

# the **Escapist**

## 'THE WAR AT HAND

by Max Steele

**ALSO:**

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

**NEWS BITS**



## the **escapist** on GREG GORDEN

by Allen Varney

## PORTABLE IS PARAGON

by Justin Leeper

## WAITING ON THE **OTHER SIDE** OF MIDNIGHT

by Tom Chick

## EDITOR'S NOTE

by **Julianne Greer**

I am a "fidgeter." I cannot help it. I've tried to mend my squirmy ways, but to no avail. In school, I doodled. In meetings, I play with the top of my red pen. Even now, as I sit at my computer to write, I tap my fingers on the desk between bursts of typing.

I know I am not alone.

There are others who are distraught at the idea of sitting still for five hours on a cross-country flight. I am not the only one who cringes at the thought of a road trip over three hours. The waiting room at the doctor's/dentist's/mechanic's elicits a feeling akin to panic in many, for more reasons than the visit itself. What is a fidgeter like me to do in today's "hurry up and wait" society?

Luckily, our dear friends in the hardware and game development community stepped up to the plate and alleviated our collective anxiety by creating Mobile

Gaming. "Fidget no more!" they cry and hand over their wares. An entire world of gaming made to fit into, and enhance, our lives was born.

This new world of gaming goodness started with the tip of a toe in the water, with oldies such as Parker Brothers' Merlin and Mattel's Football. We have since plunged, head first, into a wide array of platforms and games to keep us entertained while we are on the go. In fact, some of you may be reading this on your handheld – we hear The Escapist reads quite well on the PSP.

Wherever and however you may be reading this, we are glad you have joined us for another week as we talk about Gaming on the Go. Tom Chick has weighed in on the PSP and the Nintendo DS, speaking about their respective functionalities and the games that best display them. Allen Varney has spoken with Greg Gorden, designer of the pen

and paper DC Heroes, about how his past experiences have equipped him for his latest effort, Elder Scrolls: Shadowkey for the N-Gage. Sharing his particular take on the current mobile platform wars, Max Steele ponders the strategies of the various hardware developers. Find these articles, and more, in the next pages of The Escapist. First, be sure to take a look at what other readers are saying about us in the Letters to the Editor.

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**To the editor** - I stumbled on your on-line magazine today. The title lured me in because I thought of the fictional character "The Escapist" created by Michael Chabon in "Kavalier and Clay." Nevertheless, I read on, as my 7 year old son enjoys playing various games on the Game Cube (e.g. Sonic, Mario Sunshine), and I am curious about the industry. While I, a 43 year old, do not have the patience to sit and learn how to play the more complicated games properly (like Madden Football), I recognize the allure of the games and the pure fun they can provide.

The quality of the writing for your first issue was excellent so I will revisit The Escapist magazine in the future.

**Michael Rosenthal**  
**Philadelphia, PA**

**To the editor** - In response to Mr. Tynes Contrarian article, I think he misses the point of mainstream gaming.

"When gamers celebrate the fact that gaming has gone mainstream, that it's everywhere, they're dancing on Nintendo's grave."

He then argues that mainstream gaming is equivalent to the path of least resistance for developers. I couldn't disagree more. The videogame crash of the early 80's was a direct result of an avalanche of poor quality games. This coincides with the "seven platform" development methodology. A single game, seven platforms, crappy on each. This is not the new direction of gaming. His argument sounds more like a warning of a second videogame crash than anything else.

So what rescued the American game industry in the late 80's? Nintendo. They pushed their 8-bit system into a market... rather, they *\*created\** a market for a product no toy store buyer thought would sell. The rest, as they say, is history.



Nintendo is now creating another market for games and gamers that Mr. Tynes does not understand. That's OK. The games are not for him. But while he is shaking his head at Nintendogs, Trauma Center, and Electroplankton, Nintendo and their customers will happily support each other into the next age of gaming.

**Fuji8bit**

**To the editor** - Just a note to congratulate you on the first Escapist. Learned about it in Kotaku (or wherever, there are so many news sites around these days).

Anyway, a very nice format. I chose the HTML version. Beautiful layout there, easy to read, nice paragraphs... The articles were somewhat old stuff, but reasonably well-written, and sort of updated the hardcore on these age-old issues of mainstream, art and the label of a gamer.

Keep it coming.

**Joonas Laakso**  
**Finland**

**To the editor** - Just wanted to let you know that I think the first issue is great. Aside from the stories, which are excellent, I'm particularly impressed by the widescreen-format page layout... It's gorgeous, especially when I full-screen it on my laptop's cinematic display. Normally I hate PDF's because their page dimensions are horrible for viewing on my computer screen, but thanks to your foresight this is possibly the only PDF

that I can actually view full pages on without scrolling.

Keep up the great work!

**Atul Varma**

**To the editor** - First of all, let me congratulate everyone involved with The Escapist on producing a fantastic piece of editorial journalism. To my mind, the magazine encapsulates the tone and thought-provoking subject matter that the best (and generally now defunct or mutated) print magazines produced in the last few years. The only thing I can imagine might add to the experience would be a forum of some sort, to discuss each article (with appropriate moderation to avoid discussions degenerating too far). However, as you seem to be styling the magazine as an internet-distributed print magazine, perhaps this is inappropriate. Finally, the notion of having a single game or product advertised in each issue is a good one, and I wish you the best of luck in securing some top-quality sponsors.



I have only one (minor) criticism, related to the "Gamer Like Me" article by Jennifer Buckendorff. As a major article in the high-profile first release of a flagship magazine, I can't help but feel it's a little unwise to mention "the kid who only plays GTA after school – and loves it." In the current climate of gaming coming under heavy fire (in many cases for adult games being sold to minors), this could be misinterpreted. Perhaps I'm being over-sensitive – I play GTA and enjoy it greatly, and haven't yet felt the need to release my latent gaming-borne rage onto society... Still, if you plan to be held up as a publication that celebrates the greatness of gaming, perhaps extreme sensitivity to these sorts of public issues (however wide of the truth they may be) is in order.

Anyway, congratulations again on a fantastic first issue; I look forward to a long series of interesting articles to read.

**Simon "Rolphus" Rolfe**

**To the editor** - I just learned of your online publication via a post on slashdot regarding the article, "Culture Wargames," by Kieron Gillen. It is

probably the best essay I've ever read dealing with gaming as a new medium.

I was quite pleased to discover the high quality of content throughout the issue and that the editorial direction of the publication will fill a void in gaming publications since the days of Nintendo Magazine: that of the adult, educated individual seeking more from their reading than the latest press release/new game info. Fortunately now that a whole generation of gamers has grown up, you have an audience large enough to support the more esoteric essays that lead to more thoughtful conversation around the watercooler than the "holy crap, you shoulda seen the move I pulled last night" variety.

Thank you for a great read. I wish you much success with the new publication.

**Rob  
Kansas City, MO**

## WHY PORTABLE IS PARAGON

by Justin Leeper

It's a typical Friday morning at LAX - which means a line that runs laps around the terminal, doing my best striptease for security, and indulging in an \$8 breakfast burrito that strives to meet the strict nutritional guidelines of Purina dog food. After all that, my flight will be an hour late. With nary a crinkling of my brow, I sit at the gate and wait it out. This means I can put in another 18 in *Hot Shots: Open Tee* for the PSP, so it ain't all bad.

Mobile gaming has become huge, and the reasons why are plentiful. It suits our on-the-go lifestyles, allowing you to play anywhere the feeling hits you. Both hardware and software are cheaper, while offering competitive entertainment values. It appeals to an audience that is more vast and broad than console gaming - catering especially to casual players and kiddies. The list goes on and on.



## “We’re a society that’s always in motion.”

### **You Always Got Game**

I don’t know about you, but there are all sorts of times when I get the urge to game, and only a fraction happen when I’m in my living room with my PS2, Xbox, and GameCube staring hopefully in my direction. Mobile games bring the fun to you, instead of the other way around. You aren’t tied to your sofa, and you don’t need a bulky box and TV around to indulge in digital decadence. With their own screens, headphone attachments, and light sources, you won’t be disturbing anyone else.

We’re a society that’s always in motion. Contributing to our hurried lifestyles is making up for all the setbacks and delays we’re forced to endure. We constantly find ourselves a captive audience - be it waiting at the mechanic’s, cruising at 30,000 feet, or when you’re taking a porcelain pit stop (admittedly where I do a good portion of my playing). How can you pass the time? You play mobile games, of course! I mean, what else are you going to do - read a book!? (For those who actually do

read books, give yourselves five points. Nerd.)

The way many portable games are designed, playing is a more bite-sized experience. You can jack in and log out with ease, whether it’s a five-minute quickie or a three-hour marathon session. They’re perfect for society’s collective short attention span.

### **Bits For Your Buck**

Not everyone wants to blow \$300 on the latest console or graphics card. Some consider these people casual players, but that doesn’t make them any less important in the grand scheme of things. After all, if this industry sticks to merely appeasing hardcore players, it’s like a restaurant that only serves one dish. For those who just want a little fun every now and then, mobile is the way to go.

To start with, we all have cell phones. If you don’t, then I pity you, because you’ll be pretty darn lonely when the rest of us die of brain cancer. The phone is now Game Machine Lite. You want *Tetris*? It’s there. You want *Pac-Man*? For the price of a few credits at the arcade, you can have it for a week. This is the same crowd who’s playing all those free Shockwave games online when they should be working, and they’re a robust mob.

On the dedicated machine front, you can snag a Game Boy Advance for well under \$100, and choose from hundreds of quality games priced below \$20. That’s a comparatively small startup investment to relieve stress and keep you out of trouble.

## “The majority of portable titles still keep it smooth and simple...”

## Big Things, Small Packages

Not all portable gaming is cost-effective, however, as the PSP's \$250 price tag and \$40 average for games demonstrates. That's because it comes dangerously close to offering a console-quality system that can go anywhere. I defy you to compare the PS2 version of *Tony Hawk's Underground 2* and PSP's *THUG 2: Remix*. Methinks you'll find nary a difference, and that's a major achievement.

The mainstream portable machines are now capable of doing anything home consoles can. You want to go at it with friends? All the major handheld platforms have wireless multiplayer, and online play is either already here or just around the corner for each one, too. What about creativity? The Nintendo DS - with its touch-screen and microphone - is the biggest innovation in gaming since the joystick. It was also the platform with the most sure-fire titles at this year's E3 video game expo.

A convergence of technology means many portable game machines have other tricks up their sleeves. Cell phones are the obvious example, as they merely moonlight as gaming centers. Nokia's N-

Gage took this idea and decided to try killing two birds with one stone - combining a high-end phone with a fully functioning game platform. In fact, they plan to try killing a third bird by adding N-Gage technology to the next generation of smart phones - thus bringing even more digital diversion to the high-tech set. Sony's PSP is a next-generation Swiss army knife, as it plays movies and MP3s (and even older systems' games if you're one of the hacker "leet").

## Bring Us Your Huddled Masses

More women and children are playing portable games, while we 18-34 males are still giving it our full support to boot. If you don't wield your controller like the great Excalibur, it's not easy getting into the current generation of console games: so many buttons, so much complexity. The majority of portable titles still keep it smooth and simple, with controls that allow anyone with three or more fingers to enjoy themselves, and difficulty that won't have you breaking expensive things into tiny little pieces.

With phone games, it's like an 8-bit resurgence. Cellular game developers

are dealing with similar technology, yet they get to apply all the knowledge learned in the last 20 years. Hence, you see a lot of new styles of play that cater to a different audience. *NBA Fantasy Five*, THQ's fantasy basketball game, and *Airborne's Buzztime Trivia* are appealing and easy enough that, even if you've never played a video game, you can still partake in their splendor. Neither game requires flashy production values to get its point across, either.

Then there are the young'uns, to whom Nintendo owes a debt of gratitude. If it wasn't for the facts that more kids own GBAs than bicycles or that *Pokemon* became a worldwide phenomenon, the company may have gone under. Portable gaming is what has kept them afloat for many years, while consoles like N64 and GameCube lost more and more market share to Sony and Microsoft.

## Cut The Cord

Portable gaming is here to stay, and I have a feeling its growth will exceed

console and PC business in no time. There are just too many benefits to gaming on the go, and too many people to whom it appeals. The PSP does so many things well. The Nintendo DS has so many innovative features. Cell phone games are so painless and no-strings-attached. One way or another, mobile games are going to hook you. Cut the cord, and let your imagination run wild.

**Cut the cord, and let your  
imagination run wild.**



## 'THE WAR AT HAND

by Max Steele



The mainstream media continues to argue about a coming console war between Playstation 3 and Xbox 360. I can only shrug. What makes them think Sony has a chance?

Sony has just now produced its third console, while Microsoft is already on its **360<sup>th</sup>**. That's an order of magnitude more experience. It's called the **learning curve**, people. You can't beat that sort of expertise. It's the same reason US cars are better than Japanese cars: We've been doing it longer.

But enough about that. Max Steele is not interested in next year's battles. He is interested in the here and now. The war at hand. And that's the handheld war.

Sun Tzu teaches us that the outcome of a war is governed by the strategy of the combatants. (Well, actually, Sun Tzu teaches there are five factors that

determine victory in war, but five factors would take up too much of my allotted word count, so we'll discuss only the strategy factor. If you have a problem with this, email [editor@escapistmag.com](mailto:editor@escapistmag.com) to demand more word count for me. Thanks.)

Whose handheld strategy will lead to victory? It's not a rhetorical question. The last thing anyone wants to do is buy in to an unpopular console system. It's the network effect: You need a broad platform base to get the publishers to support the hardware with great games. Lose sales momentum and the platform can wither and die. And you don't want a dead handheld, do you? (Max Steele is still bitter about his Atari Lynx.)

So that's the question, then. Which will be the killer platform for the handheld market, and which are going to get killed?

## On the One Hand

Let's start with the DS. Nintendo's DS strategy can be boiled down to one word: innovation. "Nintendo DS revolutionizes the way games are played," the company propaganda preaches.

**"A developer can make a great handheld game for as little as 10-33% of what it costs to make a AAA console game."**

That sounds promising. Except in last week's issue of *The Escapist*, our resident contrarian, John Tynes, made a great case that Nintendo is doomed **because** it's innovative. Of course, he **is** a contrarian. It's John Tynes' **job** to be gloomy. So before we start short-selling Nintendo stock, we are going to take our own look at the situation, Steele style.

The traditional argument against innovation in the entertainment industry - and this is true across film, music, TV, and games - is that entertainment is hit-driven, and given the high cost of

production, it's foolish to try something without a proven formula. Sticking to the tried and true, whether that means formulaic plots or standardized game components, keeps cost and risk down.

That's a strong argument and, by and large, it's true. I admit to playing *Half-Life 2* and waiting in line for *Star Wars III*. But it's also true that cost, risk, and innovation sit on a spectrum. It's not black and white. In the case of the handheld segment, there might still be room for innovation. Maybe.

First off, handheld games cost less to develop than games for the PC or living-room consoles. True, the cost is rising, but it's not rising as fast as the cost is rising for AAA next-generation consoles. A developer can make a great handheld game for as little as 10-33% of what it costs to make a AAA console game.

That lower cost means more freedom to take risks and make bold gambles. Just as films like *Π (Pi)* and *Memento* can take risks no feature film would dare, a handheld game can try new things in ways that *Halo 2* can not.

There's a second point weighing in favor of innovation: The audience that plays on handhelds is younger than for consoles and PCs. Why does that matter? Well, to be blunt, old gamers get set in their ways. Max Steele expects the old farts to one day grumble about the direct-cognitive interface of *Quake X*, and wonder why this newfangled stuff is getting in the way of real gaming, using a mouse-and-keyboard.

The point is: A gamer in his mid-thirties has been conditioned to view gaming a particular way, through the lens of a set of platforms, genres, and interface options. He thinks touching is stupid and boggles at *Nintendogs*. (Max Steele does too, but **not** because he is old.) Younger gamers haven't had their expectations set, one way or another, and are more open to new ways of playing. There's a reason trends so often start with the young. They **like** innovation.

With a less costly development cycle and an audience more open to innovation, Nintendo's strategy for the DS does make some sense. They've engineered the system to provide new interface options (the touchpad), new display options (the dual screen), and new play options (wireless multiplayer and PictoChat), and they're saying, "Developers, use our platform to innovate. Take risks, try new things, and reach new audiences in new ways!" And to gamers they are saying, "Play games on the DS because you can't get this experience anywhere else!"

This strategy might just work.

## And On the Other Hand

Yet it might not. Sony sees the market differently. And there **are** countervailing forces at work.

First, the forward march of technology has created substantially more powerful handheld systems than ever before. The

**"There's a reason trends so often start with the young. They like innovation."**

power of what's in your pocket is probably in the same order of magnitude as last generation's console. As always, more powerful hardware means increasing costs to develop games for the hardware.

But with the PSP, at least, it seems a tipping point has been reached. The PSP is powerful enough so that it's possible to port living-room console games to the system. I don't mean just adapting PC and console games for the handheld (as has often been the case in the past), but true ports, with all that implies.

Publishers love ports. They're the least

expensive way to put a game on the shelf to sell to a new audience. (That's right publishers - Max Steele is on to you.)

The second force at work is the age of the handheld gamer. Handhelds used to be seen as an introductory product to get young people hooked on gaming. Indeed, I personally used to give out Gameboys to kindergarteners so I could later sell them used games at a mark-up. While handheld gaming still has a young audience, today's hardware

makers and game publishers see an audience for handheld gaming that's a lot more grown up, as well. Instead of abandoning gaming on the go, older gamers simply want it in a more mature form. The advertising for PSP positions it as a product for teens and twenty-somethings.

The existence of this older audience in turn argues for games that will be familiar to that audience. While the youth audience may embrace new ways of play, adult gamers are seeking out first-person shooters, strategy games, familiar brands and formats. Combine that with the cost advantage of porting versus developing innovative handheld games, and the strategy behind the PSP becomes clear: If the DS is about innovation, the PSP is about **familiarity**. Even the vaunted UMD movie feature of the PSP is just another way of bringing

**“If the DS is about innovation, the PSP is about familiarity.”**

familiar content to an on-the-go platform.

Sony is saying, “Developers, use our platform to port. Keep costs down while reaching your audience on the go wherever they are!” To gamers, they are saying, “Play games on the PSP because you can get the familiar experience you know from your PC and consoles, whenever and wherever you'd like!”

This strategy might just work, too.

#### **And on The ... Uh...Third Hand**

Conventional media likes to paint this as a two-way war. Max Steele believes that a simplistic Manichean viewpoint of good v. evil is perhaps comforting, but he tells it like it is. As the great spiritual guide, Yoda, once said, “There is another.”

It's called the N-Gage.



**“Publishers love ports. They're the least expensive way to put a game on the shelf to sell to a new audience.”**



**“Not many people in America may have bought one, but N-Gage has still shipped a million and a half units.”**

Here in the US, we like to rag on the N-Gage. We write it off as a dead platform. But then we're not exactly the world's leading experts on mobile technology.

Not many people in America may have bought one, but N-Gage has still shipped a million and a half units. Compare that to DS and PSP's numbers and you'll see N-Gage has done relatively better in this segment than Gamecube did against Playstation 2. And more importantly, even if Nokia never sold another N-Gage, they are pretty shortly going to have the N-Gage platform in more people's hands than Sony and Nintendo can dream about.

I'm referring, of course, to Nokia's decision to support N-Gage games across its entire range of Series 60 smartphones. The big boys from Finland expect to sell 25 million Symbian handsets this year. To put that in

perspective, Sony expects to sell half that - 12 million PSPs.

So what's the strategy behind N-Gage gaming on a smartphone? If the DS is about innovation, and the PSP is about familiarity, the smartphone is about **convenience**. A large percentage of the population is going to carry a smartphone for purposes other than gaming. If that population can enjoy quality handheld gaming on the device they're already carrying anyway, they will. Nokia is saying, "Developers, use our platform to reach a massive audience that's already carrying a smartphone, and is conveniently ready for you to entertain them!" And to gamers, Nokia is saying, "Play games on your smartphone because you're already using it do everything else!"

You know, this strategy might work, as well.



## Hand Them Over

That's the strategy review, then. It's innovation v. familiarity v. convenience. Which will triumph?

It's a tough call, even for the discerning judgment of Max Steele. I can see the merit in the innovation that is *Advance Wars DS* or *Kirby: Canvas Curse*. I also understand the joy of PS2 gaming and UMD movies on the beautiful 4.3" screen of the PSP. And I'm certainly savvy to the benefits of good gameplay on my mobile. But I can't let you read this far and not deliver the goods.

So here's how it'll play out. Nintendo's DS will end up as the #1 platform. They'll deliver innovative, exclusive content that you can't get anywhere else, and that will drive sales. PSP will have lots of games, but very few will be exclusive, and ultimately the consumer is going to pass on paying \$250 to get what he's already got, particularly because Sony's going to get distracted by the coming battle for the living room.

Sony's stumble will clear the way for Nokia's N-Gage powered smartphones to be the #2 platform in handheld gaming. I see it developing into a PC-like

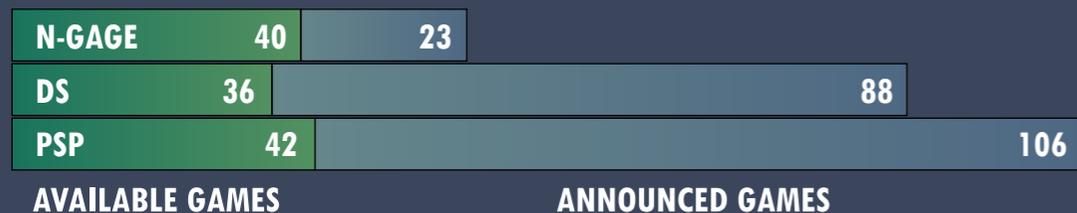
platform. Think of it like this: Everybody has a PC. Everybody uses their PC for work and web. Some people also use it for gaming - enough people to make the PC, as a platform, the second biggest;

it's the same concept with the smartphone.

That's all. Max out.

## AVAILABLE & ANNOUNCED GAMES BY PLATFORM

The current portfolio of available games is approximately equal across all three platforms, but the ease of porting to the PSP puts it poised to overshoot the other platforms in title breadth. Nintendo will have to focus on innovation to overcome lower quantity. Nokia will have to convince more third-party developers of the value of its platform when the installed base expands.



## HANDHELD PLATFORMS - WORLDWIDE VOLUME SHIPPED TO DATE

Nintendo has sold almost 67 million GBAdvances since 2001. The current worldwide shipments of PSP, N-Gage, and DS, in total, equal less than 10 million. With so many handheld gamers yet to upgrade, the war for the next generation of handhelds is still anyone's to win.



## HANDHELD PLATFORMS - PROJECTED WORLDWIDE VOLUME SHIPPED IN NEXT 12 MONTHS

Over the next twelve months, PSP is likely to catch up to DS in total sales volume, putting each platform at about 12m owners. But third-place N-Gage's installed base will begin to skyrocket in early 2006 when the first N-Gage-compatible Smartphones become available. The open question is what percentage of smartphone owners will be game buyers...



## THE ESCAPIST ON GREG GORDEN

by Allen Varney



"If it's hard, I have to know if I can do it..."

An *Elder Scrolls* game on a cellphone? It sounds like painting landscapes on rice grains. The most famous roleplaying games (RPGs) in Bethesda Softworks' bestselling PC-based fantasy series – *Morrowind*, *Daggerfall*, and the upcoming *Oblivion* – are sprawling, open-ended extravaganzas so big you need a Lonely Planet guide.

Yet, here they are: *Stormhold* and *Dawnstar*, Java and BREW-based *Elder Scrolls* games that run on dozens of different handsets, and *Shadowkey* for the N-Gage. Your jaw will drop: On a screen the size of a Federal Duck Stamp,

they're first-person-perspective RPGs with attractive art (by *Elder Scrolls* artist Mark Jones), multiple character classes, lots of quests, and dozens of detailed dungeon levels full of monsters and loot. Like bonsai sequoias growing on an end table or toy poodles that can sit in a coffee mug, the three ultra-miniaturized mobile RPGs in this *Elder Scrolls: Travels* series embody obsessive attention, a master's skill, and a crazed urge to do the impossible. Who pulled it off?

"If it's hard, I have to know if I can do it," says Greg Gorden, who designed all three games working freelance with Vir2L Entertainment. "RPGs are the biggest challenge on mobile platforms. At the time we started doing the *Travels* games, there were no first-person phone games. They're just beginning to come out with some now. With a lot of handheld games, you can burn through them in 45 minutes; they may be highly replayable, but you're not seeing any new content. But there's no such thing as a 45-minute console RPG. You have to give roleplayers generally twice as much

as you do for an arcade game and 50 percent more than a strategy game, because that's the expectation of the market."

In the *Travels* games, Gorden and Vir2L give the market a concentrated, crack-like essence of *Elder*: the trademark first-person view, the feel of open-ended adventure, plenty of quests, and a world to explore. "*Elder Scrolls* games really play with the sense of scale," Gorden observes. "Things can be vast, things can be cramped. That's hard to do on a mobile phone. For that approach, *Shadowkey* was the most successful. We had stuff that felt crampy, stuff that felt large. The world seemed absolutely huge. That one was the most successful in bringing the entire world alive."

Players like them all – and not just hardcore *Scrolls* fans, either. "Mobile games typically have a shelf life about one third as long as a PC title," Gorden says. "You're doing well if your game is still available after six months. You can still buy these *Travels* games after two years. At this point we're bringing some new people in."

# the Escapist

In jamming full RPGs onto a phone, Gorden learned that “everything is bang-for-the-buck. If I crop an image by 15 pixels, does that free up memory for a dialogue or mission brief, another palette color? It was tradeoff after tradeoff. We squeezed until we could squeeze no more.” Some of the supported handsets have just 64K of RAM. “We did custom versions for each main phone branch,” Gorden says. “For the one we delivered to Sprint, we were within 17 bytes of the maximum.”

**"I believe it was Greg Costikyan who said, 'Mobile games are designed by haiku.' If you've done that in the past, you know what to do better than someone who's come to the platform from a console game."**

**“Phenomenal cosmic power, itty-bitty living space”**

Gorden has arrived at this microminiature niche after many designs that, in size and scope, can fairly be called spectacular. He started in the mid-

’80s in the paper-and-dice roleplaying hobby. Victory Games’ licensed *James Bond 007* roleplaying game, on which he was credited as system developer, was an early entry in the “universal table” school of design, where you resolve the success or failure of your actions by rolling dice and consulting a single chart. The all-purpose chart tells whether you succeed and how well.

Gorden became the leading proponent of this philosophy, gaming’s universal

tablemaster. His pioneering *DC Heroes* comic-book RPG runs monomaniacally on two all-encompassing Action and Result Tables. They quantify everything, which is to say **evvvv**everything - strength, smarts, weight, time, distance, money, information, psychic force - in generic

“Attribute Points” (APs). Six APs of time is four minutes; of distance, 200 yards; of weight, a ton and a half. If you have a Strength of 6 APs, you can lift 6 APs of weight, or throw 4 APs of weight for 2 APs of distance, or throw 1 AP of weight at 5 APs of speed, and so on. Whether you’re Batman interrogating a crook, the Flash sprinting across the Atlantic, or Superman punching the Moon out of its orbit, you turn everything into APs, and the two tables tell whether you succeed and how well. Maybe your eyes have already glazed over, but to any roleplayer who’s struggled with a *Dungeons & Dragons* encumbrance table, this is elegant stuff.

The brilliance of *DC Heroes*, and the most telling sign of Greg Gorden’s breadth of vision, is that each additional AP is worth about twice as much as the AP before it. So, for instance, a character with Strength 6 is twice as strong as Strength 5. If 1 AP of surface area gives you a tabletop; just 51 APs (fifty doublings) gives you Earth. (A mere 5 APs of information separate Gorden’s cell phone dungeon-crawls from *Morrowind*.) This lets the *DC Heroes*’ design gracefully accommodate both petite and planetary, normal and superheroic,



Jimmy Olsen and Superman, all on the same scale.

Gorden pushed this idea to the limit with the cinematic action RPG *Torg*. A sprawling free-for-all in both design and setting, *Torg* depicts a war among realities, competing universes (“Realms”) in a surreal land-grab for Earth. The genre-spanning premise conjures competing Realms of fantasy, science fiction, cyberpunk, pulp adventure, and Victorian-era horror - supervillains, ninjas, dragons, dinosaurs - magic, cybernetic implants, shamanism, and theocratic sorcery. Gorden’s design boils down his earlier universal tables to a single line, and then layers on rules for Realm-specific genre conventions, Possibility Points, a Drama Deck of cards, a system for collecting story outcomes



from individual player groups nationwide and quantifying their combined effects to shape the published war storylines. By now you see why reading *Torg* is like eating an entire pineapple upside-down cake - rich, delicious, much too much of a muchness.

Did his experience in creating these giant games, among many others, help Gorden in condensing the *Elder Scrolls* to 64K? "Yes, it actually did," he says, "it's more just being old. You have an established bag of tricks, a game toolkit. A lot of the techniques are the same," regardless of the game type. "You can hearken back to some of the old solitaire dungeons and build-your-own-dungeon tile-laying games, and turn that into something easy to execute in code. In *Shadowkey* it's just the ability to put a narrative together that's spread across 50 bite-size pieces" - a technique Gorden mastered in his trading card game *Killer Instinct*, with Shane Hensley. Gorden relates, "I believe it was Greg Costikyan who said, 'Mobile games are designed by haiku.' If you've done that in the past, you know what to do better than someone who's come to the platform from a console game."

## First-person perspective

Gorden's presence in the mobile space echoes an earlier influx of paper-game designers into computer and console games - a horde that includes Warren Spector (*Deus Ex*), Chris Avellone (*Planescape Torment*), Zeb Cook (*Metroid Prime*, *City of Villains*), and not least, Ken Rolston, who did standout work for paper RPGs *RuneQuest* and *Paranoia* before designing - what was it? - oh yeah: *Morrowind*.

The gameplay ideas these designers brought to computers are now filtering virally into phones, and Gorden is one vector. "I love RPGs, and the mobile space is growing like crazy. I thought, 'If I'm gonna jump in, it's certainly better to jump in now.'"

Apart from his future projects with Vir2L (nothing has been announced), Gorden is shopping around a mobile game he designed with longtime collaborator, Anthony Gill: *Marble Mazeness*, a J2ME version of those infernal wooden tilting-table dexterity toys in which you guide a steel ball along a path while avoiding holes, or more often, not. The phone game adds divots, bumpers, lasers, lava, trapdoors, power-ups, and magnetic

walls. *Mazeness* went gold in May and may appear by late 2005.

From cosmos-spanning epics to ... marbles. With the *Travels* games, Gorden has brought vigor to mobile RPGs - sort of created them, really - but platform strictures forbid surpassing the scope of his paper masterpieces.

Gorden is philosophical about his future role in the space. "I think the coolest mobile game genre is yet to be developed. My experience on *Travels* got me closer to seeing how you could build an entirely new experience on the mobile phone. But I'm not there yet. I consider myself a laggard in the race, but I definitely want to see who wins.

So when will we see this breakthrough phone-game experience? Gorden doesn't know - he's not planning it himself - but he offers a guess: "My feeling is, in the next 18 months it will be out, and it will absolutely blow up the mobile business. I'm looking forward to seeing it."

We asked a few personal questions of Greg Gorden and he obliged. Read on to learn more about what makes him tick - or at least busy.

**Q:** Where are you from?

**A:** *The village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, which had within walking distance people who had worked on the V-2 program, edited fiction for a living, wrote episodes of Bonanza, became members of the Swiss National Quartet, or raised Dave Chappelle. I was pretty much doomed to lead an interesting life from an early age.*

**Q:** Age?

**A:** *Soon to be 47. Insert joke about "prime of his life" here.*

**Q:** Do you have family?

**A:** *One son, Spencer, who inherited my love of games, and apparently got his athletic ability as a result of cosmic ray exposure.*

**Q:** What's your favorite game to play?

**A:** *Currently playing Savage Worlds on table top, a smattering of Guild Wars, and Rise of Nations: Thrones and Patriots when I think, "Gosh, I would love to play Civ III, but I just don't have the time."*

**Q:** What's the last movie you went to see?

**A:** *My son thought Bewitched would be hysterically funny. Payback will be a \_\_\_\_ but I digress...*

**Q:** What's your alcoholic beverage of choice, if any?

**A:** *Local Microbrew product, MacTarnahans.*

**Q:** What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?

**A:** *Whatever I can steal from my son. See "Movie," above.*

**Q:** What is your favorite vacation spot?

**A:** *Last vacation ended with an emergency room visit, which culminated in an infection from an improper IV which lasted better than five months. I think work is just peachy at the moment.*

**Q:** Who is the person you most respect in the industry?

**A:** *When I started seriously considering becoming a game designer I drew up a list of names of people whose work had expanded the horizons of games in ways that excited me. That first list was Gary Gygax, Redmond Simonsen, Sid Sackson, and Toru Iwatani. My informal list is now considerably larger, and I expect it to keep growing. Good work is being done, right now, and someone somewhere is creating something which will make me mutter, "That is just freakin' brilliant." I live for that.*

## WAITING AT THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDNIGHT

by Tom Chick

*Midnight Club Racing* is loading on my PSP. It's pretty slow going, so I'll work on this article while I wait. I know that once it loads, it's going to be sweet. I know this because I've already played it on the Playstation 2 and this handheld version is almost identical. They're both instances of Rockstar's super-slick, super-fast city racing, traffic-smashing extravaganza (although the traffic on the PSP is lighter and the cars are a touch slower, because the PSP isn't quite a

Playstation 2, after all). So, yeah, it'll be pretty nice. When it finally comes up. Yep.

At times like this, I wonder if they even know why we play their handhelds. Because if I had a lunch break at work, or was using it for a fifteen-minute commute on the subway, or was at an airport waiting for my flight to board, I don't think I'd bother. Playing the PSP is a really involved experience, from the time investment to the hardcore next-gen-ish graphics and lighting effects and dynamic vertex whatnot. This isn't something to be approached lightly. It's for hunkering down and gaming when you're away from home, for letting yourself fall into it, much the same way you fall into your computer or the TV in your living room. You play the PSP not to kill a little time, but because you find yourself parked somewhere without

anything else around that can run a game.

The games that are best for the PSP are also, oddly enough, the games that are already best for your PS2 or Xbox. They're racing games like *Midnight Club* - hold on let me check...nope, still loading - and especially, *Wipeout Pure*, with their fancy graphics, career progression, and really bad data management, so you don't mind powering through a bunch of screens, do you? Because you're going to be here for a while. The *Diablo* clone, *Untold Legends*, is great for passing a few hours hacking-and-slashing. You also have plenty of sports games. The few puzzle games on the PSP are almost an afterthought; it's as if someone at Sony suddenly remembered how many Gameboys *Tetris* sold.

**“Playing the PSP is a really involved experience...”**

**“The few puzzle games on the PSP are almost an afterthought; it's as if someone at Sony suddenly remembered how many Gameboys Tetris sold.”**

First-person shooters (that other genre for graphics whores, couch barnacles, and power PC builders with their \$350 videocards) haven't migrated to the PSP yet for the same reason RTSs haven't migrated to consoles: they're genres with control issues. You can't play an RTS without a mouse and you can't play a shooter with the PSP's nubby little analog controller that doesn't let you aim, so much as suggest a general direction. But Konami, Planet Moon, and Pandemic are all currently working on shooters for the PSP. Best of luck to you all...we're waiting to see what you can do. If it doesn't work out, there are other windmills that need tilting.

Here's the deal: The PSP is a powerful system that happens to be the size of a handheld. Until developers start writing for people who might want to play it in quick and easy bursts - until they start

writing for it the way developers used to write for the Gameboy Advance - it's going to remain an expensive toy for gamers and a place where cool people skirt the fringes of geekdom. Walk down the aisles of a flight between LAX and DFW and you're liable to see a few guys playing the *Tiger Woods* PSP port, blissfully unaware that they're playing one of the worst golf games ever created. That, ladies and gentlemen, is the PSP.

But because the Nintendo DS is backward compatible, it's got a huge library of sublime handheld games that were written for the Gameboy Advance, often easy to find for cheap. Just going by the law of averages, you're far less likely to be stuck playing a game as bad as the PSP *Tiger Woods*. Of course, you're wasting half of the DS's screen real estate, and you're playing on a big



silver brick of a clamshell the size and shape of a six-year-old PDA. But we're on the verge of a new generation of DS games that could make it all worthwhile. *Take Kirby: Canvas Curse*, a game about a stupid little pink blob. Oh, hold on a second, let me see if I can play *Midnight Club* yet...nope, still loading. Okay, where was I?

A Nintendo game about a stupid pink blob, right? That's what you'd think. But what you might not realize is that it's the first game that makes your DS a DS. You use your stylus like the finger of

**“Kirby: Canvas Curse is probably the last step before they start wet-wiring your brain.”**

God, reaching into the game world to diddle around with the little pink guy. Sounds dirty, doesn't it? But it's an amazing interface because there's no abstracted button pressing or D-padding between you and what you see onscreen. You're in there, touching stuff and making it happen. Kirby: Canvas Curse is probably the last step before they start wet-wiring your brain.

It's a slick and well-made game, to boot, unlike anything you've ever played because the DS is unlike anything that's ever been made. The developers at Hal Laboratories did something that's a lost art in these days of cross-platform development: They wrote a game for an actual system rather than an imagined audience. *Kirby: Canvas Curse* is really one of the shrewdest creations you'll see this year. And, yeah, it's worth getting a DS for it.

**“The developers at Hal Laboratories did something that's a lost art in these days of cross-platform development: they wrote a game for an actual system rather than an imagined audience.”**

Besides, considering some of the upcoming titles playing to its strength as a platform, you'll want a DS. In addition to some potentially complex mouse-driven strategy games, there's *Nintendogs*, which will hopefully explode in popularity so I don't feel like such a little girl when I'm playing it. Yeah, okay, it's about a cute puppy, and *The Sims* is a dollhouse, but I'm just one of about five million people playing, so go make fun of them, too. Then there's the upcoming *Metroid* game for the DS which uses the touchpad as a mouse to let you

play a first person shooter. Just don't mind the graphics.

Oh, right, speaking of graphics, I just know *Midnight Club* is going to look awesome. Let me have a look at how it's coming along. Quel surprise!...still loading. But when that baby finally crams itself into how ever much memory the PSP has, I'm sure it'll be sweet. Which reminds me: one of the best uses for a Nintendo DS is playing games while you're waiting for your PSP to load.

loading...

## NEWS BITS

### Hot Coffee Spills Over

Rockstar's role in the creation of *GTA: San Andreas* Hot Coffee content has prompted Hillary Clinton to call for an official investigation to discover exactly who created the illicit mini-game. She's also remarked that the ESRB should become a regulatory body, rather than a voluntary guide funded by game companies, saying the ratings needed "teeth."

It was also revealed by Gamespot that the PS2 version of the game has the Hot Coffee content locked away, which further invalidates Rockstar's claim that the mod was indeed created by a PC hacker.

### Imperator Postponed

Mythic, creators of MMO *Dark Age of Camelot*, has "postponed" development of their new sci-fi game,

*Imperator*. Set in a fictional futuristic Rome, *Imperator* pitted Roman citizens against a technologically advanced Mayan race. According to CEO Mark Jacobs, *Imperator* was "not meeting [Mythic's] standard." Mythic definitely isn't closing up shop, however. They recently acquired a license to produce an MMO based on the popular Warhammer franchise.

### Marvel Signs with Microsoft for 360 MMO

Marvel announced a contract signed with Microsoft which gives them the rights to create a Marvel universe MMO on the Xbox 360. No mention was made of a PC port, which could deal a staggering blow to PC gaming. Microsoft has pushed the online capabilities of the Xbox, and now the 360, in a direction that causes one to wonder how many PC gaming opportunities will be available by the time Longhorn launches.

# Casual Friday

**CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!**

available 7-22-05

## STAFF

### EDITORIAL

#### Executive Editor

*Julianne Greer*

#### Contributing Editors

*Joseph Blancato*

*JR Sutich*

#### Research Manager

*Nova Barlow*

#### Contributors

*Tom Chick*

*Justin Leeper*

*Max Steele*

*Allen Varney*

### PRODUCTION & DESIGN

#### Producer

*Jonathan Hayter*

#### Lead Web Developer

*Whitney Butts*

#### IT Director

*Jason Smith*

### BUSINESS

#### Publisher

*Alexander Macris*

#### Chief Financial Officer

*Thomas S. Kurz*

#### Director of Advertising

*Susan Briglia*

#### Associate Publishers

*Jerry Godwin*

*Gregory Lincoln*

Volume 1, Issue 2, © 2005. The Escapist is published weekly by Themis Group, Inc. Produced in the United States of America. To contact the editors please email [editor@escapistmag.com](mailto:editor@escapistmag.com). For a free subscription to The Escapist in PDF format please view [www.escapistmagazine.com](http://www.escapistmagazine.com)