start to pulse faster and brighter, yet I still missed the connection to sound.

Then I closed my eyes.

During World War II, the Allied navy used sonar to locate German U-boats. A sonarman would sit in a room on a battleship, put on headphones, wait as the sonar pinged out a signal, and listen for the sound to return, reflected off the hull of the hidden submarine.


Under the water, in the U-boat, another sonarman wearing headphones would sit in a small room with a large dial in front of him. The dial could be turned to rotate a hydrophone (a special underwater microphone) until it was pointed at the direction of an unknown sound. When it found a sound, the submarine could lead chase or hide, depending on the situation.

In the seminal U-boat film *Das Boot*, a German sonarman sits on a chair in the quiet darkness. The hydrophone dial is in front of him. He is trying frantically to find the English destroyer that they had spotted previously. He turns the dial clockwise. The submarine runs on silently, and the radioman finally closes his eyes

and tunes very slowly, finding the sound and narrowing in. You don’t need your eyes when you are looking for sound.

This is what I thought of while playing *Sound Voyager*. Only I wasn’t looking at a heavy dial in a claustrophobic metal coffin; I was looking at pulsating simple graphics in my home with my friend. And by that time, the game had compounded so much music on itself that it was challenging just to separate the background music from the new sample. When I was finally centered, the audio in my headphones came equally out of each ear. And the first time I collected an invisible sound, I was rewarded with

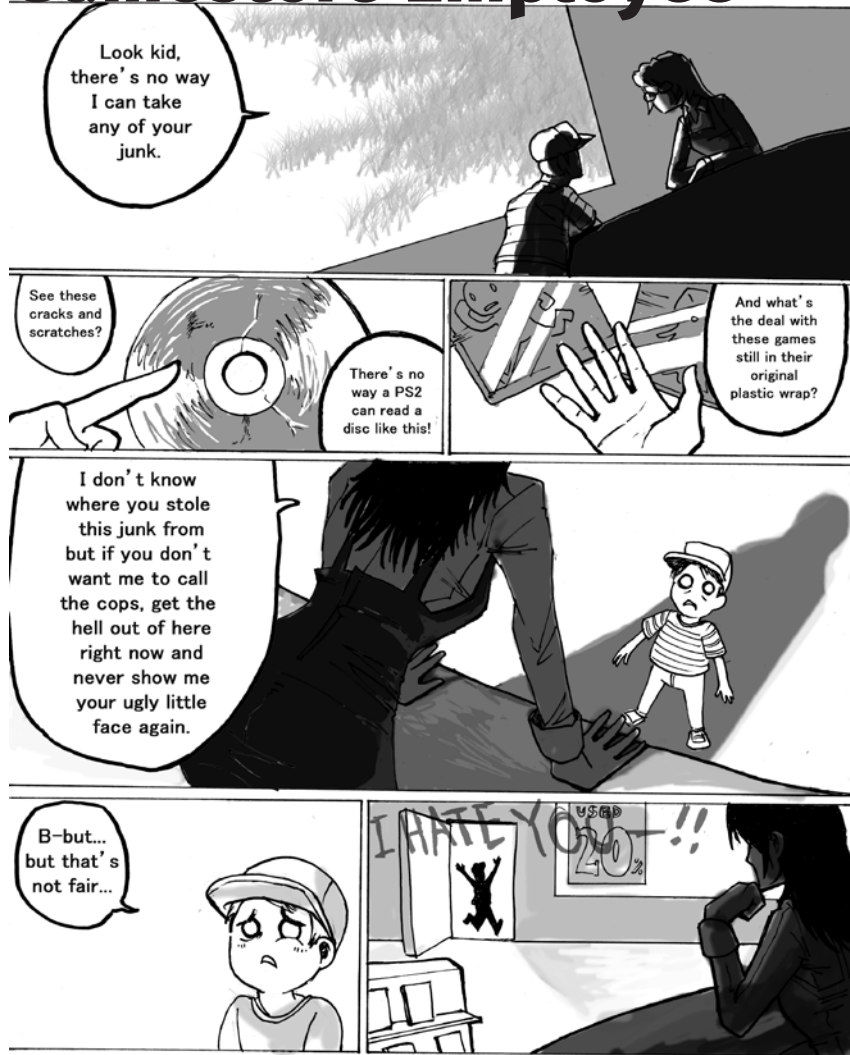
another sound, which startled me out of my slight aural daze.

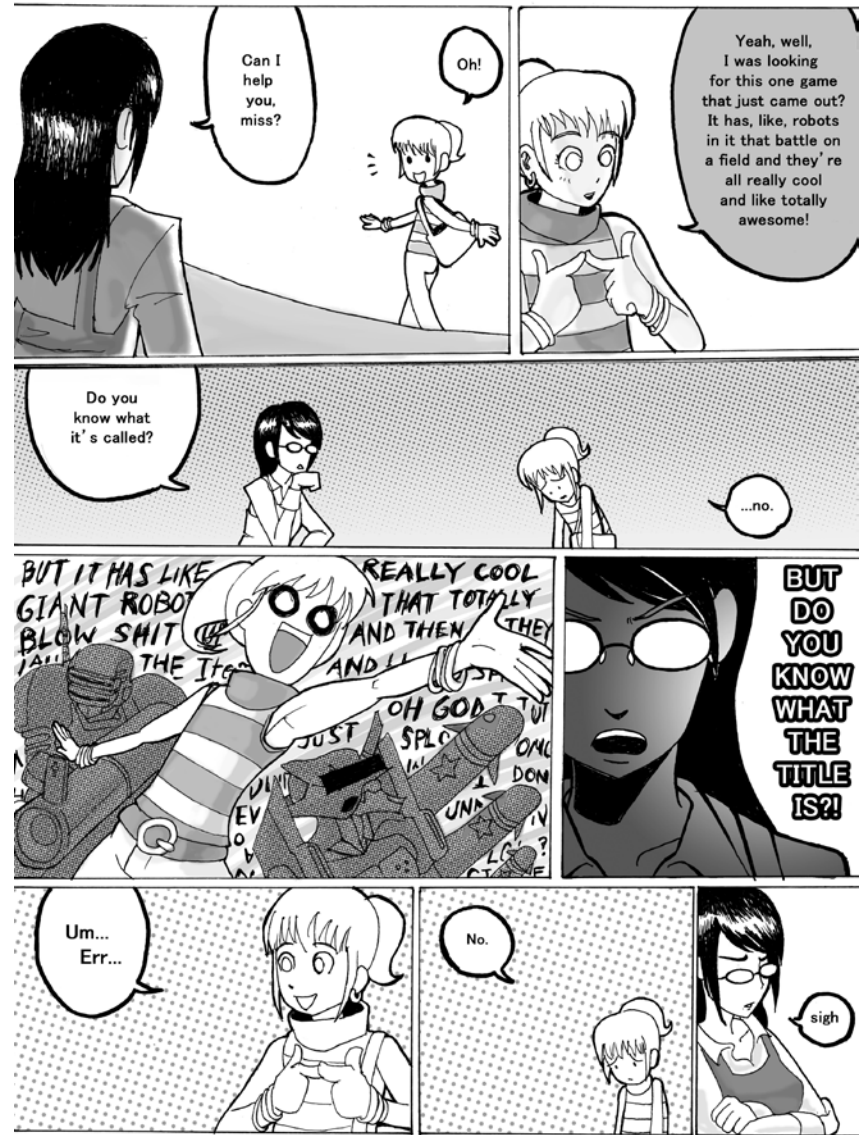
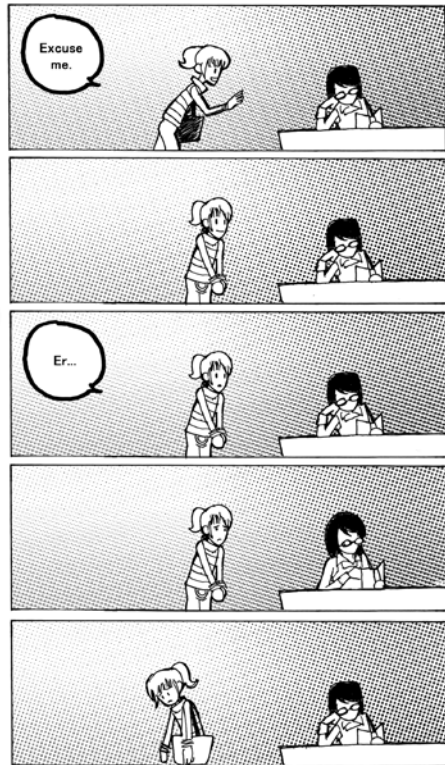
That section of the game ended shortly after, but I was treated to a few more games to play with my ears. What Nintendo has created is another innovative product like the DS or the Wii. The concept itself isn’t new. The graphics aren’t complicated or even anything more than functional. Yet the intense darkness that comes with looking for a sound is something that most have never experienced before. I can only hope that these games get released in the US and Europe so that these simple yet intuitive ideas expand into new audiences. 



<sup>1</sup> It’s not clear whether the series will be released in America, but if it is, it will probably be under the name “Digiluxe.”

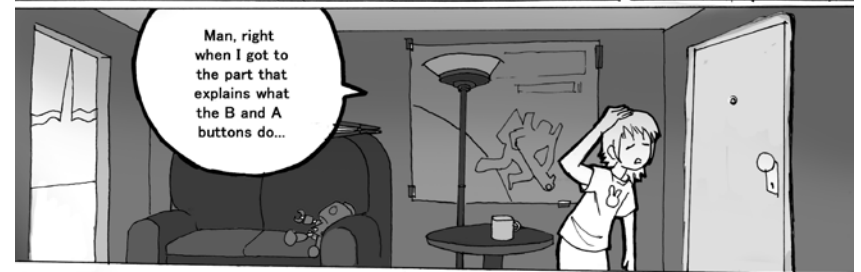
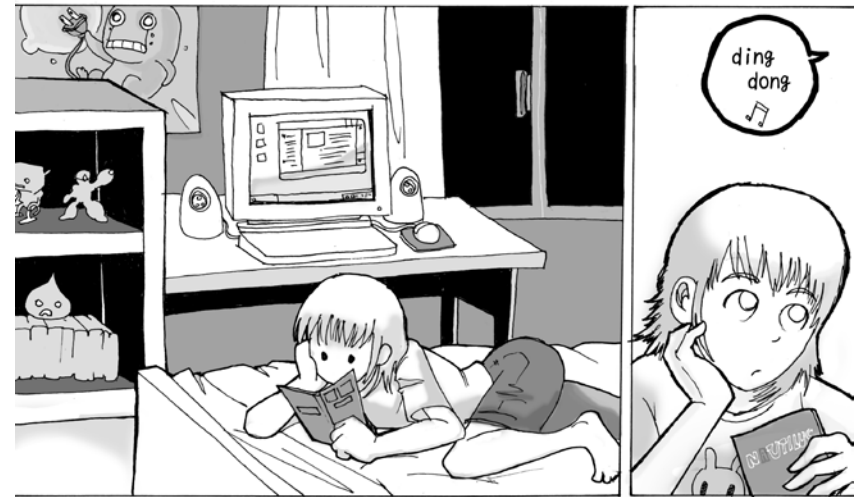
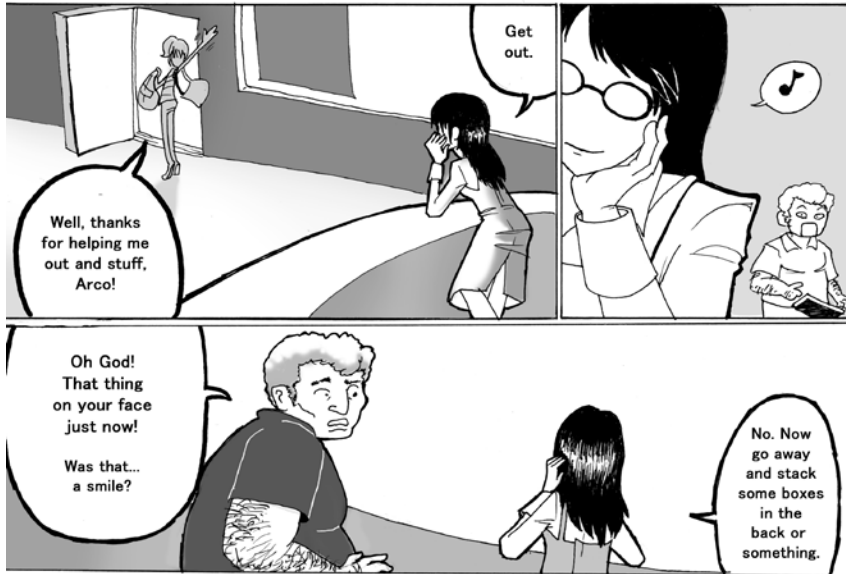
# A Day in the Life of R-ko, Gamestore Employee













# 01: ROBOKO

would move in with you if you could turn her central emotion unit on too





# Haiku for Dragon Warrior VII

## Dragon Warrior VII—PS1

By Tim McGowan, John Overton, and Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh  
Art by Mariel Cartwright and Jonathan Kim

The following is a portion of an unfinished collection of poems. The original article was to have 120 haikus about *Dragon Warrior VII*, each one representing one hour of gameplay. The authors culled the best haikus to present to you, fine reader:

Music when at sea  
Is the most relaxing theme  
Till I hit landfall

The church bell ringing  
How did Pepe not see her  
Living on that hill?

Three hours in now  
What the hell am I doing  
Not one battle yet

Little boy underground  
Playing in his secret base  
Goodbye, mom and dad

Old man in stone town  
It was probably his fault  
Though we can't prove it

Walking in circles  
I wish I were a shepherd  
Then I'd just whistle

Bottle with a face  
Casts a spell, kills my party  
Burn in hell, bottle

Epong's genius hat  
Bequeaths him the skill of old:  
Archaic diction

Pedestals mock me  
No shards that match their color  
Hi, GameFAQs

Village of dogs, pigs,  
Horses, cats, wolves, iguanas  
Where are the humans?

That old witch helps  
When we cannot find a shard  
Damn cryptic bitch

So what is the deal  
When we see that lizard there  
And never again

This monster upstairs  
Borunga, taking a bath  
We came back later

Aira the Dancer  
She reminds us of someone  
No not Kiefer

JewelBag can hurt you  
So kick him in the JewelBag  
Kick him till he cries

Make a Monster Park  
Fill it with slimes and wyverns  
For all the children

Finding monster hearts  
Can interspecies love bloom  
On a battlefield?

The friendliest slug  
Gives the sloppiest kiss  
I would shudder too

Days and nights gone by  
If monsters looked tastier  
I might think to eat

Building in a lake  
Ancient tribe waits patiently  
God was just chillin'

Playing the slot game  
Scotch tape on the X button  
I will read a book

Stupid folks can't tell  
Caterpillar must be nice  
With the name "Chibi"

Town full of music  
Arrogant tula player  
Great with the ladies

Robot making soup  
Brings it to her creator  
Everlastingly

Girl without wings  
Opens door in the temple  
Fathers oughtn't lie

Return to Loomin  
Save it from the destruction  
Again and Again

Thief and Mariner  
Cause there to be a Pirate  
Who learns water spells

Go to the Last Inn  
Before you travel to Dharma  
As you won't come back

Keifer are you sure?  
Is this what you really want?  
Just for a woman?

He may lack HP  
Even in death he still grins  
You defeated slime 🐸





# Faith & Fantasy

**Final Fantasy Series—NES, SNES, PS2, GC, 360, GB, GBA, WIN, DS**

By Heather Campbell

On June 6, 2006, PR Newswire ran a brief story on the upcoming North American release of *Final Fantasy XII*.

Square-Enix had set a date for the publication of their much-anticipated opus. America was going to get its hands on *FF12* on October 31, 2006.

At the end of this press release was a staggering statistic. Since the release of the first Final Fantasy game, on December 18, 1987, the Final Fantasy series has sold over 68 million units.<sup>1</sup> Distributed over multiple console generations, and including television anime and multi-million dollar feature films, Final Fantasy is more than just a game series.

With a vocal, zealous fan community spread all over the world, Final Fantasy has become a cultural movement. And I'll argue it may also be a religion.

But before we can consider the qualities of a Final Fantasy myth, and the behavior of its followers, we must first define what a religion is. Turns out, that's an extremely difficult task, confounding much stronger writers than myself. Regardless, we'll attempt a very brief deconstruction of "religion."

Don't worry. I'll get to the gaming stuff soon enough.

Now, a simple definition of religion is perpetually elusive. See, you can't just say, "Religion is a belief in a god,

or gods," because there are many faiths (Buddhism, Native American spiritualism, tribal traditions, etc.) which don't have central figures to worship. Religion can't be limited to organizational qualities, nor to common structural similarities, as some religions simply exist on a personal level. Religions are not even limited to a common heritage.

With such divergent attributes in consideration, the *Harvard Human Rights Journal* proposes these three ways to define a religion:

First, religion in its metaphysical or theological sense (e.g., the underlying truth of the existence of God, the *dharma*, etc.); second, religion as it is psychologically experienced by people (e.g., the feelings of the religious believer about divinity or ultimate concerns, the holy, etc.); and third, religion as a cultural or social force (e.g., symbolism that binds a community together or separates it from other communities).<sup>2</sup>

Religion is ethereal. It's also secular. It's a psychological experience. It isn't simply worship; it's a common vocabulary that creates a group identity. Or to put it candidly, religions throughout the world don't have specific elements in common, yet there are basic qualities which *seem* to speak to us—features which flavor a movement, yet present us with a tautology: *A religion is a religion*.

Now, this isn't a very satisfying definition. It's nearly polythetic. Interestingly, when taking on polythetic definitions, one example always seems to spring up:

The most widely known illustration of a polythetic approach to definitions generally is Ludwig Wittgenstein's explanation of the meaning of "game." Wittgenstein described the wide variety of activities for which we use the term "game," but notes that there is no single feature that all games have in common. Yet, he believes, we can see resemblances among the different types of activity that are all called games, even if they do not share any features in common.<sup>3</sup>

So, a religion is a religion. A game is a game. And Final Fantasy is both.

Perhaps it all comes down to how it affects you.

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I grew up religious. My parents had settled in an inexpensive (read: somewhat dangerous) Chicago neighborhood, and when it came time to enroll me in school, they discovered that the public school I was zoned for didn't offer the best education. Instead, it seemed a probable gateway to a life of drugs and crime. There were metal detectors in the doorways, but kids still carried around guns and knives. I know because there were shootings and stabbings. I was scared to go to school down the street.

So, my parents decided to send me to a private Lutheran school a short distance away. It was an ancient school for Chicago, more than one hundred years old in the 1980s, but had been remodeled when Nixon was in office. The walls were made of linoleum. So were the floors. And

the lamps. I think our desks were vinyl. Everything squeaked.

Oh, and we wore uniforms. Those were plaid.

In those raincoat-yellow rooms, I wasn't just taught reading, writing, and how to draw comics when the teacher wasn't looking. Religion was also part of our daily curriculum; we were graded on our comprehension of the Bible, and our GPA was affected by whether or not we went to church on Sundays and Wednesdays. Oftentimes, I went to church more than that.

Today, I'm of the opinion that *no child should be raised religious*. Critical thinking is not something that comes naturally to kids; if a Mom tells Johnny, "Santa's going to bring you presents," the eight-year-old doesn't normally respond, "Does Santa exist?"

We're conditioned to believe what adults tell us. And I had a lot of adults telling me a lot about Jesus.

Furthermore, I've always been predisposed to immersion (imagine that in a gamer), so I enveloped myself in the culture of the church. I was an acolyte, I sang in the choir, I led prayers and said grace before every meal. I was up for a theology scholarship. I cried when my dad didn't come with us to service.

My veil of faith obfuscated rational thought. I believed. I was a right-wing Christian and a good little homophobe.

However, the trauma of realizing I am gay and an intense, judicious reading of the entire Bible set the stage for a melodramatic turn to atheism when I was in high school.

Being a Lutheran, I believed that the foundation of the church was set in the stone of dogma; everything I needed to know about God I could get from the

1 PR Newswire, June 28, 2006.

2 T. Jeremy Gunn, "The Complexity of Religion and the Definition of 'Religion' in International Law," *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, Spring 2003.

3 Gunn, 194.

Bible. So when I read the Bible and it was littered with inconsistencies and outright contradictions, when the Bible didn't make sense, my world fell apart. I was confused, depressed, and dulled.

When I wasn't wearing plaid, I was wearing black.

I had lost my religion. Without Lutheranism, I was left with a desperate spiritual void. But soon I was playing Final Fantasy, and like many others, I had something to believe in again.

• • • • •

Final Fantasy is at its most basic a twelve-volume RPG series, featuring dissimilar plotlines and settings. The games have appeared on hardware generations three through seven, starting at the 8-bit Nintendo and showing up most recently on the Xbox 360.

Though there are twelve games in the major set, these games are not true sequels to one another. *Final Fantasy II* is a spiritual sequel to *Final Fantasy* but does not include any of the original title's characters, nor is it a linear complement to the plot of the prior game. What ties the series together are recurring monster sets and protagonist names, a vaguely consistent battle system, certain plot elements, and magical styles.

An example of these indistinct connections would be the recurring name Cid. The name Cid appears in every FF game from *Final Fantasy II* onward. However, the character named Cid in *FFII* is not the same character as in *VII*. There are similarities between them (Cids usually work on airships), but the name is more like a recurring word in a chorus, set in separate songs.

Further examples of these thematic through-lines are the repeated appearance of chocobos, giant ostrich-creatures that the heroes use as a mounts; summons, magical creatures brought into battles through prayer,

magic, or concentration; and airships, impossible floating fortresses.

The narratives of Final Fantasy games are scattered between battle sequences. Much of the tremendous time consumed by a Final Fantasy title is spent fighting. Traditionally, these battles are played out in a turn-based, semi-active system. Heroes and monsters are split on the screen, and combat is slowed down to representative actions, i.e.:

Hero Attacks With A Sword  
Hero Misses.  
Monster Leaps In And Bites.  
Hero Takes Damage.

It has been said that this battle system was initially a construct enforced by hardware limitations, but it remains throughout the Final Fantasy series in some form to this day. Taking a cue from the Dragon Warrior series, characters' actions are not controlled, but rather directed.

Finally, the stories of the games are oftentimes broad, inelegant hero tales, usually with an ecological theme. Like seventy-hour soap operas, the Final Fantasy narratives are melodramatic and simple. Yet this cumbersome and ungainly franchise boasts some incredible sales figures.

Additionally, fan enthusiasm for the games is furious: players dress up as the Final Fantasy characters at game and anime conventions throughout the world, dedicating huge amounts of time and money to the creation of intricate replicas of the heroes' wardrobes.

Final Fantasy fans often write volumes of "fan fiction," taking the characters and settings from the existing games and drafting new stories for them, oftentimes incorporating the author's own person into the narrative. A single Internet repository of these fan-fictions, [Fan Fiction.net](http://FanFiction.net), has over 36,500 Final Fantasy fan-fiction pieces, some hundreds

of pages in length. Fan Fiction.net is not alone; there are countless, multilingual fan fiction archives, virtual warehouses filled with original Final Fantasy stories.

The soundtracks of Final Fantasy games, composed in large by Nobuo Uemetsu, have a following all their own. In Europe, America and Japan, Final Fantasy concerts have been held in increasingly large venues, typically selling out quickly. Music from the games is performed by world-renowned orchestras, such as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the London Symphony Orchestra, and the Tokyo Philharmonic, to crowds of shrieking, crying, Final Fantasy fanatics.

Now, it would be easy to dismiss the series as simply popular. But few pop-culture movements can induce such radical displays of adoration. Grand Theft Auto is popular, but who has ever heard of a Grand Theft Auto convention? As many units as the game pushes, no one has ever experienced a GTA concert or ever entered a *Vice City* cosplay contest.

So just what is Final Fantasy, then?

Well, in 1994, Michael Jindra successfully argued that Star Trek fandom was a religious phenomenon. In the journal *Sociology of Religion*, he writes:

At a time when scholars are finding religion in non-conventional locations, I argue that *Star Trek* fandom is one of these locations. *Star Trek* fandom involves a sacralization of elements of our culture, along with the formation of communities with regularized practices...

*Star Trek* fandom is also associated with a popular stigma, giving fans a sense of persecution and identity common to active religious groups.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the Trek fanbase and the Final Fantasy fanbase are cut from similar



4 Michael Jindra, "Star Trek Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon," *Sociology of Religion*, March 22, 1994



cloth. Immediately, one can identify a tendency towards fan-fiction, cosplay, and massive conventions as common to both communities. Rather than reiterate Jindra's points (and step across the lines of academic plagiarism), I'll offer that if Trek is a religion, so is Final Fantasy.

Indeed, it seems apparent that Final Fantasy meets the third definition of religion proposed by the *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, that of "religion as a cultural or social force (e.g., symbolism that binds a community together or separates it from other communities)."<sup>5</sup>

It's clear that people are being affected by these games. They're being inspired to create, to discuss, to form communities of like-minded Final Fantasians.

But beyond this—beyond the flagrant, cult-like following that FF has inspired—I would argue that the design of the games themselves has a religious palette, or rather there is an element of ritual and interpretation in Final Fantasy games, which specifically induces a spiritual state in those who play them. The second definition of religion, "religion as it is psychologically experienced by people,"<sup>6</sup> is an element of Final Fantasy's gameplay.

In fact, it may be that the sacred strengths of the Final Fantasy series lie in what are commonly referred to as its weaknesses; an antiquated battle system, obtuse and vague plotlines, and large sections of unplayable cutscenes just may be the keys to the Final Fantasy religious experience. These shortcomings and holdovers are what forces FF out of the realm of games and into the traditions of myth, religion, and cult communities.

One of the most common criticisms leveled at the Final Fantasy series is of its battle and menu system. As described earlier, battles are representative sequences, with little to no player involvement. Even though game hardware has advanced considerably beyond the bottleneck of the original Nintendo Entertainment System, these battles

have remained a constant staple of the FF games.

This combat system is now so dated it could be called heritage. If Final Fantasy is a religious experience then these battles are one of its rituals. Cycling through menus encourages a meditative, inactive state in the player. Rather than engaging enemies directly, Final Fantasy fights have become increasingly passive, to the point of complete player un-involvement, as in the pre-programmed battles of the upcoming *FFXII*.

But like hymns or prayers or meditation, these fights aren't meant to provoke an anxiety in the player. They are archaic to enforce reflection, to bring about trance. Final Fantasy battles are a ceremony—often imposing to an uninitiated onlooker, like Holy Communion as viewed by Woadani tribesmen. This same insularity, however, is intoxicating, drawing in the secular towards the sacred.

Another, frequently lambasted Final Fantasy fundamental is the obtuse, vague narrative common to the series. Spanning up to seventy hours, Final Fantasy games include some of the most insipid plots ever to grace fiction. As complicated as they may be (for videogame plotlines), they pale in comparison to the finest literature available in any language. Poorly planned, these narratives often leave many questions unanswered. *Final Fantasy VII*, the best-selling game of the series, has an open-ended conclusion that has confounded fans for a decade.

It may be, however, that these obfuscated stories are part of the allure of Final Fantasy. When met with unresolved plotlines, players draw their own conclusions, and personalize the story. Without clear resolution, fans form their own ideas and take ownership of

the fiction, much as a member of any faith interprets the holy on a private level. Certainly, *Final Fantasy VII* ends on such vague terms that the player is forced to infer meaning to find closure.

Finally, the most common complaint directed at Final Fantasy is that there are simply too many cutscenes, or pre-generated computer graphics intermissions.

Since the advent of the CD-based Playstation, the series has been infamous for its reliance on pre-rendered cinematics—a tradition that stems from the lengthy text sections of earlier titles. Indeed, the back of the *FFVIII* package used this as a selling point, stating that the title included "nearly an hour of stunning motion-captured CG cinematics."<sup>7</sup> To advertise that an hour of the game would be unplayable was not only arrogant, it was off-putting to many gamers. Why buy a game you can't play?

In the light of religious experience, these cinematics take on a new significance. The CG sequences of Final Fantasy games are the sermons and homilies of the FF ritual. Like the lessons of a sage, these passive events are not meant to be discussions. Instead, once the player is indoctrinated in the text of a new Final Fantasy cinema, the witness can bring their questions to the forums of the faithful. With the combination of trance, tradition, and ceremony, these CG disquisitions are powerful, emotive moments for the player, releasing them from the stress of game-play, and setting their senses ablaze.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

I would be a liar if I claimed to be an old-school Final Fantasy fan.

5 Gunn.

6 Gunn.

7 *Final Fantasy VIII*, North American Playstation Packaging, 1999. Square Electronic Arts, LLC.

Now, in light of this article, I could assert that the first three American releases happened while I was still entrenched in the church, and thus there was no space in my life for a new religion.

That would be awfully presumptuous. Wouldn't it?

Well, I'm about to profess just that.

When I first played *Dragon Warrior* and *Final Fantasy* on my NES, I didn't get it. Sure, I was young, but I also was spending half of my waking life inundated with symbolism. Lighting candles, taking communion, wearing robes and crosses and walking in guilty processions to the cross—my whole life was ritual. I wasn't *doing* anything, I was taking representative actions.

It's no wonder I was bored with the Japanese role-playing game. When I crammed a cartridge into my Nintendo, I wanted my nights lit up with combat. I didn't want to select a menu item that signified fighting; I wanted to swing a sword or blast a cannon or stomp, grab, kick my way to the end of an evening.

So I set *Dragon Warrior* aside. I returned *Final Fantasy*. And I completely skipped *Final Fantasy II*.

When *FFIII* (the Japanese *VI*) was released in the states, my faith was floundering. But I still went to chapel; I still read the Good Book. As glorious as the game might have been, I wasn't ready.

It wasn't until 1997 that I had my falling out with God, and by the next year I was simply nostalgic for Service. Utilizing my meticulous knowledge of the Bible, I wrote an action-filled screenplay about the Antichrist (for Zide-Perry, no less) in the fall of 1999. I was thinking about religion all the time when *Final Fantasy VIII* fell into my hands.

By the end of the opening credits, I was awed. Beyond the utterly mind-blowing CG, there was a vocabulary of symbolism steeped throughout the first three minutes. On screen, feathers became swords, cryptic text faded into

flower-filled meadows, and Wagnerian choruses exploded out of my speakers. For someone nursed on metaphor, *Final Fantasy* was immediately familiar. It was a new myth.

Moreover, like the Christianity I had grown up with, it created new characters from existing religions, appropriating ideas from all over the earth to render a new narrative. Squall summoned Shiva, Ifrit, Ramuh, and other gods to battle with him just as the Judaism's traditions had been adopted by the early Christians and the Hebrew tribes had adapted the legends of Babylon and Egypt into their nomadic faiths. *Final Fantasy* was everything I grew up with, but without the hypocrisy of dogma, or the looming threat of eternal damnation.

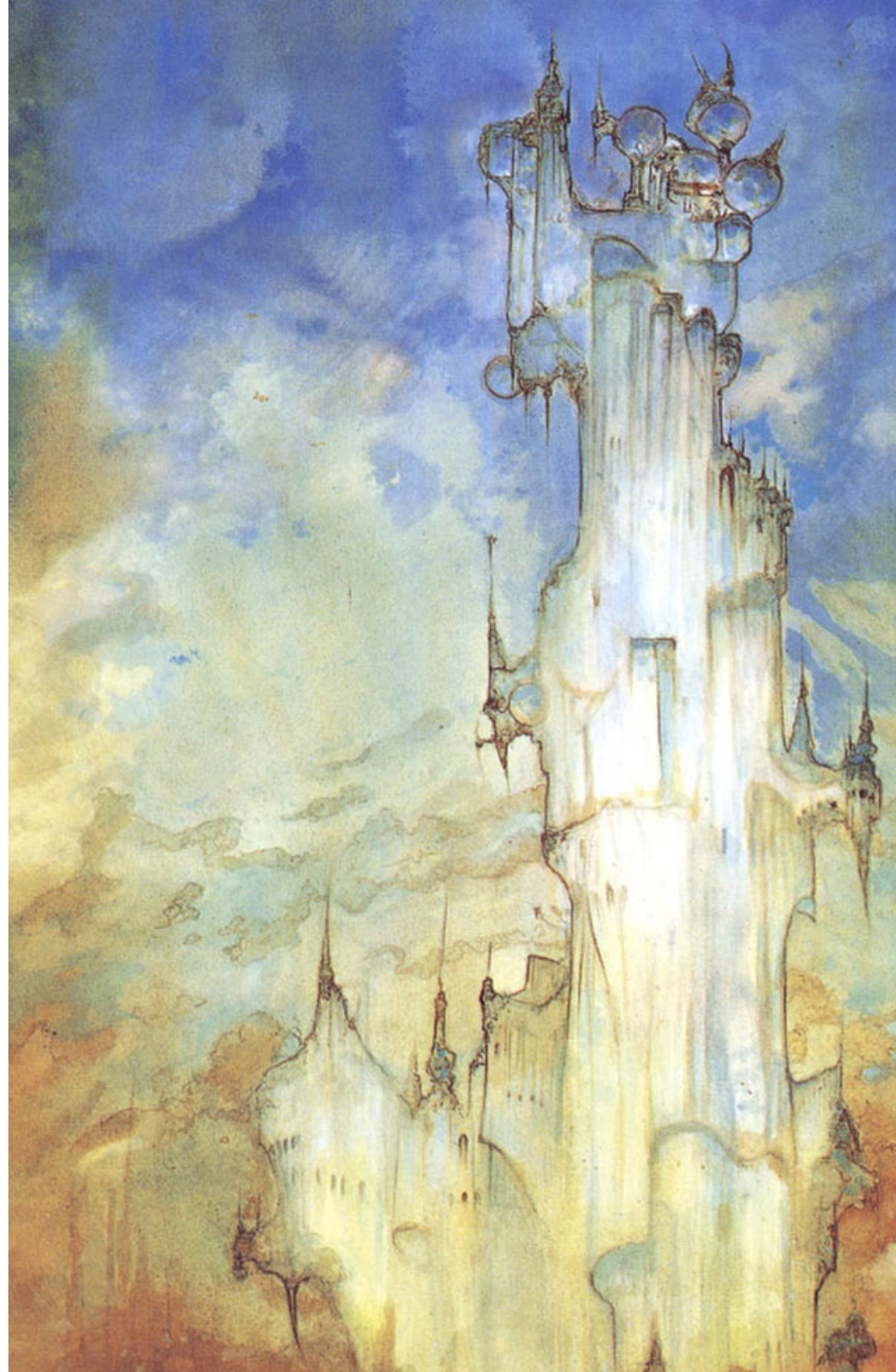
When I finished with *Final Fantasy VIII*, I played the rest, religiously.

• • • • •

Myths can rise from humble beginnings. Folklore becomes legend, legend becomes cultural heritage; these stories are organized into paradigms, transcend their origins, and become religions. In an era of international culture, the small fictions of a Japanese role-playing game may just be the folklore of the modern world.

Full of ceremony, symbolism, tradition, and morals, *Final Fantasy* has all the obvious makings of a faith. The stories the games tell, and how these stories are delivered has evangelized a generation of game players. Their fervor overflowing, they brave persecution to dress up as the characters they love, draft volumes of further adventures for their heroes, and pour over forums for the tiniest details of upcoming releases. From the most modest, 8-bit beginnings comes a new faith, only twenty years old.

On October 31, 2006, we get a new gospel. Lined up with my fellow believers, I can't wait to spread the word. ☞





# Effeminaphobia and Male Intimacy: *Far Cry* Only Worries when the Jungle Drums Stop

*Far Cry*—WIN  
By M. O'Connor

Ironic discourse has become the dominant model of communication of American culture, threatening to overtake the rest of the globe through the viral transmissions of popular music, movies, and games. If nothing is serious, nothing is then truly real; trashy entertainment only further alienates us from ourselves, our bodies, and our communities. It brings nothing to the table but black-and-white dreams of vengeance and marketed sexual identity, an absolutist system of vaguely immoral anti-heroes who, whether or not they get the girl and the bad guy, will leave a pile of bodies and one-liners in their wake. This template of human behavior is burning a legacy of violently pornographic (and pornographically violent) images into the minds and souls of players unaware they're consuming—and being consumed by—market ideology and fixed identity.

*Far Cry* is a striking symptom of this corruption of human potential. Rather than hide this fact, it revels in it, celebrating the worst excesses of that most pedestrian and vulgar genre of games, the First-Person Shooter—the murder simulator, the lowest common denominator, the height of graphics over gameplay and style over substance. The technological envelope is constantly pushed, and smaller developers are driven out of a market that is withering and dying from its own popularity. Taste,

like community board meetings, suffers terribly from democracy; the people most likely to be easily swayed by crass emotionalism always end up calling the shots. They drag their debt-laden souls to the local purveyor of electronic baubles, and the shiniest engine wins every time.

*Far Cry* teaches the player one thing—"thy will be done." Clad in a Hawaiian shirt of the loudest hues, the protagonist is the usual ex-CIA, ex-Special Forces, ex-Foreign Legion "retired" soldier of a thousand and one terrible cineplex outings. The laughably jingoistic personalities of 1980s Cold War cinema are distilled into what passes for characters and settings. An island paradise stripped of all inhabitants except for the most market-friendly avian stereotypes, whose rainbow colors are fitted with what was top-notch rendering and filtering in 2003. A white thug with an egoistic heart of relative kindness (compared to the brutal company he keeps and kills). His half-nude feminine companion—the only female character in the entire game—whose main role is to be kidnapped and subjected to the heterosexual male gaze, sometimes simultaneously.

Valerie Constantine's ridiculously oversized breasts and buttocks are on constant display. Despite being a supposed secret agent from the CIA (which is engaged in stalking great evil, as befits this kind of narrative), she needs constant rescuing and pursuit, ensuring

that the adolescent male psyche will not feel challenged by anything but overt acts of violence against the other male characters. Her "masculine" actions (jumping out of vehicles, fighting mutants, etc.) are balanced by a hypersexual persona built entirely on reflecting—and eventually engaging—the sexual desire of the player's avatar and the player himself.

But for all her masculine assertion, her actions only lead to capture and recapture—she must be claimed by the player's avatar, ensuring she remains an object rather than an individual. Her body is merely a covering for a masculine identity and is used only to titillate the player, playing into his culturally constructed presumption that a woman's worth is exclusively defined as sexual parts to be subdued via the "heroic rapist" motif.

This game of violently masculine competition leaves no room for the collective or creative; women and objectives exist only in terms of their relative worth to the main character. Even the cast of mutant characters are all clearly male, because in *Far Cry*'s supernarrative, agency—even if it is only manifested as violence—is inherently male. *Far Cry*'s other opponents are classified as simple mercenaries and exist merely to be killed with a steadily increasing amount of brutality.

*Far Cry*'s early antagonist, Crow, has the simple animalistic name of a "bad guy" (in the Norris-Segal-Schwarzenegger sense of the term). He is a single-syllable thug whose childish threats and overwrought banter provide the one-dimensional foil upon which adolescent power fantasies rely. The player's guide for the bulk of the game is Doyle, the only minority character—one who eventually proves untrustworthy, of course. He has been stripped of any racial and social identity to provide a backing narration to the player's incessant warmongering.

The dehumanization of the enemy

is completely realized through the techno-phallic "tagging" mechanism, a pair of binoculars which allow the player to eavesdrop on the absurd conversations of other mercenaries; these random snapshots provide a brief, decontextualized glimpse into a warlike and aggressive male force that buries itself in the adolescent fantasy of an invincible and undivided male ego, free of the civilizing effects of even a token feminine presence. This blatant effeminaphobia is a reaction formation that hides a subtle but pervasive theme of male intimacy, communicated through a constant barrage of violence, threats, and profanity. Every single male character features an idealized body of thick legs, muscular arms, and an overstuffed crotch—masculine in both form and function. Their bodies are pierced by the acceptably masculine (but presumably desexualized) act of firing phallic signifiers at these male targets.

The bullet holds a deep mythopoeic and tribal significance for American males under the sway of the antagonistic and contradictory signal barrage of the socio-political elite—whether those signals are found in the body of a scripted and televised presidential speech or in the idealized avatars of the infotainment-political complex. The bullet is the only true sign of dominance in *Far Cry*, allowing the clearly sexual nature of the antihero's "quest" (if mass murder in the name of clearly imperialistic "national security" concerns can be considered a form of spiritual and emotional outreach) to be sublimated into an acceptable channel for male-male interaction.

As such, penetration is an inescapable fact of *Far Cry*, because the only outlet for personal or political struggle is through sexual-social aggression games, patterned after, *inter alia*, hundreds of hours of presumably "masculine" Hollywood simulacra and the unending and ruthless search for greater profits found in

American corporate culture. The player's eventual success furthers the dominant textual paradigm enacted via an idealized heterosexual masculine identity—the individualistic, right-wing fetishism of capitalistic fantasy. In this way, the player captures the antisocial hallucination of eternal dominance that is found in the literature of Ayn Rand and which has been filtered for the last thirty years through the superficial signifiers of male-oriented action movies from America's film factories.

In fact, the game's makers have gone to great lengths to eliminate the risk of any homosexual identification with the male characters of the game, adjusting the pace to ensure that the player's attention never wanders to the obvious sexual politics of violently—and intimately—engaging with hundreds of idealized masculine figures. No matter how many representations of maleness are killed, their bodies remain for only a short period of time before fading away forever, leaving the only form of genital-social interplay truly available in this game—their guns. This prevents the player from identifying with the idealized male form killed by the actions of his avatar (another idealized male form) and completing the circle that leads to an understanding of the significant homosexual tension found in the dominance-submission games of European imperialism.

There is an unavoidable risk of players crossing the line dividing homosocial bonding via constant aggression and violence from the sexual sublimation and dominant-submissive signal generation inevitable in any gathering of the

masculine form. This is especially true of the gun fetishism required to complete the game, which forces the player's avatar to utilize many different types of weapons to literally thrust into the male "other." As such, any potential homosexual or homosocial identification is buried in a hail of bullets that reference the techno-sexual fear of death and destruction popularly identified with semen from male/male sexual contact since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. As with mainstream media's construction of gay male sex, passivity (and the effeminate shame of anal intercourse/being shot) equals death.

Driven forward both by an addiction to future time orientation and the accumulation of capital, *Far Cry* finds itself a sweaty, heaving mess of sexual confusion that can only be corrected through violently eradicating every possible male "other" in order to capture/save—and, obviously, sexually dominate in a socially approved manner—the eroticized memeplex of the female character. This fulfills the media narrative of the idealized male hero in American culture and avoids the violent fear found in challenging the effeminaphobia inherent in the materialistic dualism of solely active (phallic) and solely passive (anal or oral) partnerships.

This shallow paradigm of "fuck or kill" is the fractured understanding of a culture that has never allowed for natural (sexual or otherwise) male intimacy in any form. *Far Cry* carries this inhuman tradition to its obvious heterosexual and misogynistic climax—a hyperindividualistic orgasm of blood and steel. 🍆



## HAPPY SILENT HILL MOMENT #36

JAMES MEETS NICE MR. PYRAMID HEAD





# Mushroom Hunting in Heels

## Violence and Videogames

By Matthew Collier

The first really violent videogame I remember playing was *Bruce Lee* on the Atari 800. The premise is simple, if bizarre. You—as ass kicking, *jeet kune do*-wielding, *modern martial arts legend* Bruce Lee—must infiltrate a Yakuza pagoda palace to steal their precious lanterns, all the while repeatedly kicking sumo wrestlers and ninjas in the face. There may not have been any bloodshed in *Bruce Lee*, or any gory death scenes, but at that time in my life, it was pretty brutal stuff—the noise it made when you kicked ninjas and sumos in the face was quite visceral, especially considering the archaic hardware it was on.

As long as there are videogames, there will be violence in them. Our society worships death and destruction, whether or not we want to admit it. In a majority of our activities, there is a winner and a loser; and more often than not, the loser dies, whether physically or just metaphorically. I'm not saying that the losing *Pong* paddle is dragged out behind the chemical shed and given some hollow-point counseling, but even *Space War* involved you trying to blow up the other guy's spaceship, dooming him to a fiery and painful death. Those clouds may be smiling in the background of level 1-1, but what is Momma Goomba going to tell little Goomba Jr. when dad doesn't come home? Those cartridges are filled with blood.

You can do violence right and you can do it wrong, and there is a difference.

## The Good

I know many will groan when I cite my first example, but frankly I don't care. I've never seen a game that people are so divided on, but then again, it's not your average videogame.

I'm talking about *Killer 7* here.

Jack Thompson, whose bizarre perspectives have already been detailed in this magazine,<sup>1</sup> had it out for this one from the start, and understandably so. This game bursts at the seams with violence, profanity, and sexual content. *Killer 7* is about a group of assassins that may or may not be real, but the story isn't important; presentation is what's key here. For starters, whenever you change characters—which you do often and on the fly—the current character explodes into a million droplets of blood that then reform into the character you've changed into.

This is gory stuff; but then, it isn't. Some other highlights include an assassin named Curtis Blackburn who chops the heads off a woman and child and presents them to the man he's about to kill, a sex scene between an abusive caretaker and a comatose old man, and a woman exploding in a shower of gore after a suicide attack by a laughing, mutated assailant. You regularly blow the arms, legs, and heads clean off your horrific enemies.

Let me get one thing straight: I enjoy

portrayals of violence; one of my favorite movies is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. But I don't like *mindless* gore. That's the thing about *Killer 7*. It's incredibly graphic, but it presents itself with a classiness that most other games don't have. Every incidence of violence in *Killer 7* happens for a reason—all the blood, all the sexuality, it enhances the atmosphere of the game. It shocks you into a paranoid state of confusion and despair that only grows more intense as the game progresses.

My second example is the modern classic, *Silent Hill 2*. The game oozes with mature content. It's different though; instead of rewarding you for destroying the enemies, it punishes you psychologically. Every monster is a reminder of why you're in *Silent Hill*, and batting them away is only pushing the knowledge and acceptance of your sins to the side. The game punishes the sexuality its characters and shows how their violent tendencies destroy them from the inside out. It's one hell of a morality play, and one hell of a videogame. *Silent Hill 2*, like *Killer 7*, uses its graphic elements to further your experience instead of exploiting you, and it is being beautiful because of that.

Violence, used artfully, can even make you regret the decisions you've made within the game. In *Shadow of the Colossus*, you have to destroy—quite violently—giant, lumbering creatures trapped in an empty, sun-bleached world. These colossi never come looking for you, though; you hunt them. The designer has called them “inverted *Zelda* dungeons,” but, the dungeons in *The Legend of Zelda* were always guarding something, whether it was a piece of the Triforce or a pair of magical boots. The colossi don't have any helpful items or treasure. You're destroying them so that the woman you love may live. When you bring them crashing down, they let loose a haunting cry that makes

you feel genuinely sorrowful for invading their forbidden land to destroy them. The darkness inside them fills you up until you can barely recognize yourself. You lose your innocence, one critical hit at a time.

The majority of our legends, myths, and stories involve extreme violence. Would the Battle of Thermopylae have been as interesting had the Spartans and Persians decided to have tea instead of hacking each other into bits? Our history is a bloody history, and we're mostly programmed to off each other as often as possible. When people play games like *Dynasty Warriors* and *Sengoku Basara*, we get a rise because of centuries of ingrained instinct. There's a little William Wallace in all of us.

## The Bad

Ever play *Time Killers*?

Don't worry; you're not missing much. More than any other game I can think of, *Time Killers* is an absolutely outstanding example of “just not getting it.” It's an atrociously subpar fighting game. Basically, you've got a group of fighters from different time periods fighting it out for a “prize” or “glory” I suppose. To be honest, I never actually finished the thing. You've got a caveman, a knight, some punker with a chainsaw, a giant mutant mantis, and several other characters that I don't feel like thinking about too much because it makes me hurt on the inside. Just imagine the worst collection of the most generic comic-book characters, and you've got the roster to this game and its equally awful sequel, *Bloodstorm*.

The violence in this game is just silly. Since all the characters have weapons, limbs and other pieces of the opponent's body can be chopped off if damaged. The only clever thing about this is that you can still attack with the severed limb (you

1 See “New Advice Journalism,” *TGQ* #2.

just sort of poke it out while blood shoots from the stump). The gameplay is broken, and balance is completely thrown out the window—you can instantly kill any player by decapitation just by pressing all five attack buttons at once, at any time during the match.

I think I thought really highly of this game when I was younger, playing it in the strange-smelling grocery store that my family only rarely went to. Years later, I checked it out using MAME and couldn't remember what made me pump quarters into this atrocity. It's obvious the designers cared less about gameplay and more about making it violent—a violence which served no purpose other than exploiting and pandering to the audience that it unfortunately had at the time.

That audience was helped into existence by *Mortal Kombat*, which is another similar example. Is it entirely necessary for a massive arterial spray out of someone's mouth whenever they're kicked in the face? Or did Acclaim think that throwing this in—along with their ridiculous finishing moves—would get more kids to plunk in more tokens? Apparently it worked. They were feeding the beast with blood, and they exploited the morbid curiosity of the kids who could sneak away from their parents long enough to grab a game or two.

*Mortal Kombat*, especially, was one of the reasons gaming came under fire in the early nineties; its unflinching displays of mutilation and death eventually prompted the formation of the Entertainment and Software Ratings Board (ESRB) in 1994. Games like *Mortal Kombat*, *Night Trap*, and *Doom* were Joe Lieberman's whipping boys.

Later games like *Thrill Kill* never even saw the light of day. *Thrill Kill* was two to four characters locked in a room, murdering each other with suggestively named special moves. The whole game was based around the brutal fatalities you could perform on the other players, and

it was designed to sell copies on shock value. It's no huge surprise that it was cancelled. Electronic Arts bought Virgin Interactive (*Thrill Kill's* original publisher) just before the game's release and refused to distribute it, concerned it would hurt their image. EA wouldn't even sell the rights to another publisher, wanting to bury the thing for good. Rest in peace.

Adding violence as a selling point doesn't help the political situation either. When games like *Grand Theft Auto* allow you to wantonly massacre innocents, those games are going to get blamed when some kid decides he'd like to do the same, regardless of whether the game actually influenced his decision. The same thing has been plaguing metal bands for years."

The responsibility of prudence firmly lies on the creators of the game. Developers have to realize that they will be held accountable, rightfully or not, for their design decisions if it ends up being blamed for causing a crime. I'm not saying that videogames cause crime; I am saying that you can't make mindlessly violent games without being prepared for it to bite you on the ass when some kid who shoots up a school turns out to have played your game religiously. The more brainless your game is, the more brainless your audience will be.

## The Ugly

Games influence people.

Books influence people. Television influences people. We are mentally assaulted daily by a gauntlet of advertising and images that program and reprogram us, telling us what to do, what to wear, what slang to use when we're talking to our friends, and what not to say around the folks.

Here's my real point: Violent videogames need to be kept out of the hands of children.

The videogame-censorship advocates



blow it out of proportion, but violent images and experiences, even in a medium like videogames, can influence a child negatively. I don't think this can be debated. Some wish that its restrictions were more heavy-handed, but I fully support the ESRB and the ratings it uses. A twelve-year-old does not need to play *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, just like I didn't need to play *Time Killers* in Foodland when I was ten.

Ultimately, though, the responsibility here lies with the parents. The ESRB has made valiant efforts in parent education. I applaud them for that. The system, as it stands, works fairly well as long as the retailers pay attention to what they're selling and to whom. Wal-Mart currently requires ID for purchases of R-rated movies and M-rated games. It may be briefly annoying when I go to buy my copy of *Dead Rising*, but I know it's for a reason I can respect.

But, Wal-Mart can't babysit our kids.

It's still up to the parents. The government can pass laws and regulate all they want, but the majority of games that end up in a child's hands are purchased by their own folks. It is the parents' duty to be informed about what they're getting, and to be informed about whether or not it's appropriate for their kids.

Violence can be used to tell a great story, as it has been for millennia. Developers should still keep the right to put as much gore and bloodshed as they want in their creations (though they should keep in mind the possible consequences of their decisions). We need our *Counter-strike* just as much as we need our *New Zealand Story*. The developers just have to think whether or not that arterial spray is really needed. Sometimes blue skies are better than red pavement in the land of videogames.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got some sumo wrestlers to kick. 🍄



# Use Your Illusion

## Final Fantasy, Game Design, and Me

By Amandeep Jutla

Art by Benjamin Rivers

Videogames as a medium are not supposed to be taken seriously. That's been hammered into my head in all kinds of different ways for most of my life. First it was just the ever-present figure of my mother looking out for her son and trying to protect him from the demons of the lowbrow that she was sure infested American pop culture, though she didn't put it that way. She would just imply it in conversations we'd have: "Can I go buy a Super NES?" "No." "How about this Nintendo 64 thing, eh?" "No." Eventually I wore her down and had videogames, but she still didn't like the idea. She limited me to, at most, two hours of play every weekend. Once my allotted time was up, she made me turn the console off lest the brain-tissue-scarring caused by Mario et al. become serious.

At school, things were no different: my third-grade teacher, a stern woman in her late fifties, read our class an alarmist pamphlet about the horrors of videogames. She finished by saying, "So I hope you understand that these games are a sickness," while peering earnestly at us over the tops of her glasses. My fourth-grade teacher, in the same straight tone, told us she'd seen her nephew playing *Diddy Kong Racing*, and the violence and sadism contained therein had shocked her. When I made it to fifth grade, I

found out the hard way that my teacher confiscated Game Boys on sight and didn't return them for months.

Also at that age, I read an issue of *Time* magazine featuring an article by a woman whose son really loved *Zelda*. She could not fathom why, so, in the central line of the piece, she pulls him aside and says, "Okay, show me *Zelda*." He shows it to her and she gets a headache. She concludes by saying something like, "Well, I guess I never will get these videogames!" with a knowing wink directed at her presumably adult and sophisticated readership.

All of this troubled me—I mean, I loved videogames. I played them constantly, I used them as cultural reference points, and I used them to define and organize my life. I couldn't stand people talking about them as though they were insignificant or meaningless. Those people were, I thought, turning their noses up at the Next Great Wave of entertainment, and it was their loss. I thought it was a virtual certainty that games would come to replace films in the form of interactive movies. I thought that playing a videogame was obviously the equivalent of reading a book—the *Zelda* games, after all, were all full of characters who would never shut up. I had no luck explaining that last point to my parents, but I chalked that up to the generation gap. They were surely too old to understand the power of the Next Great Wave.

When I recount these things now, I do so with a feeling that is about sixty

percent bemusement and forty percent embarrassment. At present, I try—or at least pretend—to be a hip, detached videogame critic. I'm supposed to be analytical and honest when I talk about games—so I write that I think the medium is in its infancy; that games as they stand now are hopelessly immature; that the few that manage to pull themselves up out of the prevailing muck are still slimier and nastier than the best that the film or book worlds have produced. I don't mean to imply that I say that stuff without conviction, because I do pretty much believe it. I'm tired of pretentious gamers who ask whether games are art with a capital A, and then answering their own question by droning on ridiculously about how *Ico* is just like a Japanese art film. I think those people are dorks.

I don't think I ever understood *Ico*. It was released in 2001 and sold poorly at first, but over the years it built up the kind of fan community that the cliché "cult following" was invented to describe. I have seen people praise it without limit, going on about how it stretched the boundaries of what a game could do, and that it showed people that games were indeed serious business, because, look, *Ico* was minimalist and heartbreaking and so well put together. I finally decided to see what the fuss was about on a boring afternoon in early 2005. The EBGames clerk who rang me up looked at me, looked at the game, and then sniffled loudly. "That's such a beautiful game," he said. He then adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses and asked me for my money.

I started to play *Ico* and found it contrived and awkward and generally rather ugly in design. I could see what other people got from the game, of course—it did have some emotional and atmospheric resonance—but, fundamentally, I was missing the one thing that made people swoon so deeply for *Ico*. Grinning my smug New Games Journalist grin, I concluded that I liked *Ico*

but didn't love it, and didn't see how it could possibly point towards the future of the medium, unless the future of the medium was clunky adventure games. At the time I was too stupid to see how brain-crushingly hypocritical it was of me to dismiss *Ico* and the people who loved it out of hand like that. *Ico* was for other people what *Final Fantasy* was for me during the dark ages of my adolescence.

In late 1999, I was eleven and I didn't know what the hell *Final Fantasy* even was, but I did know that I had transferred to a new school and needed to make friends as quickly as possible, even if that meant lying to people. So when Ezra, a guy in a few of my classes, started talking to me about *Final Fantasy VII*, I said something like, "Oh, yes, that's a great game." So, had I played it? "Yeah," I said. How far in had I played? "A, uh, a little bit." Just how much was a little bit? "You know, just a little bit." I added hastily that I hadn't actually finished the game or anything—I didn't even own it, in fact. Would I like to borrow it? "Yeah, why not?" I decided.

Ezra lent me his copy of *Final Fantasy VII*—the PC version, which was just as well because neither of us owned Playstation hardware—on the day before the Christmas-and-New-Year's-Day-spanning Winter Break. He brought the game to school in one of those zippered multiple-CD holders, because the game was massive—the computer code that made it up contained so much data that it sprawled across four compact discs. I pretended not to be surprised by this. I took the game home and its first several minutes filled me with a rush of adrenaline and kinetic energy that no game I played afterwards could come close to reproducing. *Final Fantasy VII* was special. It was irregular.

Until *FFVII* came along, I had been used to uniformity and symmetry in game structure. *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (what, in my extremely limited experience, I had

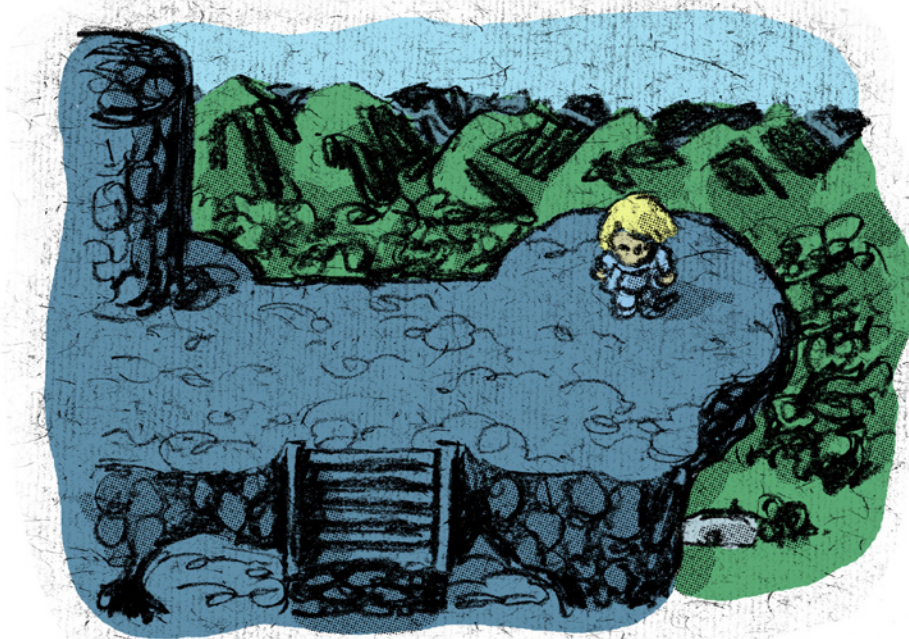
then declared to be my “favorite game ever”) was built like a machine—there were discrete “temples” that had to be entered one at a time to recover artifacts, which were all medallions that were exactly the same shape and same size and differed only in color. The Water Medallion was in the Water Temple, and it was blue. The Fire Medallion was in the Fire Temple, and it was red. That the medallions would always be in the temples was something you could depend on. They were consistently, literally there.

But *Ocarina*’s hyper-symmetry got under my skin and made me feel subtly uncomfortable. I could intuitively sense that there was something awkward and artificial about it—and maybe my parents and teachers were right about the worthlessness of games. After all, *Ocarina of Time* was very fundamentally designed as a toy: a large, well-laid-out space in which I, the player, could systematically fool around. Ostensibly, the game had a “story” associated with it—there were brief cutscenes meant to give the narrative a smooth, movie-like flow, but they were flimsy and unconvincing, and that seemed nearly intentional. Characters would giggle inanely or make odd sounds every time I spoke with them—it was like an unfunny in-joke between Shigeru Miyamoto, *Ocarina*’s creator, and me. Miyamoto often says of his games that he likens them to gardens—as opposed to “stretches of wilderness” or some other term that would imply less overt organization—that the player treks across. As much as I enjoyed *Game Over*, David Sheff’s history of Nintendo,<sup>1</sup> there was one Miyamoto quote that always made me cringe no matter how many times I read it. Miyamoto said that he often liked to put surprises into his games to “delight the child.” DELIGHT THE CHILD. How could I seriously tell people that *Ocarina* was a symbol of all that videogames were capable of if it was a thoughtfully designed, entirely transparent garden,

and one for kids at that? I had no flag to wave—no game to hold up and say, “Yes, this justifies my love for games.”

*Final Fantasy VII* begins ambiguously and in mid-flow, something Miyamoto’s games never do. After a bizarre CGI movie clip, I’m suddenly and unceremoniously cast as a guy jumping off a train and running towards a building in the distance. The scenery is futuristic yet oddly devoid of detail, and the surroundings are dark and just a bit nightmarish, though it’s the good kind of nightmare that you relish remembering the morning after. Guards run towards me so I summon lightning bolts out of thin air to toast them. There are other people running towards the building, too—they shout at me and I can barely make out what they’re saying; something about a reactor, something about blowing it up, something about me blowing it up. I enter the reactor and am joined by a big guy with a gun where an arm would ordinarily be. There’s a huge scorpion in there. The big guy and I kill it. I spontaneously fall to the floor clutching my head and swaying while having a bizarre flashback, but then I get my act together, rig the reactor core with explosives, and then get the hell out. And then I ask the big guy about “my money.” And this is only the very beginning. The rest of *Final Fantasy VII* is an insane mess of people and things including, but not by any means limited to: girls who talk to dead people, giant remote-controlled cats, ski lodges, girls who steal things, giant fanged snakes, coastal resorts, unrealistically well-endowed girls who kickbox, giant golden birds, and two-thousand-year-old-dead-alien-queen girls.<sup>2</sup>

I didn’t know what the hell any of this meant. Unfamiliar information and characters were thrown at me faster than I could keep up. There was a menu system I could access that was impressively, unnecessarily redundant—there were “slots” where I put “items” and “key



items” and “weapons” and magic orbs that were called “materia.” To get my character money in *Zelda*, I’d just pick up a shiny color-coded jewel, and I’d get a helpfully-patronizing message telling me exactly what I had picked up and how much money it was worth. *Final Fantasy VII* would just give me messages saying, “Gained gil! (54834 gil)” and it took me hours to figure out that “gil” was money, because I was dumb.

But once I twisted my brain around the mysterious ways in which *Final Fantasy VII* moved, they started to feel like the most natural thing in the world. The game seemed mature in its schizophrenia, and its confusion felt like that layer of complexity and asymmetry that I hungered for in games. I thought *Final Fantasy VII* was poetry written by a mad genius. Now instead of telling my parents and

teachers, “Yeah, so, this game is about a guy who has to visit eight temples and collect eight medallions and use them to save a princess,” or, “This game is about a plumber who collects one-hundred-and-twenty magical stars,” I could give them some hours-long explanation beginning with, “The game is about a mentally unstable mercenary-terrorist who’s following a genetically engineered soldier derived from the DNA of an alien space-woman who crashed to his planet ten thousand years ago,” and ending with, “And then this giant meteor, which is symbolic of something, probably humanity’s vice or something, crashes onto the planet and kills everyone, except for the fox thing and his family.” I never actually got a chance to give this explanation in its entirety. Most people cut me off after ten minutes.

1 My favorite book ever in 1999. I still like it a lot – for me it’s literally the only book about videogames where at least a fourth of the text isn’t unreadably stupid.

2 Puberty smashed me in the face (and vocal cords, and scrotum) at exactly this time. That’s why I keep mentioning girls: in my mind they were intimately tied to *Final Fantasy*. I had such a crush on Tifa. Jenova was creepy, though. I mean, she had eyeballs growing on her breasts. I’ll concede that this probably comes with the whole two-thousand-year-old-dead-alien territory, but I’m sorry; I just don’t find that attractive.

Still, in *Final Fantasy VII*, I had found my anti-Miyamoto. *FFVII* was no garden: there was no space in which to wander. Instead, the game just jerked me around from one plot point or set piece to the next, pushing me here and there, faster and faster as the game wore on.

*FFVII*'s beginning portions are set in Midgar, a large, even sort of city with a design that, on paper, would be right at home in one of Nintendo's games. Midgar is shaped like a circle divided into eight equally-sized "sectors," and at the corners of the slices are reactors, all numbered and all going all the way around the rim of the city. I remember starting to play, destroying the first reactor, and then thinking: right, I'm definitely, logically going to have to take out the other seven. Hell, the characters even *said* that was what they would do. The city was run by a corrupt power company that used the reactors to suck the life force of the planet dry. I was going to bring the company to its knees by cutting out its power, and at the game's end, the big guy and I would probably lead an assault on the head honchos themselves in their administrative quarters in the city's center. That this does not actually happen makes *FFVII* almost subversive.

In fact, not only does *FFVII* not follow this outline in anyway, but it derails itself completely. I didn't expect it to take me out of the city having destroyed only two of the reactors and then send me on a journey around the world following a freakish silver-haired villain for reasons that still don't make sense to me even though I must have played through the game ten times or more by now. I would like to think that this was not so much because I lacked imagination as it was because I lacked imagination as it applied to videogames. I had become accustomed to the school of Miyamoto, to straightforward games that exist first to be a game and then also maybe "tell a story" in the process that's determined entirely

by the game's mechanics. *FFVII* did not work this way: every aspect of it seemed to exist as a slave to the "story" that that was to be told, and this story did not so much unfold as it unraveled: I sensed that the people behind it had no idea where, if anywhere, their story was going—they were making shit up as they went along. *FFVII* seemed to have everything. There was inconsistent, rambling symbolism; there were weird, implausible character histories; there was creepy romance.<sup>3</sup> The giant meteor that appears at the end of the game and destroys all life on the planet is ridiculous, yes, but in the context of the story, it makes sense: it's the only way things could have really ended.<sup>4</sup> They spiraled out of control enough that that meteor ex machina seemed almost inevitable—*FFVII*'s whole narrative schema wouldn't have suited a Zelda-style showdown with the villain and rescuing of the princess; things had gotten far too out of control with that. The unraveling had progressed to the point where there were so many loose ends that it was more economical to squash them flat than to tie them up. The messiness of that was oddly beautiful.

Final Fantasy in general began to take over my life. As I played through *Final Fantasy VII*, I downloaded illegal emulated versions of the older games in the series. First was *Final Fantasy VI*, and then there was *IV*, then *I*, then *V*, and then the rest. The games had become something larger than myself—there was so much stuff there, so many nuggets of inane Final Fantasy trivia that I could dig up and tell anyone who asked and many who didn't. Through eighth grade, most of my friends at school were dorks, just like me. We played *Dungeons & Dragons* and we played *Magic: The Gathering*, and we referred to lich lords and mind flayers in casual conversations, and naturally there was also the Final Fantasy angle: we were always comparing things. What was

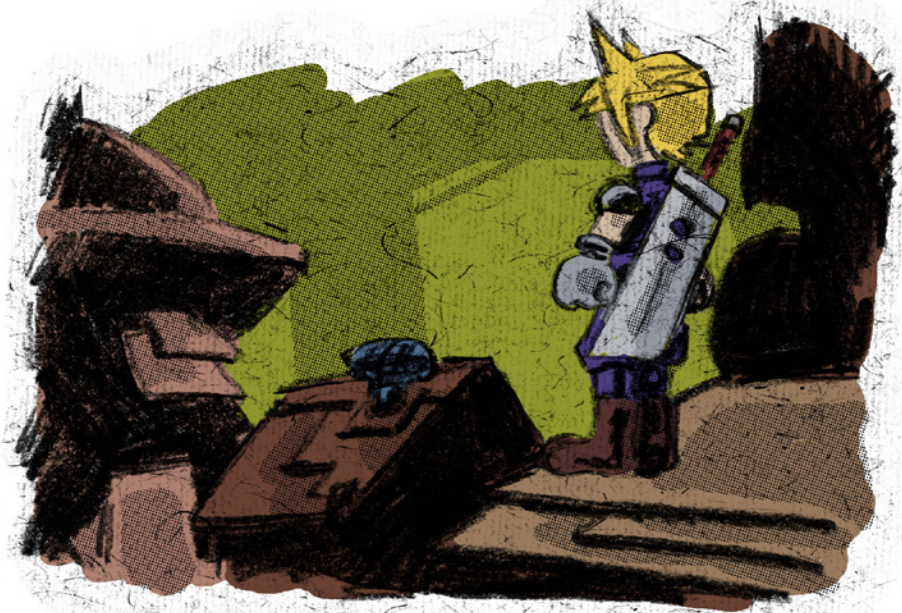
the lamer spell—Level 5 Doom or Fallen One? Okay, so what was the more absurd line—"The light...it called me...son..." or "You sound like pages from a self-help book!"? And who had more allure—Tifa or Celes? Who was stupider—Gilgamesh or Kefka? For that matter, what was the better song—"The Big Bridge" or "One Winged Angel"?<sup>5</sup>

But things began to change in eighth grade when *Final Fantasy X* came out. I had been anticipating the game feverishly and for months, but it was largely in vain because *FFX* was for the Playstation 2 and I only had a Playstation 1. Simultaneously, I began to drift away from the friends I had made. I kept to myself and let my Final Fantasy obsession run deeper than ever. For the first half of ninth grade, I studied abroad, which meant that I sat in a London flat playing *Final Fantasy VI* on an aging laptop and sometimes wandered out to electronics stores on the high street and looked at expensive European editions of *Final Fantasy X*. I'd thought the way *FFX* was packaged was kind of interesting; the back of *Final Fantasy VII*'s box was covered with all kinds of text trying to sell the game—trying vainly to describe the unintelligible story, for instance. The back of *FFX*'s box, on the other hand, contained only three vague lines of text in all capitals: "FULL VOICE ACTING," "REALISTIC GRAPHICS," and something else I can't remember. It was as though the game was packaged in tacit recognition of the fact that the words *Final Fantasy* were enough—not just to sell the

product, but enough for more than that. The words *Final Fantasy* were enough to evoke the imagery of the nerdy world that the games provided. *FFX* had only to identify itself as part of Final Fantasy culture, and instantly it was not just desirable but also important: another Final Fantasy for losers like me with no life to absorb and think of as high art, and since art imitates life, you might as well settle for it if you don't have the real deal. The problem was that *Final Fantasy X* was not a real Final Fantasy. It looked like one and even played like one if you weren't paying attention, but when I finally got it, I felt the difference, and, worse, something in my fragile understanding of videogames broke.

Hironobu Sakaguchi is often billed as "the Final Fantasy visionary," but he's not a visionary. He's just a guy who played *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1987. As legend has it, he was a big fan, which means that, like me and my friends, he would set aside a period of time every day in which he would get together with his fellow D&D gamers and pretend to be an elf. I realize that, to the uninitiated, the concept of fantasy role-playing is colossally stupid, but people do it for a reason. My friends and I were D&D players because we were all unsure of how to deal with the real world. We lacked polished social graces, we were too interested in things that were "not" important (ancient Romans, outer space, videogames) and not interested enough in things that "were" (small talk, our backyards, basketball). As a result

- 3 Isn't there a scene where it is revealed that Cloud frequently watched Tifa through her bedroom window when they were teenagers? Admittedly, that could just be some kind of fiction of my subconscious, which probably says something worrying about me as a person.
- 4 Whether or not the meteor actually does destroy all actual life on the actual planet has been subject to some debate over the years, but in 2004, *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children* settled things. It's a CGI-movie sequel to the events of *FFVII*, and it features many of the game's major characters, which means they're still apparently alive. But I'm just going to pretend *Advent Children* doesn't exist. And if you haven't seen it, I strongly suggest you do so as well.
- 5 The answers—at least for me—are respectively: probably the first one; the first one; definitely the first one; the first one; and they both suck.



of this, the average person thought we were a bit weird. We reacted by getting weirder—we retreated into our fantasy world where we understood everything, and importantly, no one external to ourselves knew what the hell we were on about when we discussed chain mail or infravision or attacks of opportunity. Hironobu Sakaguchi, I feel sure, played D&D for similar reasons. When his company, Squaresoft, was in desperate need of a new game, he went to his boss and asked him if he could, in fact, do some sort of fantasy role-playing thing. There's an interview with Sakaguchi in *The Ultimate History of Videogames* where he says that his boss asked him if he was totally sure a fantasy role-playing game was a good idea. "Yeah, it's fun," was what Sakaguchi said. He got the green light.

Final Fantasy, the idea, is fun. The games themselves are really not very much fun at all, because they are all rather clunky; there are too many statistics to keep track of, and that made the games seem impressively advanced to me when I was eleven, but now it's just tedious. Yet the actual act of playing was never the

point—you played Final Fantasy because you wanted to see what would happen next in the story. The first nine games all have strange plot elements – even the tame-by-*FFVII*-standards *Final Fantasy I* starts getting into robots and time travel by the time it's over. The games are all messy and convoluted, but most of them keep moving at a relentless pace, shifting from bombing mission to reactor interior to scene to scene to scene, over and over again, until the game is over and you are staring at the credits.

You can feel how eager Sakaguchi is to be the auteur here. He was like D&D's dungeon master, drawing up maps and designing monsters and throwing them at the player as if to say: See! Here's a cave! Here's a town! Here's a forest! Here's a factory where the evil empire manufactures magical war machines! Isn't this cool? And it's hard not to find his enthusiasm, if not contagious, then at least quite endearing. Silly as this sounds, Sakaguchi's spirit was essentially what prevented me from caring that the games were mostly bullshit.

I have finished all of the first nine Final Fantasy games, and own them all

in some form or another, except for the NES *Final Fantasy III*, which was never released in the United States. But even that's coming to the Nintendo DS soon, and even though I no longer care about Final Fantasy the way I once did, I once cared so much that I'm going to buy things that say Final Fantasy on them no matter how much I may not want to do it. *Final Fantasy III* is boring as hell, but so are *Final Fantasy* and *Final Fantasy II*. They are shakily realized; Sakaguchi just starting to get his feet wet. *Final Fantasy IV* is the first game in the series to be completely solid all around—it plays smoothly and it has great narrative flow. *Final Fantasy V* expands on the playability and cuts down on the narrative flow, resulting in the kind of game that is adored by the same sorts of people who love *Starcraft*. *Final Fantasy VI* expands on the narrative flow and cuts down on the playability, resulting in a bombastic, operatic, pretentious, wonderful construction that actually collapses on its own weight about halfway through the game—it was my favorite, for a while. *Final Fantasy VII* is *Final Fantasy VII*. *Final Fantasy VIII* is a left-field love story that works more than most people think it does. The Final Fantasy movie was career-ending trash.

I mean, I see what Sakaguchi was thinking. His games are cinematic in a way that Shigeru Miyamoto's never have been and never will be. In fact, in a narrow sense, the Final Fantasy games are anti-videogames, because of the storytelling element's immensity. I'm sure Sakaguchi felt that the transition to film would work seamlessly and maybe even gain him a bit more respect, since nobody takes games seriously. But *Final Fantasy: The Spirit Within* was a disaster. When I, personally, saw the movie, I liked it fine, but I'm used to Final Fantasy-style narrative BS. The thing is that even the worst, most ridiculous Hollywood films know when enough is enough and when the viewer is going to stop suspending disbelief, and

*The Spirit Within* was impossible for the movie-going public to understand. It had no coherency or consistency. It was just a load of story-masturbation. Squaresoft lost boatloads of money and Sakaguchi was asked to leave.

His last Final Fantasy game, *IX*, got at best a lukewarm critical reception for being regurgitated Final Fantasy vomit. *FFIX* combines elements from all the previous games in the series in a self-referential way that I'm sure is kind of smarmy, if you want to look at it that way. But *FFIX* is far from the pander-game that most people paint it as: it's not an imitation of the *Final Fantasy* of old, but rather a tribute and a re-visitation. Sakaguchi is saying that this *Final Fantasy* thing was fun while it lasted but now he's done, and so the game is indeed backwards-looking, but it's still exuberant and uncynical.

The most important question you can ask about a videogame is this: does the conceit work? This is because what I think bothers people the most about the medium is the fact that it is based on a lie. In all videogames, you are you, the player, but you control an entity on the screen, be it a cursor or a character or whatever, that is not you—except that clearly, it is you. The game expects you to behave as if it is, because, after all, you're the one controlling it. The result is that there exists an inherent, necessary disconnect between you and you-as-you-play-the-game. This is not a disadvantage of the medium, because if this disconnect were not present, videogames would not be what they are: games work because of the way the player's virtual self is affected by the virtual world, and the interplay between affect and effect constitute pongism, the underlying philosophy that all games operate on, whether they know it or not.<sup>6</sup> When I was a young and desperate videogavangelist, eager to give games to adults so that they'd see the genius, all of them, with no exceptions,



would react with abject confusion. Even if I told them that the little man in the suspenders on the screen was them, they wouldn't get what that meant—it made no sense to them. The fact that they were sitting in front of a television clutching a piece of plastic and using it to make a little digital man run and jump was so inherently crazy that they couldn't get their head around it. I'm sure I felt the same way the first time I picked up a videogame,<sup>7</sup> and I just can't remember that now. It helps that game controllers are so unnatural—the buttons that you press are often so abstract, so literally removed from the action on-screen, that you have to get past a pretty significant mental barrier to become completely comfortable with the notion that they are controlling that action.

Games tend to get around this problem by using a method that is somewhere between two extremes. The first extreme is represented by games that try to naturalize themselves as much as possible, to try to downplay the disconnect and thereby get the player to ignore it. Thus, *Gran Turismo 4* with a steering wheel tries to make you feel as much like you are driving a car and not playing a videogame as possible, and *Tranquility* smoothes over the disconnect by making the game itself consist of arbitrary, abstract spinning shapes, so the inherent strangeness of sliding a mouse across a desk to simulate movement doesn't seem odd by comparison.

The second extreme consists of games that consist entirely of complete rapid-fire bullshit that never stops, and you are so absorbed in where the game is and what the game is doing that you do not stop to think about where *you* are or what *you* are doing. Most games are like this. They are confidence men, talking faster and faster until you lose them and fall into the game and do not question what's going on. Final Fantasy is probably the premier example of this. It's a good storyteller.

Most of the stories it tells are fabrications. No one cares or notices, and that's fine. The conceit is necessary, because strip away the storytelling and *Final Fantasy* is just a mind-numbing exercise in number juggling. The, uh, fantasy needs to be maintained. Most games are happy to straddle the happy medium between Gran Turismo and Final Fantasy—*Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, say, is obviously artificial in terms of its structure, but it keeps the player absorbed by making the actual act of playing the game engaging on a small-scale level. Pressing a button while running in *Ocarina* makes the player character roll across the ground. Pressing it again makes him roll again. As long as you keep pressing that button and enjoying the small visceral thrill of tumbling across the grass, you don't pay attention to the fact that the game is so synthetically constructed—that you're tumbling across the grass to go to the fucking Forest Temple to get the Forest Medallion.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with *Ocarina of Time*, though, is that the illusion just doesn't work unless the player is either eleven years old or someone who has played so many videogames that artificiality is no longer an issue, because the more games you play, the more you are willing to put up with stupid things, and the easier it is to please you—the disjoint between you and the game is not as readily apparent to you, and as a result you accept videogames that tacitly acknowledge that it's there. Thus, *Ocarina of Time*, with its self-referential dialog and silly in-jokes and big wooden blocks that you push through dungeons, is a game for people who play games. People who are new to gaming can't play it, because to even understand it, you already need to be steeped in videogame conventions: otherwise, the arbitrary restrictions are too numerous. Now, with hindsight, I can look back on *Ocarina* and judge it to be what I'd consider a “bad” videogame,

though ironically I consider it as such because it's too well-made. It's too gamey. People like my parents wouldn't conceptually understand it—it would require too much of them, and it would give them nothing in return. Pushing a button for pleasure is silly to anyone over forty. *Ocarina* is diverting to anyone who already likes *Zelda* or Nintendo, but otherwise, it has no real reason to exist.

But Final Fantasy can entice people who don't care about videogames because none of the Final Fantasy games are even really games. They're just endlessly unwinding, semi-interactive narratives that you slip into in the beginning and then leave at the end. Sure, it's only the dorks who love FF, but almost anyone can *like* Final Fantasy. I knew kids in high school who shopped at Abercrombie and went to the country club after school and wrestled on weekends, and I thought, mostly accurately, that I had nothing in common with them, but then we'd talk about videogames and they'd say that they liked Madden football and licensed games based on movies and, almost inevitably, *Final Fantasy VII*. They seemed to care about *FFVII* on a level completely different from the one on which I appreciated it—they seemed more into how badass specific scenes were and how cool some of the villains were, or whatever, and didn't pay too much attention to the details—but, hell, they loved *Final Fantasy VII*. Even girls dug it. Take something as big and entangled as *Final Fantasy VII*, and there's at least something in it that someone somewhere will get into. All of those first nine—games are like this to some extent—they may consist entirely of Sakaguchi's jizz, but it's effortless and joyous jizz.

I had sort of taken this for granted until June 2003, when I bought *Final*

*Fantasy X* with my PlayStation 2. *FFX* was the first Final Fantasy made without Sakaguchi's influence. This shows. There was something almost offensive about the very game design—it tried to be a “revolutionary” revamping of the way Final Fantasy was played, but it was made too scientifically. It was almost Final Fantasy as Shigeru Miyamoto would have designed it. The overarching narrative was carefully composed this time around, all its what-the-hell moments written with cold intent. The story was pared down and simplified; the dialogue, because it was all voice-acted, was minimalistic, and the result was a humorless caricature of what a typical Final Fantasy story would be like. The game opens in promisingly silly fashion—a horrific creature that reminds the main character of his father flings him thousands of years into the future and across an entire continent. The main character needs to get to the other side and destroy the creature. That's all the story is, and I'm expected to take it seriously. There are none of the mangled layers of semi-subtext so common to Final Fantasy. The horrific creature reminds the main character of his father because—shockingly—it actually is his father. The main character was supposed to cross the continent and—wait for it—he eventually does, just like he'd intended. The only surprises are incidental, contrived ones, and the game as a whole is stilted. The yarn wasn't spun the right way, and for the first time in Final Fantasy, I could clearly see what was beneath it. Halfway through *FFX*, something happened to me that had never happened to me while playing Final Fantasy before: I asked myself why the hell I was playing this game, and then I couldn't answer my own question. I couldn't relate to or internalize the tale *FFX* told in any way—I didn't hate my dad

6 See Gamer's Quarter #2 for a belligerent elaboration on this topic.

7 That would have been *Mortal Kombat* in 1993 or thereabouts. I know, I know.

8 It's green.

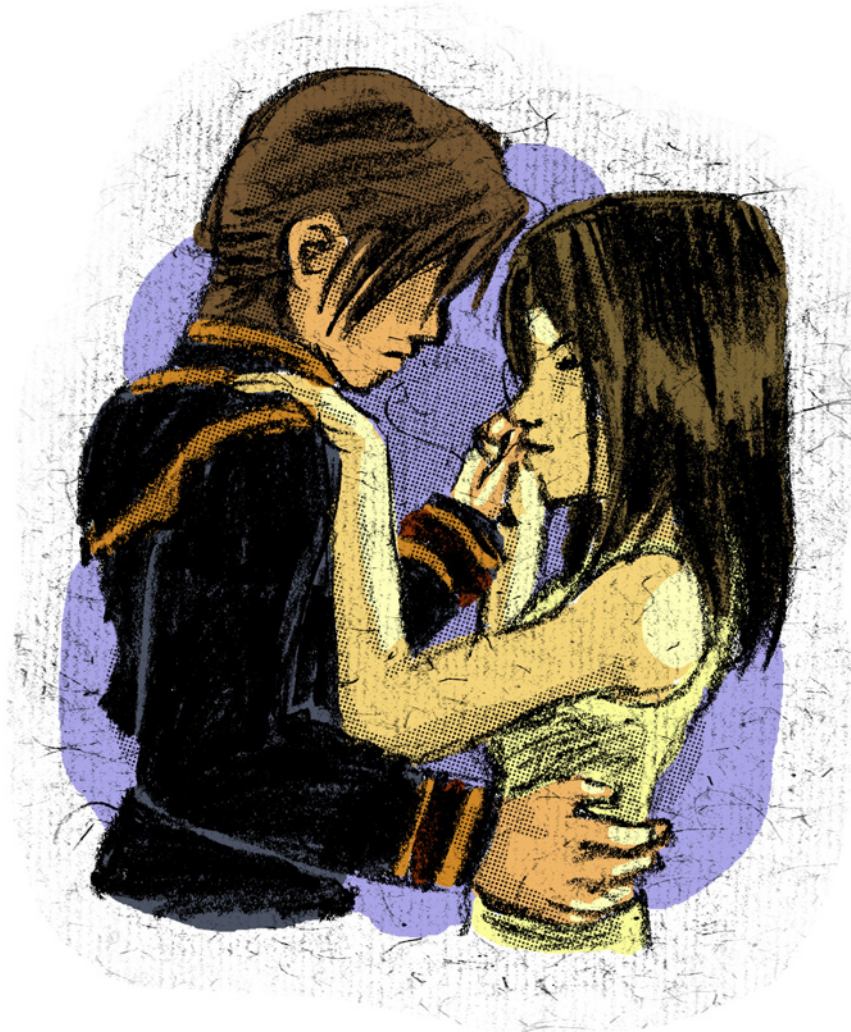
or love *Star Wars* enough for that to work. I looked to the “game” part of things for some other reason to continue, but there was none. *FFX* was complex for the sake of complexity—playing it involved collecting little spheres and using them to increase abstract abilities that meant nothing. The game was leaden. I gritted my teeth and forced my way through it anyway, and when I had finished, I turned *Final Fantasy X* off and didn’t touch it ever again.

I had fallen out of love with *Final Fantasy*. I looked at all the other games with serious suspicion. They’d all been conning me, I thought, and it was only with *FFX* that the illusion had finally been shattered. However, this wasn’t really true. *Final Fantasy* had been working in its *Final Fantasy* way for a while, though, and slowly, the rot had set in on it. The first few games in the series used abstractions to get around the limitations of technology—the towns, for example, are not literally meant to consist of only a few buildings along with three or four people who say the same things over and over again, but those people and buildings are representative of the buildings that the developers would have put in if they had the means. Slowly, these abstractions became more and more convoluted, but the understanding that they were stand-ins was always there. *Final Fantasy VII*’s Midgar confused me when I first experienced it, because at the time I was still thinking with my *Zelda* mindset: I didn’t understand why I couldn’t explore the whole city and its eight sectors. But no, *FFVII* used Midgar to suggest a large city, not emulate it—because a city I construct in my mind is always bigger than anything Nintendo’s design teams can make. *Final Fantasy X* makes the mistake of thinking that it can use technology to represent everything literally. Towns are rendered in three full dimensions, and literal, real paths connect them rather than the abstracted-away world-map screens that defined earlier

games. Suddenly, *Final Fantasy* felt very small, and its environments were movie sets with no mystique.

Without *Final Fantasy* in my life, my taste in games began to drift. Like the reactionary cock I was, I ignored things that smacked of *Final Fantasy*—like style-over-substantiality or *Ocarina of Time*-ish substantiality-over-believability. I only really liked things like *Metal Gear Solid*, mostly because they were, uh, solid in the face of my own peculiar brand of overthinking. I scoffed at people who thought videogames were in any way valuable. I’d go so far as to say that they were interesting diversions, part of a burgeoning medium, and personally important in my life, even, but they had very little to say. Even the best games were basically just bullshit laid on top of boring mechanics. *Final Fantasy* nerds and *Ico* champions disgusted and embarrassed me. I went to college, met many people who were deeply interested in videogames in creepy ways that I wasn’t, and began distancing myself from games even further. When I crept away from videogames, I discovered girls and alcohol and something resembling a social life. On a daily basis, I’d spend most of my time interacting with people who didn’t give a shit about games. I thought I didn’t, either.

Then, two weeks ago, on a whim, I bought the Game Boy Advance port of *Final Fantasy IV* and began to play it again for the first time in years. There’s a scene fairly early on wherein Cecil, the dark-knight-turned-good main character, helps two guys named Yang and Edward defend the kingdom of Fabul from his own people. Cecil’s country, Baron, has been attacking other nations unjustly, and Cecil himself had played along with it until he finally decided that enough was enough. His friend Kain—my God. Why the hell should I even bother explaining this? It’s fucking *Final Fantasy*. I’ll never be able to get it across the right way. Just



play the game. And, if you don’t, know this: that Cecil is trying to help defend Fabul, and he can’t do it. He’s failing. The soldiers are advancing on him and his friends. He gets pushed into a back room and then his former best friend attacks him and steals his girlfriend. This is emotionally manipulative melodrama at its worst, and I recognized that but was also touched by it. To me, the scene was moving. These paper-thin characters and their exaggerated situations, their losing battles, and their high-drama lifestyles struck a chord in me that hasn’t been played in years, and it’s a little out of tune now, but it’s still definitely the same chord. And I suddenly got back in touch

with my own repressed dork. I couldn’t really logically explain why I found myself caring about this silly stuff, but I did, and no amount of pseudointellectual videogame psychobabble would be able to satisfactorily explain it.

They say that ninety-nine percent of everything is shit, and that applies to videogames as well, and the people who play videogames, even the ones who really care about them and think that they’re something special, maybe even especially them, are aware of this. They want some way to validate their hobby, something they can demonstrate to others as proof that they aren’t wasting their time. But there’s no point in looking

for that. There's no reason to justify videogames, because they're a different beast altogether from other mediums. You just want to look for games that play with the way games work in interesting ways. There's your validity.

But then again, when Final Fantasy and *Ico* and other almost self-consciously arty games try to work around the limitations of the videogame by pretending to be something else, does that mean I should just consider them "bad games"? No, they're interesting in their own ways, and an imitation of a movie still isn't the same thing. Final Fantasy is the analogue of a summer blockbuster, and *Ico* is more of that independent foreign film that all people with good taste are supposed to say they love even if they secretly don't get it. I am sure that *Ico* has some redeeming features if it works for you—it doesn't for me. Final Fantasy worked for me at some point, and it worked well. I cared about it in a way that I don't think I care about *Metal Gear Solid 3* or something else that I'd say I prefer now that I "know better." I played through *Metal Gear Solid 3* only twice. Both times I was very impressed, and the play experience I had was fantastic, but after that, did it mean anything to me? *MGS3* killed my interest in videogames dead. It made me want to stop playing them because it was too well realized, as a game. That made me happy, and it still does, but now I see that when I believe that, I'm dangerously close to falling into the trap of games for their own sake: wank masquerading as something meaningful. Final Fantasy is wank, too, but it's honest wank.

The Final Fantasy games are very inclusive and very flawed—sometimes even extremely, cripplingly flawed if you're talking about certain installments, but when I played *Final Fantasy VII*, it ignited my interest in games. I want to keep

playing them. *FFVII* was just so ridiculous on such a grand scale that it made me see the unrealized potential that games had. If nothing else, Final Fantasy is a vessel that you can fill with personal identity and social meaning: the games are things that you can obsess stupidly over for years, things you can sit down and talk to like-minded kids about, things that can make you feel a part of something big and complex that other people just don't understand. And *FFX* proved that the flaws were the key, because every Final Fantasy is a glorious, stupid disaster area that's filled with enough bullshit to feed several hundred square miles of agriculture, and you are just compelled to lie around in the muck, because good muck is good muck, even if it's just muck.

A few months ago I hung out with my friend Ezra, the guy who lent me his copy of *FFVII* almost seven years ago now, and things have changed, though at the same time nothing has changed. We didn't talk much—instead we played *Mario Kart DS* and *Kirby's Canvas Curse* and *Metroid Prime: Hunters* and *Brain Age*. And I can't speak for him but I know that at least on my end, the games don't have the same meaning anymore. How the hell can I really get myself to care about *Metroid Prime: Hunters*? Why should I give a shit about a game of *Mario Kart DS*? The games are diversions, but nothing more—I can't get inside of them; they're polished, airbrushed, modernized Nintendo products.

*Final Fantasy XII* is coming out in the United States in just a few months. I will, of course, buy it, because the box will say "FINAL FANTASY" on it, probably in obnoxiously large lettering. The only question is: will I really give a damn? I don't know. My gut instinct tells me "no." I played the demo packaged with *Dragon Quest VIII* last year and hated it so much that I didn't really write about it because

that would have just inspired more anger and hate and negative feeling within me—more than is healthy. I'll just say that the introductory movie contained a voiceover by a guy with an overly-serious baritone reading a sentence that began with the words "In a world where." And, one other thing—I read interviews with the developers where they talked about how they ran all the characters past focus groups. So, yeah, draw your own conclusions. I could be wrong, but I think that *XII* has been in development for so long already that Square-Enix Corporation is probably going to try to make it the safest bet that they can. I don't know how that's going to work out.

I really wish that someone had hammered the idea that life isn't perfect or intelligible into my head when I was younger, but they didn't, and so I've spent years and years as an idealist and a perfectionist, always chasing after things I never could have gotten in the first place and trying to achieve things that are impossible to achieve. My quest for that has, I think, made me narrow-minded and rigid about a lot of things. I mean, I thought I was a social outcast for a while, until I realized that the only thing making me a social outcast was my belief that I was a social outcast—and all those thoughts I'd had about me not knowing how to talk to people were fundamentally wrong because nobody knows how to talk to people. People make everything up as they go along, and they make mistakes, and they fuck up, and things take odd turns and I guess that means life is a Final Fantasy story.

And when I say striving for perfection is unhealthy, I'm talking about the way I think about videogames, too: I'm finally coming around to see that "bad" games can be just as informative, as complex, as "good" games; that Final Fantasy, bad as it may be, is an interesting thing. The

irregular, the imperfect, the startling—those are the things that shape us and cause us to attach meaning to them, and bad taste in videogames is entirely defensible if you have it for a reason. I used to make fun of Final Fantasy fans, despite my being an ex-FF fan myself, but now, no longer. People think they're dorks, and not without good reason, but to be into Final Fantasy is to be into ambitious grandiosity, to be a dreamer, to be someone who earnestly believes in the power of videogames, and even if that belief is faulty, who the hell am I to try to strip that away from them?

So Final Fantasy is shit, so what? I'm done being pompous about my own past and I'm done lying to myself. Final Fantasy was my adolescence, and even though we're kind of estranged now, even though the games never give me the same feelings that they once did, I can still feel flickers of the old sensation sometimes. Listen, I really don't care about videogames the way I used to. I have next to no interest in what's coming out. I don't read Gamespot's updates any longer. I don't keep myself posted on what the next big thing is, because I feel largely burned out. Videogames have let me down by letting themselves become so clean and polished—the *Ocarina of Time*-ification of the industry is the worst thing that's happened to it in a long time. *Final Fantasy*—the pre-*X* Final Fantasy, at least, is rough-hewn madness, and it's a comforting counterpoint. Right now, that GBA port of *FFIV* is the only thing I can bring myself to play. I just don't have the energy for anything else. I don't want a game that makes me think and solve problems. I want a game that isn't a game, because real games have started to bore me, and I don't think that's going to let up. 📺



# Zen Type

**Ridge Racer—PS1, PS2, PSP, 360**

By Matthew Williamson

On certain nights in the late 1990s, I could be found at a distance from my TV, which my mother would have told me could “ruin my eyes.” But since I was no longer living at home, I didn’t have to listen to her anymore and could sit as damn close as I wanted. The blur of tail lights reflected in my cornea. I had that glazed-over look in my eyes, the look that anti-game evangelists talk about as “dangerous.” This look shows no spark of life, no cognitive recognition.

With good reason I sat that close to the television—I was racing a car, and the television tube was my windshield. I held Namco’s JogCon in my hands, thumbs very carefully rested on the force-feedback dial, fingers on the shoulder buttons. “Lucid Rhythm” played for the hundredth time as I drifted around the same corner I had taken hundreds of times before. To ensure that nothing distracted me, I wore my oversized headphones, which were intended for studio use. I could escape to Ridge City, a place that doesn’t exist, and has almost no description. But it was still one of the greatest cities imaginable.

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*Ridge Racer Type 4* was a game that I happen upon in an over-priced and well-hidden import store in the northern suburbs of Chicago. A short man named

Scott owned the store. He drove a Corvette with his name on the vanity plate, and it was always parked in front. The location was fairly close to the video store where I was working, and I would make frequent stops on my way to or from work.

In December of ’98 I was working extra hours at the video store because of the holiday season. This resulted in extra money that Scott loved to help me spend. His games were always priced at the release MSRP no matter how old they were. This particular day, I happen to notice a small stack of yellow boxes prominently displaying *R4* on them. Upon asking what was in the box, Scott told me that it contained a T-shirt, the JogCon custom controller, *Ridge Racer Type 4*, and a new version of the original *Ridge Racer*.

I am a sucker for collector’s boxes.

After getting back to my apartment, I opened it with great anticipation. Inserting the disc into the Playstation and pressing the on button, I was introduced to the world of *Ridge Racer*. Saturated in a dark hue of yellow (called “positive yellow” by Namco), I navigated menus, picked a racing team, and watched as a grid of spheres outlined the upcoming race course for me. My induction was a little rough: I was playing the game like a racing game. Braking for sharp turns and trying to stay to the inside of the corners got me nowhere, and I found out that *Ridge Racer* is an arcade game that just happens to involve cars.

It didn’t help that I was also attempting to learn how to use the JogCon. The controller itself is analog with force feedback, but not in the form of rumble. The controller has a dial in the center for resting your thumbs at the ten and two positions that you rotate as you would a steering wheel. When hitting a wall or getting a tire in a rut, the dial will either push back or need a bit more force to turn. With your car in the air, the controller would go slack because there was no resistance on the wheels. The controller was exactly what I had been looking for in many peripheral items related to games—it allowed me to become more submerged into the game’s world.

Since the game was in Japanese, I had no idea what was going on between races. Depending on which racing team you selected, there was a different manager who would say, well, something to you. It wasn’t until many years later, when I picked up a used English version of *Ridge Racer Type 4*, that I found out what was going on here. Each team has a different, and overly melodramatic, story to unfold. There would be slight variations of the banter that the team manager spouted out at you based on what place you achieved in the race. But it wasn’t really something that I felt I had missed out on. It was the racing itself that became the driving force of the game.

Racing over and over again, through the same tracks, in the same order, seems like it should become monotonous or boring. It never did. For a couple years, I would bring the game out on a regular basis and seat myself close enough to the screen to encompass as much of my field of vision as possible. The game demanded it of me: I needed to get into the “zone” or “zen state” for the game to really grab hold.

This was what *Ridge Racer* did. It wasn’t unlocking the 320 cars that kept me coming back. It wasn’t to beat the special races. It was because I could invoke “zen state” brain patterns exceptionally easily

with *R4*. Every little thing the game does makes for a perfect setting, from the heavily stylized menus and the acid-jazz music to the feedback and control of the JogCon, everything kept me in peace.

When the layers of the game start to peel away, you begin to see the game for what it is. The mechanics are entirely unrealistic, what with drifting into corners at over 150 mph being intentionally the best way to drive. Using the brakes usually means that you have done something wrong. Most of the other drivers are about as aggressive as a butterfly, and you never see more than two of them on the screen at the same time. Eventually you get to the point where you even realize that the cars travel on a very distinct and designated path with little deviation. Stripping all this away brings you to the realization that you are not racing as much as you are just passing cars as fast as you can.

I have taken up what I learned in *R4* and applied it to my life. I take many drives that are five or more hours in length. I usually spend most of them trying to pass the person in front of me while listening to music. I do a pretty good job of it, and I never realized why until my last couple of trips from New Orleans to St. Louis to visit my wife. I had just recently finished *Ridge Racers* for the PSP.

The game is what sold me a PSP, and honestly it was worth it. The game takes advantage of the PSP’s shortcomings and makes them work. The blur of the taillights on *RR* goes hand in hand with the PSP screen’s low refresh rate. The main reason that I was sold on the game was because it was similar to a greatest hits album of a band—it took all the best courses from all the previous games and parts of their soundtrack, and threw them into a new game with new mechanics. *R4* was in there too.

I had played *Ridge Racer 5* when it came out. It even worked with the JogCon. I don’t know why, but it left a bad taste in



my mouth. I never even bothered with *RR: Evolution*. But something about having parts of *R4* in a new game enticed me even after a rough history with other sequels. There was unfortunately little from *R4* in the PSP game, but it was some of the better parts. The stylish aesthetic of the game was lost, unfortunately, and all that was left was to find out if meditation while driving was still possible.

Some nights, I could be found in bed with the PSP approximately a foot from my face, oversized headphones covering my ears. What *Ridge Racers* added to the world of *RR* was just what it needed at the time. It became faster. No longer were you only looking at one or two cars as you tried to avoid them while they traveled along their paths: you were almost racing. Nitrous was added to the game for boosts of speed, and while the mechanic was nothing new to racing games, Namco abused it to further force the player into the zen state.

*Ridge Racer* now cheats like a hustler. It's no longer fair and even. The game gives the other cars whatever they need to beat you, whether it is the ability to manage an impossible drift or just nitrous when it isn't possible to have it. It doesn't matter though, and you have to stop thinking about it.

Get into the zone and focus on driving your best. Learn how the game works, how the AI thinks, how to beat it. If you get bumped from behind you take the speed from the car that hit you, so when you're in front, you don't try to take the corner at the best angle, but instead make

sure to stay directly in front of them. Focus directly in the center of the screen, off into the distance, where the goal is. Keep checking your mirror and stay in the lead. It never hurts to know every curve of the course like the back of your hand.

This takes a while to get to. The game progresses nicely to the point where you need to induce the deepest of trances and keep the coolest of heads. When, or even if, the game connects with you, it becomes an extension of consciousness. *Ridge Racer 6* for the Xbox 360 is the concept of the PSP game but now with its own courses. It is almost perfect, and



R4 OPENING MOVIE COTINUTY

the only thing *R4* has over *R6* is style and music. The bold yellow and circular theme of *R4* has not even come close to being challenged by lime green and hexagons of *R6*.

The main loss is that the personality is mostly gone from the game. It has slowly been departing over time until eventually even Reiko Nagase (who's absence from *R5* was noticed by many fans who complained to Namco who reinstated her afterwards), a staple of the series, won't be around to greet us in the intro movie. 📺



# High Calibur

## Soul Calibur—SDC

By John Overton

I enjoy fighting games. I harbor an unhealthy obsession with *King of Fighters*. However, I never took the time or made the effort to become competitively good, because I had no reason to. My friends don't play fighting games. Despite spending almost no time on Shoryuken.com or any sort of in-depth skill FAQ, I can compete against the artificial intelligence, and I'm damn good.

Like many others, I have natural video gaming skills. I've found myself able to adapt, overcome, and confidently play much more quickly than anyone I've met. When I played *Kingdom Hearts*, the supposedly "hard as hell" platforming made me wonder if any of the complainers had actually played a platforming game before.<sup>1</sup> During middle school, *Goldeneye* matches generally pitted me against the three other people in the room. I would win.

This isn't to say I'm the best at any game I play. If anyone plays a game long enough they'll be the best. I don't believe I could accomplish some of the stuff I've seen in speed runs, shooters, and fighting-game tournaments. That sort of thing flabbergasts me as much as the next hardcore gamer.

There are generally two ways I get to try multiplayer competition in fighting games. One happens when I convince a friend to play a fighting game; the other is when I

meet people that eat, breathe, and drink fighting games. If it's the first case, I will win. The latter will promptly beat me while calling me their bitch.

I love an even fight, though. When facing my friends, I try to balance the odds. I cannot play to my fullest ability. I have to hold back so that they can win, because I hate always winning.<sup>2</sup> So I hold back and they win more than they should while I lose more than I should. In the back of my mind, I hold a bit of regret about the whole affair. But there's a cure for this, something which can easily determine one's skill at videogames in comparison to another player. This game is called *Soul Calibur*.

There are specific rules to follow in order to get this scientific result. You absolutely must set the characters and stage to random, and the match time to sixty seconds. At the end of thirty matches, you'll clearly see who is the better gamer. *Soul Calibur* does not rely on knowing all the moves or characters. It relies on pure videogame skill. A button masher can beat someone who only plays one character, because that person becomes so stunned that their character is losing that they choke. They say, "This is my character! How is this punk beating me?" The answer? You probably weren't that good in the first place.

Corner traps in 2-D games are self-explanatory: you're backed into a corner, trapped, with generally no way out. With extensive playtime of *Soul Calibur*, you

learn that if you aren't being juggled you can get out of whatever shitty move the button masher is using on you over and over again. If you can't get out of it, think harder. You have more than two directions to move in. You could try to: counter the attack, move in, move out, jump, roll to the left, duck, block, do a quick hit, or kick. *Soul Calibur* gives a handful of options and possibilities for every situation the opponent puts you in and vice-versa. The trick is to play ahead, and keep in mind what your opponent has previously done. It's like a faster version of chess, only with a big-boobied ninja girl.<sup>3</sup> The quicker thinker determines whose soul still burns.

Recently, I set up my Dreamcast ASCII arcade sticks with a friend who is more interested in cars than videogames. While he cherishes his WRX, he has no love for any particular videogames. We set up *Soul Calibur* to the previously stated rules and

the endless battle of souls and swords began again.

The Dreamcast roared, and after thirty rounds of clashing steel, he had seventeen wins to my thirteen. I had slammed buttons down, and he had slammed buttons down. He did something absolutely amazing—by dodging at the last second, he caused me to come out of a slide, be hit in the back of the head, and go flying out of the ring. I did something amazing—with him at half life and myself at near death, I jumped over an attack, knocked him down, and hit him while down, thereby countering his next attack and hitting him to his defeat.

In the end he had proved to be the better fighter. I felt good, because I hadn't held back. When he left, he looked me right in the eye, pointed his finger, and said, "We are doing this next weekend."

I said, "All right." 🙄



1 A terrible example for videogame skill, but work with me here.

2 Which may something about my school and life performance.

3 I'll admit that not all the characters are equal to one another, so it's not as balanced as chess. It's more of the same feel and mindset.



# The Next Next-Gen

## Back to the Future

By Craig Dore

### Now-Gen

It was coincidence, not desire, which placed me in front of the TV for *VH1 Games*. Fascinated, albeit grimly, I perked up when I heard, “An exciting game, with the best next-gen graphics you’ll ever see!” Indeed a strange coincidence, considering that I had just spent my entire week writing and thinking about next-gen.

According to VH1, and the gaming mainstream, next-gen is hyperrealism. It is a sure, sexy bet for the companies investing their futures in those products. Graphics, whether we like it or not, are the hallmark of each generation of games and hardware.

What are the technologies that will bring us to this supposed next-gen?

Graphics are Microsoft and Sony. Visually speaking, these systems are like Coke and Pepsi; unique flavours of the same thing. Unfortunately, the Xbox 360 and PS3 have been constructed such that their very innards are bent towards the greater realization of streaming graphics. What is most surprising is that these advancements have been gained at the expense of greater capability in controller, physics, and AI. It’s axiomatic in hardcore gaming circles now that “better graphics do not equal better gameplay.” Well, we won’t be surprised that the next, next, next generation will have better graphics. So how, exactly, is this revolutionary?

The wild card, Nintendo, is arguably the Apple Computer of the games industry. They’ve looked upon vast libraries of games and said, “Where is the game in these games?” So, the Wii is essentially a challenge to us all: dare to be different. But although I do not want to minimize the promise of WiiGen, as it is totally exciting, does anyone remember the SpaceOrb? It was a joystick-mouse hybrid, billed as the future of controllers. I remember the guy with one at our LAN. He did not go home victorious. Also, some Wii players report that flicks of the wrist can beat wild, arm-swinging opponents. These aspects underscore the risks of trying to forcibly advance gaming technology; you better know what you’re doing. Controller innovation is not even new. Anyone walking through a video arcade can see an impressive assortment of controllers.

And we have the PC, resilient and expandable. As people were hailing the PC as dead, *World of Warcraft* became one of the most successful online games ever. Can you play *WoW* on a console? A few years ago, never; nowadays, it might be different. Although the PC can leverage new hardware advances faster than its console rivals, the realities of cross-platform development might prevent it from driving the industry in the future. The consoles may start dictating terms to the PC, instead of the other way around.

These are the “next-gen” platforms. Unfortunately, we know that history will likely judge these platforms with a shrug.

Why? Because we’ll look back on these just like the Playstation, Dreamcast, and Atari, with the same gameplay elements, the same RPGs, the same FPSes.

So forget about graphics and hardware and look at the elements of gameplay. “Artificial Intelligence” is the longest running joke in the industry. I have several friends in the AI field, studiously pursuing their PhD’s. All have “done some time” in games; none of them are still there. At the minimum, good, developed AI should create opponents that take one look at my array of weaponry and just turn around and run away. Now that would be impressive!

Physics. In a short while, a deluge of titles will be unleashed upon us, promising to smash, shatter, and ignite many an innocent game world. From *Half-Life 2* to the upcoming *Cell Factor*, these games hold advanced physics as a truer form of new-style gaming. Though some of the possibilities are starting to emerge in this field, there are distinct hardware limitations on its advancement. In many ways, physics are inextricably tied to graphics systems.

The real state of “next-gen” should probably be called “now-gen.” It’s no longer something nebulous and distant. We’ve watched the previews. We’ve read the specs. It is part of our landscape, even before it has arrived. So, where are the whacked-out ideas? Has all of the creativity been buried in asset production?

To me, real next-gen is surprising. It’s out in left field. It’s not something that I already have a front-row seat for. Essentially, it is a figment of wild speculation. So allow me to speculate.

### Next-Gen

Before I touch next-gen, I want to mention that most developers find it naturally difficult to approach development from the user’s side of the screen. There are so many considerations in building what

designers need that there is little time to act proactively on behalf of perceived user behavior. This is true in any type of software development. There are minor exceptions, but it’s nonetheless a fact of life. This applies to next-gen game development, as you’ll see.

As everybody knows, the biggest problem in game development, and one of the most necessary components of production, is content. It’s costly. It’s time-consuming. It’s “the long pull” on the project schedule. Whether building a huge environment or filling it with stuff, content is the biggest hurdle in game production. Smaller developers can’t compete with it. Bigger developers are struggling to conquer it, with a rising bar for quality and scope.

So let’s just suppose that the developers solve this problem, I mean really solve it. First, they’d rejoice. Would that change the games we play? I think we’d get the same stuff, just a lot more of it. Before long, we’d be back where we started. Take a massive game like *WoW*. What is the environment? It’s a shifting frame of reference on a surface plane. Can you pick up a rock? Can you cut down a tree? Can you mercilessly windmill your sword and make the slightest scratch on the most defenseless of bookcases? Nope. That’s because you’re playing in a painting. The world itself is static. Take any game and watch how much interaction you really have. Ninety-nine percent of our games are composed of inert backdrops. All those beautiful art assets that cost millions are expensive paperweights, gameplay-wise.

I think the answer is procedural content. Game developers know procedural content—how it is difficult, how it would be like starting over. But what they’re talking about is production, whereas few are talking about the actual games. They’ve forgotten the users, placing focus elsewhere. Everyone is so busy solving content from a development perspective

that they've forgotten why they need to do it in the first place.

Most content, as we know, is produced "manually" via slow, sculpting clicks in a 3-D package. Precious little attention is paid to more algorithmic methods of creating objects and environments. Many developers have their heads buried so deeply into the pipeline that they've completely forgotten what powers their graphics packages in the first place. It's a shame, because procedural content buys you so much when you consider objects that are calculated versus merely displayed. They're no longer static meshes that require articulation for the animators. They're entities that exist within the greater context of the world in which they're placed. From a developmental perspective, this is powerful stuff. Is it possible that these techniques have been abandoned? Where do we go from here?

There exists a wealth of information about world creation, primarily from our real world. Yes, I'm suggesting "growing" our games from biological algorithms or evolving systems. One good book is *A New Kind of Science: Cellular Automata*, a proposed suite of mathematics for biological systems. Is it possible to bridge this into 3-D graphical environments? Well, in the "old days," this was how graphics were done! Think of fractal-generated landscapes. Apparently this was too difficult, because today it's a largely uncharted topic.

Don't believe me? Then answer this question. What type of algorithms does SpeedTree use, exactly?

SpeedTree is a tool for rapid tree creation within digital environments. It sells very well. Its algorithm is an L-system, devised initially as a mathematical descriptor for the growing patterns of fungus. Fungus! In fact, these L-systems are precursors to "old" fractal generators. So why stop at trees? Even man-made objects have self-similarity, a requirement for representation within a recursive

fractal algorithm.

I mention SpeedTree because it is the most widely used piece of middleware in the industry of gamespaces, and the type of content that it produces is easily on par with a piece of hand-crafted foliage. All of this is just from the developmental side of things. We should need a reason for this content to exist in our games to begin with, other than just static and inert pieces of window dressing.

We need to approach it via gameplay and dynamic environments. Map those to procedural content and the techniques will follow. Will Wright's *Spore* is an excellent example of this in motion. In fact, he's gone one smarter by making content creation the primary objective of the game. *Spore* is the fruit of a game-centric approach to design. It's a harder road, admittedly, and it's taken them several years to build it. The gameplay result will be innovative and quite unlike where we've been before. *Spore* is a next-gen game.

I mentioned *WoW* earlier and defined its gameplay within a spatial environment. Now, look at Monopoly or any old family boardgame. Besides the mechanics (the rules), the board itself is the defining aspect of the game. The "space" of Monopoly never changes. It is pretty hard to manipulate a piece of cardboard. Now look at multiplayer Capture the Flag or Deathmatch maps. The map plus mechanics is the game. *Counterstrike*? *Unreal Tournament*? These map-centric games are old-fashioned relics of the cardboard era. If I were looking for simple map adjustment, I'd play the random dungeons in *Diablo*.

No, I'm talking about adjusting everything—rocks, trees, grass, water. Take a container and fill it. Pour the water on the rocks. Crush the rocks and make mud. I'm suggesting we create procedural play spaces, where the world itself is dynamic and responds to the player.

What gameplay elements emerge

from environments that shift like this? How about a completely destructible environment, or by the same token, a constructable one? Or a responsive environment, that merges a fantastic realm with a furious gunfight; paths open up where there were none; the board game is no longer a board game. It's heartening to see the newest *Portal* demo from Valve incorporate exactly this type of element. All of these ideas are possible within a procedurally based gaming framework.

This is new-style gaming, is it not? With a whole new set of rules, choices, and expectations creating a brand new possibility space. A new style of game begets a new style of development, yet procedural content is still lamented as

the "impossible dream" by many game developers. Is that not the hallmark of a truly next-gen concept?

Many games will follow *Spore*'s "procedurally enhanced" vision. We've also seen examples in the past: in text-based worlds. We used to call them MOOs (MUD object oriented).<sup>1</sup> Obviously, the mechanics differ, but MOOs are spiritually close to what I'm suggesting.

Rapid change is the clearest sign of revolution. At best, the latest gaming technologies feature iterative improvement on what's already here. Great leaps in high-fidelity cutscenes, controller systems, and physics are not enough to signal great changes in gaming. Is it possible for us to fast forward to the next next-gen? 🎮



1 A MUD, of course, is a multi-user dungeon, the text-based predecessor of *World of Warcraft*.





# Mommy, Where Does Novelty Come From?

## A Parable

By M. O'Connor

Once, a long time ago in a place that isn't here, a scorpion came upon a river far too deep for him to cross. And so he clacked his claws in frustration and looked about for a solution. His eyestalks came across a squirrel enjoying her evening meal on the far bank.

"Would you please carry me across this river?" the scorpion asked. "I'd be ever so grateful." Upon saying this he batted his eyestalklashes.

"You must be nuts," said the squirrel. "How do I know you won't just kill me?"

"Well, I'd still be stuck here no closer to the other edge, and I've got a date with a real hot piece of tail tonight, sister," the scorpion replied.

And so it went, back and forth between the two animals in an argot cribbed from late-night movies and the fiction of Raymond Chandler, with the squirrel positing various actions of nefarious mischief and misdeed upon her tufted person. The scorpion reasonably countered all of her objections and pointed out any attempt at a double-cross would be a murder-suicide on his part, and hardly conducive to his stated goal of crossing the river.

And so the squirrel finally asked why the scorpion would refrain from killing her once they reached the other side of the river.

"What, me?" cried the scorpion, his

claws pointing towards his thorax in a fit of disbelief. "That wouldn't be fair at all. In fact, Madame, I rather regret the implicit speciesism inherent in your belief that just because an animal is outfitted with a poisonous barb he is incapable of any action other than violence. It would be unethical of me to lay a vile ambush when only by your grace and leave—" he paused to smile, and continued, "am I able to cross this viciously rough river. Scorpions may indeed be poisonous, but our feelings can still be hurt."

"Very well," said the squirrel, whose taste for maudlin drama and sheer claptrap began and ended with the plays of Bertolt Brecht. She crossed the river, pausing only to shake out her tail on the far bank before gathering the scorpion to her back and returning to the current.

Halfway through the river the scorpion's tail flailed at her body, without warning or reason. With a tongue rapidly going numb from the noxious toxin, the squirrel asked, "Why?"

"I had to. It was in my nature," the scorpion replied with calm resignation and no hint of regret.

"You are such an asshole," gasped the squirrel, as water filled lungs that would draw treetop air no more and rushed into a mouth that would never again feel the dry and tangy aftertaste of an acorn.

## And Love Is a Battlefield

Novelty is a scorpion. It gives you a reason to cross the river, but can kill your reason

for doing so after time. The videogame industry lives and dies by novelty, and so does everyone who follows in its wake. It's the only reason that the now obsolete concept of "next-gen" still has any pull on the hearts of mankind: graphical updates are the most obviously saleable form of novelty when it comes to games, although if the Wii takes off we'll see more excursions into increasingly novel control schemes.

## For This People's Heart Has Grown Dull, and Their Ears Are Heavy of Hearing, and Their Eyes They Have Closed, Lest They Should Perceive with Their Eyes, and Hear with Their Ears, and Understand with Their Heart, and Turn for Me to Heal Them. (Isaiah 6:9-10)

The moral of the squirrel's story is that self-destruction is either a part of human nature inflicted upon ourselves by our own hand, or that peril lies of the minds and hearts of others who would sink us out of habit and destroy their own lives in the process. The story of the squirrel is also the story of the drive for novelty and entertainment. People create aesthetically pleasing but useless (as far as survival and propagation are concerned) objects and performances in search of the creation of something new.

## Lord, I Don't Care if You Break Me

Novelty is in one sense a lack of control; it's part of the thrill, in fact. At one point, the term "next-generation" was a very

novel and crisp marketing tactic. It is now a joke of sorts that represents the failure of novelty to deliver on promises implicit and explicit. But why, then, does anyone manifest frustration? We accept this march of progress (i.e., novelty) for a number of reasons, but mainly because it has always been thus. Novelty is the girlfriend calling you at two in the morning because she had a bad dream: through her reliance on you, she controls your life.

## The Price of Existence Is Eternal Warfare

I think it's important to understand that there is nothing wrong with novelty. It is the driving force behind creation's successes and failures, the destructive creativity of the market (i.e., people) in full swing. Governments fear it, since they are made up of a gang of pre-recordings who have no use for such unbridled—and often untaxed—expressions of novelty. Most of the squirrels drown on the way across this river. Those who don't fall to drug abuse, hubris, madness, and sadness carry their scaly passenger safely to the other shore, only to turn around and shoulder yet another potentially deadly package of novelty.

## The Price of Eternal Warfare Is Existence

The most obvious example springs from these pages, and appears in many forms. The rediscovery of an old game brings forth memories of how a game was, and how the player felt when they played. It can be done well, by shedding light on the subjective and personal and making it larger than just one experience, regardless of the judgment of history. Novelty is an engine that makes the past hum as it was for one brief moment, before the garden was closed to Adam and Eve.

## There Is No Friend Anywhere

There was never any Garden of Eden. It was only kids with games, but now those kids have kids and look into the mirror wondering where the time went. Novelty is a thief, and its sting steals time away from our lives. The pursuit of novelty not tempered by compassion and reason is a self-abusive hedonism, a modern mirror held up to the face of a thousand packrats. What will they see when they search for the time that slipped through their fingers? Will they find wrinkles, debt, and carpal tunnel syndrome? Will they go so far as to write essays to try and capture

those moments of perfect absorption in their play, when they were unconcerned with the politics of fanaticism and the draw of novelty? When the play was truly the thing, there was nothing else but that moment: infants in love with their reflection.

## There Is No Enemy Anywhere

The real next-gen is a mixture of novelty and competence, when the moment arrives and competence is no longer surprisingly novel. Even graphics play a part. I've seen it myself. 🎮





# Untold Tales from the Arcade

**The Battle for the Kingdom Continues!**  
By Francesco-Alessio Ursini

I have played a lot of games in my life, some were sci-fi, others were fantasy. It is important to roam around the vast plains of our favorite imaginary worlds every once in a while, and to relish the marvelous days spent fighting unicorns, minotaurs, trolls, and other creatures of might and magic.

I played most of these games in my uncle's arcade, fighting real trolls while I tried to fight the sprite ones: an epic fight to dispel the damn kids who harassed me while I tried to nail that hard one-credit clear, who bugged me between a magic fireball and a death spell of doom, and who used their mystic powers of annoying innocent players to confound quest for the holy grail of the top score.

But of course, good always prevails, so my epic struggles were successful regardless of the endless difficulties I had to faces, the perils I had to overcome, the kids I had to slap. Let us go to those lands of wonder and mystery, and celebrate—among other things—more gems of gameplay!

## The Glorious Ascension to Babel

*Magic Sword* is one of the coolest games you can have the pleasure of playing in an arcade. Perhaps its charm comes from its complex and elegant gameplay. Maybe

it has to do with the fine graphics and the lush variety of enemies, or with the idea of ascending some Babelian tower, defeating the evil demon, then facing your own demons. It's probably also the overall feeling of a full fantasy adventure with an arcade pace, something almost too good to be true.

The game is pretty complex. You play a powerful warrior who can be helped by eight different companions, each with a unique set of abilities; and you need to ascend the mysterious tower from which a powerful demon rules your oppressed kingdom, with a fist of iron. During the fifty stages, you can encounter all sorts of fantasy creatures (including Moai; don't ask); discover tons of secret items, extra items, and secret passages; fight the same boss over and over again; and score fantastillions of points at level 45.

Yes, I'm serious about the boss. Capcom slacked off and just recycled the same (cool) dragon a lot. Well, there's also a manticore and the flying worms in stage 35. But that's not a problem: the game offers much more variety than any other fantasy title ever, in terms of enemies. And if this is not enough, the different routes allow the players to make their ascension to the heavens even more elaborate.

The game offers a lot of "secret routes": short-cuts to further levels or, in some cases, alternate versions of the same place. The basic idea is that the tower is actually a system of towers, and every six or seven floors, you battle a

boss, move across a bridge, and go to the next tower. In some cases, you can discover a hidden passage and ascend the tower from another route, with all the risks (many) and the rewards (many as well) that this implies. Some alternative routes are rather nasty, and they involve themed floors—like tons of satyr-like creatures and giant lizards, or a plethora of undead popping up from everywhere.

And there's the time-based aspect. Your character loses energy every minute of life or so—ascending Babel consumes energy! So it's also necessary to clear a floor of its enemies in the shortest amount of time. True, a fairy will pop up to give back half a bar of energy every 300 thousand points or so, but you still need to be extremely fast and precise, which is by no means easy. Let's not forget, also, that doing things in a hurry may lead to disaster.

But the most epic aspect of this experience wasn't even in the game. I can clearly remember that there were at least ten of us rotating on the game during the long summer afternoons (while having breaks on *Dark Seal*, which I'll talk about soon), trying to crack the game down to the single lines of programming, discovering and memorizing the tiniest secrets and tricks. I still remember how we took notes and organized them in a giant handbook, which "the almighty Vittorio" was able to glance at even while playing. *Ascension to Babel* became a collective quest, a challenge between us and the programmers, in seeing who was the best in the fight against the gods.

It was also an interesting idea of design. The humble barbarians fight the demon sitting atop the city in the sky, wander inside entire worlds hidden in the walls of the gargantuan construction, and end up, after the almighty final battle, to meet the most difficult challenge ever. Would we accept the power of the gods, or would we throw it away, knowing it can only bring temptation and ultimately ruin? It was thus a quest inside the quest, with

some brilliantly designed stages evoking some of the most exotic and mysterious atmospheres found in my first fantasy sessions, back in the glorious D&D times.

At the same time, it was the ultimate challenge in gameplay, and it sparked one of the most interesting phases of my gaming activity. I remember fondly those hot afternoons spent dissecting and discussing the game. We analyzed the game like a mysterious alien artifact. We scoured the tricks we'd discovered to understand what we were missing, where to look for more points, hidden gems, and unfound treasures. The spiral of mysteries (and all towers in fantasy settings should go upwards, spiraling onto the heavens!) forced us to dwell for many hours on its floors, promising us scoring secrets behind sibylline hints hidden in the scenery.

After all these years, I look at the game, and I think on the quest within the quest. I think back to those friends roaming around the mysteries of the tower; most of them have disappeared from my own spiraling ascension. But then again, if a man ascends to the heavens only to find temptation and perhaps his own fall, we could wonder if heavens are, after all, benevolent, a doubt cast since Gilgamesh's time. A least, we did conquer that Babel, thanks to the common language of gaming passion.

## Isometric Forces of Evil

Data East was a "hidden bonus" of the arcade landscape. While almost none of their titles were truly epic, flamboyant masterpieces (except perhaps for *Magical Drop III*), the overall quality of their titles is truly impressive. Ok, most of their titles actually lacked in some minor aspects (mainly quality of animations and graphics), but they often pulled off excellent engines, creative mechanics, and brilliant games.

One of these brilliant ideas is *Dark*

*Seal* (which was called *Gate of Doom* in Japan and some other places). Despite an isometric view, multi-directional scrolling, four characters (the usual knight, a sexy priest, a ninja, and a kick-ass bard), the ability to build up a metamorphosis power-up (once the bar is full, you can change into some supernatural sdcreature, including a swine of course!), and a good choice of time-based power-ups, this title was a sleeper at the time.

It went unobserved for most of one spring in the '90s; my uncle was pretty disappointed and planned to give away the board. We were all busy dissecting *Magic Sword*, but since I had to queue a lot to play *Magic Sword*, I ended up putting the odd coin or two in this title.<sup>1</sup> After some plays, I realized that the title is actually solid and very well designed, albeit with a simpler engine.

So, while everyone tried to discover all the one gazillion secret passages of *Magic Sword*, I decided to also give this title a spin. Lo and behold, the game convinced me once I selected the bard and discovered how cool is to fight monsters with a pike.

Eventually, the other *Magic Sword* enthusiasts began to wonder: why does Francesco always play that other lame fantasy game? So a couple of buddies started to try out the game while waiting to play *Magic Sword*. Unsurprisingly enough, they also enjoyed the title, realizing that it was pretty solid in its simplicity.

At some point, a nice synergy grew between the two titles, *Dark Seal* and *Magic Sword*. People began to play *Dark Seal* as the more action-oriented title, while waiting to dissect and analyze the secret son of Babylon, *Magic Sword*. After all, *Dark Seal* has a gigantic beholder as the third boss, so it can't be anything but a great game, right? Except that at some point it becomes pretty hard.

The apparent "fill-in" revealed itself to be another tough battle as well. Its

difficulty mainly focused on the quite gruesome number of enemies to destroy and spells to dodge, but the true challenge came from the bosses. The fourth boss (a red dragon!) and the final boss (a dark knight!) proved to be a great source of stress for most of us. But still, we had to proceed further. And further we went, discovering all the tricks and safe-spots to beat the two creatures of evil.

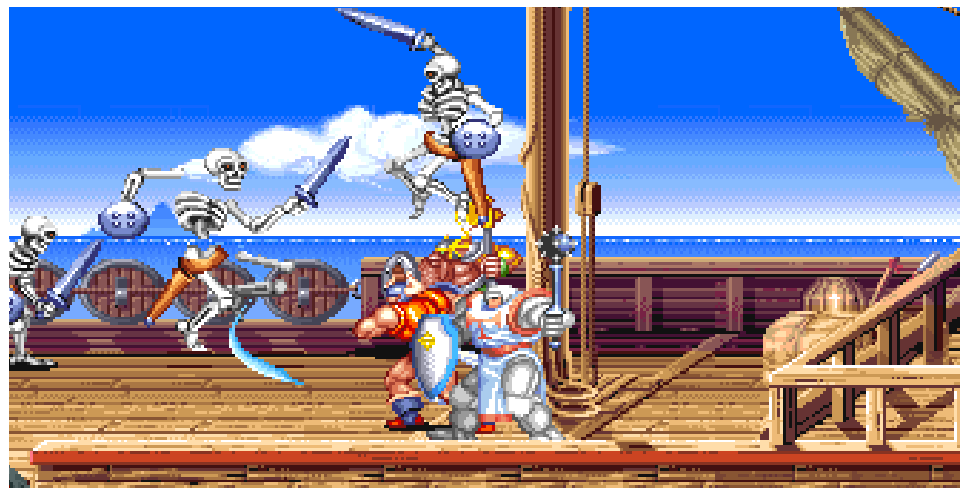
No, wait, that's a sweetened version of the facts—at some point, I decided to give up. I was really frustrated with the gigantic (almost the whole screen!) fourth boss, a red dragon with the bad habit of shooting balls of fire like a machine gun. Then, out of the heavens as an angel bringing mercy to the poor mortals, my uncle saw me playing and said:

"Circle around him and don't stay too long on a diagonal, cretin!"

Which was the sudden revelation that allowed me to proceed unscathed to the final stage. Then, the final boss became my new nemesis. Again, my uncle spent some time watching me play and came to the conclusion that I had to force the final boss to move along the border of the stage during its spinning attack. With these words of divine wisdom, my crusade became a triumphal victory over the forces of evil.

And, what's more important, it allowed me to enjoy beholder-killing while waiting for *Magic Sword* to become free: because beholder-killing is indeed one of the noblest activities that a human soul can be focused on, in the name of peace, justice and the generic kingdom to be saved from the evil creatures. In a nutshell, some stereotypes should really be endorsed and nurtured: and, much to Capcom's shame, *Magic Sword* lacked some good beholder-slashing.

At this point, then, we should explain all other cool features that *Magic Sword* had, though.



## King of Dragons, Lord of Fantasy Lands

Let's see...1991 was the year of a certain one-on-one fighter. I can't remember much of it, except that everyone wanted to play that. Oh, all right, it was *Street Fighter 2*. But I, on the other hand ... wanted to play it as well. But since the queue to have my ass handed to me was so long, I often spent my waiting time playing other games, like *King of Dragons*.

*King of Dragons* is a nice little game by Capcom. Basically it is a mix of beat-'em-up and scrolling action games. Five different fighters, two projectile-firing (Elf and Mage) and three weapon-slashing (Cleric, Fighter, Dwarf), for sixteen D&D-esque levels. The game is your usual RPG fare—score points, level up, get new weapons, and beat the shit out of the final red dragon in the secret cave atop the mountains. Nothing particularly original, and *Magic Sword* did the same in a more elegant way.

At the same time, this is one of the most

fun titles of that period. Fun because of its simple but elegant action. Fun if played at right difficulty: my uncle had it set at the maximum difficulty level, and it was a well-paced challenge. But in my various ramblings around the city, I encountered various copies (this was one of those games that were everywhere) that were set at default, and I realized that the original version was too easy! At least I had my uncle, no?

The game quickly became the favorite pastime of the *Street Fighter* crowd, and many people started to share my passion for the title when they discovered how to get the true high scores—by avoiding the more powerful weapons and being forced to hit bosses and enemies more often. And of course, all this was done at maximum difficulty. It was a way to increase my passion for the cheesy genre of fantasy games, and many afternoons were spent trying to recreate the same atmosphere with dice and pencils.

*King of the Dragons*, in some sense, represented the simple and unproblematic

<sup>1</sup> Arcade gaming often meant standing in a line. I'd like to have a penny for all the games I discovered, in perfect serendipity, while waiting for another title to be free.

fantasy dreams of my youth. The game represents the most linear and solitary vein of the of the many fantasy-based titles of those days. While other titles preferred gory atmospheres (*Cadash*) or distant esoteric worlds (*Magic Sword*), this title had all the flavor of the first campaigns of D&D, played while drinking orange juice and eating cookies at friends' houses.

I must confess that I never learned to play with the three short-range fighters: in my cheapness, I focused on the elf or on the mage, since they also offered occasions to have marathon scoring sessions. Years passed, and I discovered MAME, and I learned to one-credit the game with the fighter, the cleric, and even the dwarf. At the same time, I realized that on the standard difficulty (so easy!), all of my scoring efforts were ridiculously inflated by the much higher amount of hit points by enemies, much to my frustration.

And I went back to those happy days when I spent my afternoons playing this title, alone or with my friend "Furcio,"<sup>2</sup> before going to play Greyhawk or Forgotten Realms adventures at our local RPG club.<sup>3</sup> My future would be different, of course. I had yet to discover Chaosium, with *Call of Cthulhu*, and the king of (Gormen)ghastly landscapes, his Majesty, the Emperor of Melniboné, Elric.

(There is one more mysterious hero to be mentioned, but I'll leave that for the next article, in which we will cover the Ozma wars.)

But if fantasy can be cheesy fights and lizardmen and wizards, it can also represent the struggle of one man in his violent search for his own destiny. This quest had another, and sadly final, chapter in the excellent title known as...

## Warrior Blade—Rastan's Saga, Chapter III

The story of how I became a king is so long that I cannot tell it in just one night.

However, I will keep telling it as long as I can, of those days filled with danger and treasures.

I can still see myself, with the eyes of my memory, approaching the *Warrior Blade* cab, back in those lazy, hot summer days. I was mesmerized, because my uncle hadn't told me anything about a new Rastan title. I just entered the arcade and heard this voice. A rush of emotions went through my chest as I slowly realized who was pronouncing those words—it was a new Rastan game!

A new chapter of this melancholic saga entered my blood and veins, and for months I was Rastan, with his chiseled muscles and his incredibly long sword.<sup>4</sup>

The gameplay kicked me hard, though. As much as I liked the title, I never was able to go through all stages; I was never able to complete the game in less than three credits.

But still, I was enthralled by the beautiful atmospheres of Rastania: the snowy peaks, the dangerous shores, the bewitching "Spiral Life" song with its incredibly evocative and nostalgic pace. I was Rastan, fighting for a glorious future, and at the same time wondering if my spiraling progress was really progress at all. Wondering if, captured by the bittersweet melody composed by Masahiko Takagi,<sup>5</sup> the spiral ascension could have been some kind of weird metaphor of my life.

*Warrior Blade* was, and still is, a pretty hard game, with some tons of secrets. I never was able to discern all the possible tricks to get the extra stages, and neither could any of the numerous fans. I remember a pretty big number of enthusiasts and none could complete the game unless playing in team. Still, I remember fondly its sheer class and elaborate fighting system, with the capability for huge combos and the beating of five or six enemies at once. By Crom, Taito really understood the spirit of the Conan novels.

The game perfectly recreates the atmosphere of perils and wonders that lies behind Conan's wandering adventures. The kingdom of Rastania, much like the kingdom of Deerzar, comes alive thanks to all small but classy details scattered across the game. The world map is finely detailed; there are great touches like, the

road paved with bones; there is a vast variety of enemies, humans and meta-humans alike. And in all of this, there was an awesome mage who is kicked to cast spells! Ok, this is probably a cheesy aspect, but we're not here to celebrate the serious elements of the game (the null set, honestly).

I don't even want to celebrate the title at all, I think. Everything is covered with a veil of nostalgia when my mind wanders back to this title. I played this title in a weird phase of my life. Maybe this title brings to mind my weird moments—the musings of things past, and my desire to wander around and find a kingdom to be the king of. That desire was ever present when I played the title, with the added irony that I was never able to conquer the game properly, a small defeat that somehow haunts me still, after all these years.

And then, the end. I really adored the final stage: a volcanic isle with a mysterious ruler. The final fight occurs at the center of a place that's a sister to R'l'yeh, and beautiful parallax effects evoke the stormy tropical seas of Rastania, on a warm, sunny day of glorious battle. Finally, the infinite square where Lord Dupon<sup>6</sup> waits, to tell us:

*You want to be a hero, too, but you have the same fate as I.*

And then the final battle against the demonic creature. I wonder what his final words were meant to be. As silly as it sounds, I think they must have been a bad omen, especially for the series. And perhaps for the player? But, of course, that would be silly speculation, wouldn't



2 It's not really an Italian word, and no one (including the guy himself) knows what the nickname really means, making it even more kick-ass.

3 It later turned out to be a shady place for neo-Nazi recruits, but that's another story.

4 I didn't care for the other two available characters. They were actually fun to use, but not Rastan. A Rastan game must be played with Rastan, by Crom!

5 Also known as MAR, of Night Striker fame.

6 This is apparently an homage to Phelios, in which the god Hades, for absolutely unknown reasons, is called Dupon.

it? After all, we're the makers of our destiny, and all comments we can make about life are trivial (and those inspired by videogames are triviality squared).

I think back often to those days. More than the games, and the fun, I think at the kid I was. Much like Conan and Rastan, I dreamed of and fought for a better future, but at least mine was not paved with violence (and lizardmen). I also listen to the *Warrior Blade* OST, and I go back to my personal Rastania, the snowy peaks of the mountains surrounding my city, the mysterious forests, the thrills of the savage world surrounding me. Have I become a king? Not yet, but ...

*If I have the time, I will tell you about one of my other adventures.*

This was the last adventure that Rastan was able to tell us about. I always wonder what could have become of his story, if Taito had made an F3 version, or even one for the FX-1. Sadly, they didn't. But at least I will still be able to tell you of my adventures for a while, of those days filled with dangers and wonders. And arcade thugs harassing me while I played games. Which brings me back to the beginning.

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I have played a lot of arcade titles in my life: not only of spaceships, WWII planes, and secret agents, but also of powerful magicians, Eldren archers, ninjas and bards, slain beholders, and barbarians who ascend to the heavens to fight the ultimate temptation.

Some of these stories are but minuscule episodes in the tapestry of much grander epics; others are stand-alone tales of justice and peace, at the cost of sacrifice and blood. All of them are part of my arcade experience, isles of the great arcade archipelago. And our journey has not ended yet: stay tuned for the third and final installment of this epic story through the fantasy kingdoms of the arcade world! 🎮





# Why Game?

## Reason #6: Nostalgia

By Sergei Servianov

A month ago, I was writing a letter to this magazine's infrequent and wildly unstable contributor Brian Roesler in which I mentioned the bitterness I felt as I was returning home after a sour date. In that letter I stated that for some reason, drunk and wobbling around midtown Manhattan at four in the morning, I began humming the first stage music from *Mega Man X5*.

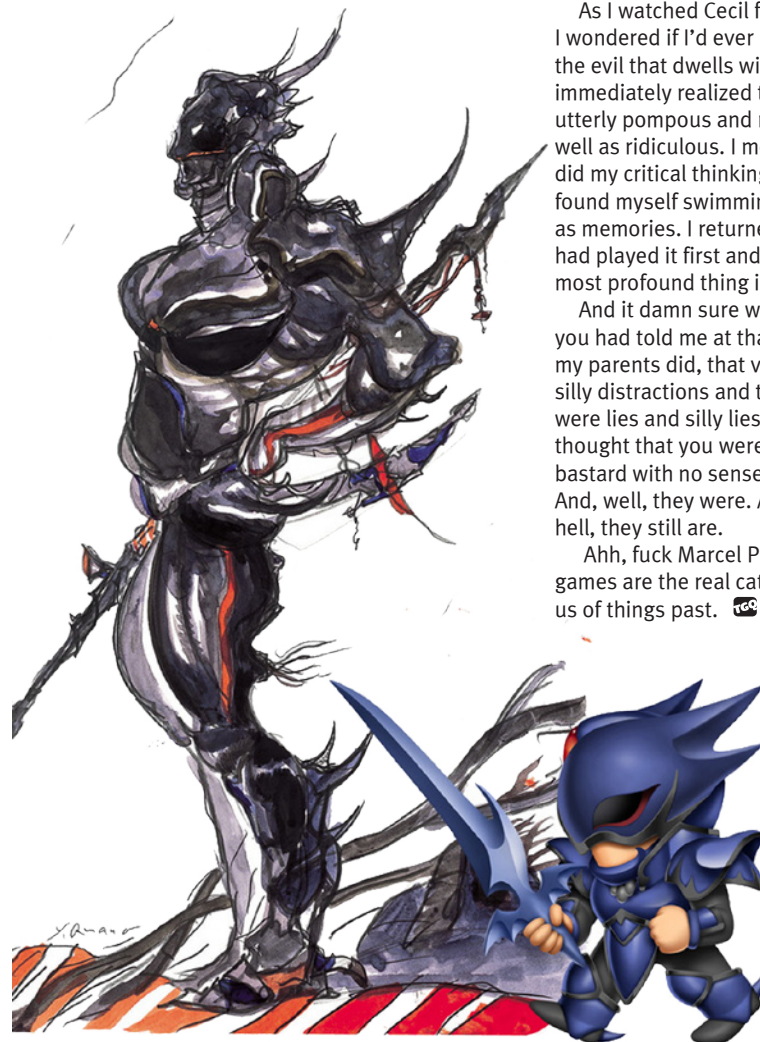
That scene above is precisely why I have yet to assign games to my mental dustbin; despite my best efforts they continue to influence my life, even when I don't want them to. Every generation has an art that gives its youth meaning, and for us (and by "us" I mean the pitiful nerds reading this magazine) videogames have ended up being the purple cloak in which our hazy, nostalgic youth is wrapped. Despite the utter ridiculousness of most of the things that videogamers admired at the time (and continue to admire), we remain loyal to videogames, because to stop playing is to admit that our youth is now over. I can think of no other reason for the growing trend of people continually buying games and not playing them for more than five minutes.

I won't say that I enjoy videogames anymore. I have yet to play a game that has truly captivated me in more than a year; nevertheless, I enjoy them for the nostalgia that they trigger. If one can't

enjoy the present, then remembering the past is one of the few pleasures left to the melancholy.

On my first day of work at my new job, I felt horrible because of the nervousness of finding myself in unfamiliar territory, and because I was running a high fever. I was sweating, trembling, and coughing so hard that I had ended up smoking only one cigarette that day (as opposed to the two packs I usually enjoy). I felt afraid, hopeless, and utterly depressed; as I typed in another long list of data into the worksheet, I suddenly found myself humming the theme of "Hydrocity Zone Act 2" from *Sonic 3*. My heart cooled and seemed to sink a few inches as I recalled playing the game at my cousin's house when I was twelve, the smell of his dog who circled around the TV, and the bright summer leaves swaying on the tree branches outside the window. And then I saw myself as a seven-year-old, sitting on a fold-out chair next to some bragging, loudmouthed upperclassmen, watching them complete *Sonic 2* at my school's videogame club. I remembered the feelings: the blind optimism for a future filled with adventure and sorrow, friends and laughter.

I then realized I was at work, using the same keyboard that I'm using now—exactly two months later (I noted the exact time of that memory on a notepad and oddly enough, as I'm typing this essay on Thursday, September 7, 2006, exactly



two months have passed since that day—going through the motions of my grown-up job. If only I'd been born a blue 16-bit hedgehog.

To give another example of why games give our lives meaning and to further sentimentalize my existence, I'll recall an incident from last New Year's Eve. On that day, I had bought *Final Fantasy IV Advance* at the videogame store run by a real-live North Korean not too far from my house.

As I watched Cecil fight his shadow, I wondered if I'd ever be able to defeat the evil that dwells within my soul. I immediately realized that I was being utterly pompous and melodramatic, as well as ridiculous. I mean, where the hell did my critical thinking go? I suddenly found myself swimming in the LCL known as memories. I returned to the time when I had played it first and thought it to be the most profound thing in the world.

And it damn sure was at the time. If you had told me at that young age, like my parents did, that videogames were silly distractions and that videogames were lies and silly lies at that, I would've thought that you were a liar and a jealous bastard with no sense of beauty or style. And, well, they were. And for most of us, hell, they still are.

Ahh, fuck Marcel Proust and his cake, games are the real catalyst for reminding us of things past. 🍷



## We're Sorry, But Our Princess Is in Another Castle.

One day the kingdom of the peaceful videogame people was invaded by the Next Generation, a tribe of turtles famous for their photo-realistic black magic. The quiet, peace-loving Videogame People were turned into mere stones, bricks and even horse-hair plants, and the Videogame Kingdom fell into ruin.

The only one who can undo the magic spell on the Videogame People and return them to their normal selves is the Princess Gameplay, the daughter of the Videogame King. Unfortunately, she is presently in the hands of the great Next Generation turtle king.

The Gamer's Quarter, the hero of the story (maybe) hears about the Videogame People's plight and sets out on a quest to free Princess Gameplay from the evil Next Generation and restore the fallen kingdom of the Videogame People.

We are The Gamer's Quarter! It's up to us to save the Videogame Kingdom from the black magic of the Next Generation!

