

THE GAMER'S QUARTER

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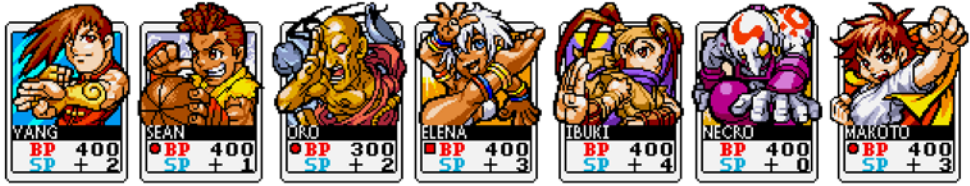
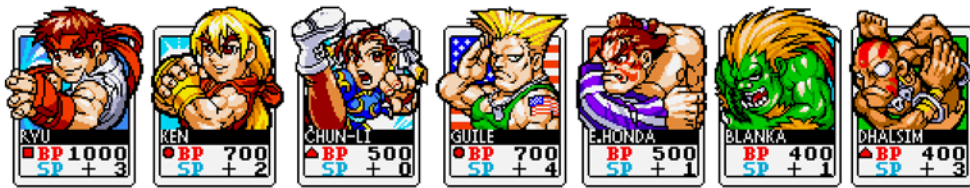


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From the Editor's Desk

Keep On Keeping On
By Matthew Williamson

It's been a little while since our last issue came out; I hope you enjoyed the anticipation. Time is something strange, though. Has it really been over two years now? It goes so fast.

In the past twenty nine months, I have attempted many things with this magazine and have always aimed at giving the reader the highest quality product. In doing this, I sacrificed much of my free time—time with my wife, time with my pets, time with my family, and even time with my games. I don't regret a second of it. All the fights, all the sleepless nights (and mornings), even all the microwaved coffee.

But it's almost time to move on. The magazine will continue, but I personally am at a point in my life where I have less and less time to dedicate to it. And soon, I'm going to be making a large change in my life: I'm going back to school.

Unfortunately, the criticism of games hasn't really progressed much since issue one, even though the ranks of those critical of games have grown. So, I'll be studying Film and English instead. Hopefully, in time, I can return to the game scene more fully and help expand the perception of games further.

As a trusted friend said to me, "As long as you keep writing and creating, that's all I care about." And that's what I'll do, and what I'll help others to do as well.

But don't worry about *The Gamer's Quarter*; we have big plans. We will be shifting from a strict quarterly schedule to something more free-form, still aiming to publish four issues a year. We are working to develop our website, and soon we hope to see some of our earlier articles finally in print.

The magazine has been a gigantic undertaking, and there have been many people at my side for these past years who I would like to thank. Not just the spectacular writers and editors, but their family and friends who I know have been put to the side once or twice for the sake of *TGQ*. Your sacrifice means more to me and this magazine than you may ever know.

I would also like to thank the readers. Many of you, from all over the world, have been with us since our first issue. The support you have shown, in your mail and on our forums, is outstanding. It means a lot, not only to me but to the rest of the *Gamer's Quarter* team. Without you we wouldn't be where we are now.

Keep reading, and we'll keep writing and creating. 🎮



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On the Grand Master's Stage

Strider—ARC (C64, NES, SMS, GEN, T16, PS1)

By Ancil Anthropy
Art By Chris Harback

Capcom's *Strider* opens with a figure sailing on a robotic hang-glider through a night lit by searchlights. A lattice of city lights twinkles in the distance; in the foreground, gold, onion-domed towers loom, their narrow windows glowing red. "Kazakhstan CCP," reads a stylized Cyrillic subtitle, "2048." The figure dismounts onto a rooftop, and the glider continues into the night alone.

Strider is theater.

A great deal of detail and care has been paid to every element of the game. The characters—a weary Russian minister, a troupe of triplet acrobats, a battleship captain who dresses in near pirate regalia (as if to add romance to his role as little more than a lapdog for an invader from the stars)—have detail etched into their sprites. In the between-stage dialogue, each speaks his or her own language—Russian, Japanese, English. Their threats of "The Master's" strength carry an almost pleading tone, one which hints at experience. "You can't go up against The Master. He's too strong. He controls everything."

The music is also strong, setting a mood both proud and wary; it is by turns heroic and brash, dark and brooding. There is a chiming futurism which

falters and is consumed by fear. A Cold War tone pervades, reminding us that this is a 1989 game set in Russia. When Strider Hiryu, in stage 2, climbs out of a booby-trapped warehouse into the bright light of a Siberian mountainside, a victorious fanfare rings but is almost immediately swallowed by doubt as a mechanized bounty hunter swoops down from the sky.

The stages contain just as much detail. The first stage, Kazakhstan—a once-proud Soviet republic that has since become little more than the seat from which Grand Master Meio rules his empire—contains the recurring image of a red star missing one of its points. They are emblazoned on the Roman-columned State buildings that Hiryu passes in his battles with green-uniformed Russian soldiers who, through the course of the stage, are increasingly replaced by mechanical automatons. At the stage's end, Hiryu confronts the Politburo that has failed its people, retaining power only as a dead husk in the pocket of an extraterrestrial conqueror. Its apparatchiks attack Hiryu with a weary resignation.


These things give the game a sense of depth and a feeling of history—but they're incidental, a painted backdrop. A play requires a player, and the drama is what unfolds upon the stages. The *narrative*, as opposed to the story, is that which the player herself enacts.

Those stages bristle with life. After

that robot glider wings its way back into the night, Hiryu confronts a doped-up Russian strongman, battles a swarm of mosquito-like robots on the roof of the capital, dodges reflecting lasers in a tiny onion dome, and fights an enormous hammer-and-sickle-wielding centipede. In later stages he'll leap between helicopters, dodge bombs from above, battle the mechanical heart of an airship in zero gravity, and ride dinosaurs along the floor of an Amazonian jungle.

The discourse of game design borrows yet another term from the theater to describe these exquisitely choreographed dramatic moments: set pieces. *Strider* has many such moments and strings them together so seamlessly that they do not feel staged at all. At one point, Hiryu fights a robotic gorilla, which explodes when defeated, setting fire to the floor, forcing Hiryu to climb up a vent in the ceiling leading to a mountaintop, where the mechanized bounty hunter Solo waits. At his death, Solo detonates a series of explosives on the mountainside, forcing Hiryu to sprint down the slope and leap to the next peak, where he finds a towering electrical grid to explore.

The fires, the ambushes, the explosions are the translucent hand of the developers directing you—who, indeed, are merely playing out a part—to the next scene in the script. It is a performance. And each time you play the game, you better learn your part. In the theater of the game, it is the audience who has the lead role.

Strider is a beautiful play. It is rife with tension, passion, danger and drama. And it is all the more real because it does not take place in a cutscene movie, a paragraph of scripted dialogue, or any element lifted from a non-participatory medium. The drama that occurs on *Strider's* stages has the player at the heart of it. 





Goading 'n Gouging

***Ghosts 'n Goblins, Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts, Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins*—ARC, NES, GEN, SNES, PSP (C64, AMI, ZXS, X68, SWN, GBC, GBA, PS1, PS2, SAT, AST, CPC, PC)**

By Matthew Williamson

Art By Benjamin Rivers

The Ghosts 'n Goblins games do not compromise. They are stark, bold constructions, rigidly focused in intent and in design, and they don't mess around. They don't let you mess around either; if you do, you will make a mistake, and if you make a mistake, you will die. Perhaps because of this, the Ghosts 'n Goblins series does not quite have the international name recognition of, say, Shigeru Miyamoto's Super Mario games: there is a difference in attitude. Miyamoto is very interested in making his games accessible—he is interested to the point of making his productions increasingly cute and cuddly, holding the player's hand more and more. The Ghosts 'n Goblins series, on the other hand, conceived by Tokuro Fujiwara, has fundamentally different aims.

Ghosts 'n Goblins has been around for over twenty years and has clearly achieved a tremendous level of success in its own right, but its success is primarily among people who already play videogames and understand them, and who can appreciate the Ghosts 'n Goblins school of discipline. Normal people

have difficulty playing these games. They get frustrated. They curse and throw controllers at walls. They think that Ghosts 'n Goblins hates them. But in this, they are dead wrong.

The first Ghosts 'n Goblins game that I played was the version released for the NES—I had managed, miraculously, to get the last copy at Toys "R" Us. With that near-miss behind me, I was prepared to relax as I turned the game on for the first time.

Ghosts 'n Goblins tells the tale of Sir Arthur. The love of his life, the princess Prin-Prin, was stolen from him while they were having a picnic, he wearing nothing but his boxers. Arthur, like a bizarre videogame Orpheus, must journey into the Ghoul Realm to save her.

This story is, of course, entirely ridiculous. Mostly because of the boxers at the picnic. I still can't get that image out of my mind. The overwhelming silliness of that scene made me expect an equally light-hearted, insubstantial game, and I met with quite a surprise. *Ghosts 'n Goblins* is frustrating on multiple levels. Arthur's movements and skills are extremely limited—jumps are stiff and feel like commitments, because once you hit the button to jump you can't change direction in mid-air at all. Many of the stronger enemies require multiple hits with Arthur's weapon, often at ranges that are too close to kill them in time.

Arthur runs through the Ghoul Realm

wearing a suit of armor; if he gets hit once, the armor shatters and disappears, and suddenly he's running around in his boxers again. But there's nothing funny about the boxer-clad Arthur taking a blind leap into an enemy or a bottomless pit and accidentally dying. That shit is just frustrating; though I suppose the oddness of the juxtaposition was compelling enough to keep me playing, even though the game brutally crushed me time and time again.

This is because, while *Ghosts 'n Goblins* is painful, maybe even exquisitely so, after a while the burn begins to feel kind of good. I mean, I still haven't properly finished the NES version. There are two levels that I cannot get past without a password. Hell, I can't properly complete any of the games. "Properly" completing a Ghosts 'n Goblins game requires you to not only finish the game once, but to go back through the entire thing again, at a higher difficulty level.

Ghouls 'n Ghosts, the second game in the series, was one I had never been able to finish without cheating until very recently. It took a huge amount of near-masochistic focus on my part: the game trained me, over and over again, in how it wanted to be played. Every action, every motion, every twitch of the controller burned itself into my muscle memory. When I picked it up again to write this article, I was surprised at how intimate and familiar the game felt to me—the attack patterns of the enemies and the jerky movements of Arthur had almost become a part of me.

Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts came out three years after *Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, and it was available for the Super NES, and the Super NES only—unlike the first two games, it did not have arcade origins, nor was it ported to any other home computer systems. At the time of *Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts'* release, I did not have a Super NES, and I had

to wait to play the game. When I finally did, I hated it.

If I had to pinpoint what I thought was wrong with it then, I'd say it was that *Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts* introduced a double-jump. Even though many platform games have double-jumping, and the mechanic feels pretty ridiculous in most of them, it reaches a kind of zenith of unforeseen absurdity with this game. The double-jump allows Arthur to adjust himself, or correct himself in midair, using a strange animation that features Arthur pumping his legs and pitching himself slightly more in the direction of your choice. At the time, I supposed that this double-jump went well with the silly juxtaposition of the game, and slowly it grew on me.

I still had other problems with the game. For one, it seemed more difficult: I couldn't say whether it was because of the mechanics or the level design, but Capcom was clearly out to frustrate again after the marginally easier second game in the series. To be honest, all of these things compounded to the point where I never really gave *Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts* a fair shot.

I decided, for this article, to revisit it, and I borrowed the newer Game Boy Advance port. It's a fairly satisfactory version of the game, although the screen is cropped and the sound is less crisp. The port also has an interesting "Arrange Mode," which features levels from the first and second game that you can play through using Arthur's new double jump. Unfortunately, to see most of these levels, you need to be very, very, very skilled at the game, so they have remained mostly out of my reach.

When I first started playing this Game Boy Advance *Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, I spent over sixty lives attempting to complete the very first half of the introductory level. Seriously. I started out playing by myself, my wife read-

ing in the same room, but eventually we began to trade off after each set of lives. Death after death ensued. I swore vulgarly, and my wife insisted that the game was just stupid. Yet I kept picking up the controller each time she'd had three deaths, and she did likewise. It made me realize that, despite everything these games have put me through, I still keep playing them. And I still enjoy them.

I keep playing the Ghosts 'n Goblins games because they give me a sense of mastery. Every time I finish a level, or even just a smaller subsection, I know it's because I have learned that level; I know it in and out; I am the master of it. Now, I'm not the kind of person who tries to always go for a high score or who tries to record himself making a super-play, and my wife isn't that great at games that require a lot of skill. But we still both kept playing that first loop over and over again because we wanted to master it. Even though the odds were all against us, even though we kept dying, the game kept spurring us on. Every time you die and respawn, the game shows you both how far you have made it and how far you are from the end of the map. Once a section is over, you feel as though you have put it behind you because of skill, not because you got lucky. Mastery feels good.

Tokuro Fujiwara, the Ghosts 'n Goblins mastermind, states that the games require "experience and making decisions on the fly which will inevitably help players improve their skills over time."¹ This is exactly what every game in the series requires, and also what they encourage. The levels are designed to train you, and many have points that are impossible to proceed past without having demonstrated a clear understanding of some important game skill. In the first level of the first game, you must make a precise jump

onto and off of a moving platform over a pit of instant death. In level 1 of the second, there is a point where you must use your up-attack on a tree of buzzards or else the birds will kill you as walk past it. And *Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts* requires precise double jumps to reach the second half of its first level.

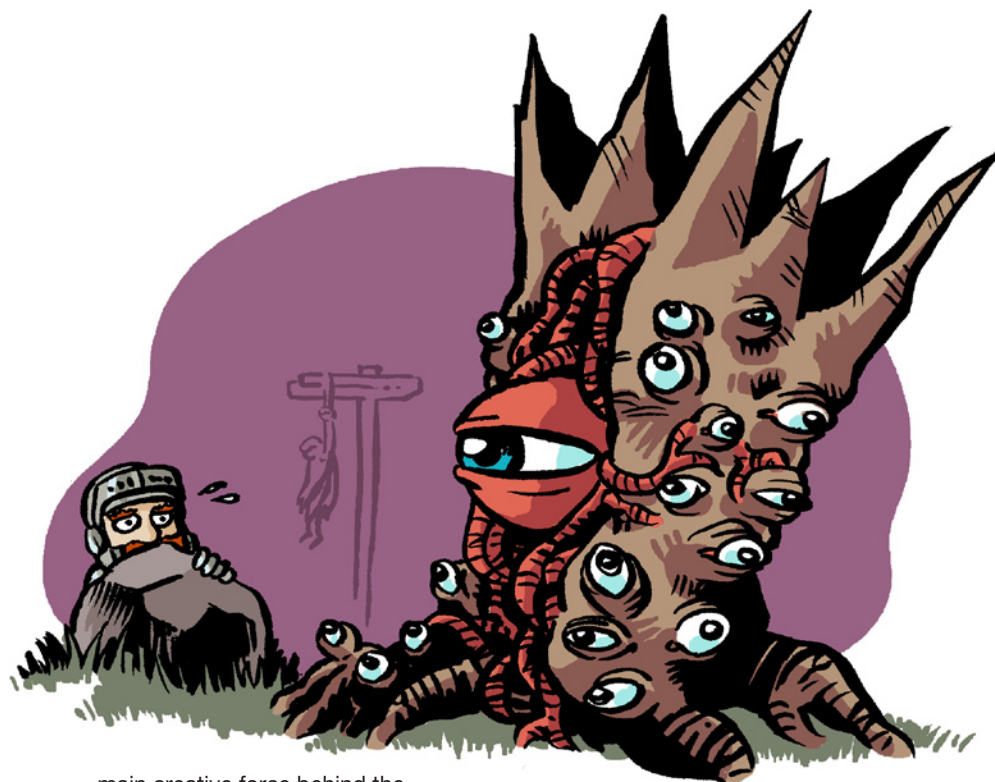
I died over sixty times in the first part of *Super* because I hadn't improved my skills enough. I was not ready to go on—I wouldn't have been able to handle the difficulty that awaited me later on. In some games, when you die, it is because of something cheap and arbitrary—it is the game's fault. In Ghosts 'n Goblins, when you die, it is because of something you couldn't handle—it is your fault.

Ghosts 'n Goblins does not hate the player at all. In fact, as you play it, it gives you respect—it just demands some as well. No situations in Ghosts 'n Goblins are insurmountable or impossible: once properly trained, anyone can overcome them. The Ghosts 'n Goblins games are, above all, fair and just.

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The first game in the Ghosts 'n Goblins lineage was released in 1985 for the arcade. The series progressed through the years, but seemed to stop abruptly with *Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, the Super Nintendo incarnation. Most considered this the last game in the series, but in 2006, the unexpected happened: *Ultimate Ghosts 'n Goblins*, the first new title in fifteen years, was released for the Sony PSP. When *Ultimate* was announced, my curiosity was piqued: what had happened in those intervening fifteen years? What had Tokuro Fujiwara done in the meantime?

I found that, having created Ghosts 'n Goblins, Fujiwara went on to create *Mega Man*, and was in fact the



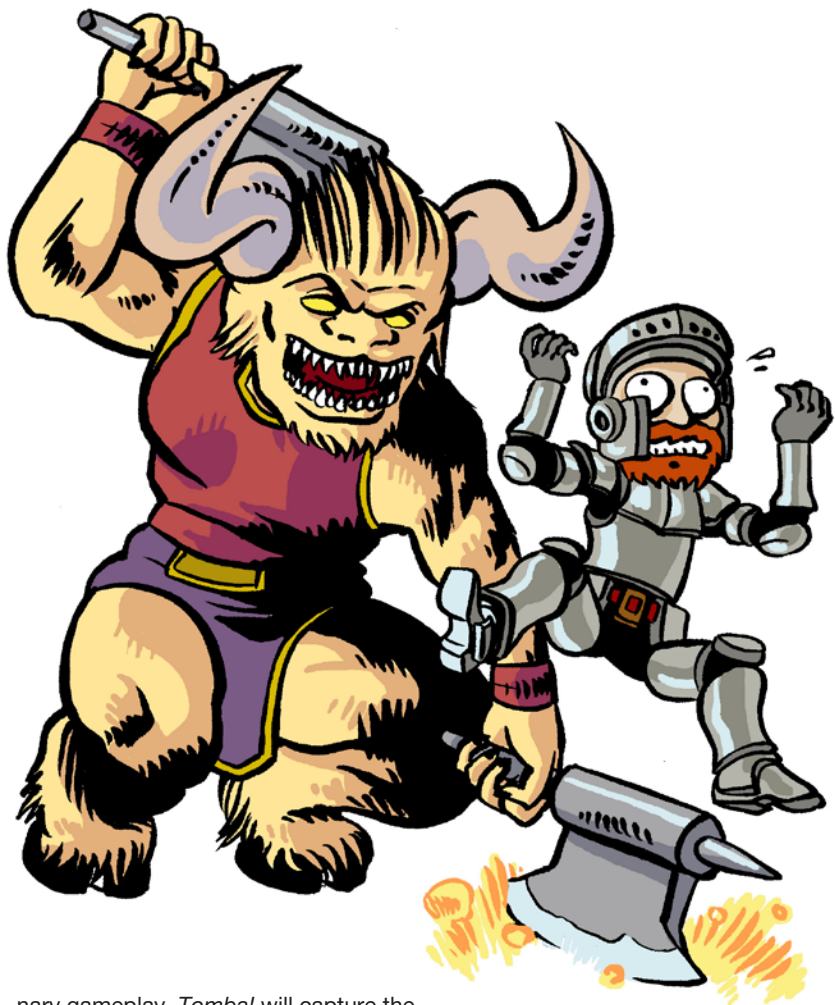
main creative force behind the first two Mega Man games.

After that, he took the producer's role throughout the Super Nintendo era, but found time away from overseeing Mega Man-related projects to create *Street Fighter*, *Breath of Fire*, *Strider*, and *Resident Evil*, which have all been enormously successful in their own right. *Resident Evil*, especially, has seen multiple sequels, reprints, rereleases, and even films. While sometimes Fujiwara was only on a producer, his influence could be felt all over them, from their control schemes to their difficulty levels.

In 1996, Fujiwara left Capcom and created the company Whoopee Camp,

which, despite its ridiculous name, had a very serious mission: to "create high-quality games based on creative sense, experience, and close calculation." The first game to come from the new venture was *Tomba!*, which Fujiwara says was his "biggest challenge," but also his "greatest personal achievement." Fujiwara went on to say of *Tomba!* that "the character and the gameplay have the ability to attract and challenge gamers of every age and skill level ... Nothing satisfies me more than imagining parents playing with their children as well as challenging those hardcore gamers who want to experience a whimsical fantasy world with extraordi-

¹ James Howell, "Previews: Ghosts 'n Goblins PSP," 1up.com, August 8, 2006, <http://www.1up.com/do/previewPage?cid=3152792>



nary gameplay. *Tomba!* will capture the hearts of everyone.”²

It did just that. The first time I heard about *Tomba!* was from an ex-girlfriend who wasn’t even really a gamer, just someone who liked good entertainment. Years later, I introduced my then fiancée to the game, and she instantly fell in love with it. In between, the game had captured my heart as well.

In 2000, *Tomba! 2* came out for the Playstation. A *Tomba! 3* was announced for the PS2 in 2001, but shortly thereafter, Whoopee Camp fell off the face of the earth. In 1998, Fujiwara had been appointed as executive producer at the company Deep Space, a joint venture between Whoopee Camp and Sony Computer Entertainment Interna-

tional. Deep Space made *Hungry Ghosts* and later listed Whoopee Camp in the Special Thanks section of the credits for *Extermination*.

That was the last official mention of Whoopee Camp. In early 2002, Whoopee Camp and Deep Space were combined into Access Games, and the original companies disappeared. Access Games released *Spy Fiction* in 2003, and then fell silent.

Where was Fujiwara? Perhaps he was sitting around at Access Games developing a sequel, but I can’t say for sure. *Mega Man Powered Up*, the re-envisioned remake of *Mega Man*, lacked a credit for his name. It wasn’t

until late August of 2005, when *Ultimate Ghosts ’n Goblins* was announced, that Fujiwara returned to Capcom.

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Expectations for *Ultimate Ghosts ’n Goblins* were high. After all, there were rumors that the game would have branching paths, and that Arthur would now come back to life right where he died. The internet went wild imagining some sort of Metroid-style exploration game.

It turned out that these rumors were partly unfounded—the game does not feature branching paths, it just allows you to jump to starting points in the levels. You do respawn at the point of death—mostly, you just respawn *closer* to the point of death, which removes some of the headache but which is just as difficult. This is still *Ghosts ’n Goblins*.

Ultimate’s level design, too, is forward-thinking, but still completely suited to the *Ghosts ’n Goblins* series. In the old and tired genre of 2-D platformers, Fujiwara is a master of challenging level design, one of the few remaining dinosaurs from the old school of game design. “I think that game trends are like fashion trends. What people want changes with the hardware and environment in each generation, ... [but] the desire for playing 2D platformer games will still remain. Perhaps there aren’t as many game creators who can really pull off a good 2D game anymore.”³ This could well be true. Recent entries

in older 2-D platformer series, such as *Yoshi’s Island 2*, *Castlevania: Portrait of Ruin*, *Sonic Advance*, *The Revenge of Shinobi GBA*, and even *New Super Mario Bros.*, frequently fall short in level design and gameplay. *Ultimate* never has this problem.

In fact, the only real problem the game has is its audience. Few retro gamers or fans of 2-D platformers consider the Playstation Portable their console of choice, even though those who look can find many great games, such as *Mega Man Powered Up*, *Exit*, and *Every Extend Extra*. As it stands, though, these games sell poorly and are largely unknown to the people who would enjoy them best. Even some PSP owners who would enjoy games like *Ghouls ’n Ghosts* and *Mega Man* wouldn’t be able to play them anyway, because they haven’t updated their firmware so they can continue playing homebrew games and emulators.⁴

This all may point to a shift in the demands of the gamer. Sales of 2-D platformers are low, and many people who are interested in them propagate misconceptions about their shortcomings to avoid buying a new console. Maybe this is the reason that companies like Whoopee Camp no longer exist: their markets seem to wither or disappear because the videogame business shifts. However, Fujiwara was right in saying that somewhere, in whatever form and with whatever prejudices, there will always be gamers, like me, who appreciate a well-put-together 2D platformer. 🎮

2 Sony Computer Entertainment of America, “Tomba! Brings Pink Hair and Pigs to the Playstation Game Console,” press release, archived in Internet Archive, http://web.archive.org/web/20020608160926/http://www.scea.com/news/press_example.asp?ReleaseID=9499.

3 Howell, “Previews.”

4 See “In a Sea of Intellectual Property, Pirates Arise” in TGQ #3



That Spiky-Haired Lawyer is All Talk

Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney—NDS
By Jeremy Penner
Art By Mariel Cartwright

The most useful verb in traditional adventure games, at least since Sierra abandoned the text parser for an icon-based system, is “use.” “Use” interacts directly with the environment: pushing buttons, picking locks, building contraptions, fetching things.

Phoenix Wright does not have this verb. The only verb worth anything in the Phoenix Wright games is “talk.”

There are variations, of course. Sometimes, you dramatically shout, “Objection!” Sometimes, it’s “Hold it!” When you’re really on a roll, you’ll say “Take that!” Most of the time, you are showing things to people, but sometimes you’re pressing people for more information on what they said.

To call the game a glorified dialogue tree might be overstating things. There’s not even any branching—if a character has new things to say in a single conversation, it’s presented as a new topic. Finishing one conversation unlocks new ones with new characters, moving the story forward. In short, *Phoenix Wright* is an entirely linear game in which you never actually do anything.

It’s also tremendously involving, and a marvelous use of the medium.

I don’t need to mention the gameplay to explain why the game is involving: the writing is funny, the characters

charming, and it’s never long before a ludicrous twist turns the case upside-down in a way you never saw coming.

But even with the game mechanics as simple as they are, this is misleading. The core trick that the game uses to involve the player is this: when you have clear goals as to what you want to accomplish, you are penalized (with a hit to your “life bar”) for getting the question wrong.

The design of these goals is a critical component of what makes the game work. The meat of the game takes place inside the courtroom: the prosecution calls witnesses, and you cross-examine them. The introductory case tells you what to do: present evidence that shows a flaw in the witness’s testimony. (In the world of Phoenix Wright, your client is always innocent and the prosecution’s witnesses are always lying.) You go into each day in court with only a vague idea of what actually transpired when the crime was committed, and it’s through this process of catching people in lies that the truth comes out.

The less interactive evidence-gathering portions of the first game are similar to a traditional visual novel. You wander around, clicking through conversations until you unlock the next one. Even though these portions are technically as linear as the in-courtroom sections, they feel less involving. The sequel (*Justice for All*) eliminates much of the

aimless wandering, and introduces an engaging interrogation mechanic similar to the courtroom system.

When the game is at its best, every new piece of evidence and testimony from the prosecution forces you to subtly reevaluate your mental model of what really happened. You scrutinize every piece of witness testimony and evidence under a microscope, determined to find the subtle flaw that will bring the case to its knees. And the “Aha!” moment when you finally track it down is extremely satisfying.

When the game is at its worst, you throw up your hands, save your game, and start guessing, reloading when your “life bar” gets too low. When you finally find the evidence the game wanted you to present by sheer dumb luck, you wonder how you were ever supposed to have come up with the explanation coming out of Phoenix’s mouth on your own.

The game’s strength, therefore, lies in its ability to present the player with puzzles that, firstly, integrate seam-

lessly into the plot of the game, and, secondly, have solutions that are obviously correct once you discover them.

Unlike many adventure games, the Phoenix Wright series never falters with the former. It’s difficult to imagine a puzzle that would fail in that respect, when your only real verb is “talk.”

Unfortunately, the first game is much better at the latter than *Justice for All*. (Case 4 pretty much redeems the rest of the game, but it’s difficult to talk about it without giving too much away.) In *Justice for All*, the correct next move is frequently unclear; the game relies on cryptic hints to nudge the player in the “right” direction, rather than solid evidence and logical contradiction. As a result, the game suffers.

The more the game herds you in the direction it wants you to go (through well-designed puzzles), the more in-control you feel. But *Phoenix Wright* is striking in how skillfully it uses its minimal game mechanics to create compelling gameplay. Thus, we have no objection. 🗨️





Shinji Mikami and the Lost Art of Game Design

Resident Evil—PS1; P.N. 03—NGC; Resident Evil 4—NGC, PS2; God Hand—PS2

By Jonathan Simpson

Art By Jonathan Kim and Mariel Cartwright

Capcom understands game design better than any developer today. Over the years, it has produced a staggering number of quality titles, and many avid gamers feel that Capcom is currently in the midst of a renaissance in design. It produces excellent skill-based games at a time when many studios are content to churn out simplistic stories dribbling out as a succession of multimedia scenes to reward a player's Pavlovian responses. Capcom has created beloved franchises like *Mega Man*, *Street Fighter*, *Resident Evil*, and countless classic arcade games in the early '90s. And its renaissance of game design can be traced to the contributions of one man, Shinji Mikami.

Resident Evil (*Biohazard* in Japan), released in 1996, was a defining game for the Sony Playstation and for the genre of survival horror. *Resident Evil* took advantage of the Playstation's increased storage to provide a more cinematic experience, with prerendered 2-D backgrounds and full-motion-video sequences. This cinematic philosophy carried over to the game mechanics as well. Most games with a third person perspective used either a dynamic camera system or a static isometric

viewpoint. In *Resident Evil*, the camera was placed differently in each area; the player could only see what the designers wanted him to see. The designers were like movie directors choosing the best shot for each scene.

Perhaps as a consequence of the camera system, the control system became the most criticized component. In *Resident Evil*, you always move as though you're playing from a first-person perspective, regardless of the viewpoint. Up on the direction pad moves you forward, and Down moves you backward. Right and Left rotate you, tank-like, clockwise and counter-clockwise. This can be counter intuitive, to say the least.

Resident Evil spawned numerous sequels and offshoots, some of which Mikami produced, but the gameplay elements of the series changed very little until Mikami directed *Resident Evil 4*. But the renewal of *Resident Evil* actually began with an earlier Mikami game, the mysteriously titled *P.N.03*. Developed rapidly and with a relatively small budget, *P.N.03* was designed to be a 3-D homage to old-school 2-D shooters.

The most important aspect of *P.N.03* is its control system, an action-oriented evolution of *Resident Evil*'s system. The reason the system works so well, and the fundamental difference between it and *Resident Evil*, is the camera. The camera is seldom a problem in scrolling

shooters; the viewpoint is static, and all enemies are clearly visible. *P.N.03* recreates that environment in 3-D by placing the camera in a fixed position behind Vanessa—the game's protagonist—and by keeping enemies in clear view in front of you. Occasionally you can become surrounded by enemies, but like in 2-D shooters, enemies in *P.N.03* are entirely pattern-based. They never try to flank you, and if you get swarmed, it's almost always the result of your actions, when chasing a combo for instance.

P.N.03's is essentially *Resident Evil* with dodging. Left and Right still rotate you instead of moving you, but because of the fixed camera, it is less confusing than in *Resident Evil*. You can press Z to execute a quick 180° turn, and the trigger buttons let you gracefully cartwheel left or right. You can jump, and if you are running, you'll perform a nice acrobatic flip.

P.N.03 definitely takes some getting used to, and I can't think of a game which plays quite like it. Vanessa dances with measured precision and although her individual movements are also exceptionally graceful, it takes a skilled player to move her fluidly through them. But once you have the skill, controlling Vanessa becomes second nature. *P.N.03* is not a game where you feel cheated if you fail.

The real importance of *P.N.03* is that it demonstrated that tank controls work in third-person action games given the right camera system. Shinji Mikami reused *P.N.03*'s system as a basis for *Resident Evil 4* when it was decided that the survival-horror series needed a more action oriented overhaul. A bold move considering that the critics' dislike for *P.N.03*. Chief among their complaints was that Vanessa couldn't move and shoot at the same time. *Resident Evil 4*, widely considered by critics and players alike to be one of the best



games ever made, depended on Shinji Mikami ignoring them on this.

Mikami took *P.N.03*'s camera and controls, removed all the fancy dodging, and replaced them with an aiming mode. The camera slides in to sit tight over Leon's right shoulder while you aim your weapon with the analog stick. Once again, you are unable to move and shoot simultaneously, but in a survival-horror game such as *RE4* where tension is key, it makes more sense. When you're forced to stop while hordes of enemies plod towards you will obviously build anxiety. Beyond that, we know that Leon is a former cop and that, in the real world, cops are trained to plant their feet and grip their weapon with both hands. The focus of the controls shifts from the graceful dodging of *P.N.03* to tension-filled shooting. Other than that, the controls are pretty much the same.

The most obvious homage to *P.N.03* is *RE4*'s Mercenaries minigame, which is unlocked after completing the story. Mercenaries is a score/time-attack mode with four stages and five playable characters. The goal is to rack up as many kills as possible within a limited



time, with a scoring and bonus system inherited from *P.N.03*. Many players spent more time with Mercenaries than they did the main game, a testament to both the soundness of *RE4*'s fundamental mechanics and the staying power of "simpler" arcade-like experiences.

God Hand, Mikami's most recent game, is the third game in the *P.N.03* family tree. This time Mikami applied the *P.N.03* template to the beat-'em-up. The familiar behind-the-back camera remains, but there have been some changes to suit the genre. There are a number of built-in moves which are hard-coded to certain combinations, such as Back + Triangle for a juggle, but otherwise each face button is mapped to one of 114 different techniques. There is no block button in *God Hand*, but four different dodges may be performed with the right analog stick, which is traditionally used to adjust the camera in third-person action games. The combat system implemented in *God Hand* is very deep, implementing all the familiar buzzwords: counters, juggles, guard breaks, evade cancels, etc. And of course, the game is well known for its painful looking and often humorous special moves.

God Hand's camera is much more of a problem than in *P.N.03*'s, however, because it is much easier to become surrounded. There is a radar to help you deal with unexpected enemies, but ultimately it is the ability to dodge repeatedly, coupled with aural cues signaling incoming attacks, that make it manageable for the dedicated player. *God Hand*'s camera also received criticism for a design decision which was perceived by many as a bug. Every camera does its best to keep the environment from obscuring your view. Most games try complex manipulations to keep a clear line of sight, but *God Hand* simply makes the intervening objects invisible. Although it can be unsightly when walls suddenly blink out of existence, this is a simpler and more reliable solution. The designers consciously chose to maximize gameplay over aesthetics.

Of the three most recent Mikami action games, only *RE4* received broad critical acceptance; in fact, it was many critics' choice for game of the year. Only *RE4* had the budget and development time necessary to impress the critics; the more experimental *P.N.03* and *God Hand* were panned. This was especially tragic for *P.N.03*, since it was

the proving ground for ideas that would later find acceptance in *RE4*. Instead of analyzing the design of these games, the critics merely complained that they didn't play the same as the games they superficially resembled.

What Shinji Mikami does perhaps better than any other game designer is tailor the design of his games to their concept. In architecture, they say form follows function; the equivalent maxim for games should be "design follows concept." Perhaps part of the problem today is that there are so few designers who are willing to begin with a novel concept. Sure, there are established genres in electronic gaming, but when most games within a genre have almost identical mechanics, there is stagnation. *God Hand* was surely not the first 3-D beat-'em-up, but it was one of the few that truly rethought the mechanics of its two-dimensional forebears. Likewise, *P.N.03* was a fantastic 3-D reimagining of the 2-D shooter.

I don't expect to see too many designers take inspiration from *P.N.03* or *God Hand*, but *RE4* is already showing its influence. Recent action games like Epic's *Gears of War* and Capcom's own *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition* feature *RE4*-styled over-the-shoulder cameras. Cliff Blezinski, lead designer of *Gears of War*, has often cited *RE4* as an inspiration for *Gears of War*.

Of course, the aspects of *RE4* that have impressed developers most are the pacing, atmosphere, stage design, boss design, and general polish. But copying those things will only bring them halfway to Mikami's level. To climb the rest of the way, they must learn to evaluate every mechanic in the context of the game's concept. Mikami isn't alone in reaching this level, but as the last generation comes to a close, only Mikami has consistently been there through it all. 🎮





Secrets and Save Points

Secret of Mana—SNES

By Heather Campbell

Art By Troy Boyle

I have a lot of trouble letting go of things. I tend to fixate on memories until they become cold, unmoving, temporal fetishes. Handled in my mind so often, they set like coal. So, I use them as fuel, throwing them into the fire of my drive over and over again. Coal is an ugly energy. And these memories spew forth so much smoke and ash that the way ahead becomes clouded. I lose sight of my path in the filth, and find myself churning forward along obfuscated tracks. My memories fuck up my future.

I need to learn to forgive. To move on. To erase my save points and start over.

I dated a guy in high school for almost two years, and it was the worst two years of my entire life. More shameful than the loneliness of Amsterdam, sicker than the doubts of Los Angeles. Two years I spent stuck to his side, bound by my own insecurities, naïve and traumatized. I spent Every Single Afternoon defending my innocence, deflecting his advances, gasping for air as he pinned me with kisses I didn't want.

I should have left him. But I didn't know any better. All of my friends had boyfriends, and most had long ago lost their virginities. Making out was

supposed to feel good; I just needed to overcome my inhibitions. Sure, I knew most girls didn't sweat when the school bell rang at the end of the day, most girls didn't cry when their boyfriends felt up their shirts, didn't drive home dry-heaving. This wasn't just pubescent pressure. It was a constant chorus of sexual anxiety. The only time I've ever been pulled over by the police was after leaving his house. I blew through a stop sign. I couldn't get away fast enough.

I don't want to get graphic, but I want to convey some sense of the nausea. He actually said, "You would if you loved me," once when trying to unbutton my reticence. Another time it was, "Are you gay or something?" More often than not, it was, "Please, I need this," like the dude was reading a script prepared by *Seventeen*. I was never date-raped, but I was constantly dodging. I don't know why he didn't leave me. Maybe the only thing left for him was the conquest.

Finally, he clutched my hair and forced an insignificant finish. I went to the bathroom and threw up.

When he wasn't shoving his clumsy tongue down my throat, he was talking about his ex-girlfriend, whom he simply referred to as "The Bitch." They'd done it together. She had a major pregnancy scare and dropped out of school. Now, they hated each other with adolescent intensity. He loved her. He hated her. He loved me. Let's have sex.

We didn't.

But we did play *Secret of Mana* together. And I'll never forgive him for it.

Secret of Mana is the only SNES game I have. I can't let it go. It sits atop of my SNES, dusty and threatening. I know it's an incredible game, but I can't play it. I've tried to reset my memories of it, bringing it out for other lovers to rewrite history together. But I've never gotten through the game after I did it with him. It's anchored in my past, like the sword set in stone at the beginning of the game.

You know, it's almost too much that the damn game is called *Secret of Mana*. I mean, the intimacy metaphors are sophomoric. *Secret of Mana*? I might as well have hang-ups about a game called "*We'll Keep This Between You and Me, Don't Tell Anyone of Mana*."

I love the music but it gives me motion sickness. I adore the gameplay, the charming fights and swordplay, but the charge-up sounds are like shrill alarms, reminders of a miserable youth. It's the one game I possess but can't own, the one game whose sweet achievements are mockeries of the way I feel playing it. It's a saccharine antagonist. I want it to be mine, but it will always be ours.

It wasn't just the atmosphere of the relationship that ruined *Mana* for me; it was the way he played the game. *Secret of Mana* features three heroes, all rendered in candy colors and large spites. In defiance of the fantastic setting of the game, my boyfriend decided to name the hero "Asshole." The girl was "Bitch." And the cheerful sprite was called "Lump."

My adventure was foul-mouthed, as every townspeople would call out *Bitch* when asking for my attention. When I couldn't handle the silent humiliation, I'd switch to Lump ... and be demeaned in a way less human. After an hour guiding Asshole and Bitch through

the wilderness, we'd save the game, and I'd try to keep coming up with things to talk about until curfew.

The boyfriend and I cut our way through the world of *Mana* over the course of the fall, and my complicated disgust-obsession manifested as violent comics drawn about the characters. I'd toss Lump on a spike and stretch Bitch out over open flames. Since Asshole was only played by my boyfriend, he received the worst of it.

Deep down, I loved the characters; I wanted to draw them, to think about them. But the tension I had with *Mana* meant hours of torturing their cheerful outlines.

Worse, my boyfriend and I didn't so much enjoy the game as we did break it. When we realized that there could only be three enemies on screen at once, we cheated through harder sections by keeping weak villains alive. We leveled up for days on howlers in the Ice Forest, so that the following sections were just speed-runs. We skipped large portions of dialogue, and any time I started to drift into the world, my boyfriend would yell something inappropriate at the screen. Or at me.

Maybe if I'd just acquiesced, it would have been easier. Why didn't I like making out with him? For one, the guy was a jerk. Another easy answer is, "I'm gay!" But the truth is more muddy. See, I'm dating a boy again, for the fourth time in my life. This current boyfriend plays *Katamari*, and I enjoy kissing him. So, there's a part of me that wonders how much of my sexual identity was in response to these two terrible years. Yeah, sure, when I sleep, I dream of girls ... but how much is attraction, and how much is reaction? Did I stop dating boys because of him? Did I stop playing SNES because of *Secret of Mana*?

No game in my life is more obviously incredible, and yet no experience has been more joyless. *Mana* is poisoned,

and no further attempts to free the game from my past have met with success. I've tried playing it with girlfriends, boyfriends, by myself. I've tried confronting it with alcohol, or studying it with sharp sobriety. I've emulated it with extended dialogue; I've shoved it into my tobacco-stained SNES more times than I can count. I've sold it off, only to repurchase it at a greater cost. I can't let go of *Mana* until I can play it for itself, by itself, in an emotional vacuum that is filled with new save points.


This year was my ten-year high school reunion. I didn't go back to Chicago for two reasons. One was this guy. The other was my best friend, who was constantly flirting with him, with me, with everything around her. They may or may not have hooked up; it doesn't matter. They were both abusive.

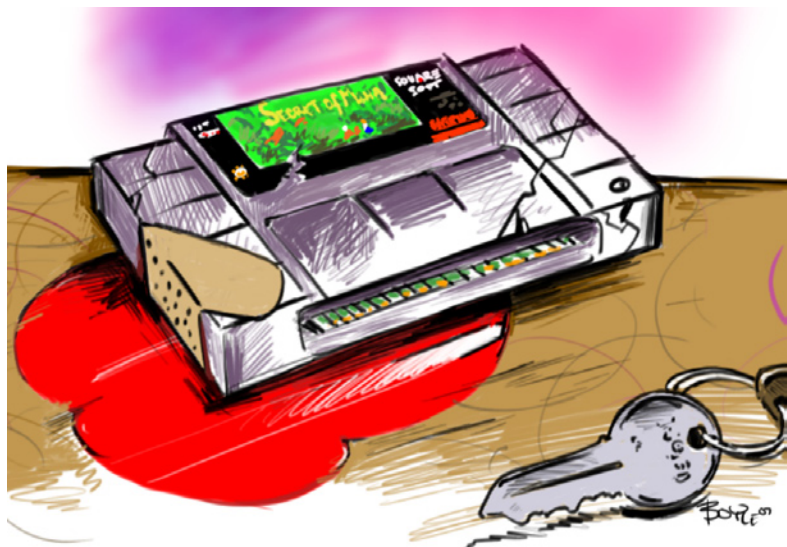
As a bit of an epilogue, I keep casual MySpace contact with a girl from this school, and she showed me pictures of the two of them at a sports bar in Wrigleyville. He's heavy, balding, pedestrian. I think he sells something. She's as

gorgeous as ever, and is smiling wide in every frame. Sure, it's a little late to introduce a new character here, but for clarity's sake, I wanted to make it known that he wasn't the only reason I didn't go back to Chicago this summer. He was just most of it.

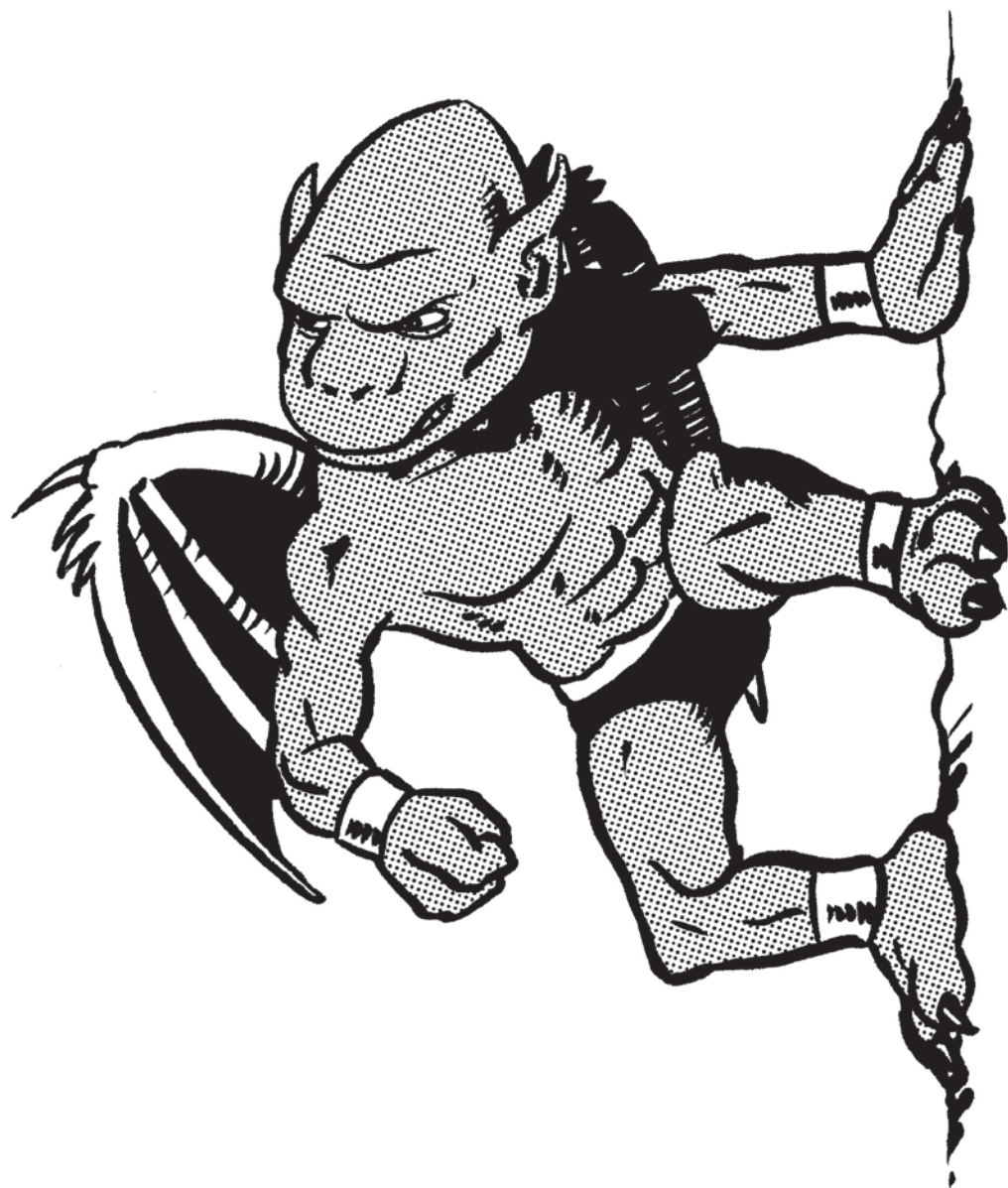
I wonder if I had gone back, could I play?

There are other *Mana* games now, but it's sadly obvious that they don't compare with the quality of the SNES original. The balance is wrong, the music is dull, the focus is on childish characters over bright visuals. *Mana* wasn't just well-composed, it was gigantic—prepared as a launch title for the SNES CD, the game was scaled back when the peripheral was abandoned. It's long, original, engrossing, beautiful ... hideous, sad, and awful. God, I can see an amazing game on the other side of this river, but crossing it seems impossible. It may be time to just let go.

Seems the sword is stuck in stone, though. And drawing it out will take a hero greater than myself. 



Break time!



Giving Up the Ghost

Metroid II: Return of Samus—NGB

By J. R. Freeman

Art By Benjamin Rivers

SR-388 is a lonely place. When you go there, it is only you and the harsh environment harboring the creatures that have inhabited it for who knows how long. There are the cryptic remains of a long-dead civilization; your only contact with them is the strange artifacts they left behind—left behind for a wandering explorer to find.

You leave your trusty spaceship topside, all the stars in the universe above it. Cold, daunting, staring down at you from however many millions of years in the past, however long it took their light to reach you at that exact moment. Gazing up into millennia past for a brief moment, before trudging down into the belly of the whale like Jonah.

You've got a job to do, your steely determination your only true weapon against the dangers that await you in the deep, dank, dark. And when it is all over and the job is done, all that is left are the remains of that long-dead civilization, their artifacts thoroughly plundered, their statues and their shrines left to stare alone into the depths. Their story untold, the only thing remaining a faint echo of a voice that once shrieked out into the darkness and then slowly faded away...

SR-388 is a lonely place.

—Excerpt from an untitled, unpublished manuscript, circa 2004.



I was on vacation with my family in Washington D.C. this past summer when I realized that I always travel with my Game Boy Advance SP and a bag of games. One of those games is an old copy of *Metroid II: Return of Samus* for the original Game Boy that I once borrowed from someone and never gave back. I realized that in the past five years of taking yearly vacations with my family across the United States I always had *Metroid II* in tow, and it was Samus that kept me company in those odd moments when we weren't out sight-seeing or doing something together.

During those long car trips, lush green Midwestern states flying by outside the window, there was Samus. At night, lying awake in some strange bed in some alien hotel in some state far away from home, there was Samus. During those moments in New Mexico when the summer sun would call to mind memories of nuclear tests and the fallout radiation that surely still lingered in the air, there was Samus. Always silent, always moving, and always carrying out her mission of exterminating every last Metroid from the interior caverns of SR-388.

There was something comforting in knowing that Samus was always at my side when I needed her there. I don't know why I now place such importance on a mere videogame. Partly it was

that the game was quite entertaining, but partly it was that I had been using videogames as something to escape into when I felt cut off from the rest of the world. Being in a strange place can do that to you, even if you want to be in that strange place to see things you've never seen before.

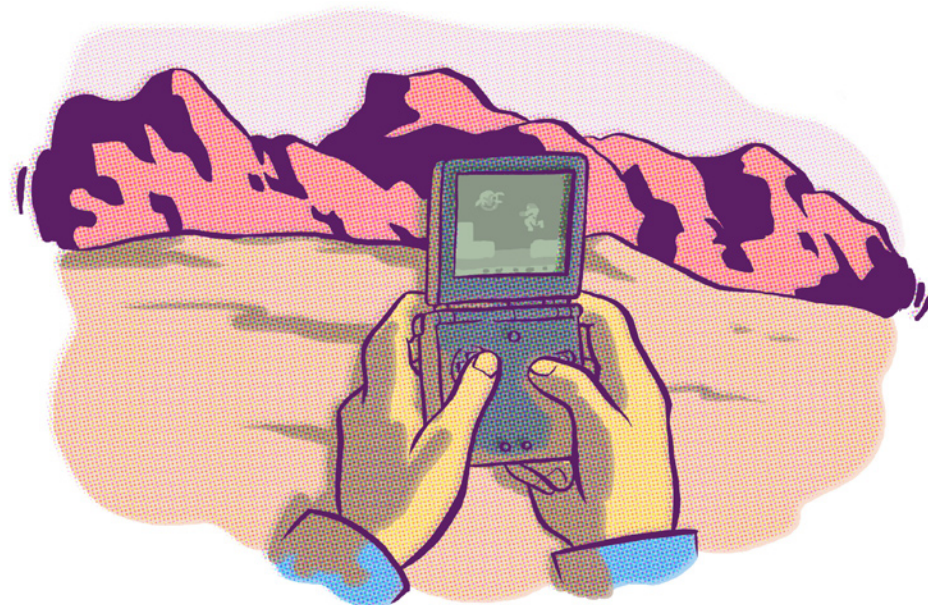
I guess videogames have an effect on me—strange places, discovery, and the wandering traveler—that perhaps others get from books or movies or their favorite music. Whenever we were in Vegas and my parents were hitting the casinos and I was still too young to gamble, I would sit in the hotel room and guide Samus through her trials in between flipping through the local channels on the hotel television. Her struggle in some way mirrored my own. A stranger in a strange land, lost and slightly confused, wondering if we'll ever make it out alive and see home again. Being a teenager is like that sometimes.

You get surprised when you realize what it is that you relate to most, and then perhaps frightened at what it implies. For me videogames have never really been much more than pure escapism, but I never realized the depths to which I escaped until I had beaten *Metroid II* and took another family trip.

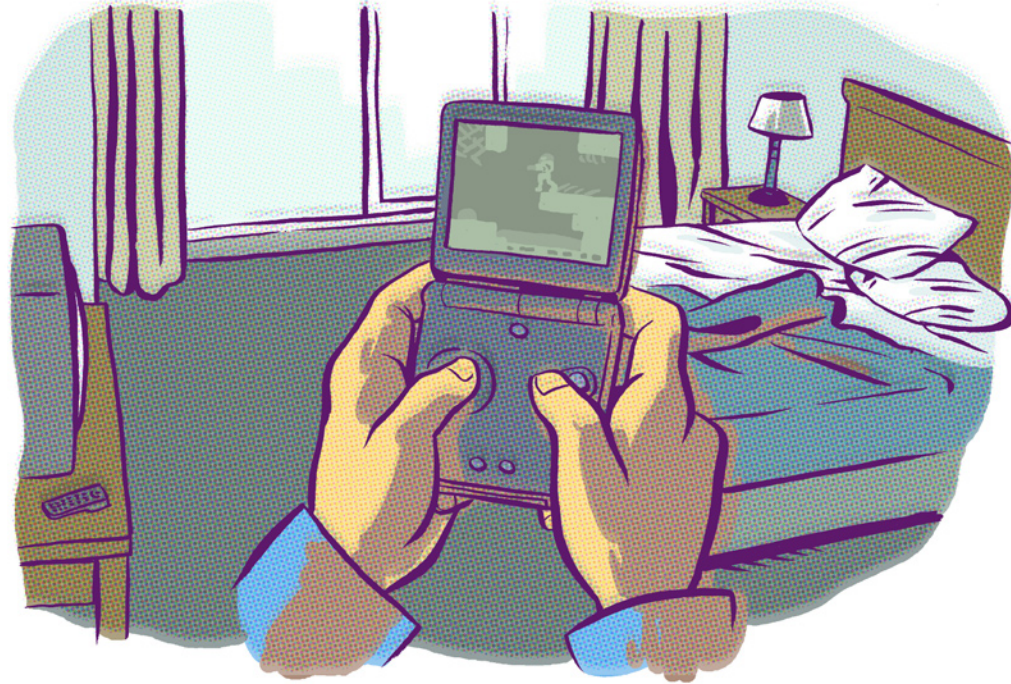
The last time we had traveled I had successfully eradicated the metroid problem on SR-388, exterminating every living metroid I came across and slaying the queen. Satisfied with myself, I turned the SP off and didn't think much about it other than it was a fun ride. A few months ago, I was in Washington D.C. on vacation again and during an odd moment at the hotel I popped out the SP and fired up *Metroid II*.

I couldn't play it for more than five minutes.

I was a bit confused at first, figuring I'd get lost in the game like I always did, but something was different this




Break time!

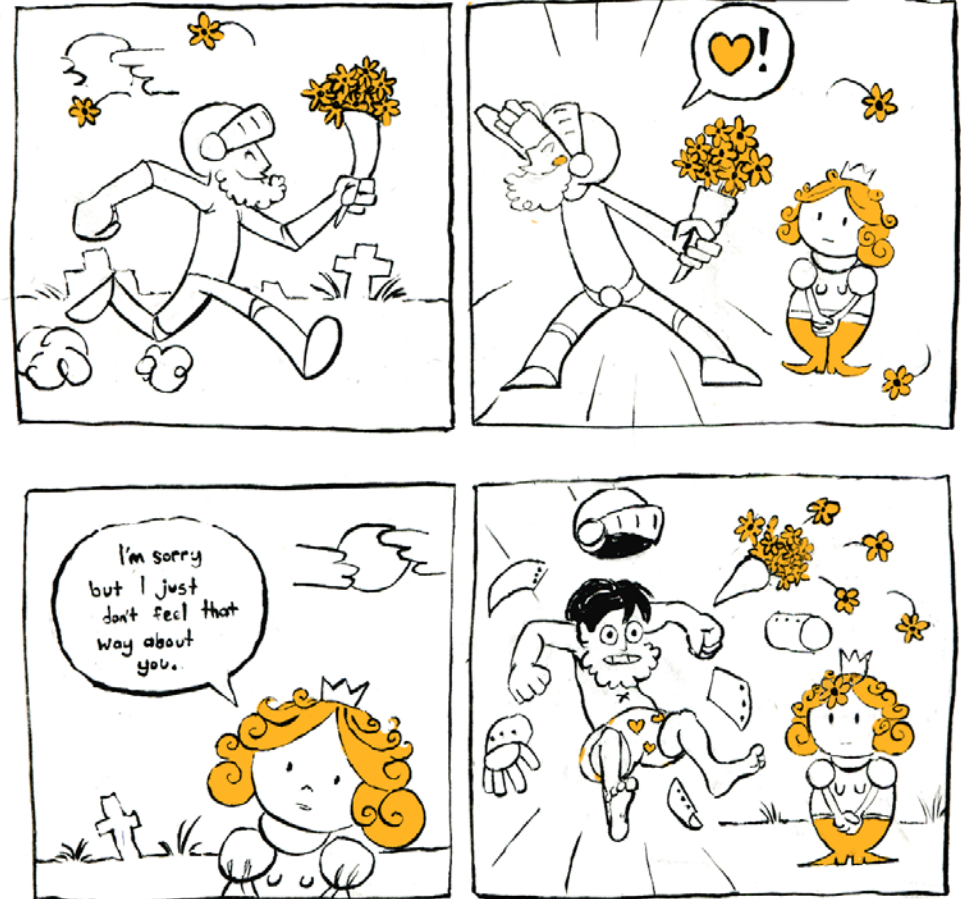


time. I had beaten the game, uncovered the mysteries of SR-388, and defeated all the metroids. For some reason I couldn't quite bring myself to do it all over again. The game was like a book you only read once in your life but never forget. Samus had completed her mission. She had moved on, and I wasn't ready to move on with her.

This sort of thing happens, I suppose. Sometimes things move on from you without you even realizing it, and there was no baby metroid to stay with

me like there was for Samus at the end of *Metroid II*. Nothing from the game leaped out and followed me wherever I went, demanding my attention and care. The game simply stopped speaking to me, and became as silent as the caverns of SR-388.

No resolution to the story. It is a book that stops three-fourths of the way through and then becomes nothing but blank pages. I guess in writing this I'm moving on from *Metroid II* and giving up the ghost. 



By James Harvey



Militia II is Machinima

Militia II—AVI

By Steven Schkolne
Art By Jonathan Kim

Machinima has gotten a lot of press lately, trumpeting the glorious potential of machinima as a voice for the downtrodden, putting film back in the hands of the people, the way cheap recording gear put music back in the hands of the people in the '70s to birth punk & hip-hop.

But I've been teaching a course called "Machinima and Videogame Theory," which requires watching a lot of machinima, and from most of what I've seen, you wouldn't believe it. Fans dutifully recreate their favorite Hollywood plots with game characters. The result is footage that is, at best, not quite good enough to be played very late at night on cable TV. They are certainly not the museum-quality masterpieces that students at prestigious art schools pay \$40k a year to ponder¹.

Within this puddle, amongst this unbroken field of mediocrity, a brilliant light appeared on my flat-panel: *Militia II*, twenty-five minute *Counter-Strike* masterpiece by David Frome, a.k.a. The Family God. Before you get too excited, let me set some things straight. *Militia II* has no innovations in plot or story. The setting is the "cs_militia" map, and in the film, a group of counter-terrorists invade a base where terrorists are holding pale men in lab coats hostage. The

goal: rescue the hostages.

The universe of *Militia II* does not extend beyond the bounds of the map. The characters are not "costumed" with new skins, and the map has only slight modifications applied to it. The actors do not engage in brilliant repartee. At one point late in the film, the protagonist, C.T. Russ, converses with Brad, the terrorist leader, as if they had been eating lunch together in a suburban U.S. high-school cafeteria just a few hours before. The story plods along, delicately unfolding the predictable dramatic arc that CS fans enjoy every time they sit down for another session of "Hostage Rescue."

Each shot, however, is perfect. It was this combination of lush boredom and perfect cinematography that, about five minutes in, first forced my mind to compare this machinima with other grand attention-span opuses, Matthew Barney's *The Cremaster Cycle* and Kubrick's *2001*. Much like these works, once the mind settles in and takes the boredom for granted, *Militia II* filters in, and an amazing presence takes hold.

Narrative machinima fails because it is a new medium attempting to be the old medium, like photographs in 1860s composed as if they were oil paintings, like films in the 1920s recorded as if they were on a stage. *Militia II*, though cinematic, does not aim to provide a complete cinematic universe; it presents a game universe. *Militia II* does not

tell an external story; it tells the internal story of the *Counter-Strike* player and documents that world. Frome has captured the psychological space of the CS gamer and laid it on top of the game space itself.

If you have seen *Militia II* and think I'm crazy, I'm not surprised. The machinima community barely registered it, merely giving it an award for sound at the Machinima Film Festival in 2002. Since its release, the community has not realigned machinima-making to incorporate the vision of Frome. They instead follow the lead of machinimists like *BloodSpell* director Hugh Hancock: "So are we competing with Hollywood? Fucking right we are²." It is that failed attempt at being generic that leaves the members of my class disappointed

with machinima as the end of the term grows near.

But having discovered a secret machinima masterpiece, I assigned my class to watch it for homework. When they wrote in to the class discussion list, it was clear that absolutely no one saw what I saw in *Militia II*; their messages had nothing but criticism and disdain for this, the greatest machinima work of our time:

- "This is fan-fiction, nothing more."
- "it's that type of aesthetic that really makes my spine shiver"
- "There was little to no explanation in this film"
- "the person and I watching it were more interested in my shoe laces than the video"



1 There are a few notable exceptions—Koulamata's *The French Democracy* and Rachel Bray's *Jean-Charles de Menezes*.

2 Hugh Hancock, "BloodSpell and Hollywood," *BloodSpell Development Updates*, <http://community.livejournal.com/bloodspell/78381.html>.

3 Although there are some aspects of it in the recent South Park episode "Make Love Not Warcraft."



And, of course, many creative uses of “bullshit.”

Not that this changed my opinion of *Militia II*—these complaints were exactly the reason that I fell in love with it in the first place, the reason I’m writing this article. *Militia II* unabashedly flaunts its origin in the gamer culture. Its constraints, its pure limiting to the space of the game, rocket machinima to new heights.

We can make an inverse comparison with Hollywood’s adaptations of games—they are supposed to represent a game, but instead we get game-ish Hollywood lives. The game becomes a backdrop, a device to justify more familiar devices—a few scattered live-action renditions of gameplay in service of a cheap Hollywood plot.

In *Militia II*, there is no attempt to go beyond the most basic of game stories: the game itself is exactly what unfolds. The plot is boring—because it is exactly the game’s plot—but within it we can

see the game more purely. The characters are bland and unexciting, but they are precisely as bland and unexciting as the strangers you meet in an MMO or a LAN party.

This film is not machinima trying to be cinema. It is something else entirely; it is exactly what machinima must add, if it is to live on as its own form instead of as cut-rate movies.

The word ‘aesthetic’ is now popularly used as a synonym for style. This use of aesthetic makes the small, art-snob homunculus I have embedded within my brain cringe. It treats taste as a triviality, based on color choices or set of cultural reference. This ‘aesthetic’ is having a favorite color that is blue, instead of green, which diminishes the notion of taste, and doesn’t recognize the great power of values within society. The history of aesthetic theory has a deeper sense of the word ‘aesthetic.’ Aesthetic, in the Kantian tradition, is judgment, a process in which a set of

values is applied to a work of art. In this historical sense, the aesthetic of a work is the values that it represents.

Masterpiece artworks are important because they mark a shift in values. When Warhol painted *Campbell’s Soup Can*, it was noteworthy because it pronounced a shift in intent. Instead of an art that valued the human condition, Warhol’s art placed value on the commercial condition. In the years since he painted his cans, more and more cultural practitioners have investigated the role of consumerism with no direct reference to human experience. These works are cultural markers; they help us understand the shifting values and priorities in our society.

Militia II makes a similar pronouncement. *Militia II* does not value the Hollywood reality. The value of machinima

is not how well it mimics the conventions of Hollywood blockbusters or Adult Swim. The value of machinima is the extent to which it embodies the psychological dimension of gameplay. The only precedent is the speed run, which embodies the *physical* aspects of gameplay.

Sadly Frome, unlike Warhol, is unlikely to inspire imitators. In the four years since *Militia II*’s release, there have been no grand renderings of classic games in this vein. How I would love to see the enhanced dimensions of *Grand Theft Auto*, *The Sims*, or even *World of Warcraft*! Alas, these machinima followers-on have yet to appear³. Frome and his collaborators are boldly claiming a unique vision for machinima. And no one listens. 🙄



Mega Microcosms



Warioware—GBA, GCN, NDS, Wii

By Ancil Anthropy

Art By Troy Boyle

We tried, between our last issue and this one, to record a podcast about Nintendo's *Warioware* (*Made in Wario*) series.

It was to be thorough and informative, a summation of the entire series (and *Rhythm Tengoku*). It was to be clever and insightful, it would articulate the Relevancy of the series, explain What It All Meant. We had high ideals.

And so it was that we—Wes Ehrlichmann, J.R. Freeman, M. O'Connor, Jeremy Penner and I—logged on one October evening to Skype, the podcast tool of the penniless, a free internet voice-chat client we were twisting to our own purposes. Skype, we found out, is chronically unreliable with more than two people.

Hours later, after disconnects, unexpected boots in the middle of conversations, and—to judge from the audio quality—alien invasions, we had come around at last to “What *Warioware* microgame would you design?” “How about one where you restart your computer, unplug your headset, plug your headset back in, turn up the volume on your mic, stand on your head, take five deep breaths and say a prayer, and Skype still crashes?” I suggested. “That can be the boss stage,” said Wes.

We ended up with two hours of

unusable audio. Our apologies, dear reader—our third podcast ended in failure.

Which means it's left to me, in a single short essay, to explain the *Warioware* series and What It All Means. This is not an easy task. The *Warioware* games are rife with paradox. They are difficult to describe, and yet fairly simple to relate to a new player:

“A game pops up, and you have five seconds to complete it.”

That is the simple, entirely true definition. The more complex, equally true definition is: “*Warioware* is all videogames, it is the entire history of the medium from the Famicom through the Wii, it is Nintendo's most inwards-looking and most outwards-looking release, it is—in the postmodern sense—the Aleph¹.”

Warioware is simultaneously the most backwards-looking game Nintendo has published in twenty years and the most progressive. Nintendo's *Bit Generations*² series is often described as “backwards-looking,” but they only peek back long enough to crib some notes which will let Nintendo market them as retro. *Warioware* looks back and comprehends.

Warioware is indeed a game where a player completes shorter games—the documentation calls them “microgames”—in five-second time limits. Creating a game that a player can encounter, understand, and complete

within a span of seconds is no easy task; to accomplish it, the microgames borrow context—often from mundane, everyday activities like cutting hair, washing dishes, ironing clothes.

As an example, one of the microgames in the series' third episode (third developed, fourth released in the US), *Warioware Twisted*, presents you with an image of a cake with three candles and an instruction: “Blow out!” You turn the head of the birthday boy, directing his lips toward the candles, and his breath puts out the flames. The party guests clap at your success.

The next time the game is encountered, the boy is a man, and there are more candles in the cake. It's harder to put them all out within the time limit. The third time round, the man is old and white, and his cake bristles with candles. Each iteration of the game obeys the same rules and has the same goal, same mechanics, and same time limit; but difficulty rises from an increased complexity, which follows from a natural and immediately understood observation about the nature of time and aging.

What's important to note is that, despite its depiction of a scenario based in reality, the game remains deeply abstract. Taking a deep breath, holding it in the lungs, and blowing it out again isn't handled by a complex physical model, or even implemented at all. The boy is always blowing, a gust of air forever painted on the tips of his lips, and you interact merely by rotating the boy's head. The party guests who applaud when you succeed are just the same two-frame animation of disembodied clapping hands copied and pasted four times on the screen.

Warioware understands that abstraction is the basis of communication between the game and the player, if not all communication. Videogames are composed of abstractions in the same way that books are composed of tiny symbols that once were drawings of oxen but are now just stick atoms that mean nothing without context.

Warioware lifts context from other sources than barbery and birthdays. Sports-themed microgames proliferate within *Warioware*, having their own rules and goals that most players will already be familiar with. And there's another, even more readily-accessible source of pre-existing rules and abstractions: videogames.

Warioware becomes videogames' Aleph by containing those games within itself, transposing their rules and goals into its own structure. A microgame might show Mario, in his 8-bit skin, standing in a landscape over which a few goombas crawl. “Stomp!” the game commands. And you recognize, as readily as with the birthday cake, the laws and abstractions to which Mario dances. Left and right moves, A button jumps. Touching a goomba from its side means death—to touch it from above means victory. It is completely arbitrary, but immediately understood.

Needless to say, the original *Warioware* was a revelatory release. In aesthetics, gameplay, and content, the game is complete. But completeness does not lend much ground for follow-ups—as Nintendo likely learned with the release of *Warioware: Mega Party Games*, a multiplayer-oriented Gamecube title that spends most of its time asking players to replay games from the original *Warioware*.

1 The Aleph is an invention of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges: a point that overlaps every point in the universe, a tiny speck into which one can look and see Everything.

2 See “Dark Odyssey,” TQG #7.

Internally perfect, *WarioWare* turned its gaze outward—toward the player and the means through which a player interacts with the game. So began the series' marriage to unusual input devices. First a gyroscope, which detects when you turn the machine, then a stylus and touch screen, then the Wii's 3D mouse. The microgames remain largely the same, only instead of using the D-pad to help the athlete do chin-ups, you're tilting your Gameboy left and right, moving the stylus up and down, or lifting the controller over your head.

Each method does feel new, though—in much the same way that there are only seven stories in all of literature and it is merely the telling of them which makes them new. We have been playing the same games for twenty years, and this is rarely clearer than when we make Mario hop on goombas in *WarioWare*.

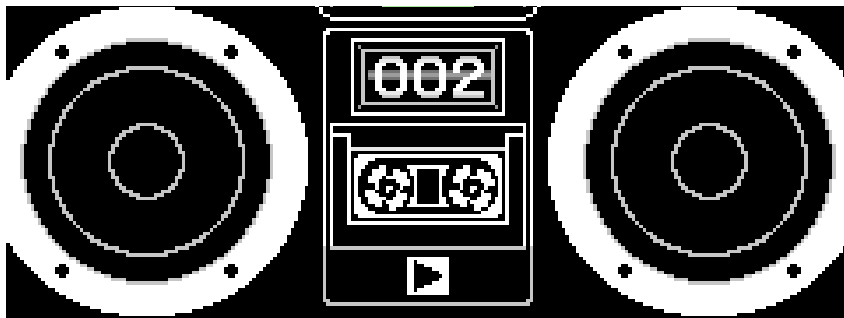
Having completed their masterpiece, the *WarioWare* team has been spinning their wheels, repeatedly remaking their perfect game. A year or so ago, Nintendo finally gave them leave to develop a game outside of the Wario franchise (which Nintendo wedded to the original for fear that the untested game model might not sell). The team collaborated with the J.P. Room recording studio to produce 2006's *Rhythm Tengoku*, a rhythm game for the Gameboy Advance.

Most rhythm games feature colored icons that move across a screen, activated by the player when they reach a certain point. This may seem too abstract, a context- and meaning-free activity, but the rhythm genre got hold of the input trick a long time ago—so that what you're actually physically doing to activate those icons is dancing on a mat or pretending to play a guitar.

The *Rhythm Tengoku* team, developing for a handheld with two face buttons and a D-pad, did not have this option. So they did something different: they gave the rhythm context. What you're actually doing is pushing the A button in time to beats in the song, but onscreen is you're helping a martial artist punch stones out of the air, or plucking hairs from an onion who needs a shave, or bouncing a marble along a platform.

Rhythm Tengoku displays an understanding of the intermingling of abstraction and context that is at the heart of the *WarioWare* series. That is ultimately why we play *WarioWare*, and why we play any games: abstract gameplay plus meaningful context creates compelling experience. And I think my peers at the magazine would agree.

This has been your Gamer's Quarter podcast. Good night. 🎧



Persona Visits the Wii Line

By Jonathan Kim



I drew this picture at about 2 AM, about the time when everyone that was going to spend the night there was settled in. There was still a lot of activity going on despite all the stores in the plaza being closed

In the corner of the sketch you can see some guys playing basketball with a Fischer-Price hoop. They were pretending to be crazy b-ball players, dribbling around then dunking the plastic ball that came with the set. While watching them, I wondered what kind of guy carries around a children's basketball set in his car.

I drew this while squatting on those concrete slabs where cars park at. Next to me, some guys started pumping techno out of his car with Arabic lyrics. I never even knew Arabic techno existed.



In front of Best Buy a group of guys were tossing a giant frisbee around. The frisbee was huge and people had to swing their whole body to fling it around. As it soared through the air like a neon UFO, a sprinkler in the parking lot suddenly exploded. Water gushed up into the cold night sky and the people playing lost their attention, instead gathering around the geyser in a semi-circle like a cult.

Later, Mariel and I got tired of sitting around so we drove around the plaza to see how the guys waiting in line at Target were doing. What we saw was miserable: there were about fifteen people sitting in the dark, cold and pathetic. All the lights around the Target were off and the area was surrounded in darkness, as if the company itself shunned these people and wanted them all to never come back. The people waiting in line weren't even having fun like the guys around Best Buy - they simply sat in a straight line, waiting.

Midnight @ Best Buy

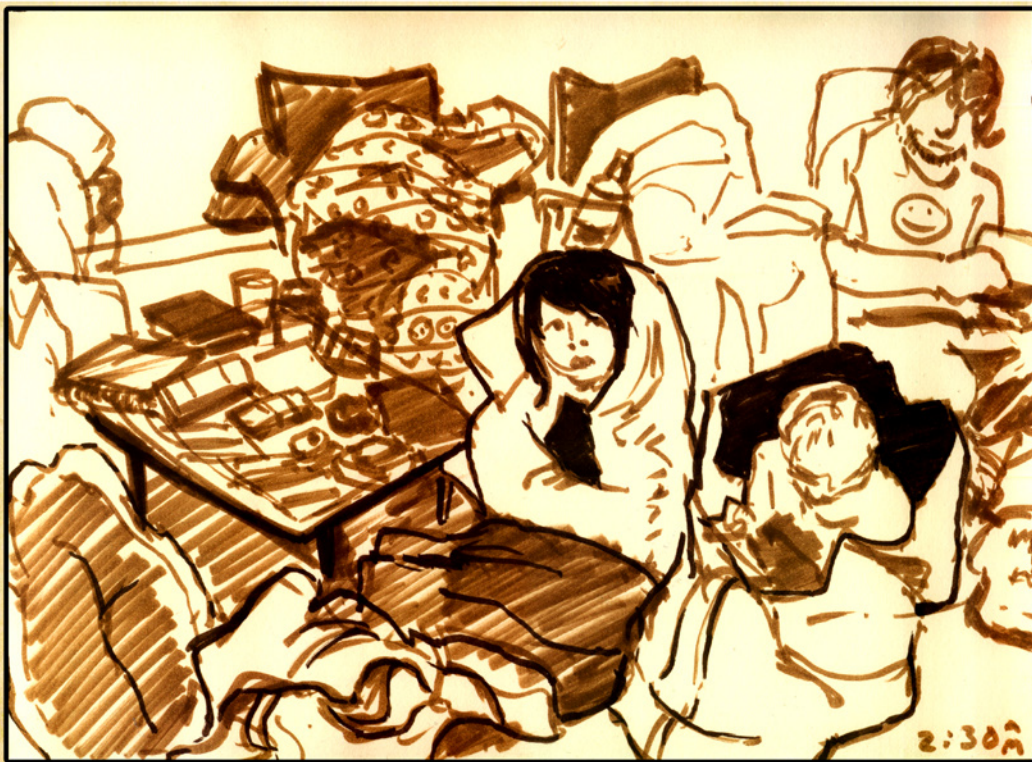
AN ILLUSTRATED CAMPOUT FOR THE wii

November 20, 2006:

My friends and I waited in front of a Best Buy in Burbank, California to purchase a Wii. It was my first time camping out for a game system, and I took sketches and notes of things to record my experiences (and to kill time).

I went with my friends Mariel and Ouendan. We got there at 3 PM and there were about 10 people in line. By chance, one of my school friends was lined up already so we just lined up together.





At around 2:30, I drew this picture. Mariel and Ouendan were wrapped up in their sleeping bags and the table we brought with us was cluttered with cellphones, DSes, sketchbooks, and drawing supplies.

A little later, the group of Armenian brothers next to us started playing a Pokemon quiz game where they tried to name all the characters from the show without repeating what someone else said before. They eventually got stuck while trying to name "that nurse in the Pokemon Centers and that police officer woman." Getting bored with that, they decided to just start wrestling each other. It looked painful since the only thing between them and the concrete floor was a thin sleeping bag but they seemed to enjoy it.

Meanwhile, Mariel, Ouendan, and I entertained ourselves by drawing Mudkips in Pictochat.

Later, I heard a rumor that the miserable Targetians got one of the televisions in the front display window on and were enjoying some late night TV. *Damn them.*

I woke up around 5 AM to the sound of jogging. It was freezing cold and my face felt like it was covered with prickly ice needles. A handful of other people were waking up from their frozen graves too, thawing themselves by shaking and jumping around.

As the sun rose, more people bloomed from the heat and the silent air was once again filled with quiet chatter. DSes were turned on and some guys were looking around to see if anyone was up for a few games of New Super Mario Bros.

While drawing the sketch below, a couple of guys drove by the Best Buy in an SUV. They looked at the line that had now grown enough to wrap around the store and even behind it, and shouted, "Oh my God... OH MY GAAAAAAAAAAAAAWDDDDDDDDDDDDDD!!!" as they drove off in defeat. Lesson: one should never assume showing up at 6 AM is early enough to procure a next generation console.

Around this time, I realized the last time I went to the bathroom was at midnight and that I really needed to Wii- I mean, pee.





At 7 AM everyone was pretty much awake but trying to stay warm inside their sleeping bags. Strangely enough, there weren't that many people that pitched tents for their stay overnight. I'd thought the majority of the people would've brought something like that to fend off the elements but it turned out only the first three people in line had them up. Maybe they stayed here longer than just the day before?

I started a conversation with Scott who stood next to me in line and was also the subject of the drawing above, about where I could potentially relieve myself. While we talked, Scott's friend turned his little PDA on and connected to the internet. I heard the Dateline jingle play as he read the news to Scott.

"It's 48° here and 24° back in Detroit. Compared to us, they're freezing their asses for a Wii."

"I remember when I was living there, during Winter we'd always be like: 'Oh God, it's cold but thank God it's only 0°! It's fucking freezing but at least it's not below 0!'"

Rumor was that the store would open at nine, an hour early, to sell the Wii. Supposedly an hour before that, the employees would come outside to hand out the first 80 or so people in line a ticket that was their guarantee to purchasing a Wii. Around 7:30, everyone began packing away their sleeping bags and other accessories and started lining up. I noticed that the line suddenly grew much larger, with sudden friends and family coming out of the cracks to line up together with those that fought through the night. From my estimation, I was pushed back from number 15 during the night to 27 when we were finally handed the tickets. It seemed really unfair to the people in the back that camped out, especially since they were around the corner and couldn't tell if more people jumped into the line at the front.

At 8 AM, the manager of the store began handing out tickets to the line. Unfortunately, right at that moment Ouendan went out to throw our trash away in the only dumpster on the other end of the plaza. Being out of line, the manager passed right by him without any sympathy. When we tried to argue his case, the manager coldly stated that anyone not in line didn't deserve a ticket. It was looking pretty dismal for Ouendan until I managed to convince the manager that Ouendan was not just throwing trash but doing a public service to his business by going out and throwing away not only our trash but those of the people around us, which wasn't actually a lie. He was safely given a number (36) and a thank you from the manager.



After all the tickets were given away, I spotted some inconsolable kids crying as if Christmas was cancelled while their parents took them back to their cars. My school friend, who was in line with his girlfriend and only needed one ticket, felt sorry for one of the kids that looked absolutely devastated and gave the boy his ticket. It was like the kid was seeing color for the first time in life the way his eyes lit up as he happily lined up with us. His parents thanked my friend profusely for his generosity and he laughed it off. Later, I found out that people not as scrupulous as my friend were hawking their tickets off to the desperate people in the back for amounts up to a seventy dollars.

As we stood around in line for the next hour, people were happily chattering about what Wii games and accessories to get. Then out of nowhere, some punks cruised by the line, holding their Wiis out the window while slowly laughing at all of us.

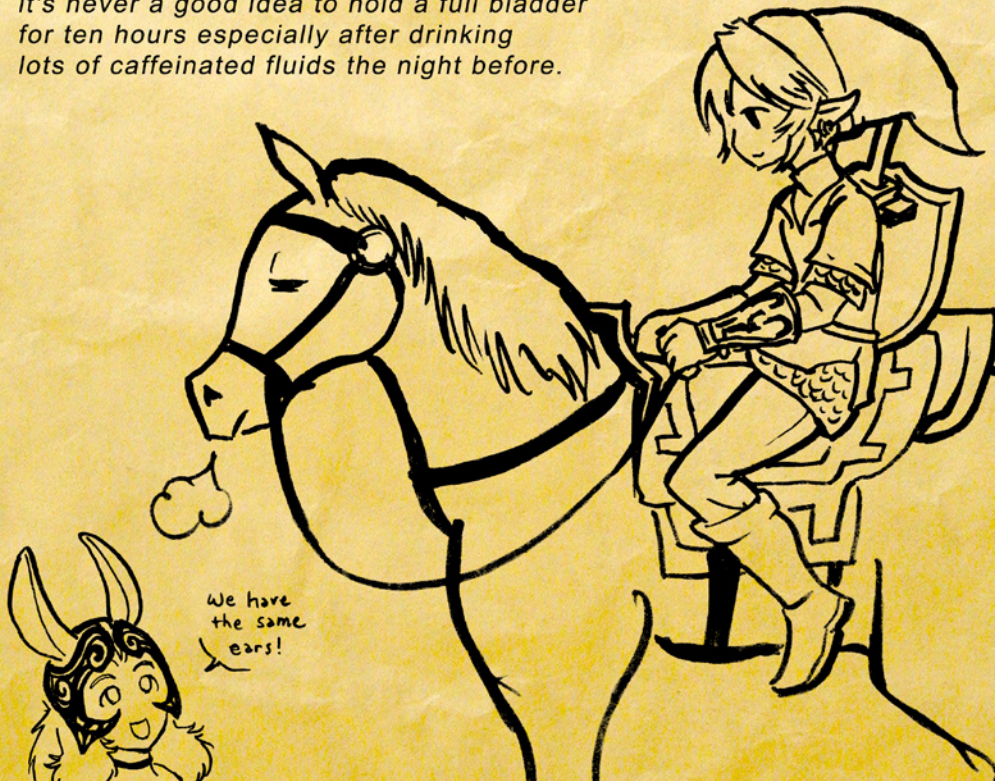
Those Targetian bastards opened an hour earlier than us.

At 9, we were let into the store in small groups along the side of the store where they setup a special section just to sell Wiis with games and accessories. It was well organized and everyone was aware of the price and availability of the products thanks to a dry erase board two employees carted around the line an hour earlier, showcasing all the information they had about their inventory.

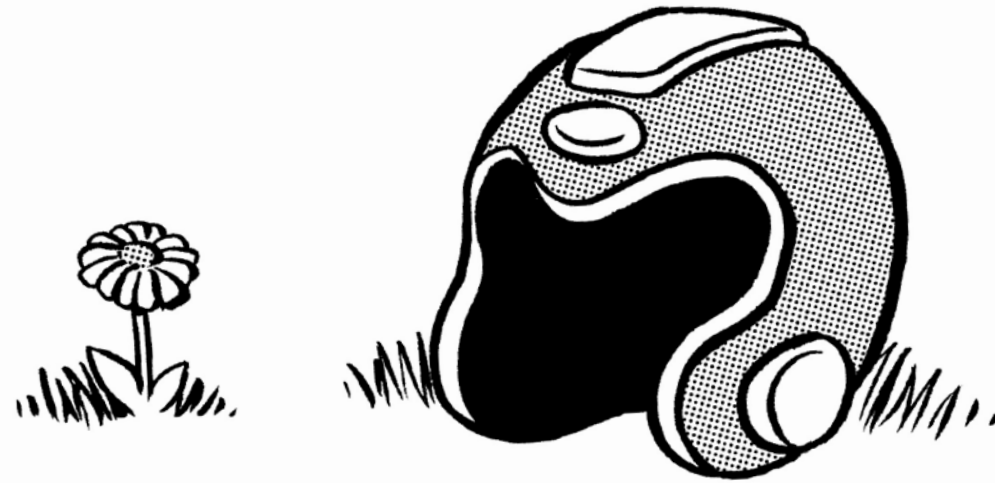
At the end of it, my friends and I all ended up getting a Wii and the overall experience was cordially and friendly. After hearing about the PS3 incidents just a few days before where people were mugged or trampled by overzealous people waiting a week for a system, it was a relief to be able to get a Wii with no problem at all.

With thanks to Best Buy's well organized setup and to the friendly people waiting in line during the Wii that made the campout so pleasant, I leave with one final lesson:

As great as a next generation system is, it's never a good idea to hold a full bladder for ten hours especially after drinking lots of caffeinated fluids the night before.



Break time!





Christmas Morning at the Leukemia Ward

Tokyo Game Show 2006
By Brendan Lee

Small, depressing amounts of this piece appeared on Largeprimenumbers.com in a wildly different format.

By the time you read this, the 2006 Tokyo Game Show will be a distant memory.

One of the true benefits—perhaps the only benefit—of adhering to a quarterly publishing schedule is the sense it gives of 20/20 hindsight. Where other magazines (we’re looking at you, *EGM!*) are obsessed with outdated notions such as “up-to-the-minute news” and “relevancy,” the quarterly publication takes a far different and more refined tack. If you’re reading this issue of *The Gamer’s Quarter*, you are one of the few that truly get it.

One of the very, very few.

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Every year, roughly 50,000 game journalists tuck their mom-laundered *Yar’s Revenge* T-shirts into stone washed denim shorts and trek to the Tokyo Game Show, causing a sudden and immediate drop in Japan’s strategic Fabreeze reserves. This year, the stakes were higher than usual: due to the recent cancellation of the Electronics Entertainment Expo (E3), the number of annual opportunities for New

Media keyboard-floggers to expense Ziff-Davis for an out-of-town handjob dropped from two to one.

Although I staggered around in a tipsy and disheveled funk at last year’s TGS, this was the first time I actually had any credentials or coverage responsibility. I got my pass in an incestuous internet situation where someone knows a guy who knows a girl who knows a guy who collects dinosaur erasers who managed to fill out the press relations section of the Tokyo Game Show website. Sadly, there exists a sacred (if legally non-binding) trust known informally as the Lanyard Accord: if you’ve got a badge from a publication, you owe that publication at least fifteen hundred words. According to Microsoft Word’s count function (one that can even count very tiny words such as “if,” “a,” “or,” “no,” “we,” “be,” “on,” and “in” (even if those words lie buried within a nested parenthesis) due to clever programming techniques), we’re up to 317¹.

Anyway, videogames!

You, gentle reader, cannot hear me, but I am making a sort of muffled gaging noise in the back of my throat. It sounds as if I am trying to dislodge a gummi bear, and indicates displeasure and contempt. I moved to Tokyo for two reasons, two reasons only: the *moé*², and the horrible crushing feeling of isolation. Thus far, those two reasons have only gelled in one game: Ban-

dai-Namco’s soon-to-be-seminal *The Idol M@ster*. This touchscreen gal sim (arcade and Xbox 360) combines all the finest aspects of a supermarket cash machine, a Newgrounds Flash widget, a fresh *doujin*-CG rip, and a cosplayer’s Flickr page. It is the electronic-entertainment version of slow-melting an Akihabara maid café into an ornately filigreed spoon and then injecting it straight into your spinal column. Although I knew that *TIM* would be making an appearance at TGS 2006, it seemed like a fairly weak reason to haul myself all the way out to Chiba. One can only spend so much time around *TIM* before chewing one’s lip and cursing one’s name.

Still, you’ve got to do something to stave off the boredom, and this year’s Tokyo Game Show had somethings in industrial-grade supply. The Makuhari Messe convention center in Chiba is where they put the big bastards. Fifty-four thousand square meters, according to the splattered press kit I found on the floor of my bathroom. They’d filled it completely with videogames and the cut-rate bottom-feeders that live off their scraps. The last time I’d been there was for Electraglide, one of the largest indoor techno events in Tokyo, and I saw Underworld belt out “Born Slippy” at fourteen thousand slack-jawed Japanese high on 3000-yen-a-pop ecstasy and Shinjuku street acid. Mass delusion was the stock in trade then, but TGS 2006 gave it a hell of a run for its money.

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I saw a meadow. It was the Next Generation, a 1080p meadow with luscious textures, lens flares, and absolutely breathtaking polygon counts, held steady at 45 frames-per-second. There was a woman there, dressed in white. For the briefest of moments I was in love, and somewhere in the dark recesses of my mind I started to hum the familiar tune that had lulled me to this tiny island in the first place.

Then she was falling.

I couldn’t really see what happened, but somehow she wasn’t on the firm solid ground anymore, and the wind was whipping through her hair, and her dress was streaking out behind her, and her perfect mouth was locked in sudden terror.

She was turning and screaming, and the ground was rushing up, faster and faster, and my stomach sunk with the inevitability—but just as the end was supposed to come, it didn’t.

Suddenly, she was flying, a foot and a half above the ground, the trees blurring behind her.

She turned, and her eyes caught the face of her savior full on. Her face shone with a perfect mixture of wonderment and relief and joy, in a place free from worry where she would be safe.

She closed her eyes and nestled down comfortably into the gentle, protecting arms ... of Sonic the Fucking Hedgehog.

It’s the kind of dark horror that makes people run screaming for a priest.

• • • • •

1 318!
2 キモイ!
3 Possibly Berry’s shoes.



I tried to deal with the main floor, so help me God I did. I picked up a camouflage-skinned PSP and jammed down on the square button in some half-assed *Metal Gear* retreat; I scanned a stack of cards into a copy of Sega's *Love and Berry*, changing Love's shoes from formal to semi-formal and back again³. I found a promotional glowstick on the ground and waved it around; then I stopped.

I started going up to booth babes at random, making ridiculous and insistent demands for very specific photographs in broken Japanese:

The Gamer's Quarter: I TAKE YOUR PICTURE, IS IT GOOOOD?

BB: Okay! [smile]

TGQ: YES. BUT! YOUR FACE, ROTTEN-FOOD-FACE PICTURE I WANT.

BB: Huh?

TGQ: OKAY. I AM YOU! I EAT THE ROTTEN FOOD. MY FACE IS ROTTEN-FOOD-FACE! YOUR FACE, MAKE! OKAY!?! SMILE IS NO!

BB: I won't do that.

TGQ: PLEASE DO IT. ROTTEN-FOOD-FACE. SMILE IS NO! I AM FROM AMERICA. ROTTEN-FOOD-FACE IS MORE BETTER. TRULY!

Eventually I just took to wandering the back halls of the press area and flashing my badge at nobody in particular until the novelty wore off. This was almost impossible amounts of fun at first, and then almost no fun at all. The press room had free drinks, though, and I whiled away a few minutes on sweet tea and screaming into my cell phone at nobody:

"Well, Kevin's a drug addict and a bum! Tell him to bring the big lens! No, not that one, the enormous fucker! This trailer is going to be broadcast in 1080-fucking-p! We don't have one-last-fucking-dance-with-Mary-fucking-Jane time here! This is a fucking CAPCOM trailer! They are going to show it once, and then it's going to be an hour-and-a-half of nonsense and casual gamer market analysis! We need to get this fucker locked down, dammit! I've had the fucking Swedes breathing down my neck

all day, and those calls from Stockholm cost about two-hundred fucking euros a minute! Tell Kevin to put the bong down! Where did he even get that stuff, the entire country's a damned floaty island!"

But nobody seemed to care, save for a small cluster of Chinese correspondents who gave each other sidelong glances and moved their notebook computers a little closer together.

Eventually, I collapsed with a Mountain Dew around a dented coffee can filled with water and cigarette butts in the ramen area. I helped a jet-lagged Viacom splinter group order some *nori* ramen from a cheery old woman. They were good at the chopsticks, the Viacomers; they remembered to rub them together first to sand off the splinters. I had a sudden clear vision of them eating some of the finest California rolls known to man.

Someone asked what kind of videogames I was into.

"I despise these things," I said, and for a second I thought, you know, that I was just being all clever and hard-boiled and grouchy and awesome. But it had a certain weight once I said it, a certain truth. I rolled it around in my mouth and said it again.

One of the Viacomers looked at me in a way that said he understood; he asked why anyway, just to be polite.

I sighed. "Videogames—or the scene or whatever—are just a bunch of ... well, do you want to know what it's like? Go to McDonald's, and order a Happy Meal. Cheeseburger, ketchup only, or however you used to order it back when you were seven years old. Sit down with it, and play with the toy first. Take out a french fry. Dip one end of it in ketchup, and then pretend that it's a cigarette, and you're smoking it. Take maybe three bites of cheeseburger. You will feel stupid, and you will feel greasy and ridiculous, but

you'll feel this warm, faint prickling of nostalgia that will make you finish the entire thing. That is what it is to be buying video games in your 20s. Or 30s. I mean, *Final Fantasy XIII* is looking pretty hot."

We flipped some business cards around and drained our ramen detritus into a sludge bucket.

I slouched waist-deep into the merchandise area.

• • • • •

I started to feel desperate.

I started to feel *heroic*.

There had to be someone worth saving in the place, I figured; some way to strain the signal from the noise. Were they clustered near the corners right now, banging on the pipes with a shoe, hoping the fire department would lower a few Nutri-Grain bars?

I thought for a bit.

I mulled.

I flipped out my DS and started up Pictochat.

It was the first time I'd ever seen it being used for anything useful; the first chat room was actually full of 10 people or so. In between wi-fi drop-outs, people were having something like a conversation—a blur of kanji and roughly-sketched *noma-nekos*. I felt one of those Stirring Feelings of Innovation, like I did watching mid '90s AT&T commercials, where vacationing mountain-climbers in Peru call their geosynchronous orbiting grandmothers on their 22-inch widescreen holo-watches.

I wiped a few bits of fluff off the DS and started to sketch in my best romaji-based pseudo-Japanese:

"HEY EVERYBODY! LET'S DRINK SOMETHING TOGETHER! FREE DRINKS!

"2:30!!

"PUYO PUYO! THE SEGA BOOTH"

I was shocked—the effect was almost immediate; a sudden rush of people leaving the chat. I glanced at my watch. It was 2:26.

Four minutes, and a wind sprint was out of the question. The leering masses were packed tight and angry, and they moved with an uncomfortable shiftiness that was difficult to predict. I glanced right—a solid impassive wall of carpet-moisteners was trying to purchase authentic vials of Aeris's tears from a man with a golden tooth. I glanced left—a terrible person in a Hawaiian shirt was pimping bed-length *Dead Or Alive Extreme 2* body pillows to a gaggle of the damned. I flipped a business card with a fake e-mail address at him. It stuck in his back, just below the shoulder blades, leaving me an opening.

2:27.

I blurred past the *PuppyOn* and *FishOn* tables, with their incomplete builds and horrible texture maps and creepy out-of-proportion furry-themed booth art.

Weaving faster now, past the enormous inflatable cube advertising an incredible new dating simulation where all the girls are in a high school band and you're the band leader and something strange and erotic happens to them in the xylophone storage room, again and again and again and again and again.

Past the maids shoving official *Bumpy Trot 2* tissue packs into *ta-koyaki*-stained hands.

Past the man splayed out on the ground, limbs twisted in a bad angle—he'd probably be fine if someone would just flip him over, but there's no time to help him.

Past the lesbians.

Past the mom/Tifa wiping snot off the kid/Cloud she overperfectly dressed up that morning. Trying not to think about the therapy he'll need later and never get.

Past the lies.

Past the truth.

A quick dodge around the clusterfuck of people taking furtive, sweaty pictures of the *Devil May Cry 4* screens that all say, "No Photo," so that you'll take pictures of them and post them on 2chan.

A shortcut through one of the near-empty booths sponsored by a telecommunications company that nobody invited but who showed up anyway.

Faster.

A precarious one-footed hairpin twist in front of a stinking gaggle of jet-lagged Caucasianoids, their bodies mashed tight against a 6-foot-tall Bomberman, their faces wild and bright and ecstatic, looking for all the world like they're participating in a poorly-conceptualized orgy with the Dalai Lama ...

2:28.

Past the bespectacled, cat-eared man with his head in his hands, crying softly and well out of the way of foot traffic—a considerate soul, certainly. Like a failing dentist who shoots himself in the head, but makes sure there are lots of paper towels and Windex nearby.

2:29.

Past French WonderSwan enthusiasts, a sickening group.

2:30.

Touchdown, throttle back.

I reached the *Puyo Puyo* table and looked around. There were one or two people that I thought were possible matches. They seemed shiftier than the others; slouching around, not playing *Puyo*, but also not *not* playing *Puyo*⁴. I opened my DS and started waving it frantically.

"Here!" I shouted. "*Koko desu!KOKO DESU YO!!!*"

A couple appeared.

Japanese, in their mid 20s, smiling, clutching their DSes. We got the preliminaries out of the way (awk-



ward bowing, awkward handshakes, awkward photography), and then got straight into *business*:

TGQ: LET'S DRINK TOGETHER.

Them: [*nervously*] Hm. Drink what?

TGQ: OKAY! OKAY. I AM PRESS. OKAY. WE GO TO PRESS ROOM. WE ARE FREE DRINKS, GET!

Them: [*nervously*] Uh...hm. Really?

TGQ: OH YES. YES. THE TRUTH, IS. LET'S GO TO PRESS ROOM AND FREE DRINKS GET.

Them: [*nervously*] Well...okay.

We sauntered to the doorway of the press-relations center; I flashed my badge and a half-grin.

"It's okay," I said, poking a thumb into my badge. "I'm with the press. These people are with me."

I had to say it a few times before anyone noticed.

They had a little drink bar of sorts set up; I passed paper cups to the Japa-

nese and told them to help themselves. They took some tea and a couple of tentative half-sips, but I could see that their hearts weren't really in it. They kept looking around in rapid, worried twitches, sure that sooner or later some angry beast of a man would catch them in a place where they Clearly Didn't Belong, and it would be off to the gallows or worse. And in that moment, I realized that the Hero Angle had been crucially flawed from the get-go. Anyone that came to this place knew, for better or for worse, exactly what it was they were getting into.

They didn't need saving. Or, at the very least, they didn't want saving.

I gave them a wan smile and a business card, and I let them go.

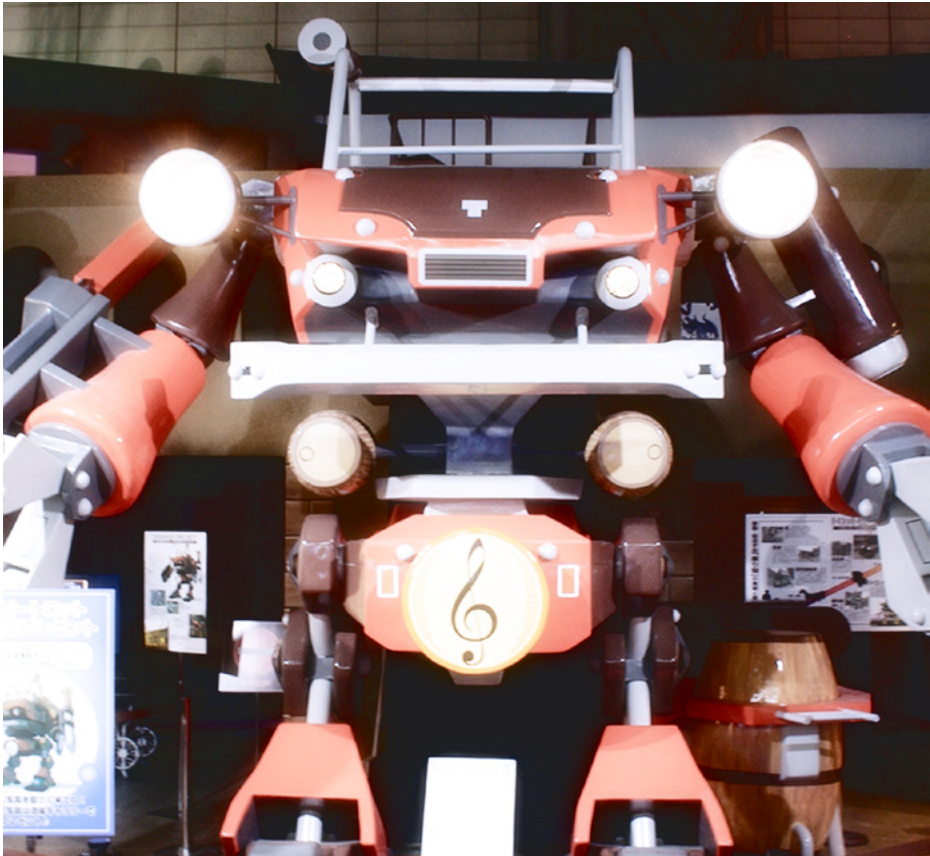
They went, like all the others.

• • • • •

In a certain frame of mind, and with the right type of blinding headache, you can see the future.

Pinch the bridge of your nose as hard as you can, and squeeze your eyes tight until the white-hot sparks begin to fry themselves along the backs of your

4 If you catch my drift.



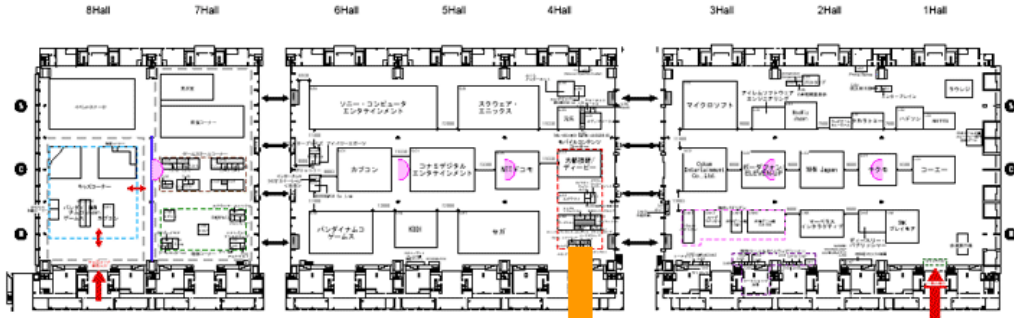
eyelids. Do it long and hard enough to give you a horrible blinding bastard of a migraine—the kind that makes you hate your own name.

That's it. You're there.
 It's a horrible, Technicolor, HDMI-enabled lung, rendered in a brand new lossless codec that will make you go blind unless you've paid a Hebrew living in New Jersey one tenth of a cent. It's hot, and moist, and the lights never shut off completely.
 The hemispheres inside your head will scream at each other in a terrible dark unison. One will demand New and Exciting, and the other will demand Old and Familiar, and they'll both meet

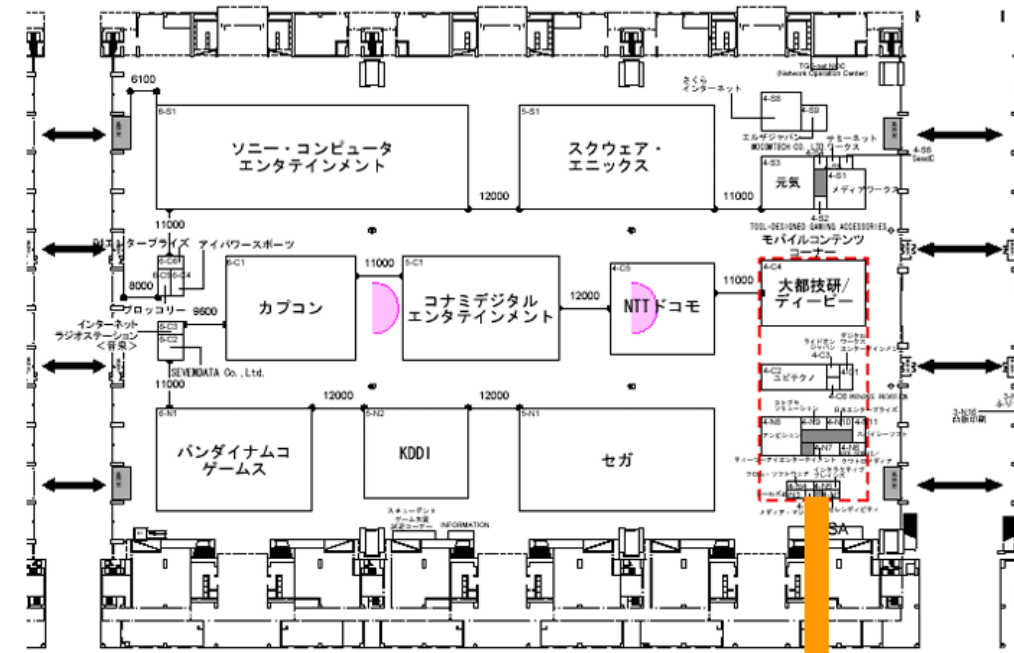
directly in the middle and explode in a terrible, gray wave of triteness and ennui.
 You'll scream for your mother, the one that you hate and never call. You'll scream for a peanut butter sandwich with the corners cut off, and make do with gin. You'll scream a black fucking streak for a plastic sippy cup of apple juice, and then call an ex-girlfriend and beg her for sex.

In the end, it isn't a question of whether or not you'll go down.
 It's a question of how long you can circle the drain. ☹️


TOKYO **GAME SHOW** 2006



拡大図



さらに拡大



A Retrospective Survival Guide to Tokyo Game Show

With Extra-Special *Blue Dragon* Preview

By Rudie Overton

When you decide to evaluate your Tokyo Game Show coverage, make sure you do it under the right circumstances and with the right equipment. For example, I do not recommend, in the middle of day one, giving your Sony CyberShot DSC-P73 digital camera to a man who has only dealt with electronics from a fruit-themed computer company. When I did so, I discovered that, although I got to make a “Macs don’t crash” joke, hours of lost data left me little to evaluate as I queued to try *Blue Dragon*, an Xbox 360 RPG by the creators of *Final Fantasy*.

I cupped my camera in my hands and realized that it was all gone—hours of photos and video casually deleted by one of the pseudo-hip legions who keep Steve in a Job. I wanted to cry or kick something, but decided that it was best not to get upset. Several minutes of almost funny footage had been deleted, but it wasn’t like anyone was really going to care. The internet has already turned its jittery attention span toward grainy YouTube Sean Connery/*Thundercats* techno dance parties.

By the time I got to the front of the line, the net-savvy gamers of today would have already pored over all of the games, news, and previews of TGS and made YTMND pages in their honor.¹

Being away from the internet, all I had been able to do was catch a glimpse of *Devil May Cry 4* from far away and browse the Sega booth. A look at my watch told me that devoting myself to the *Blue Dragon* line left me with a snowball’s chance in hell of playing anything else today.

The line was two hours long and was held within a sweaty box/cavern that was only open for eight hours total. The first day of TGS holds only two types of people: a group that reports themselves as press to the women at the front of the building, and a group paid to entertain and pretend to worship the very ground the first group walks upon. This second set of people secretly spends the day trying to see which of the others will end up with the title of “Most Likely to Fail at Life.”

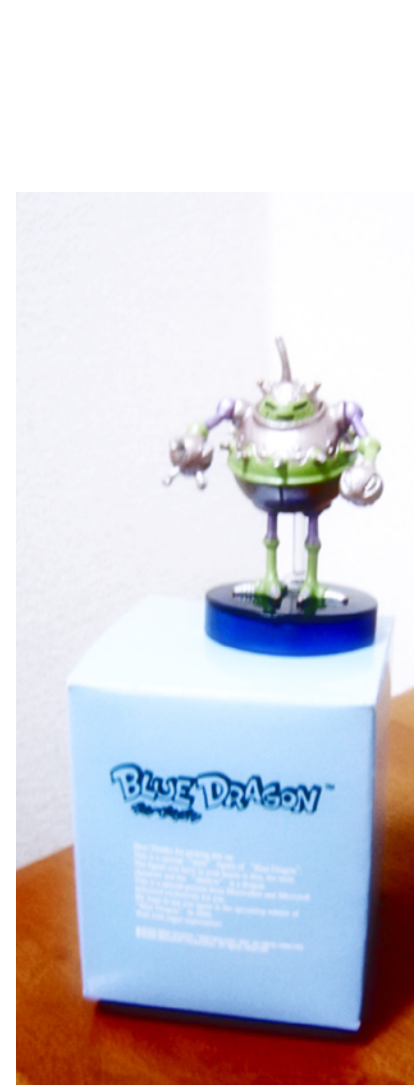
The *Blue Dragon* demo is a bit like the entertainers—it looks pretty but doesn’t show any indication that it understands videogames. The demo sees your characters dropped into an empty field, and you are then sent to kill monsters. It becomes obvious that the demo’s characters are beyond overpowered for the tiny, lens-flare-infested den they populate; every enemy goes down in under two hits. In a fit of mind-blowing graphical innovation, the game’s motion-blur is nearly enough to distract from the realization that your party itself outnumbers every group of enemies you come across. Outside

of these startling innovations, what’s left seems like basic RPG fare; you run along a false-walled forest only to hit a set of enemies and watch as the screen breaks and comes up into battle mode. Unfortunately, this knowledge is all based on what I witnessed from those in front of me, for I was still in line.

I looked around to see if I recognized any famous people—famous by internet standards anyways. And I did! There was that one guy who did that one thing. Wasn’t that the guy who writes for *EGM*? There was the dude who orders European-Blend Mocha Kocho Lattes, who knows a guy that you know you know. He isn’t really in line for a Japanese RPG, is he? I heard him saying something about a missing guy, and as his worry became my worry I thought about distracting myself by calling out to the people milling around. I distracted myself long enough that it was finally my turn to play *Blue Dragon*.

I may have no knowledge of the Japanese language, but I could still successfully communicate with the booth babes designated to tell you how to play *Blue Dragon*. Being hardcore, I learned how to RPG on the cold suburban streets. The ladies manning the booths pointed at controller diagrams and spoke in a slow, unintelligible language. I can only assume that they were telling me all about the revolutionary new game that features menus ripped straight from *Final Fantasy*. As the lady’s finger pointed to the A button over and over again, I nodded politely.

Perhaps because I knew *Blue Dragon* relies on the gameplay system of a popular game that I was already sure I didn’t like, I felt I *deserved* to be there. Or maybe I just wanted the bragging rights that were my present for waiting 120 minutes to play a game for only



15. I shouldn’t be upset that the package misstates the contents. I should be happy that I might end up walking away with a very nice looking toy action figure of the main character, rather than the cheap-looking side-character robot toy that a few people got.

Getting back to *Blue Dragon*. While slamming buttons around randomly in the hopes that one of the thirty menu options might show something cool, I glanced over to see that the guy next to

¹ For example, <http://worththe600.ytmnd.com>.

me, who chose the other menu option, is shooting baddies from a cockpit ripped from *Star Wars*. A few minutes later he was talking to some people in town. I'm not sure why I watched his screen for so long, but back on my screen I was able to defeat a tiger and discover—through a misfocused virtual camera—that one of my over-leveled party members has once again leveled up! I was able to fake enthusiasm just enough to convince the booth babe to hand me my toy. Yep. I got the crappy robot. And now my fifteen minutes spent staring at the next generation of RPGs was up.

While being pushed out of the tent I noticed another set of booth babes trying to hand out free Xbox Live points. Like nearly every other gamer in Japan, I don't own a 360, but I took some points anyway just to be polite. The girls seemed ecstatic, as if no one had taken the points all day.


Not five feet from the Xbox Live points ladies I found myself at the *Sonic the Hedgehog* demo. I didn't think I'd have time to play another game, but the *Sonic* line was strangely empty. This would be the second pre-release game I got to play! I thought to myself that this must be what being a *real* video-game journalist feels like. Staring at the cutscenes, I realized that it only meant I would get to scream about a terrible video game months before other people.

If I were I true game journalist, I could pretend that the game might magically get better in the two months before its release and write an article stressing that this was a pre-release build and Sega promises everything will be fixed. Journalists need to use all sorts of tricks like these if they hope to make it into the brand-new, ultra-exclusive E3 2007.

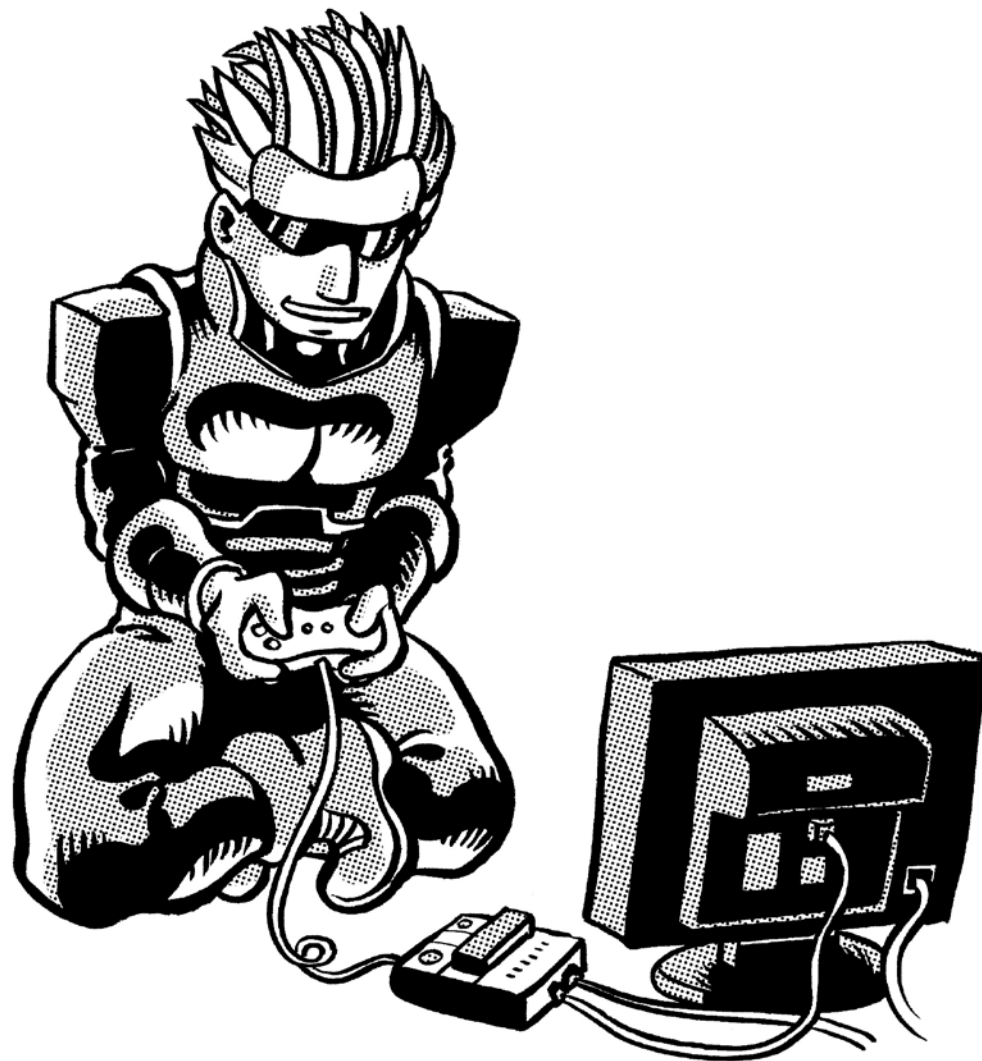
I'm not a real game journalist, so I can just tell you that it sucks.

At least now I can say that I was able to make it through TGS 2006 day one. If I had gone back for day two, I would have had to deal with the Japanese public, and the lines and crowds would have been even larger. Cosplayers would have been present, and I could have taken tons of pictures to show just how fanatical the Japanese are about video games, but that's not even worth it. I'm fairly certain that by actually being at the show I had access to far less information than the people surfing the web at home. After all, most news sources wrote their Tokyo Game Show coverage ahead of time based on the preview builds they'd been playing for weeks; they were just waiting for the show floor to open before they could post it.

Now, safe at home, with the prepackaged online coverage in front of me, I am prepared to evaluate my Tokyo Game Show coverage. If I were a *real* video game journalist sitting down to write my Tokyo Game Show report, I'd have to think hard. What were the wacky Japanese doing? Why was making the *Dead or Alive* girls do tricks on jetskis and crash into rocks the most fun I had the whole show? Was it the *incredibly* realistic breast physics? Was it because it gave me fond memories of *Wave Race 64*? Was it because *Devil May Cry 4* only made me want to play *Devil May Cry 3*? Once again, I'm not a real game journalist, so I can just tell you that I had a terrible time the whole show.

But I find my eyes often wandering to the *Blue Dragon* "main character" figurine, and I have had an epiphany. My lack of the distinctive Akira Toriyama young man was just a ruse. My badly proportioned Mardi Gras robot will be, must be, the true hero of *Blue Dragon*. I'm sure they will sell an expansion that lets it cast the dragon shadow. Game companies are like that. 

Break time!





You've Won a Prize!

Deployability

By Tim McGowan

Silent Hill 4 is a cerebral game. You, the player, are stuck in an apartment. You can leave only through a hole in your bathroom. This hole leads to various locations which are connected to the memory of another. Back and forth you must go, to discover why you are trapped in your room, why the hole leads where it does, and how you can get out.

The story unfolds in multiple forms. With enough poking there are clues to find around the apartment. Often these take the form of notes passed to the player through various slots or crevices from an unknown entity. There are clues to find in the stages. Combined, the game tells a surprisingly coherent story. And though most of its environments and enemies are not innately frightening, the game becomes more threatening as it progresses.

To appreciate this takes investment. The gameplay is often frustrating, the interface unintuitive, the story somewhat forced, the graphics a far step down from the previous game in the series, and so on. But if one grants it some leniency, there's a good amount of detail to appreciate in this game. So it puzzles me that the developers chose to reward the player for doing the exact opposite.

If you play through the game on

the hardest difficulty setting, kill 150 enemies, collect every single note, and beat the game in less than two hours without saving or dying, you unlock a mode in which you can play through the game with only one weapon, chosen at the very beginning. If you manage the exact same feat in this mode, you unlock yet another mode in which you can use all weapons from the very beginning. Furthermore, you have access to an infinite number of health drinks and ammo. In other words, you are nigh invincible.

Yet, this is a terrible task. *Silent Hill 4* is a broken game. To earn this reward you must delve into the most broken parts of it: the glitches, the frustrating combat, the nonsensical maps, etc. You have to entirely ignore the thoughtful parts of the game. If you want to be rewarded with game-breaking invincibility, you have to put up with a lot of crap.

Maybe that's the point. Maybe the designers just don't want you to get that reward. But I can't imagine why; a videogame is an experience, and if recent generations have taught us anything, it's that game makers usually want you to experience every last part of their game—sometimes they even make it mandatory.

Let's consider another example: *Devil May Cry*. The principle is similar; if you want to be rewarded with game-breaking invincibility, you must slog through

a burdensome task. In this case, you must beat the game three times, each play-through increasing in difficulty.

This game, however, fares far better than *Silent Hill 4*. The reason is obvious: *Devil May Cry* is about only one thing—fighting—and to beat its hardest setting you must get very good at that one thing. It's rewarding being good at a game with a solid combat engine. The power you're granted afterward is neat, but you don't need it. You've just become a master of the game, after all. Everything else is just candy.

Now contrast it with *Silent Hill 2*, which offers a prize for completing a task similar to the one found in its series sequel. That is, if you play the game quickly and brutally, ignoring the fun-to-read messages and exploration, you will unlock a powerful weapon. This weapon, however, can potentially kill the player as well. On top of that, the game can be played in an easy mode with almost no monsters anyway. The secret weapon is there as an afterthought, to reward those who want to play *Silent Hill 2* like a videogame. But it's surely no invincibility.

Years ago, when developers wanted to give the player some stupid, game-breaking power, they'd simply throw in a well-hidden cheat code. Now they would rather the player perform some mind-blowingly difficult task, even if that task doesn't suit itself to the game in question. In *Onimusha*, there is a frustrating pot-breaking minigame. In *Shadow of the Colossus* there are time trials, in which each boss has a time limit. In *Resident Evil 4*, there is the "Mercenaries" minigame, where you are rewarded for killing lots and lots of enemies with every single character on multiple stages. The end result is always game-breaking. Whether it's a speed run on hard mode or an idiotic minigame that grants you a superpower, the punishment-and-reward system

dominates modern game design philosophy. But it doesn't have to be that way.

What if *Silent Hill 4* compensated the player for being extra-attentive? What if the game presented a run through another character's perspective upon completion? What if it offered a minigame in which you had to work your way through a twisted version of Candy Land? Perhaps a few players wouldn't feel challenged enough. But that's a far better outcome than frustrating the rest of us.

The truth is that punishment is often its own reward, because it bestows a sense of accomplishment. Without it, the prize at the end of the tunnel feels empty. The entire point is to reward us with a unique and hopefully enjoyable experience, not to make us grit our teeth at design flaws which keep us from fulfilling arbitrary goals so we can become invincible and finally thumb our nose at all that.

If the player can't feel talented for jumping through the designer's hoops, perhaps it would be better to turn to sheer creativity, even absurdity. The potential size of videogame worlds is so enormous it's hard not to wonder why so much has been left untapped. After all, once the game is over, what's left to hide? Why not go all out, ignore what's been established—or better yet, have fun with it?

Give me *Silent Hill Candy Land*. I deserve a prize. 🍬





Knee-Deep in Legend

Doom—PC (JAG, 32X, PS1, SAT, SNES, 3DO, N64, GBA, PDA, SDC, NDS, PSP, GP2X, MOB, POD)

By J. R. Freeman
Art By Jonathan Kim

Doom is legend. It is timeless, a game that will never age or be forgotten as long as there is hardware to play it on, a game from which an entire genre spawned.

Doom is the kid who introduced you to pornography—the monsters, blood, and the guns were the stash hidden under the bed in an old, beat-up cardboard box. *Doom* is the kid you got into your first fistfight with, ending childish days and ushering in an adulthood that you weren't ready for. *Doom* is the first girl you ever had sex with.

Doom was a defining moment of my childhood. I still clearly recall playing it on a 486, back when it was a top-of-the-line computer, impressing my father and older brother by clearing the first stage with 100% kills when I was merely five or six years old.

Doom is one of the most ported videogames in history. It can be played officially on the Atari Jaguar, Sega 32X, Sony Playstaion, Sega Saturn, Super Nintendo, 3DO, Nintendo 64, Game Boy Advance, Tapwave Zodiac, Microsoft Xbox, and Xbox 360. Unofficially, fans have invested their own time and effort to port the source code to the Dreamcast, the DS, the PSP, the GP2X,

and mobile phones. Right now, people are playing *Doom* on iPods.

When I was in junior high, I would hang out with my friends in the alleyway space between the two main buildings, Etta Dale and Lucas Hall. After lunch we'd stand around and shoot the shit until it was time to go back to class. I remember suggesting how cool it would be to have a portable *Doom*, like on Game Boy, and everyone said, "Yeah, that would be neat, wouldn't it?" and then change the subject. Only a couple years later, my dream came true, *Doom* came to the then-brand-new Game Boy Advance. I could carry *Doom* with me wherever I went.

Doom is the quintessential game of the 1990s—fast, hard, brutal, fun like an arcade game is fun. It has just enough depth to keep you coming back for more abuse at the hands of angry cyberdemons. It is literally a game about all hell breaking loose, and that's exactly what happened when it came out, and when the media caught wind of it. Lt. Col. Dave Grossman of the Killology Research Group dubbed *Doom* a "mass-murder simulator." while religious groups protested the Satanic imagery.

Doom was the game that scared the overly sensitive into believing that videogames could be used as training simulators for would-be serial killers. The controversy was there at the beginning of the decade with the game's



release, and again at the end when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold took guns and pipe bombs to school and started killing. Eric Harris's *Doom* WADs can still be downloaded and played to this day.

If you've never played *Doom*—and I find it very hard to believe that you haven't—here is the premise: Hell has broken free, and you're the last surviving marine who can stop it. You take whatever weapons you can find and blast anything that gets in front of you, simple as that. The main character, affectionately known as the "Doomguy" among fans, was the perfect videogame protagonist because he mirrored the player so well; silent, impulsive, and focused solely on the task at hand—shooting many, many, many evil bad guys.


Doom didn't have puzzles or traps or anything to slow you down in your "mass murdering" other than the setup of the level. Early levels were small and simple, introducing you to the idea of getting the right key, so that when you reached the later, massively sprawling levels, you knew what to do. Find the key to open to the door, kill what's on the other side.

Doom wasn't about the things other games were about. There were no coins to collect, no crates to stack on top of each other, no stupid jumping puzzles. *Doom* was about lining up the bad guys with your barrel and pressing fire, or clearing out a room full of hundreds of enemies with a Big Fucking Gun.

Doom brought people together in a way that videogames simply hadn't before. They connected with each other over the internet to play death-match games and swap levels they had designed. They built an online community that is still going strong. Now that *Doom* is downloadable on the Xbox 360, new players are being introduced to the joy of co-op over Xbox Live.

When Id Software created *Doom 3* a few years ago, they turned *Doom* into something it clearly was not. The original game was never about cheap scares and heebie-jeebies. It was about finding the biggest gun out there and finding the exit to the level. The original *Doom* was about quick, easy-to-pick-up, unadulterated, childish, dumb, violent fun. It was upfront and to the point, and without *Doom* we wouldn't have games like *Half-Life* or *System Shock*, games that rewrote all the rules on what can and should be a first-person shooter.

The only things that *Doom* and *Doom 3* really have in common are the fact that they both started as tech demos. But time has shown that the original *Doom* stands on its own. It always has and it always will, as long as there an electronic device even remotely capable of playing it.

Doom is legend. 





Killing Dad and Getting it Right

Shadow Hearts—PS2
By Justin Boley

A friend asked me a while back what you do in Japanese console role-playing games. My reply was: “You kill god and sometimes your dad!” It was funny, but it’s not completely true. You also fight monsters and collect treasure. Then you explore new places and kill new monsters and collect new treasure. Sometimes you fight a boss, and sometimes there’s a scripted cutscene.

But mostly you participate in the great database tendency of nerds everywhere—reducing a colorful world of scary places to a set of variables that can be controlled with a memory exercise and a menu choice. Monsters are simply a matter of identifying the most efficient response and retrieving it from memory. Stories are a matter of identifying what event flags are triggered by conversation choices.

The core mechanics that have remained relatively unchanged since the genre’s inception aren’t especially important to RPG gamers. Role-playing games have become one of the most treasured forms of media to Japanese otaku, and as such, their economic viability has come to depend less on mechanics and more on their ability to respond to the psychological needs of their entrenched, dedicated fanbase.

Most games accomplish this with a careful mixture of deliberately vague and blindingly obvious analogies. Evil

empires establish the necessary feeling of conflict with mainstream society. Demonized priests and gods satisfy the need for a villainous father figure, leading up to the now thoroughly clichéd battle in which the main character, filled with a sort of generalized chronic angst, kills god, and sometimes his dad. What makes *Shadow Hearts* stand out in a huge herd of similar games is the amazing cultural specificity with which it repeats that last cliché.


Yuri, *Shadow Hearts*’s protagonist, is scared of his father. Gameplay-wise this is because his father’s ghost will show up and beat the tar out of him if he doesn’t play right; character-wise, it’s because his dad represents everything he can’t live up to. Yuri’s father is a stern, silent figure, who fights with karate to protect his family and honor the directives of his military superiors.

Even though Yuri is archetypal, he’s not the Japanese male lead of the past – he’s moody and unstable, he’s awkward around women, he’s rough around the edges where his father is block print. And despite being Japanese, he has no connection to his culture. This isn’t anything unusual—RPG heroes are brooding, culturally neutral pretty-boys almost as a rule—but by juxtaposing him against a father figure who embodies so many of the ideals of Japanese masculinity, *Shadow Hearts* throws the differences between yesterday’s male ideal and today’s otaku everyman into horrifying relief.

In Yuri and his father, otaku see how far they have strayed from the social boundaries set for them as men. The constant threat of *Game Over* in Yuri’s father is a symbol of the fear that drive otaku to live their lives in games and porn and message boards—the unshakable belief that, even within the comforting environment of an RPG, they’d have no hope of emotional survival if the next random encounter was their dad. In a genre which is, even more than others, about a feeling of empowerment, the fact that the hero can be killed dead by his father at any point, regardless of how much he levels up or how good his equipment is, speaks to how debilitating and frightening the father figure is.

But hidden in the subtext, and in a long, convoluted sidequest, is the hope for reconciliation. Yuri can confront his father, and by defeating him, gain his approval. This sequence is accompanied by every type of catharsis the writers could get their hands on. By conquering his father, Yuri saves his girlfriend, recovers his sanity, escapes from his curse, and becomes almost unstoppable. Although the climax of the game deals out the usual RPG themes of self-affirmation and approval from others, it’s there. Concealed behind the main story, where no one without access to a walkthrough, determination, and boundless free time to complete the sidequests will see it—that is, concealed even further in the depths of otaku cultural ritual—the frightened and desperate whom Yuri represents can finally beat the strongest.

One sequel later, the resolution between Yuri and his father became an “alternate ending” that never happened according to game canon. Thus the danger of depicting a hero who’s already at peace with himself was evaded, and players could relive the catharsis again, or for the first time. One

more sequel later, in a flailing, panicked flight even further away from manhood and Japan, Yuri was replaced by a pre-adolescent American boy with a giant cowlick. This should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Japanese RPGs. These games are antennas that pick up the fears of Japanese otaku, garbled by the constant radioactive bombardment of media signals from across the Pacific. The subconscious of a boy too scared to leave his room is a frightened, muddled mess even without all that distance and interference. It still comes as a surprise, though, how, for just a brief moment in one game, we got a crystal-clear signal of a boy looking the symbol of all his fears straight in the eye, and dreaming of winning. 





The Sound of Horns and Motors

Fallout and Fallout 2—DOS, WIN, MAC

By M. O'Connor

The end of the world—the finale for all that is, was, and shall be—is a universal human theme. It shows up in religious and secular cultures and appears in an array of materialistic and mystical guises. Decay, death and destruction are the hallmarks of any eschaton, regardless of the culture.¹ This ultimate destiny of all things is generally negative, though it is often followed by a beautiful age of unending peace and goodness, typically in a spiritual or otherwise noncorporeal state—the fragile body left behind in the fallen world of flesh and pain.

One obvious interpretation of this theme is that everything living eventually dies; a slight variation is the idea that cultures can, in some sense, foresee their own demise. Their apocalypse is a mythical telling of the end of their way of life and of their sense of a “people” (as of a nation or tribe or religious community). Taking them literally seems to be a mistake—Ragnarok didn’t claim the Vikings, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses have been wrong a few times now—but this shouldn’t be taken as evidence that belief in an end to material existence is solely a religious delusion.²

Modern eschatological themes exist in the public “discussions” of disparate topics: global warming; the War on

Terror; revolutionary political groups; and the works of European traditionalist writers like Julius Evola, Oswald Spengler, and Jacques Barzun. They are also common in the social criticisms of gay marriage, materialism, corporations, consumerism, and immigration; fears and worries are loaded into terms like “the gay agenda” or “the religious right.”

There’s also the “2012” mythology, popular in a rather wide variety of people expecting a new Age of Aquarius or a technological singularity or perhaps even the “self-transforming machine elves” of Terrence McKenna, who along with his brother helped hatch this particularly robust meme. It’s piggybacked on a loop point in the incredibly detailed “long count” Mayan calendar that will happen on December 21st, 2012. The McKenna brothers essentially picked this date after trying out other combinations, since the actual “long count” doesn’t loop until about 2700 years from now.³

We continue to exist despite these obsessions and manias. Persistence is all.

The end in Interplay’s *Fallout* comes with a bang, a classic theme lifted in equal parts from the 1950s and 1980s American understandings of what nuclear power meant to the world: giant mushroom clouds. The bastards really went through with it in this particular universe—and human cultural life had

to be recreated from the ground up. There is warfare, drug abuse, rape, and slavery; life is cheap, in every sense of the word. The end of the world is your playground.

The winking nostalgia in the art and design is similar to that very strange Americana one finds in a ProperNoun-igan’s restaurant. They vaguely reek of the beginning of the 20th century. The décor is a smattering of small-town college-football booster club paraphernalia, daubed with other displays of Teddy Roosevelt-esque manliness and adventure. Yet the customers in these establishments are generally not old enough to actually recognize these cultural artifacts, much less have an emotional response based on direct experience.

Fallout players are in a similar boat, feeling a connection with motifs they never actually encountered. Not many folks under forty remember bomb-shelter drills; very few under fifty would have seen genuine Cold War duck-and-cover action. But the feelings are there. The bulk of *Fallout*’s audience grew up in the late ’70s and early ’80s, a period that saw the resurgence of classic megastate antagonism and had plenty

of paranoia for everyone.

But the bit works well enough to draw folks in, partly by laughing at such obvious propaganda attempts, and partly because the notion that some kind of apocalypse is drawing near (or will, eventually) has never left us. The *Fallout* series shows a world in which all the goofy lies about scampering under desks to avoid nuclear annihilation was worthless; none of the Cold Warriors foresaw giant scorpions (occasionally intellectually and spiritually beautiful) as a future trend to watch out for. All the science, all the decades of political grandstanding, all the proxy wars were hopelessly trying to stave off the inevitable.

Fallout and its sequel *Fallout 2* (for the sake of brevity, we shall pretend that these two constitute the entire series) illustrate the problem of creating coherent game worlds within any kind of vaguely human setting. “Historical” or not, there is only so far a designer can go and still have a game, rather than a series of tragedies disguised as error messages. The next time you’re rolling a new character in a “medieval” fantasy world, consider the high infant mortality rates in pre-industrial cultures,

1 *Eschaton* is derived from the Greek word for “last” and from *eschatology*, the study of the end of the world.

2 Savitri Devi Mukherji, a French convert to Hinduism and an important thinker (so to speak) in neo-Nazi literature and what some writers have called “esoteric Hitlerism”—a continuation of the cult of personality rituals which had sprung up in Germany during World War II. She envisioned Hitler as the final Avatar of Vishnu in the Kali Yuga, the “Age of Darkness,” or the final age of the world before the coming Satya Yuga. Vishnu will arrive as a great destroyer, named Kalki, who will cleanse the earth of evil. Supposedly Hitler was this great cleansing force, and for neo-Nazis signals the beginning of a new Aryan age. Depending on whose divine mathematics you think is more reliable, the Kali Yuga has either ended or not yet begun, and may last 2,400 years, 32,000 years or 432,000 years (the traditional figuring of the length of each of the four ages of existence, which endlessly repeat following the end of the Kali Yuga and the start of the Satya Yuga, a great paradise where gods and men work in harmony, righteousness reigns and everything is totally rawkin’).

3 For more information, please consult *A Forest of Kings* by Linda Schele and David Freidel, which contains handy illustrations and an in-depth account of how the various Mayan calendars and almanacs were constructed and consulted.



and be thankful you don't have to deal with game-over messages popping up minutes later to say, "You have died of smallpox at the age of three. Please roll again."

Playing *Fallout* as it falls, accepting the constant barrage of cruel fate, is thematically appropriate to a degree, but at some point you might actually want to see how things turn out sans disasters. Death is a run-of-the-mill occurrence, even as you approach the end of each game with sharpened abilities and big guns. Your companions die with depressing regularity (don't trust any of them with a burst-fire weapon, by the way). If you play the game without spamming the save button and reloading at every misfortune, there's a good chance you'll wind up with no allies.

That's the kind of experience one would expect in a horrible place and a terrible time. It's especially anxious when dealing with the long turn-based combat sequences, as you have no direct control over anyone but your own character. But coincidental realism is cold comfort when you're being accidentally shot in the back by one of your trusty friends. (It turns into warm hilarity, however, when those friends—or random children—get a taste themselves, as punishment for

real or imagined assaults. You can also sell your allies into slavery if they get too pushy.)

Both games are about cults, literal or figurative, with their own plans for the end of the world and the beginning of the next. Both are undone with a combination of violence and trickery. The first *Fallout* has a better setup, in that many of the clues about "the Master" are appropriately delivered by fawning cultists who have no idea of the scope of the coming apocalypse. The Unity is a typical collectivist nightmare crafted by a mutant blob that figures if you can't beat 'em, mutate 'em (and consume 'em when 'em don't turn out right). The plan is to use the Forced Evolutionary Virus (FEV) to create an army of miniature Incredible Hulks and bring about world peace. Of course, the player, in the guise of the Vault Dweller, puts an end to these happy utopian dreams of sameness squared.

Fallout 2 twists the theme a bit—you can tell the end was rushed by the time you get there—into a conspiracy thriller that's really another exercise of religious fanaticism. The remnants of the US shadow government have become a kooky military order known as the Enclave, which figures you cannot make the *novus ordo seclorum* without breaking some eggs (i.e., all life on earth). So the FEV gets a 2.0 revision using a combination of cold science, live slave labor, and tasty, tasty racism. After the mass slaughter of everyone else, the Enclave will repopulate the earth with their non-contaminated genes. Depending on how far you dig into the backstory surrounding the *Fallout* universe (or simply dig around in *Fallout 2*), it appears likely the Vaults project was entirely engineered by a gang of "political realists" (read *sadists*) for their own Strangelove-related sexual shenanigans.

Yet all these grand plans are un-

done by the work of your character, a presumably unsuspecting messiah. To some extent all RPG player characters are saviors of some world order and destroyers of others, otherwise people wouldn't bother putting up with cumbersome play mechanics and turn-based mania. And both villains are, despite their bloodlust, not entirely unreasonable. The Master lacks some important data, but is driven by compassion of a kind. The Enclave has plenty of information and utterly no remorse, but is compelled for something that can be construed as a greater good. Politics at the end of the world is certainly no time for saints or Boy Scouts, anymore than our own time.

In some ways it is disappointing that no apparent strands of any of the major world religions survive into the *Fallout* era (outside of a thinly veiled burlesque of Scientology⁴) because, as the series shows, there's a lot of fun to be had playing "what if?" with bits of human culture. What happens to Christianity (and Judaism and Islam) when the end comes and those who are left must endure the pressure cooker of a decades in isolation?⁵ Would we find resurgent messianic spirits battling each other upon their release from the vaults, or would the framework turn deeply individualistic from the lack of a larger community? Would sectar-



ian divisions still matter? Perhaps the religious impulse as we know it would die out simply from being trapped in a self-contained marvel of science with a small group of jumpsuit-attired busybodies, and some other means of providing meaning – and controlling population growth through rituals and rules concerning sexual relations – would be implemented.⁶

In *Fallout 2* the legend of the Vault Dweller has swelled from rumor and fantasy and events from the first game that may or may not have been experienced by the player. Despite the carnage, suffering, and despotism (despite even a lively slave trade), some still have a yearning for messiahs to save and destroy the world. ☠

4 And Scientology can burlesque itself quite well without any outside help, thank you very much.

5 Supposedly this theme was going to be central to the planned version of *Fallout 3*, before Interplay met its own apocalyptic end. What Bethesda will do with the franchise remains to be seen.

6 Though the Malthusian current that's so popular today (Short version: too many people / we're all going to die) has been shown to be dead wrong when so broadly applied, in a closed system like an underground vault there's a very simple lack of square footage to consider. Obviously a whole mess of pre-and-post-natal infanticide underpinned vault life, unless the birth control was real primo stuff. This is avoiding the larger question of sexual politics in the vault, though it seems likely that autocratic elitism a la Vault 13 was the rule, rather than the exception. They didn't call them "overseer" for nothing. Furthermore, there's an argument to be made that these folks were in on the grand experiment that was the true purpose behind the Vaults. Visit <http://falloutvault.com> for more information on the subject—and all others related to the *Fallout* universe—than you could possibly hope for.



The Punch Line

Rule of Rose—PS2

By Ancil Anthropy
Art By Mariel Cartwright

Shuji Ishikawa walks into Yuya Takayama's office. "I have an amazing idea for a survival-horror game. You should publish it."

Yuya Takayama says, "Sorry, I don't publish survival-horror games. They're a little too cliché."

Ishikawa says, bowing, "Sir, if you just hear my idea, I know you would want to publish it."

Takayama says, "Okay, okay. Tell me."

Ishikawa swings over a chair and mounts it backwards, leaning over it as he talks. "Picture this," he says. "A young girl is captured by a band of sadistic orphans. They give her books, hand-drawn books, full of pictures of goats being slaughtered and mermaids being hooked. They make her act them out. We give her a dog, see, and the dog helps her find things, so she can't do anything by herself. She finds the things the orphans tell her, and then they spit on her, they beat her and tie her up, they hold dead rats to her face and cover her in insects. They make her fight shrivelled monster children with pigs' heads and giant scissors. She can barely fight, of course. And there's a headmaster who canes her and a man who keeps children locked in his basement. The girl comes to accept that the

only person she can rely on is her dog. She becomes completely dependent on him. And then, at the game's climax," he pauses on the word "climax" and leans over the chair, his face sweaty and his eyes shining, "we kill the dog."

For the longest time, Takayama just sits in silence. Finally, he manages, "That's a hell of a game. What do you call it?"

And grinning, Ishikawa says, "The Aristocrats!"

• • • • •

The game, developed by Ishikawa's aptly named Punchline studio, is actually called *Rule of Rose*. The description may not be entirely accurate; after playing through the game and reading through the script, I still have no idea what the game's plot is. But the children who torment the game's protagonist—who is named Jennifer, but who the game's narrator calls "the unlucky girl"—do call themselves "The Red Crayon Aristocrats." They have a hierarchy, you see, and Jennifer is at the bottom of it. Therefore she must do their bidding.

Their bidding is fetch quests (and appropriately, Jennifer enlists a dog to help). "Find a beautiful butterfly." "My rabbit ran away. Bring him back." The characters, usually off-handedly, toss Jennifer a clue, and she shows it to her dog, Brown. Then she follows Brown

to the next clue, clumsily evading any enemies who may appear or, when she is forced to, clumsily fighting them.

The clues eventually lead Jennifer to the beautiful butterfly or rabbit, and she takes it back to the Aristocrats. They tell her it's not good enough, berate her for completing her task too slowly, ascribe her victory to someone else, or blame her for something she didn't do. Then they punish her. And then a new chapter starts.

The game is an exercise in tedium. The first few hours are spent groping; you mash the X button, hoping to find a door you can't see in the darkness. Once you find Brown, the game becomes vapidly straightforward, asking you only to squint at the screen, sit through the long load times, and occasionally fight rejects from *Silent Hill*. Combat is not only intentionally crippled but also shamelessly buggy—enemies will hit you when you're nowhere near them, and you'll die because the game is miserly with healing items. Then, because the game is even stingier with its save points, you'll repeat the whole past hour of the game, sitting again through the long load times and unskippable dialogue.

You're given no reward for doing this, other than a lurid cutscene and more of the same. You keep playing because you get satisfaction out of withstanding everything the game subjects you to—"Thank you Ma'am, may I please have another?" You play because the game is cruel and you like it.

The game demands something rather personal from you—it asks you to submit. At the opening of the first chapter, Jennifer is told she's been a "bad girl." "And bad girls need to be punished, don't they?" You are prompted to respond by selecting "yes" or "no."

The scene will carry on regardless of your pick; the game will tell you, "I'll be the one giving the orders around



here, okay?” Jennifer has already made her choice, must eternally submit—to the Aristocrats’ demands and pejoratives and punishments—with scarcely a protest. Whether you, the player, choose to submit—to the game’s tasks and objectives and constant cruelties—won’t be decided by answering “no.” When you press that button, you’re just playing along with the scene, giving the game the okay to continue.

Rule of Rose brilliantly illuminates the roles of “Top” and “bottom” inherent in all gaming and the choices we make to enter those roles. Though it is most obvious here, with the cruel children spitting on Jennifer as she obeys their demands, the Top/bottom dynamic is intrinsic to all demanding games.

I enjoy playing shooters, some of the most brutal, punishing games in existence. But when I escape a situation that had hitherto seemed impossible, there is a sense that the game is proud of me—for enduring, for learning, for rising to meet its demands and improving myself. Even if the game says nothing, if my only hint is the twinkle in its eye, I feel the respect. And then the wicked grin as it lays another, more difficult scene upon me. I may struggle, I may surmount, but we—the game and myself—will push my limits further.

As a game, *Rule of Rose* is a mess; as a Top, it learned all its meager tricks from bad '80s pulp flicks—it doesn't think to ask your limits, doesn't check to make sure the rope isn't cutting off your blood flow, doesn't keep a box of emergency supplies on hand, really doesn't think of you at all. It's the kind of Top experienced players stay away from.

The one thing it does is respect the safeword. The buttons on your controller, both “yes” and “no,” will never change the scene or the game. But there's another button with another response—it glows green on your console, always within reach. If there's one thing you can learn from a Top—or game—like this, it's that the choice to keep playing is wholly yours. Maybe that's the punch line. 🍷





Untold Tales of the Arcade

Killing Dragons Has Never Been So Much Fun!

By Francesco-Alessio Ursini

I have played a lot of great games in my life, and a chunk have been set in fabulous imaginary worlds of might and magic. Demons, wizards, and creatures of light and darkness were the victims of my arcade violence; I spent countless hours destroying every single supernatural creature that dared show up on my quest to save the princess. Sometimes I needed to quest around to save a kingdom, while other times I had to fight with the poor, discriminated-against magical beings, who wanted nothing more than a peaceful life of destruction and rampage.

I have played many arcade games set in fantasy worlds, most of them sporting cheesy and delightful plots and fascinating settings. In the third and final installment of this “Untold Tales” miniseries, I’ll cover more exotic quests. I have enjoyed the incredible pilgrimages and magic wars of Elta, helping him to become the Magician Lord; I have roamed at length in the rich and intriguing world of *Dungeon Magic*; and I have fought countless dragons in the two *D&D* titles set in the classical world of Mystara. All these adventures are narrated here again, with the glorious purpose of reminiscing about the past epics of the arcade experience.

Let’s make haste to the final part of our quest!

Elta and the Magic Wars—The Lord of All Magicians

Magician Lord is one of the first games that appeared on the Neo-Geo in 1990. The Neo-Geo hardware became the target of the collection-obsessed during the ’90s, thanks to the insane prices of the carts. Its initial nature, though, was more arcade-oriented. I doubt that all early Neo-Geo titles were meant for the arcade market,¹ but games like *Magician Lord* provided a great arcade experience.

It is the quest of the warlock Elta and his perils against the lord of the underworld.² All his adventures take place in evocative settings and are blessed by entrancing music, creating a sense of wonder and arcane mystery. When I was a kid, this game bewitched me with its environments; I remember being enthralled by the big moons in the background of stage 2 and the Lovecraftian ambience of stages 6 and 8 that summoned the bizarre landscapes of Kadath and R’lyeh. This, however, is just one aspect of the game’s appeal.

Magician Lord is basically a platforming/adventure game. Elta can jump, shoot magic beams, and pick up shape-shifting crystals. Collecting two

crystals will trigger a metamorphosis, which is based on the combination of two elements (blue for water, red for fire, and green for air).³ Aside from the ability to transform into a ninja or a samurai, Elta can also roam around the worlds and beat up magic creatures while discovering new rooms. In short, the gameplay is quite straightforward, and actually a bit stiff, with a number of cheap aspects like Elta himself (who can be pretty annoying to control), hits that come from nowhere, and unbalanced enemies and bosses.

But the sense of “otherness” was the strongest element in the game’s charm. All bosses are gothic creatures of doom, some of them perfectly in line with the Great Old Ones’ descriptions. The seventh boss is a perfect rendition of Nyarlathotep, the god with a tentacle in place of his face, the herald of Chaos and the Great Old Ones’ agent.⁴ Other creatures haunt the incredible worlds of clouds to which Elta is transported to banish evil and regenerate Earth, and all of them share a design made of impossible shapes and labyrinthine routes.

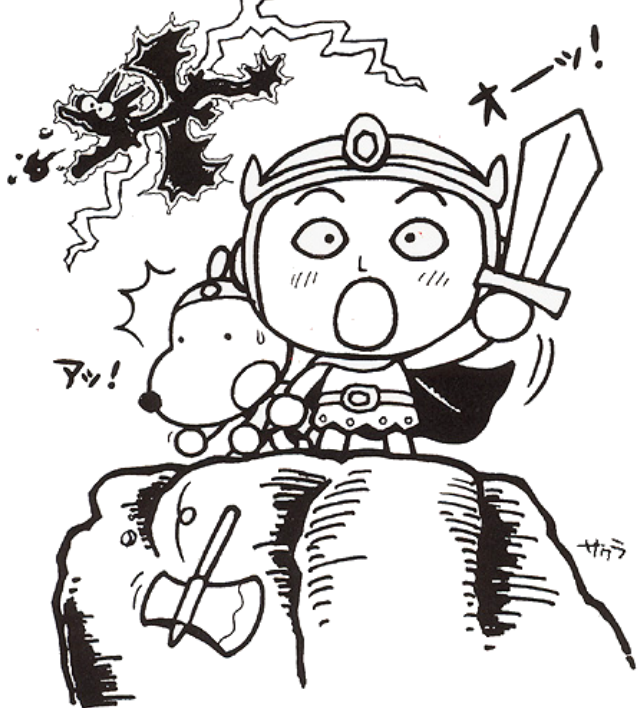
One peculiar aspect of this game that has always fascinated me is its close resemblance to Lovecraft’s Dreamlands. I was a fond player of *Call of Cthulhu*, and I honestly adored the Dreamland settings. Actually, I remember thinking that most enemies in this game were inspired by Lovecraft’s

nightmares. The only deviation from the classic Lovecraft Mythos is that Elta is not a poor man driven to madness by horror, but a powerful warlock bent to defeat gods and bring peace back to his land.

While I was playing *Magician Lord*, I was reading classic tales from the Mythos, and I often imagined what those stories would be like if, instead of the whiny, reactionary alter egos of Lovecraft, the main characters were the arcane, shape-shifting magician. I thought of Elta as some sort of Outer Ones priest—his goals only superficially linked to the usual “get rid of the demons”—secretly fighting for a much higher cause (like inner enlightenment, Nodens’s triumph, or other zany things). Today, I can only frown or laugh a bit at my silliness of yesteryear, but I am still fascinated by the laconic charm of *Magician Lord*.

I don’t remember completing the game on one credit, but I had a couple of friends who could do it. I was frustrated after trying many times to reach the later stages, something rather difficult to do without learning all the cheap tricks to avoid getting hit and losing power levels. The advantage of my disenchantment is that I spent part of my time watching these two friends playing, and I could appreciate the aesthetics of the game without having to punch the cab because of the peculiar

- 1 Some of them are too long or too “expensive” to be played in this way, like *Crossed Swords* or *Riding Hero*.
- 2 A warlock is a conjurer or even a demon summoner. Elta is a good guy who uses shape-shifting powers, so he’s “witchy” and ambiguous in his appearance and methods, definitely part of his charm.
- 3 No earth: Elta doesn’t like heavy things! Besides that, I’m not sure that the gems actually are associated to the classic Aristotelian elements.
- 4 Actually, Nyarlathotep has three legs and it is described as gigantic in its monstrous form. I doubt that a gigantic boss could have been a good choice for the game, though (he wouldn’t have fit the screen).



gameplay. The fascinating aspects, thanks to this more passive attitude, quickly took precedence. Every play was a journey into the infinite wonders of Gal Ageise, the netherworld in which the saturnine boss awaits his final defeat at the hands of Elta.

Years have passed and I can only recover the sense of *Magician Lord's* wonder with the almighty power of MAME, unless I want to fork out a fortune to buy a Neo-Geo plus a *Magician Lord* cart. I prefer to be a filthy pirate and revisit the worlds of my youth without spending a penny. I am still fascinated with the perils of the young magician Elta, even though trying to deal with odd jumps via a laptop keyboard causes me stress. The gigantic moons and the endless cloud worlds are still as evocative as they were years ago, and I fall quickly into Otherness.

A Tale of Isometric Quests—The Magic of Dungeons

Dungeon Magic (or *Lightbringer*, its Japanese name), is a rather interest-

ing game. First, it uses an isometric perspective. Second, the dungeons are pretty elaborate, and each level offers many different choices of possible paths to reach the boss. Some paths are better than others as they lead to more special items or rewarding events. At the same time, they're also more difficult, so there is a balance between advantages and handicaps. Levels are big and complex, with a lot of different enemies, all based on the traditional *D&D* milieu. Bosses are tough, and the key to each is learning how to destroy them in the quickest way possible.

At first glance, it seems like a rather straightforward action/beat-'em-up game, with the perspective its only intriguing aspect. And when we remember that the first game to do fantasy in an isometric perspective was *Dark Seal*,⁵ any possible claim of innovation and originality goes out of the window. But the charm of *Dungeon Magic* lies in the overall mix of ingredients; Taito decided to put together a number of elements already present in many other titles and refine them to a new level of class, in perfect Taito style.⁶

The fighting system is also pretty good, as characters can do interesting combos, charge attacks, and spells. All four dungeons are pretty big, and it takes some time and many plays to discover all of their intricate details. The routes through them are by no means easy to dissect—each of the three or four possible routes grants enough benefits and handicaps for future stages to be considered an acceptable choice. Unlike many similar games, the possibilities are really open-ended. All that matters is devising the right strategy.

Aside from the intricate gameplay, *Dungeon Magic* has a number of interesting features. The plot hides an intriguing anticlimactic ending (which I won't reveal) and a lot of narrative twists based on the structure of the game. It has a delicate and elegant orchestral score, something very rare in arcade videogames. The animation is rich, with bosses like the giant snake moving around the screen in superb detail. There are a variety of enemies, all offering a nice challenge, and many possible options for fighting.

I remember that my friends and I spent a lot of time trying each combination and path in *Dungeon Magic*. We shared our knowledge via diaries and notes; we even started to organize our lives to spend more time on the game. Long before MMORPGs, giant campaigns, and other campy ideas became trendy, we spent our time in a giant campaign for the conquest of this world

Much like Elta's adventures, this game had a weird synchronicity with

the fantasy books I was reading at that time. In this specific case, I couldn't avoid associating *Dungeon Magic's* mood and style to the Elric of Melni-boné saga and its melancholic mood. *Dungeon Magic* lacks the depressing ending of Elric's saga, but it shares the light sadness, peril, and difficult choices. After all, killing an innocent who was transformed into a giant, loathsome spider is something that could have happened in the Michael Moorcock novels.

Dungeon Magic became, then, a sort of natural progression of the Rastan series.⁷ Not only because they shared the same glorious producer, but also because both represented an often-ignored aspect of fantasy: the sense of oppressive fate, the struggle against predestination, the inevitable impossibility of a happy ending when a group of heroes fights against ominous creatures.

After all these years, *Dungeon Magic* still strikes me as an original and melancholic title. Original because it introduced many intricacies to an otherwise drab sub-genre while remaining arcadey enough to attract me. Melancholic because it has so many subtle elements that avoided the clichés of crappy fantasy plots in favor of a darker, and somehow more human, narrative. No fearless knights in shiny armor, no sappy endings, no miraculous feats that save all the innocent people. Unless we want to buy into childish black-and-white settings, no one can conquer everything.

5 See "Untold Tales of the Arcade" in *TGQ* #7, the second installment of the trilogy.

6 The reader wondering if I'm a bit of a Taito partisan is, as always, right.

7 Which I talked about in both of the previous installments of this trilogy: "Untold Tales of the Arcade" in *TGQ* #6 and #7.

Kicking Undead Creatures and Red Dragons Around—The D&D Videogames

I think that everyone that can be labeled as a nerd has, at least once, played *Dungeons & Dragons*. But *D&D* and its bigger brother, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, never attracted me a lot. As tabletop role-playing games, they were too cheesy, even in a medium that, by definition, was cheese at its cheesiest.

But the two arcade titles inspired by this series remove a good amount of cheese, leaving a good mix of side-scrolling beat-'em-up gameplay, following the example of their predecessor, *Dungeon Magic*. Of course, Taito's game was published only a couple of months earlier, so I'm exaggerating to say that *Dungeon Magic* inspired *Dungeons & Dragons: Tower of Doom* (the first Capcom's two *D&D* games). But both games do share the same basic idea: different paths, each with advantages and penalties, plus a good roster of characters.

Tower of Doom is not as deep as *Dungeon Magic*, but is nonetheless a great game. Stages are simple: choose a path, find secret doors and magical items, fool around trying to find out how to open those damn doors on the last stage, discover the cheapest tricks to beat the bosses (including the insanely difficult red dragon on stage 6). All the clichés one would expect to find in an RPG, all within the classic setting of *D&D*—specifically, the principality of Glantri, a world that harbored my first experiments as a Dungeon Master.

Tower has a traditional plot: monsters start attacking humans *en masse* and cool heroes full of noble intentions and altruistic tendencies⁸ beat the shit out of those poor, innocent monsters. Cruelty ensues, and a mass slaughter

of demi-humans becomes unavoidable. Of course, the mastermind behind all these attacks would have to be an undead creature, namely the lich Deimos (named after the Greek god of terror). In short, the plot is the usual *D&D* adventure that every one of us has played at least a dozen times.

What makes the game great is its *D&D* setting. Back in 1994, I was already tired of *D&D*; my RPG of choice was the much darker *Stormbringer*, which had just been revised as *Elric!* However, I cheered at the sight of a videogame set entirely in the lands of Mystara, one of the first fantasy settings I had the pleasure to explore in an RPG. Even if the renditions of most of the characters and monsters were not so accurate (every enemy except for the red dragon looked different from my mental images⁹), the overall *D&D* feeling—cheesy generic fantasy—was perfectly translated.

At the same time, I liked the gameplay, especially with the elf and cleric. Both had a cool ability to launch spells and use weapons together, and comboing magic missiles with four-hit sword slashes always made me smile. It's a shame that the tabletop game was so boring and linear: Gary Gygax, the author of *D&D*, should have designed something more like a side-scrolling beat-'em-up, or at least he should have used a less static approach to fighting!¹⁰ Aside from the campy idea of elves comboing trolls, the core engine was fairly serious in faithfully reproducing the “hack enemy, find treasure, proceed to next section” dynamic of *D&D*.

Of course, an arcade videogame doesn't play like a turn-based RPG. Consequently, beating the shit out of ogres is a more pleasurable and faster experience, especially when you can jump, charge, land stunning hits, and whatnot. No waiting for the Dungeon



Master to cheat on his dice roll, you can mangle kobolds in no time! Add parrying, and you pretty much have a completely different game—one that points out the problems of older hack-and-slash RPGs. Part of *Tower's* charm was how it removed all the boring elements of fighting and made it actually enjoyable, even if dashing at a lich trying to kill you with its wand is a bit zany.

Like *Dungeon Magic*, *Tower of Doom* generated enthusiasm, and the people who didn't much like the isometric view and over-complicated dungeons of *Dungeon Magic* found *Tower* refreshingly linear. My uncle, for instance, clearly and definitely preferred the game: enough to clear it on all possible paths with all four characters, discovering every secret and optional path. People of all ages rejoiced in seeing him defeat the red dragon alive. If you wonder why, you should really get the game (it's in MAME or Saturn), reach stage 6, choose the shortest route, and send me an e-mail in which you cry that the Red Dragon has beaten you silly, destroyed your *Zelda* collection and roasted your cat.

But my uncle could beat it without getting hit once. Of course, the nerdy kids were all awestruck by his skills. And when you remember that my uncle usually swore like a sailor and became overly aggressive when having hardcore playing sessions in front of the zit-faced nerds attracted to coin-op renditions of their basement pastimes,¹¹ you can only feel sad at the missed occasion for a great show.

Tower of Doom caused many arcade accidents and occasions for laughter, but *Dungeons & Dragons: Shadow over Mystara* generated mass hysteria. Capcom decided that the sober *Tower of Doom* was not the real deal and turned to another one of their great (but completely unrelated) beat-'em-ups for inspiration, *Alien vs. Predator*. The result is that *Shadow over Mystara* has one of the coolest fighting systems around, but it doesn't really evoke tabletop sword fights. The problem lies within the core fighting system: all of the characters have rather long combos, as in *Alien vs. Predator*, resulting in some rather odd-looking events, such as the elf doing somersault kicks, triple

8 Mercenaries, actually.

9 Which are obviously the most accurate.

10 *Stormbringer*, on the other hand, allows you to do a lot of things in a single round. Just letting you know.

11 Not me at the time, and hopefully not you as well!



ascending slashes, and other Hong-Kong action-movie attacks.

If that were not enough, the inventory system is much more complicated than *Tower*; you have to handle spells and items while at the same time juggling orcs around the screen. In short: press C, move the inventory items with the joystick (your character will also move around the screen), *change inventory types* (from items to spells for instance) with B, then press the jump button to use your item. Puzzled? Yeah, we all were, frankly.

Aside from the initial disorientation resulting from the much more hardcore fighting system, the game quickly became the object of mass abuse by the usual posse of players. It's full of secrets (the inventory of items you've found, at the high-score screen, is good proof); people spent hours trying to find everything. And since the game is actually pretty big, this operation demanded careful planning, written guides, lots of swearing, and many headaches. The best part for me was my uncle playing it in every single moment of his freedom, cursing all possible divine entities in the world and menacing any kids who dared to ask for change while he was busy playing.

Not counting my uncle's insanity, many lives were destroyed by the appearance of this game. The number of players orbiting the cab was, at

any time of the day, consistently high. Some heated sessions involved things like:

- Brawls, the real thing, people punching each other over which zone to choose to get secret items
- Acts of vandalism to the cabinets (two of them inspired by rage toward Tel'arin, the ninja-esque shadow elf)
- Ultra-nerds studying all imperfections and divergences from the original descriptions in the *D&D* handbook (some of whom received physical punishment because of their obnoxious über-nerdism)¹²
- Random craziness, including some weird bugs (shame I don't remember them)

The game was, in many aspects, the pinnacle of arcade ghetto culture. At no point in my life can I remember a more pure and untouched nerdiness drifting through my old beloved arcade. Kids my age weren't even the worst ones; the older generations, the ones who were teenagers when the *D&D* trend started, spent the most time on this title. There's nothing more horrible than thirty-year-olds monopolizing a cab because they need to get revenge, in some sort of horrible, perverse way, for all the humiliations they had to suffer from their dungeon masters.

Wait, there's something worse. Personally, I haven't been a huge fan of this title. To be honest, I mostly played it for the absurd atmosphere surrounding it—the young kids talking in wannabe “magic speak,” the older people trying to reminisce about the early '80s (in the mid '90s, yuck!), and my uncle menacing everyone else. My main concern was its gameplay, after all. I never liked the idea of a hybrid between *Alien vs. Predator* and the first *D&D* game. There is something too silly about an elf doing triple somersaults and juggling kobolds around the screen. Add in downright stupid bosses of the “find the cheap trick and they're harmless” variety and fairly useless magic items and you're set with a rather disappointing formula.

There were other cheesy elements, too. The plot is the usual “red dragon masked as human tries to overcome the human world.” In addition, the red dragon is trying to summon back into the world of Mystara some kind of Cthulhu-esque demon, and lame-ness triumphs supreme. But the most fascinating aspect of *D&D* is indeed its absolute silliness, even by fantasy standards. In a way, the charm of the game (aside from the absolutely crazy context in which I happened to play it) lies in its many pointless aspects, like the gameplay balance of the two female thieves. Their only good elements were a useful juggling move and very hot sprites. I could comment on the erotic aspects of the stabbing action performed by these thieves, but I'd rather not subject you to some scary thoughts.

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I have played a lot of great games in my life, and many times, the prize was twofold: save something (the kingdom

or the princess or sometimes both) and have fun with well-designed titles. In retrospect, these games attracted me for their otherworldly settings, the bizarre and exotic creatures that populated their worlds, and the sense of wonder that permeated them. Later, I would grow to be interested in rather different sorts of things, namely science, but nonetheless, magic, as it appears in these games, still fascinates me.

Giant laser cannons and the farthest stars are cool, but so is the ability to summon a meteor strike to beat up stupid trolls and undead creatures. With magic, I have visited submerged continents, floating islands in the sky, netherworlds full of monsters, and paradises ripe with divine creatures. My trilogy on fantasy games ends here, but there are other titles made of sword and sorcery that I will surely cover in future installments of this column.

See you in the arcade... 🎮



¹² Sadly, I was one of them.

WHY GAME? WHY NOT?

Reason #7: Why Not!?

By Mister Raroo

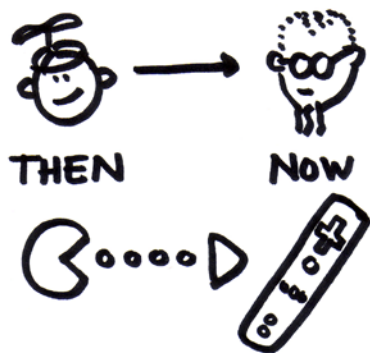
Art By Missus Raroo

Dear Non-Gamers of the World,

Greetings! It's come to my attention that you're still a little iffy on the notion of videogames as legitimate entertainment. While I can understand that you have your reasons for not playing games, I'm hoping that maybe you'll rethink your stance on the matter. No doubt, you most likely have some hang-ups about videogames that have prevented you from enjoying them, but don't worry, because I'm here to help!



Perhaps you think videogames are strictly a children's hobby. That's a very common misconception, and it most likely stems from the fact that videogames are still a relatively young category of entertainment. But the fact of the matter is many adults who grew up playing videogames still play videogames, and in many ways, games themselves have grown up right along with us.



Videogames cover such a broad spectrum of styles and genres that anyone can find something that suits them. Furthermore, despite what you may have heard on television or read in the newspaper, there is much more to videogames than graphic violence. Whether you're a history buff, a painter, a bug collector, or a doctor, there is surely some game out there that'll match your interests. There are musical games, dating games, trivia games, scary games, fishing games, funny games, driving games, pet-raising games, and, yes, should violence really be your cup of tea, violent games. In other words, people of all ages, tastes, and backgrounds can enjoy videogames.



Now, you might say that's all fine and dandy, but you can't deal with the crazy controllers. You're not getting off that easy, friends! Yes, becoming accustomed to using joysticks and control pads might have a bit of a learning curve, but I have faith that you can do it! If Missus Raroo's eighty-three-year-old grandma can be taught how to navigate around a computer and fire off e-mails, there's no reason you can't figure out how to use an analog stick and press buttons on a controller. It might take you some time to get comfortable with it, but with practice everything will be second nature before you know it. Even if you absolutely refuse to allow yourself to learn the ins and outs of using game controllers, you can play games through dance pads, light guns, styluses, cameras, and even your own voice.



Don't let the hype about the high price of videogames throw you off, either. There are plenty of inexpensive alternatives to paying full price for games and systems. With a huge back catalog of titles to explore, someone new to videogames can jump right into the hobby by picking up some used games and systems for a reasonably

small sum. And just like books, movies, and practically any other form of entertainment, there is a large stable of readily available and inexpensive "classics" that everyone should play, so digging through used game bins will warrant plenty of gems. But even with the newer, top-of-the-line game systems, a little patience will result in access to plenty of high-quality, budget-priced titles. To top it all off, you can even just rent games for a fraction of the price it'd cost you to buy them outright. Gaming is a hobby that can be tailored to fit any budget.



Heck, I wonder if many of you are actually gamers and don't even realize it. If you're the type of person that sneaks in a few sessions of computer solitaire at work when your boss isn't looking or enjoys a quick fix of *Bejeweled* on your cell phone during your commute to work, then you are already a gamer! Chances are, you'll love other types of videogames as well. Gaming is a hobby that has something to offer just about anybody, and you'd be surprised at how entertaining and rewarding it is. Give videogames a chance!

Your pal,
Mister Raroo 🐶



The year is 2007.

A series of disasters have transformed the once-vibrant field of games journalism into a wasteland. Months passed with no sign of salvation, and it seemed as though all hope was lost.

Hold it!! The Gamer's Quarter, the youngest magazine ever to achieve the rank of A-class Strider, has been assigned the incredible task of liberating this stagnating field from its captors and stopping their sinister plans!

Lance in hand, *The Gamer's Quarter* sets off on a perilous quest through eerie lands of decay and devastation to rescue the soul of games journalism! The power of love burns fiercely in their hearts. Is there any force that can defeat them?

Objection!!

