the escapist

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by Julianne Greer

When confronted with an obstacle, we have two possible responses: We can wonder, "Why?" or we can wonder, "What if?" The two are related, but only one is forward-thinking.

The forward-thinking choice, in games, has prompted the exploration of the next frontier in interactive entertainment – player created content. Since game development became a professional endeavor, players have become used to interacting with the finished product. In fact, many of today's gamers have never been even the slightest bit involved in the actual construction of a game.

However, times are changing. Whether through "modding" games, creating content in a "virtual sandbox" style game, or even interacting with developers during game development, gamers are becoming more and more important to the Process of game-making.

It's a fact of life that nearly anything a human can get his hands on will likely be taken apart at some point. He does this to better understand how the Thing works. And when he puts the Thing back together (if he is able to at all), he inevitably does so in a way that improves his life – whether for convenience or entertainment. It is instinctual.

It is this ability to adapt ourselves and the world around us which has produced the great things in human history, both the terrible and the wonderful. Is it really any surprise we do this with games, the first truly interactive entertainment medium? We change the games to better meet our individual needs, whatever those needs may be.

This deep desire to modify our surroundings, coupled with the ease and speed of communication on the internet, fosters a small but important subculture in the gaming world. A large majority of gamers will buy a game, play it in its released form and never think to change it. But there are always a few who ask "What if?"

It's a double-edged sword, though. Are we ready for this kind of interactivity? Are we ready for this kind of power? Who is accountable? What is allowed? When is this kind of modification OK? These questions are a natural response to the relatively new issue of player created content. Now, we just need to find the answers.

This is the point in the evolution of the movement of player created content at which we find ourselves. And these are certainly valid questions needing to be addressed before we can move forward in the most useful and positive way. But let's not get too bogged down in the, "Who?" "What?" "When?" "Where?" "Why?" so as to lose the forward-thinking "What if?"

In doing our part to not lose the "What if?" we have invited several of our writers to discuss this topic of player created content. Allen Varney and Kyle Orland discuss personal experiences with player created content, Allen, from the designer's perspective, and Kyle, from the player's perspective. Dave Thomas discusses the freedom a gameworld provides, and how Second Life's world is the ultimate playground. Along the lines of ultimate fun, Jim Rossignol discusses one of the most masterful mods we have ever encountered, Garry's Mod for Half-Life. Find these pieces, and more, within this issue of The Escapist and let yourself wonder "What if?"

Julianne Greer

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor - I think I found Escapist because of Penny Arcade. Needless to say, I have enjoyed every issue and Casual Friday so far. It's been intelligent and thoughtful reading, and has actually filled a gap in my gaming reading that Next Generation (RIP) used to occupy.

I cannot even hope to tell you how great that is.

- Sam T.

To the editor - I just found your magazine through Instapundit, and I am suitably impressed!

I'll be back; keep up the good work!

- Ron Fisher

To the editor - I never, ever write letters to the editor. This is the first time I've ever responded to any article - let that just show how much I enjoyed this issue of the escapist. The articles were well written, but the "Horse of a Different Color" got a tad boring, but whatever, a good read none the less.

What I'm really writing about is the article entitled "The Left Behind" I couldn't help feeling a bit of sadness while reading that article, mainly because it was spot-on. I am, as the author puts it, a "gaming hobo" and the article brought back great memories of happy fragging. I thoroughly enjoyed the article, and the tone was well suited and really added to point the article wanted to get across. The game that I called home was, Half Life 1.5, say what you will about the multiplayer, the map "killbox" was as close to perfection as I've ever seen.

Just thought I'd thank you guys for putting out another great issue and share a bit of my experiences. Great work, and that article was the best thing I've read in a long, long while. Keep it up!

- [nerd]

To the editor - "The left behind" article has done much for me to put perspective on 'mainstream' thinking. It is these types of articles which I enjoy reading and expect from a magazine that has demonstrated the ability to engage in meaningful discussion.

Though only three editions have been published so far, the quality found in the first edition seems to have fallen by the wayside in favor of news-type articles. I feel this means there is too much reporting and not enough writing. Such news can be found easily on the internet, but it is the thoughts of your writers which I am more concerned about. I would hate to see The Escapist become "just another" magazine.

- William Leung

To the editor - Kudos to you and your staff for producing such a fine magazine! This magazine is exactly what gamers need at this time. It's good to see something about gamers, rather than about games, about gamer culture, rather than game reviews, and about the future of the hobby/lifestyle (depending on if you are a 'casual' or 'hardcore')

rather than release dates. It is about time someone realized that there is more to gaming than games!

I am not knocking games, I love them, I really do, but there is a whole culture that has been overlooked that games are only a part of (the base, but still, just a part). Music, movie, and art lovers have long since had magazines that were about more than reviews and releases. It's about time gaming did! You also could not have chosen a better time to begin than now! This is a great way to let those who are unaware of our culture (I'm looking at you, Assemblyman Lee, Senator Clinton, and especially you, Jack Thompson) and think that we consist of nothing more than bratty, obnoxious 12-year-old boys. This is an excellent way to show them that we are informed, intelligent people with more than just GTA and 187: Ride or Die on our minds.

Keep up the great work, and I look forward to your continued success!

- Aaron Hedlund

PLAYER CREATED CONTENT

By Jason Smith

In the beginning, developers and players were the same, hacking away on academic networks for the entertainment of their peers. The advent of affordable computer systems, and eventually consoles, gave rise to a new hierarchy: Now, there were developers and there were players. The developers developed the games, and the players played them. For a time, when the concept of video gaming was new, this was enough for the players, and they were - for the most part - content with what the developers created.

Naturally, this state of affairs didn't last long. The first reaction to art of any sort, and I'll take the liberty of including games in that, is to think of ways that it could be better. This drive originally manifested itself in copycat games, when most developers and players were the same, but as time progressed the outlet became actual improvements on existing games. This shift has ushered in a new era, one where the players take on the roles of developers after release.

By Gamers, for Gamers

What is player created content? Just as it says, it's anything created for a game by its players. Early player content was limited to data file hacks, and was often used to tweak gameplay. Because development teams were small and a tools market had yet to develop, individual titles tended to use unique, proprietary data storage systems instead of the more standardized formats of today. These proprietary systems increased the difficulty of user content edits, and limited changes to only the most skilled.

The climate is completely different today. Standardized engines, widely available graphic and modeling tools, and global connectivity have made the deconstruction of game code orders of magnitude easier. Those same factors, along with an editor-friendly developer outlook, have made the creation of new content easier still. Nowadays, it's rare to find an RTS or FPS that doesn't include some type of graphical map editor, and more genres are integrating player content creation into their designs every day.

Products of Your Imagination

Before map editing became accessible, the easiest type of content for a player to create was graphical replacements. These replacements have historically been a first step for budding editors. Because most developers use standard image file formats, changing game textures is easy to perform with common tools. With the widespread availability of 3D modeling tools, as well as an increasing focus on their use in art and engineering degrees, graphical replacements are becoming more complex and include the modification or creation of 3D objects. Whether updating the graphics of an older title to newer standards or replacing the "skin" of a 3D model, image replacements are popular for their dramatic effects.

With the advent of developer-created editing tools, the most common type of content players create today is that of maps or levels within an existing game. Editors have grown sophisticated enough that, with a minimal amount of time and effort, the average player can have a basic map created and working in a single evening. With more effort - and some creativity - near-professional work can be produced without needing any formal training or programming experience. At the most complex level, dedicated individuals can create content as good as, or better than, the content originally delivered with the game.

For players with programming skills, an alternative outlet is often "mods," or player-created content that adds new functionality to a game. While graphical replacements and map creation are limited to the content already within the game, mods can be used to create entirely new gameplay. Designing a map that includes a burning building is creating content within the existing game, while adding a functional fire extinguisher is a different beast altogether.

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Combining all other types of player content, the most complex creations are referred to as "total conversions." Although using the core game engine, these conversions replace the majority of the art and levels - and sometimes the

gameplay - to create an entirely new experience. Although sometimes accomplished by multi-talented individuals, total conversions are usually the work of a small team. The first total conversion is generally considered to be *Aliens TC*, a *DOOM* mod designed around replacing the entire game with a new campaign based on the *Aliens* movies.

Now You're Playing with Power
Although they originally saw it as a threat, developers are beginning to support and promote player-created content like never before. There are a lot of good reasons for that. Financially, it's a sound move - by empowering the players, developers can give their games stronger communities, extending the lifespan of their product long beyond the traditional shelf life. *Counter-Strike*, a total conversion based on *Half Life*, was released in 1999. It is still being played - widely and constantly - today, which is more than can be said of most other games released six years ago. The community, as well as the abundance of new content it generates, helps draw in new players ... all of which require a copy of the original game in order to play.

There are more reasons than just the financial, though. Supporting player-created content is also training the next generation of content designers. Unlike development in the early days of gaming, today's games are developed by teams using a combination of standard programming and art tools and specialized, often homegrown, content creation tools. Most students can acquire the standard programs through university programs (or otherwise) with relative ease, and for the low price of a game box, can have access to a professionally built engine and a variety of the specialized tools that the developers have released. With access to the tools and engine, any budding designer today can learn the fundamentals of level design and game balance well before employment. Independent level design has become a staple on many entry-level game industry resumes for this very reason.

If your sights are set a bit higher than mere content design, mod and total conversion development can be used as a stepping stone towards getting a **company** off the ground - or proving a design, or getting a project lead position.

> **...by empowering the players, developers can give their games stronger communities, extending the lifespan of their product long beyond the traditional shelf life.**

Like any open medium, much of the content generated is not of significant quality, but when amazing work surfaces, the community takes notice. Provide that level of quality several times, and development studios take notice as well - several total conversion teams have become development studios in their own right.

Finally, player created content can help alleviate some of the more specific demands that developers receive. Each player is looking for different things in a game, and it's impossible for any title to please everybody. Whether it is a certain character class looking for a more specialized user interface or a group of gamers looking for a more realistic experience, niche targeted content can be created by players when it wouldn't

be feasible, or productive, for the developers to create it. For an independent mod developer, an audience of several hundred can be an exhilarating rush – for a development studio it's a terrible failure.

Power Without the Price

Having player content is not without its negatives. The most evident pitfall is that users are now combing through the data files like never before – and finding things they were never meant to find. The best- known incident of this sort to date is the *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* "Hot Coffee" mod, which revealed borderline pornographic mini-games and fully nude models that had been included on the game disc, but not intended for player access. The resulting mod, which enabled the mini-games, spread like wildfire across the network world, and resulted in a retroactive rating change for *San Andreas* from Mature to Adults Only. A less extreme

example is players' discovery of unused scenes and dialogue in *Knights of the Republic II*, and their subsequent attempts to add them back into the game.

Even when players don't find anything negative hidden in the game itself, the changes that they themselves create can draw significant negative attention to the game or the brand. An incredible number of games have had textures on female models replaced with fully nude ones (most famously, *Tomb Raider*, and most recently, *World of Warcraft*). Although these incidents are unlikely to have the same impact that Hot Coffee had on *GTA* (as the content was not present within the game itself), they can and do cause negative press. Perhaps the worst instance of this problem was suffered by id Software with *DOOM* when the media discovered that one of the Columbine shooters had created a *DOOM* level based on his high school.

> **...niche targeted content can be created by players when it wouldn't be feasible, or productive, for the developers to create it.**

With multiplayer games, there is also a distinct danger that users will be able to create mods that dramatically tilt the competition in their favor. Some early FPS mods made all walls transparent, added "auto-aim" functionality to weapons, or colored opponents in bright colors to make them easier to spot. An entire industry has actually sprung up around keeping these types of user modifications out of the multiplayer arena, led by PunkBuster, and it's now becoming a standard in many multiplay-

The most evident pitfall is that users are now combing through the data files like never before — and finding things they were never meant to find.

enabled games. Some MMORPGs are also integrating similar anti-cheat protections, as NCSoft did with nProtect's GameGuard in *Lineage II*.

Finally, as mods and their distribution become more fully integrated with game communities, there's the possibility of changes to gameplay spreading unknowingly. As a part of their supporting the *Sims 2* community, Maxis provides a way for players to download other player-created content - a significant draw to longtime *Sims* players. This distribution system was unintentionally responsible for the spread of objects with hidden side effects, resulting in many players going to Maxis' forums and customer support department to report strange behavior.

We See Farther
The future of player content is rapidly approaching. What will it hold? Despite the recent negative press, expect to see more access for more genres, and a much higher level of developer involvement.

Player-created levels are coming to consoles. *Pariah*, an otherwise unremarkable first-person shooter for the Xbox, provides both an integrated map editor and a way to use and distribute those maps over Xbox Live. While we're unlikely to see the same levels of heavy editing we see with PC titles, as the next generation of consoles go online we can expect to see more, and more sophisticated, content creation tools included with them, along with the ability to distribute them to friends.

Second Life, an online virtual world, bases its entire game on player created content. With an advanced scripting language and full support for customized art, players create everything from customized player models and lines of clothing to virtual fish and simulated skateboarding. On top of that, players can then sell these creations to other players, allowing the most talented to actually make a living independently developing game content.

The Sims Exchange, a centralized point for players of *The Sims* family of games to distribute and download new content, is a great example of where developer support of the player-content community is going. The Exchange provides thousands of customized character models, house designs, and objects created by both official developers and the player community.

With Neverwinter Nights Premium Modules, Bioware has approached some

of the most talented module creators and offered them the opportunity to create more complex adventures professionally. These modules include voice acting work, composed music, and heavy scripting that would make their independent creation prohibitive. Sold through their online store for far less than the cost of retail expansions, these modules provide trustworthy, high-quality content that extend the life of the game dramatically.

Like it or not, player content is here to stay. And we should like it. Players are responsible for *Counter-Strike*, a genre-defining mod that became a separate title in its own right, and arguably the most popular online game to date. It's responsible for the wonderful - independently created - adventures that make *Neverwinter Nights* a permanent fixture on my hard drive. It's responsible for the endless font of creativity that comes from *Second Life*. And it's training the next generation of game designers, who will create games with more depth, content, and customizability than ever before.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PLAYER CREATED CONTENT

Unlimited Adventures
Based on the famed SSI "gold box" D&D games, Unlimited Adventures is a world creation and game design toolkit released in 1993. Despite many limitations, an active community and a number of very enterprising 'hacks' have kept this title active to this day.

War2xEd
Written by Daniel Lemberg, War2xEd improved so much on the basic Warcraft II level editor that Blizzard even began using it internally, and it's considered the inspiration for including a more advanced map editor with StarCraft. First becoming widespread in RTSs, map editors are included with a wide variety of games these days, and are the source of the majority of player content.

Doom WADS
Credited with the first real developer embracement of the modding community, DOOM made quite a splash by incorporating all the media needed for a level into individual files, called WADs. With a central location, community-

created tools quickly sprung up to create these files, and id's release of the source code for their editors only fueled the fire. DOOM was also the birthplace of the first "total conversions", starting with Aliens TC.

Neverwinter Nights Modules
Not since the days of Unlimited Adventures had a RPG toolset been released with as much capability as NWN's Aurora engine. Combine the ease of use with the ability to design adventures for single-player, multi-player, and DM-controlled play and you have a recipe for some amazing creations.

Excitebike!
Who says player content has to be on the PC? While a decent "racing" game in its own right, Excitebike really shone because of its track editor. Players couldn't save the tracks, and the design environment was no more complex than combining track pieces in a customized order, but it was one of the first tastes

console users would get towards customizing their gameplay experience.

Atari 2600 compiler
A recent development for an archaic system, Fred Quimby's Atari 2600 Basic Compiler is a fantastic example of the lengths that fans will to go to in pursuit of their hobbies. Although the games created using his system can only be played in an emulator, though some fan-made games do still get converted into cartridges, the fact that the community is still active over 20 years after the system release is remarkable enough.

Counter-Strike
The most famous and successful mod ever created, Counter-Strike earned its creators positions at Valve, spawned a retail release - and expansion - of its own, and has earned the distinction of being the only mod that ended up being more popular than the game it was based on. It stands out as the holy grail of mod authors, and as a symbol of independent development.

ARCHITECTURE AND VICE
FANTASY IN THE MAGIC KINGDOM OF SECOND LIFE
by David Thomas

There's Cinderella with her gown up over her face, glass slippers in the air and Prince Charming ... well, hang on a second.

A sad fact I have come to realize is that there are really only two kinds of adult fantasy. One kind is a form of the Disneyland/childlike fantasy. The other always features some form of rubber or another. That's too bad because there is really only one form of healthy adult fantasy that including both Disney **and** rubber. And we almost never go there.

I was 14 the first time I hit a Disney park - Disneyworld 1979. I had a great time and don't recall thinking about any form of sex while there. But I did daydream about cuddling with that special girl I would, hopefully, one day meet and bring back to Fantasyland. Cuddling is, of course, the gateway sex drug, so, I suppose you could say that I was actually having the beginnings of thoughts about getting nasty in Cinderella's Castle.

...I suppose you could say that I was actually having the beginnings of thoughts about getting nasty in Cinderella's Castle...

Really, I think that it's perfectly normal to think about sex and about Disneyland and about having sex at Disneyland.

Thinking about making magic in the Kingdom only feels creepy if you think about Walt's paradise as a place exclusively for kids. Yes, kids go there and tend to dominate the park discourse with their demands to high five Mickey or eat some sloppy sweet treat. But really, the park is a place for general fantasy, young and old. There's no long list of adult fantasies that doesn't include getting busy with a girl dressed as Snow White, or a boy dressed like Aladdin or, I suppose, either dressed like Peter Pan.

Fantasy that focuses only on acting like a child, wearing a hat murderously created by scalping a Goofy mid-grin or clapping like an idiot at fireworks, well, **that's** creepy.

Maybe it's just immature.

It shouldn't surprise you to think of Disneyland as a substrate for grown up fantasy, because the place is, like porn, inherently about fantasy fulfillment. And,

As I said, Disneyland is porn. And I love Disneyland.

also like porn, Disney is ultimately non-configurable and peculiarly non-interactive. You look at it, you reach out, and all you end up holding is yourself. It's designed so that you can't mess it up or get anything on it. Disney is our national mythic memory and, you don't go messing with the collective consciousness, man.

So, what do you do? You look. You imagine. You fantasize. You look up the curving surface of Space Mountain and try to imagine what's inside. Even once you load into the ride's sperm rockets and jettison up its fallopian tube of outer space adventure, you never quite get the intimacy you wanted. You just have to pleasure yourself, or find pleasure in yourself, or imagine you are having pleasure. Or something.

As I said, Disneyland is porn. And I love Disneyland.

I also love the game *Second Life*. And *Second Life* is a new kind of porn.

It, rather than naked ladies encoded as JPGs and distributed, well spewed, over the Internet, is the porn for the information age. And it's because this fantasy is configurable. Crazy, organic, hippie-love, make your own reality, crazy fantasy.

Let me try and explain.

I am a homophobe of a particular type. As to whether I think gay people should be able to get married, I do. As for whether or not I think gay sex is immoral or un-natural, I do not. No, my homophobia is of the sort that thinks being gay is funny. Yes, I am a rank and file "Will and Grace" homophobe, the kind that thinks being gay is perfectly normal, but is really funny. It reaches actual comedy when you watch the way straight people squirm around anything

they think of as queer. "Will and Grace" is the measure of the same sex zeitgeist. And I'm sure we will live to see the day that gay Jack and gay Will appear to represent all the media sensitivity of that charming tale of "Little Black Sambo."

For the time being, I'll merrily play the cynic and enjoy the fact that I can get a rise out of people by discussing two men kissing or the mere notion of man-on-man hot sex.

That accounts for the case of the troll marriage. Two boy trolls.

If you think it's funny when two men flirt, you should see it in *Second Life*. As a "massively multiplayer online game," or "game-like massively multiperson happening" *SL* goes down as the greatest public freak fest on the Internet. Where else can you find a world of people that dress up like humanoid animals and then hook up? These people give the phrase, "humping like bunnies" a peculiar kind of literal currency.

I'm not trying to pick on people who don furry costumes and have animal sex, because in the right context, I'm sure

that could be a lot fun. Really, I'm just picking one of the silly things that I've come across to stand in for all the massive weirdness that goes on in SL every moment of every day. It's like describing Paris as the place with the Eiffel Tower. It's true, but sort of leaves something out.

So, imagine, if you will, a world where furries live and breed (so to speak) along side fat, 50 year-old-men dressed as buff rave kids, moms strolling the streets in freaky bondage gear and a guy I know who thinks its funny to lurch around as a zombie lord with a syringe poking out of his bleeding eye.

Get the picture, or at least **a** picture?

There's more. I have photos of a man going at it doggy style with a Cootie toy scaled up to donkey size. I've visited a floating ice palace and flown around as an Oompa Loompa on a giant hovering Wonka Bar. I've driven a hamburger and fallen out of a skyscraper. I also walk around butt naked most of the time, but no one really cares. And that's probably because I am bright red and have no discernable genitals.

I'm a troll, or at least that's what I tell people. And for fun, my fellow troll and real life buddy, Knight, and I decided we'd get married. You might think that it is odd that two pretend 3D characters, in a made up 3D computer world, could get married. And it is. The fact that anyone can get married, regardless of sex, affiliation, nationality or intergalactic life form, says something. *Second Life* aspires to a truly liberal and egalitarian society. The fact that a couple of boy trolls can get hitched for laughs tells you something important. *Second Life* is all about doing whatever it is that turns your crank.

I could go on (and on and on and on). *Second Life* is an expansive place that unfolds like a dream, a tapestry of desires and ideas held in symbolic shape. And like trying to tell people about your dreams, talking about *SL* just makes you boring in your effort to get people to understand why statues of 40-foot-high naked women holding hands are just so freaking cool.

Second Life's sublime kookiness stems from one source: The players generate all of the content - the walls, the trees, the cars, the chairs, and mostly,

themselves. Think of it as the real face of liberty, a picture of what people would actually do if they could design the world, the society and the people.

And that is they would build monuments to their own passions. Contrary to notion that people are deeply boring, *SL* shows that instead, people are deeply kinky. That guy that works in the next cubicle over from you (yeah, him) really wants to be a slender blonde in a teddy who lives in a glass tower guarded by robots and dragons. And in *Second Life* he is.

I know you don't want to think about **that** guy in girly underwear. But that's sort of the point. We all have these inner lives that we use to create a counter pressure to all that crap on the outside. Fine, your happy place is the white sand beach and a bottle of Corona from that TV commercial. His inner life is just that more interesting, and filled with more lingerie, than yours. And I can get married to a boy for laughs, whether you get it or not.

Further, it turns out you don't need a computer to play *Second Life*. We do it all the time.

Although 10 years have passed, I still vividly remember the face and the curly red hair of the girl I almost ran over with my bike. For that moment, her face looked up, the sun shone down in painterly streaks, she smiled, time stopped and I fell in love. I didn't plow her into the gutter and instead peddled on home to my family. But right there, in that second of cliché so perfect that they could use it to sell soap on TV, I slipped into my second life.

We think of time as something that pushes us through life, relentlessly conveying us from station to station, piling on experiences at each stop before dumping us into a coffin for final shipment. This is time as the eternal taskmaster. Really, though, we press time forward with the weight of our expectations, the gravity of our demand for things to happen the way we expect. We go home after work because, well, that's what defines being at work, going home. And then we get up in the morning to head to work to afford having a home. We press and press and press.

Fantasy stops time and we fall through the floorboards of those mental shanties of expectation.

At least, that's how I felt when time literally stood still not just long enough for me to avoid mangling the red-headed girl, but long enough for me to spend a lifetime in that smile, to imagine another life where I see that smile every day and the sun always shines like a Bob Ross painting.

You see, we all have a second life, and we bottle it up in our fantasies and stop time.

When a cute waitress brushes your hand as she hands you the check, when a

glowing mom and dad walk by hand-in-hand with their children as precious as lambs or a Jaguar glides down the street, a glimmering metal beast, you slip into fantasy, into your second life.

These images of fantasy are powerful. And frozen. We collect them and collect them until our fantasy life is a junk drawer of unrelated things.

In *Second Life*, these bits and pieces come back to life, tangible and in motion. It's like opening that junk drawer of experience and suddenly realizing you have all the pieces you need to build a moon rocket or make cheese.

Want to talk to that waitress, or dominatrix, or guy dressed like Mork? Want to try out the family life or drive a fancy car? It's our collective fantasy, so go for it. Build the place where and the person you want to be. Besides, I like you better when you start pretending to be the person you want to be rather than pretending to be the person you are.

I've never had sex in *Second Life*. I've seen people having sex and certainly know plenty of people who have had the kind of cartoon higgly jiggly that passes for intercourse on the Internet. My pal Jack once offered to show me penis - in game. Apparently it comes equipped with an erectile animation as well as an ejaculation command. I asked him how much he paid for that and he scoffed.

"Man, I never paid for any of my dicks. Girls buy them for me."

In Disneyland and on the street, our fantasies are moments of experience captured in the amber of memory and held as precious jewels. On the canvas of *Second Life*, people extract those fantasies and recreate them in a sort of Jurassic Park of imagination.

When Jack talks about his collection of penises it's not because his fantasy is to have a box of cocks. No, his fantasy world is filled with interesting and exotic women ready to equip him as they see fit. Why women would want a customizable unit, I can only imagine. And why a guy like Jack has managed to meet so many of these women, I can only guess. The great thing is that I don't have to think much about it because Jack and the tribe of cock-gifting women are my *Second Life*

On the canvas of Second Life, people extract those fantasies and recreate them in a sort of Jurassic Park of imagination.

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Construction in Second Life is a peculiarly silent and solo endeavor.

neighbors. I don't have to wonder about why they are, they just are. They fantasize, they concoct and create a big crazy world that visualizes, as far as I can tell, the collective consciousness of the people I meet on the street.

Interesting to me, is just how much of those streets *Second Life*rs have imported into the game world. Players spend a lot of time crafting their persona into exotic gay pirates and buff superheroes. They also spend something approximating the labor force of Nepal building, building and building.

Construction in *Second Life* is a peculiarly silent and solo endeavor. When you see it happening, it looks more like a Wiccan ritual than anything involving hardhats. A character stands with some sort of force silently throbbing from their outreached hand. An object - maybe a wall, a window or a twisted shape that will serve some unseen architectural purpose or perhaps commit an

unspeakable architectural crime - floats, turns and drifts into place. There is no conversation. To build, a player must open a series of screens on their computer that makes following in-game chat difficult. So you just watch. And quietly, a building begins to take form.

In the stripped down Libertarian economy of *Second Life*, only land costs real money. The ephemeral building material of computer data is free. This is the imaginative strip tease of real life where bored men try to imagine what a woman looks like naked in reverse. *Second Life* players imagine what it would look like to put a wall of towering stone in front of their face, a picket fence, a temple of feathers.

One day, someone might pen an architectural tour of *SL*. Until then, you can summarize it into the categories of the architecture of the familiar, the architecture of the fantastic, and the architecture of the inspired. You might

think of these categories as things people usually build, things Walt Disney would build and things Charles Manson would build.

Let me explain.

Kids draw people as freakish heads populated by dot-point eyes and maybe a crooked mouth below. That's more or less how they see adults - big beady-eyed heads hovering over them. These crazy drawing may not look right, but they are highly accurate, at least as far as kids see adults as some form of malevolent space life. It's not hard to imagine why some people have nightmares about space aliens who look, more or less, the same.

Likewise, *Second Life* players make places that look, more or less, like things they've seen - boxy homes in shady pine groves. Boxy homes by the sea. Boxy homes made of hewn stone and filled with S&M gear. These are familiar buildings, or at least places most of us have seen or, possibly, visited.

The more determined *Second Life*r takes the freedom of fantasy much more seriously and tries to reproduce places

that blare IMAGINATION. You can find fairy tale castles, wizard towers and Playboy Mansions. With a little looking you can find a Smurf Village and a Toon Town. And, frankly, these tend to be the most uncomfortable places filled with the people earnestly trying to turn *Second Life* into a virtual Disneyland.

Basically, the goal is to bring childhood, or at least childlike impotence, back to life. That means no tampering. This group of players likes to stick to the script and live in the non-configurable world of the amusement park. Their fantasy is really that of Walt Disney - they want to configure in their own image and then freeze out the interlopers. You can visit the land of the vampires. Just don't suggest that it would be funny to open a "normal club" where people dress in dumpy clothes, cover up their evil tattoos, pretend to be fleshy office workers and all talk about how "norm" they look.

Conversely, the most developed and entertaining of all *Second Life* locations center on the virtual architects who throw all sense to the wind and build the objects of the id. These objects/buildings/structures of pure passion

the escapist

And it's all so very, very punk.
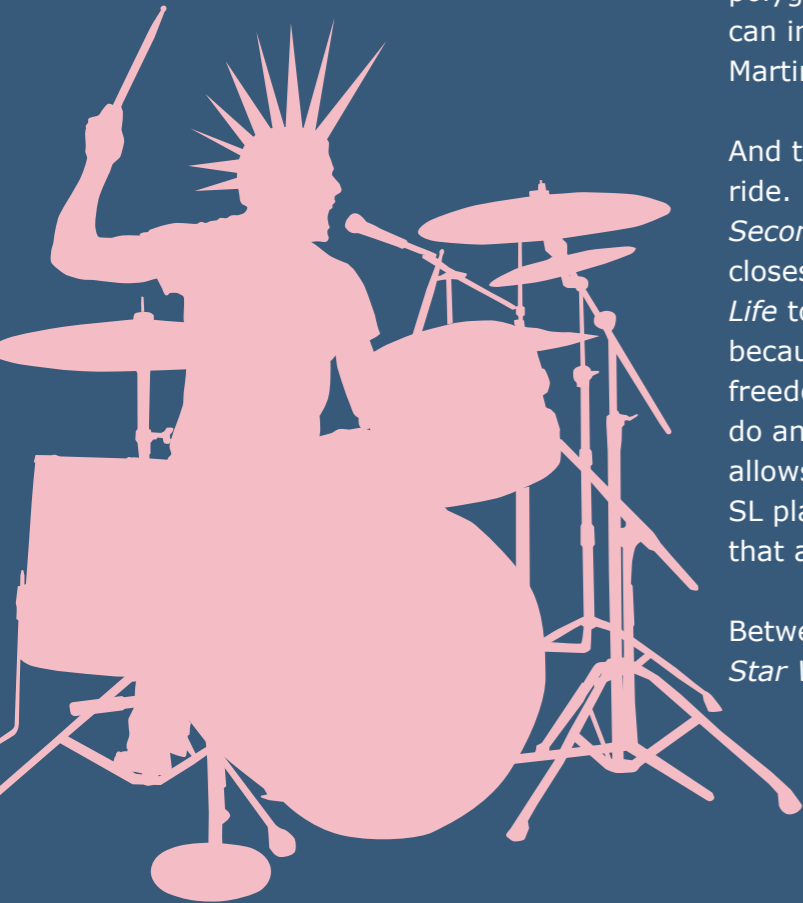
simply exist. You cannot rationalize a staircase that winds up 2,000 feet into the clouds, a sprawling atrium of glass nestled in a snowy landscape or pimp palace the size of a football field, covered in white marble and decorated with eternally billowing curtains. These builders have imagination, or at least deeply felt fantasies. They dump their insides in a punk rock symphony of low-polygon models. It's all as low-fi as you can imagine and as subtle as a Doc Martin boot in your teeth.

And that's where I want to get off this ride. Because if you want to understand *Second Life*, look at punk rock. It's the closest thing in media that's not *Second Life* to what *Second Life* is. That's because both punk and *SL* are about freedom. Punk fetishizes the freedom to do anything - Anarchy! *Second Life* allows the freedom to fetishize anything. SL players, being people, have taken that as a sacred cause.

Between the players pretending to be *Star Wars* characters, players pretending

to be strippers, players pretending to be Iron Man and players pretending to be Snoopy, you'll find that people want to be everything. In the medium that happily pretends to be anything, the *Second Life* community finds its voice. And it's all so very, very punk.

Sure, *Second Life* is nothing but architecture and vice. I suspect that's about all anything is when stripped of the basic need to feed, clothe and shelter yourself. Sex is one of the ways we give into that desire for wild abandon and architecture is all about the place that it can happen.

Disneyland remains the classical music of fantasy. We appreciate the depth of the structural elegance and the masterful composition. But we observe it from our seats in the audience. And when the lights go down, toe-tapping is strongly discouraged. You don't mess with the classics. That's what makes them classic, ya know?

In the punk rock of *Second Life*, fantasy finds it most urgent voice - this game is

a boiling mosh pit of desire. And the players are punks merrily bloodying each other in a real time orgy of self-actualization - building, pretending, fornicating, fixing the world and feeling alive.

So, to raise a question that you may or may not have at this point, but one I'm sure you'll find interesting anyway: Would I rather have sex in Disneyland or play *Second Life*?

To me the answer is all very "Waiting for Godot". Sure, it would be fun to configure Disneyland. But who gets to do that? While I'm waiting, I can spin the entire solar system around the knotted finger of my troll hand while riding a flying carpet with the girl I love.
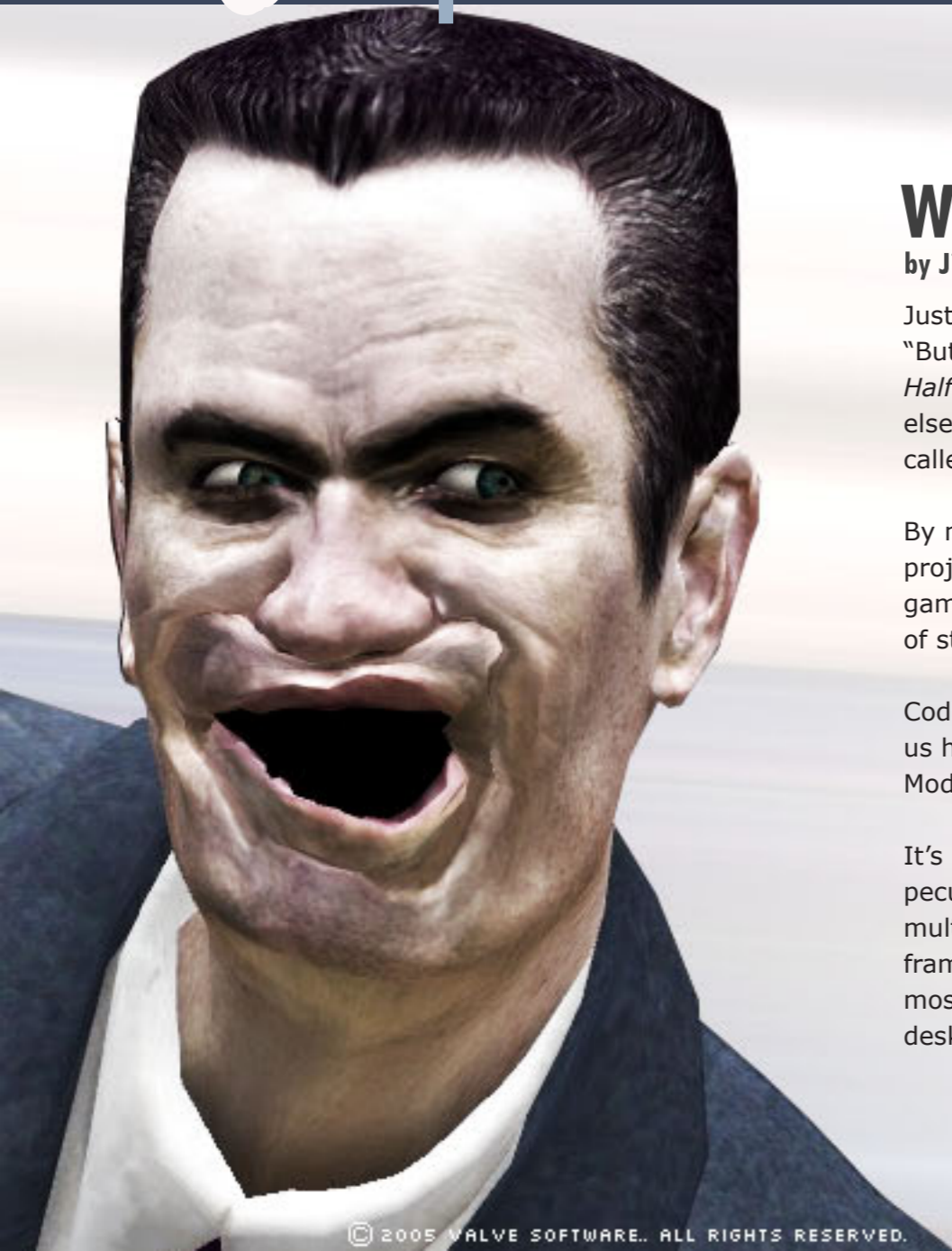
WHAT GARRY MADE

by Jim Rossignol

Just last night a gamer said to me: "*Half-Life 2* - is it as good as they say?" "Oh yes indeed," I replied. "But not for the reasons you might think." Of course I was **breathless** with excitement when I first played *Half-Life 2*, but my reasons for breathlessness have changed. Now, almost a year later, there's something else going on - something entirely crazed and absurd that makes *Half-Life 2* "as good as they say." It's called Garry's Mod.

By now we should all be familiar with mods - the user-created add-ons and remixes of certain games, the projects that spawned things like *Counter-Strike*, *Day of Defeat*, and *Desert Combat*. Using a popular game as a template to create your own is an obvious solution to the seemingly insurmountable problems of starting a modern game from scratch.

Coding is all about remixing - recombination of old elements into something new. This method has given us hundreds if not thousands of new games to play. But none them can boast the mad verve of Garry's Mod. It is the ultimate remix: a mod without limits.

It's perhaps because Garry's Mod was never meant to be a game at all that it has become one of the most peculiar and entertaining experiences on the PC. Rather than attempt to create a new game world or multi-player deathmatch, the titular Garry has simply encoded new tools into the complex physics framework of *Half-Life 2*. He has created a gameplay palette that allows gamers to engineer some of the most deranged creations that have ever clanked, groaned and exploded their way across a gamer's desktop. It is both hilarious and bizarre in equal measure.

I originally encountered Garry's Mod in the office of a popular games magazine. The chap whose task it was to play and collate game mods was giggling to himself and hooting with joy. Nothing unusual about that, but then I saw what he was playing with: The giggler had built a 'snake' of interconnected barrels, tied them to a rocket canister and sent it flailing, wildly across the sandbox map.

This was a couple of iterations into Garry's Mod and some of the physics tools had been implemented. There wasn't much more to it than that, but it nevertheless left a strong first impression. I write about games because I want to experience the novel and the new, and I knew I'd come back to this. I watched him play a little more, blasting heaps of ragdoll corpses across the map. It was grotesquely compulsive. But then I had to talk business and my attention moved elsewhere. It would be a couple of months before I saw it again.

Initially Garry's Mod was little more than a rag-doll poser, allowing players to fiddle with the posture and facial expressions of game characters, leading to galleries of surreal and grotesque screenshots. It was a puerile fancy,

something worth a smirk and nothing more. If it had remained like that, I doubt I would be writing about it now. But Garry, an unassuming coder who rules his mod forum with an iron fist, kept on refining his creation. It's thanks to the enthusiasm of the online community, and their dedication to annoying and helping Garry on his forum, that it has grown into something I just can't ignore. A friend forwarded me a screenshot of *Half-Life 2's* Father Grigori riding a monstrous contraption pulled along by a team of zombies. It was a bizarre image. Where the hell had this come from? Ah, of course. Garry's Mod.

Today the mod is a game-physics sandbox of startling proportions. It provides the gamer with a smorgasbord of objects, properties and tools that at first seem bewildering and disconnected but, with a little ingenuity, can be fashioned into creations of remarkable complexity. It's a next-generation Lego kit, filled with motors, explosives, people and guns. Likewise, my first experiences were strangely reminiscent of trying to build something complex from Lego without any instructions. I ended up blasting around heaps of bodies and

smacking myself unto death with flailing strings of sofas.

...some of the most surreal sights to emerge from games...
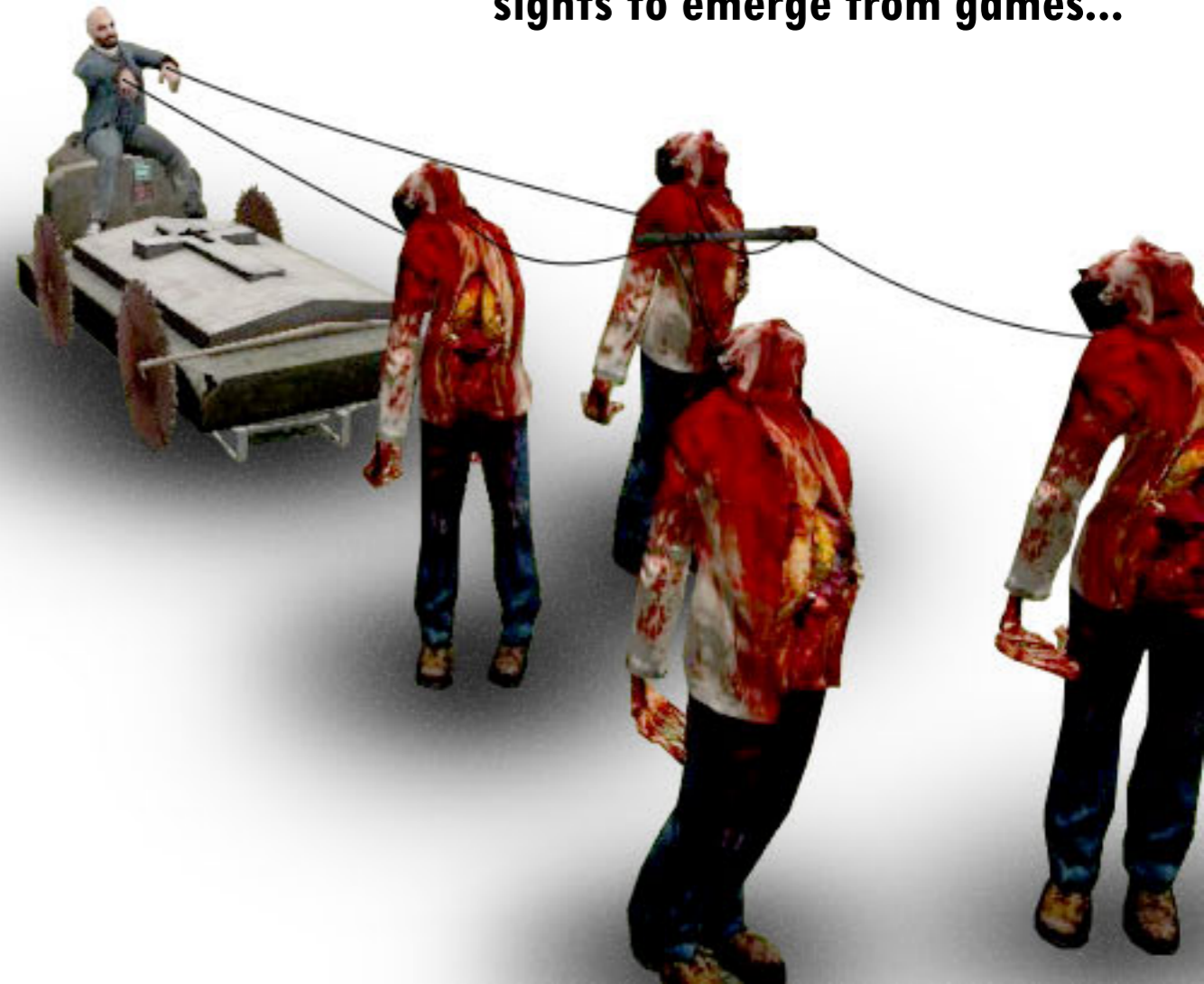
Not very impressive.

But players whose dedication and engineer sense surpasses my own have gone on to build baroque contraptions worthy of Da Vinci, as well as conjuring up some of the most surreal sights to emerge from games: cartwheeling furniture with rocket boosters attached; forests of floating, twitching corpses hanging from brightly colored balloons; even lurid and disturbing ways to play the original game itself. Defeating the striders by welding their legs together or battering them with rocket-propelled sofas are just some of the delights that unfold, dream-like, in this deranged remix of Valve's gaming world.

As with all the best toolkits, the possibilities for creativity within Garry's Mod are generally limited only by imagination. It was thanks to Garry's own challenges that I was inspired to plunge back into his mod. When you see what people have made - moving bridges, absurd vignettes of characters in unlikely situations, even working vehicles, spliced together from the physics objects in the game - you realize how grand this simple idea can be. It's now possible to download ready-made

inventions of startling intricacy. Giant combine harvesters and zombie-drawn carts populate a deranged carnival of invention, all thanks to this unheralded piece of clever coding.

What is most thrilling though is that this sandbox toy is so easy to use. You conjure up items from noodle cartons to giant chimneys, all of which are physics objects that can be picked up, stuck together and turned into alien flesh. Instantly you work out ways to play: creating obstacle courses for the dune buggy, building domino-like chain-reactions of explosions and collisions.

Ever see that Honda Advert where all the car parts knocked into one another in a perfectly engineered chain reaction? I started making that without even thinking about it. The immediacy of Garry's Mod, thanks to our familiarity with first-person gaming conventions, is part of its genius. While it takes application and dedication to create some of the more complex things that appear on Garry's forums, it's all too easy to download this tiny app, install and begin playing with a game in a way that had never been intended by the developers. It's ludicrous, filled with a

surreal logic in the way that only games can be.

Where it'll end up is anyone's guess, but for now at least Garry's Mod continues to be refined, continues to expand its tools, and continues to produce works of bewildering originality. It is a striking example of the most important aspect gaming: the imagination of the players themselves. It's a celebration of what we do best - think up ever more ludicrous ways to play. The latest challenge for the fans is to build a working rollercoaster, and their efforts are already caving in the walls of my tiny mind.

http://www.garry.tv/garrysmod/

PLAYER-PROMPTED PARANOIA

by Allen Varney

I didn't know it at the time, but in late February 2004, I was Rick Jones. There's probably tens of thousands of Rick Joneses, but I was specifically Rick Jones from the Marvel superhero comic **The Incredible Hulk**.

An innocent freelance game designer, I'd blithely accepted the contract to design a new edition of a classic tabletop paper-and-dice roleplaying game, PARANOIA. I was as oblivious to my imminent peril as was Rick in that 1963 origin issue, playing his harmonica out on the New Mexico testing ground, with the terrible gamma bomb ticking away. But on the Internet my salvation was at hand, like Dr. Bruce Banner racing across the desert to push Rick to safety, even as the explosion bathed Banner in the gamma radiation that would make him a savage monster - uh - no, wait a minute -

My metaphor has gotten away from me, but the point is, I was in trouble. I had three months to write, playtest, edit, and lay out a 256-page rulebook for release in August 2004. Tick tick tick...

And - appropriately, given that the game was PARANOIA - I was being watched. Closely.

"Trust The Computer! The Computer is Your Friend!"

Originally published in (appropriately) 1984 but out of print for ten years, PARANOIA (designed by Dan Gelber, Eric Goldberg, and Greg Costikyan) was the first successful comedic RPG. Set in an underground city of the future ruled by an insane Computer, PARANOIA inverted the traditional cooperative play of most games. As elite "Troubleshooter" agents, players hunt traitors, including mutants and members of secret societies -- but each Troubleshooter is, him- or herself, secretly **both** a mutant **and** a secret society member. So play consists of gathering evidence on your teammates and shooting them before they shoot you.

As much a psychological exercise as a game, PARANOIA became a legend in the hobby. A decade after the last edition, the game retained a devoted fan following in various Web communities, especially the remarkable Paranoia-Live.

net. Hundreds of P-L.net forum members showed passionate love for, and strong opinions about, the game.

In pre-Web days, a publisher's usual approach to a new edition was top-down: poll some potential customers, then retreat to the word processor, circulate a few playtest drafts, publish, and pray. But I was starting to hear that gamma-bomb deadline tick, so I looked for a way to harness all that enthusiasm, a sort of bottom-up angle. Fortunately, I found a ready model: the Forge.

The Forge is an online community of roleplaying game theorists - not a large group, but as devout as a Mennonite colony. They debate rarefied Gamist-Narrativist-Simulationist theory, trade self-publishing strategies, and create small, fascinating games on weird topics. The Forge espouses a public design process, where designers float ideas for feedback and brainstorming.

Stealing this neat approach for the PARANOIA design, I organized dozens of collaborators using every Web tool I could find: Paranoia-Live.net; a Wiki; and a development blog started by Greg Costikyan. Fans vetted the playtest rules and contributed lots of material, like coders on an open-source software project. It wasn't really open-source; everyone knowingly surrendered their material to PARANOIA's owners, without hope of compensation. (The blog disclaimer read, "All your rights are belong to us. No bloody Creative Commons here! Bwahahaha!") But - this is the key point - they pitched in anyway, hoping they would benefit by getting an improved game.

The fans not only made the new edition incomparably better, they pushed me to safety just ahead of the deadline-bomb's explosion. The new edition received fine reviews and has sold well. Now I'm using the same model to package its support line.

Shared Creation

Watching the PARANOIA line evolve, I'm reminded of that Marvel Comics character, Rick Jones. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby created Rick in 1963 as the Hulk's nondescript teen companion. Rick later became the shared Marvel universe's all-purpose general sidekick, first for Captain America, then the Hulk again, then Captain Marvel... Writers made it a running gag to work him in everywhere. And over time, Rick got a lot more interesting, growing into a jaded young man who had seen it all and now took the most astounding events in stride.

Likewise, as talented contributors have added to PARANOIA, the setting has evolved in new directions. Known in the '80s primarily for slapstick parody, it now embraces darkly satiric suspense a la Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* and Stanislaw Lem's 1973 novel *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*. Troubleshooters, formerly low-ranking disposable nobodies, can now rise and fall in The Computer's esteem over lengthy careers - well, lengthy compared to the old days, when lifespans were measured in hours if not minutes. At high social ranks, characters face anxieties entirely new to RPGs,

existential dilemmas that would make even Rick tremble.

Whether in comics, books, TV series, movies, and games, pop culture offers endless Jonesian examples of collaborators successively shaping a property - the property's personality and tone unpredictable, emergent phenomena of the collaboration. In iterations over time by hired creators, these properties grow feature-rich. But this development was always, so to speak, closed-source. You personally, an audience member, cannot influence the development of Rick Jones, nor James Bond, nor Han Solo. Post fan fiction about them on your site and you get a lawyer's nastygram, as surely as if you hacked Microsoft Word.
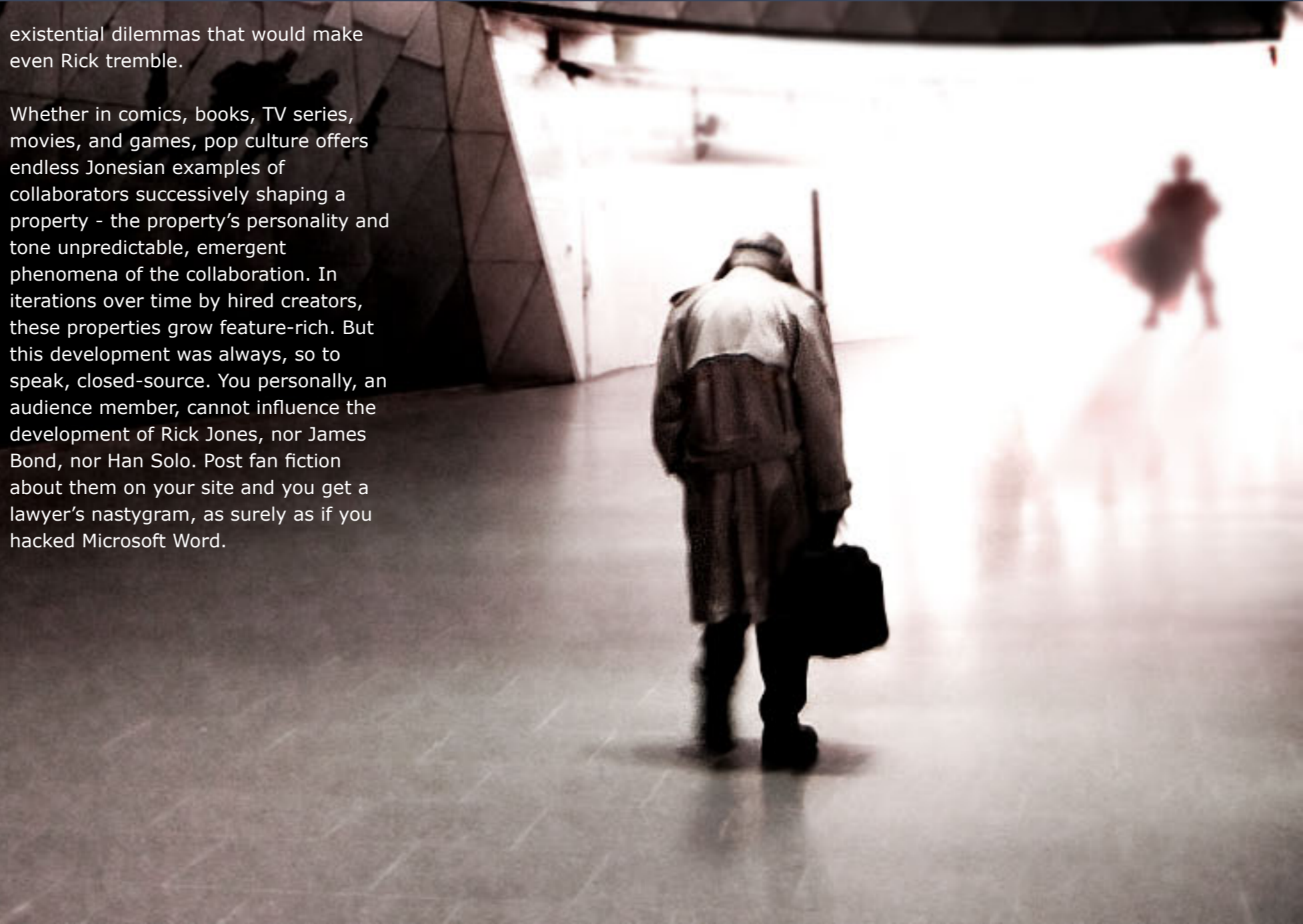
The PARANOIA example shows how to open up creative collaboration, to make the process thoroughly public.

The One-Word Takeaway: "Synergize"

You can adapt this approach to develop characters and background for any roleplaying game, either computer or paper. It would probably work for fiction and screenplays, too, though I suspect you'd want to keep the group small.

Aim for these priorities:

1. Excited interest
Promote your idea. Convey why it's cool, why people should mess with it, and how they can improve it. If you can't get a dozen people excited about your creative property, it's probably not worth pursuing anyway.

2. Fast, frequent communication
After you build energy, synchronize effort. Use mailing lists, instant messaging, forums, blogs, and shared netspaces of all kinds. Use a Wiki! A collection of editable Web pages is probably your best resource. Note, though, Wikis select for deeply involved contributors. It takes so much time to stay current, lightly involved onlookers may soon drop out.

3. A gatekeeper
Everyone involved will have a different take on the material. Either set direction and vet all contributions yourself, or appoint **one** person to do so - preferably a good listener.

4. Honesty
Ensure everyone understands up front the rights they're assigning you, and their compensation (if any). Be candid about why you want things done one way and not another. Tell everyone basically everything, short of betraying confidences or making someone in the group look bad. Brace yourself for corresponding honesty in return. I'm already hunkering down, awaiting the criticism I'll get for muddling that Rick Jones metaphor.

5. Love, not money
Though it sounds weird, it would be harder to make this PARANOIA thing work if actual money were on the line. I get a flat (extremely low) word rate for editing and packaging the line, and pay the contributors out of that minimal fee under a work-for-hire contract that assigns all rights to the game's owners. Hour for hour, I earn less than an entry-level Starbucks barista. This is pretty much standard for the penurious roleplaying industry. And that's fine. I knew the pay when I took the job. (See point #4.) If the designers thought they could make serious money, the maneuvering and politics would be awful.

It's a labor of love for all concerned, like a lot of open-source software. The experience itself has been the reward, and I hope it works out that way for you too.
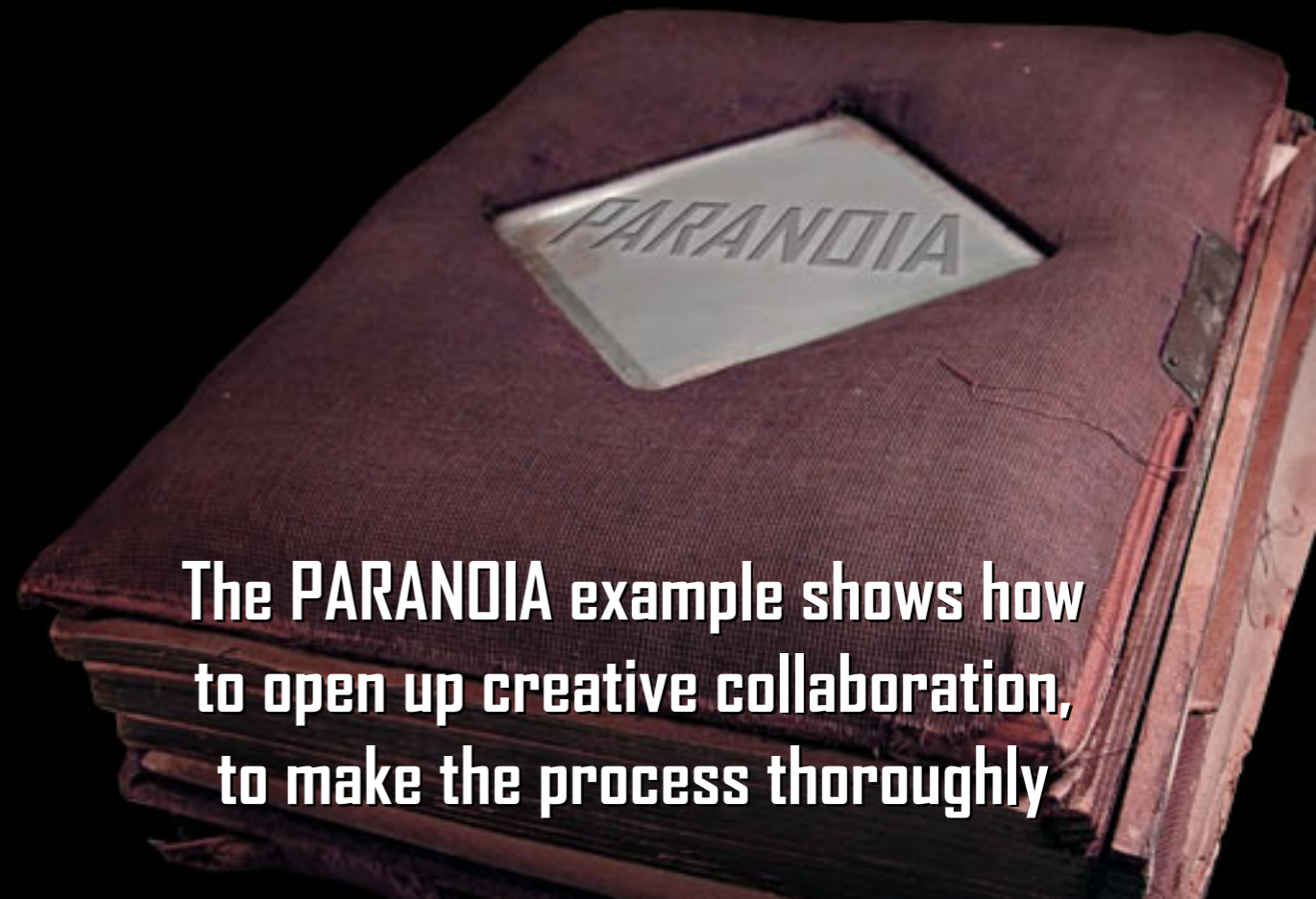
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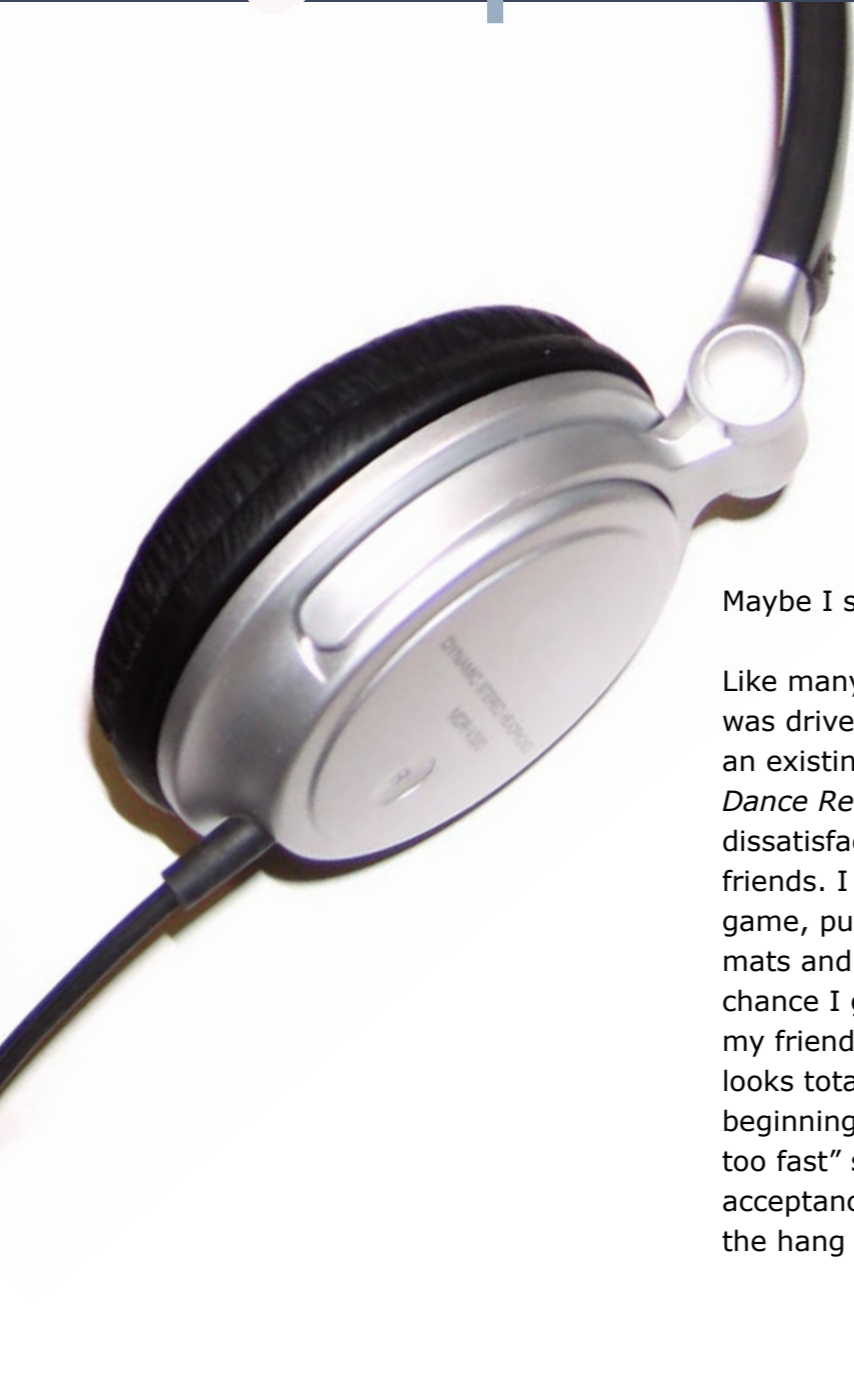
DANCE WITH INTENSITY

by Kyle Orland

I was almost a world-famous game designer.

Well, world famous might be a bit of a stretch. "Certain-parts-of-the-Internet" famous might be more accurate. And I didn't really design a whole game, I just designed some files that modified an existing game. Also, none of my modifications were ever released to the public.

Like I said: "almost."

Maybe I should start at the beginning.

Like many budding game designers, I was driven by a deep dissatisfaction with an existing game. The game was *Dance Dance Revolution (DDR)* and the dissatisfaction belonged to some of my friends. I was perfectly satisfied with the game, pulling out my thick foam dance mats and stomping to the beat every chance I got. I had even hooked some of my friends, pushing them past the "This looks totally stupid" stage to the beginning dancer's "the arrows are going too fast" stage and finally to the pre-acceptance stage of "I'm kind of getting the hang of this."

At this point, some of my friends rammed headlong into the "I just don't like this weird music" stage. Alas, some of my companions did not share my love for high-energy Japanese pop music. And while Konami has recently gotten better about including songs more palatable to American tastes, in the heady days of my youth (a.k.a. three years ago) playing *Dance Dance Revolution* meant dancing mainly to some truly saccharine Asian beats. "You know what would be cool?" my friends would ask rhetorically. "If you could put in your own music and make arrows for that."

So I was understandably excited to find *Dance With Intesity (DWI)*, a freeware version of *DDR* for the PC that lets you design your own dance steps and, more importantly, use your own MP3 songs as the background for your flailing. No more complaints about the weird Japanese pop – now any song in my library could be part of my favorite dance game with just a little bit of work. How hard could it be?

The answer, it turned out, was "plenty hard." The first hurdle was simply getting the program to work, which required setting up a complicated hierarchy of folders and settings that tested my patience even before I got to any actual designing. This also required downloading a companion program called Xstep, which allowed me to edit steps without masochistically hacking around in gibberish-laden text files.

"You know what would be cool...If you could put in your own music and make arrows for that."

Once I actually put pen to paper, as it were, I realized that getting the beats in my head to show up on the screen was much harder than I had anticipated. I could tap out a decent, interesting rhythm as I listened to a song, but I was

After putzing around for a few days, I had pretty much given up my hopes of converting my friends to DDR through an improved song selection.

at a loss to transfer that timing to Xstep's simple static grid. It was a long process of trial and error to get the steps to show up exactly the way I had imagined them, and by that point I was usually dissatisfied with the results anyway.

After putzing around for a few days, I had pretty much given up my hopes of converting my friends to *DDR* through an improved song selection. The hours of work required to create even one halfway decent set of steps was too daunting, and producing songs en masse would require giving up large chunks of my free time. I was not very inclined to invest this time, especially given the bewildered looks I got when I told some people I was now creating *DDR* steps for

my own songs (others were more supportive – a few of my friends became *DWI* tinkerers as well).

I was about ready to go back to being just another *DDR* fan when I happened to stumble upon Tournamix, a regular competition put on by a web site called DDR East Invasion. Tournamix allows people from around the world to submit their best step files for judging by a panel of *DWI* experts and the site's visitors. When I discovered it, they were taking entries for the fourth competition.

This was a dedicated community of step designers who had gotten way past the tinkering stage in which I was currently mired. They devoted a great deal of their own time and resources to the art of

step creation with no reward other than the admiration of their fellow designers. I was inspired by their dedication (and by dreams of Internet stardom), to pick up my keyboard and try my hand.

Finally, after many hours of painstaking transcription and tedious tweaking, I had a complete file that I felt was good enough to compete.

In preparing for my tournament entry, I knew that the song I chose would be key. I looked over reports from past tournaments and noticed that the chosen songs skewed heavily towards... you guessed it... Japanese pop music. Many of the entries were actually remixes of popular *DDR* songs (actual *DDR* songs were prohibited in the rather detailed rules). I knew that I probably couldn't compete with the old guard in this space, so I looked through my song collection

for a candidate that was as different as possible while still being danceable. I settled on Sum 41's *Pain for Pleasure*, a short hard rock song with a good driving beat. I sent in my registration by email.

Next came actually making the entry. Over the span of a few weeks I developed a set of steps that slowly built itself up from a simple introduction to a high energy crescendo of activity, much like the song. I studied the steps for other *DDR* songs on sites like DDRFreak, looking for the patterns and styles that made some songs strong and others fall flat. I even consulted with some of my *DDR*-obsessed friends, asking them for constructive criticism of my half-formed entry.

Finally, after many hours of painstaking transcription and tedious tweaking, I had a complete file that I felt was good enough to compete. With days to go before the submission deadline, I was ready to put my entry out there for the world to see. But a funny thing happened on the way to the forum.

I didn't submit my entry.

Every day for almost an entire week I would come to my computer determined to put the final touches on my step files and send them off to the judges. Every day I would hesitate, until, finally, the entry deadline passed me by and my career as a step designer was officially over.

Why the hesitation? I think deep down I knew I wasn't ready to compete with my much more experienced Internet counterparts. Given my lack of experience, the idea of putting my creation out there on the Internet for public ridicule scared me to death. Sure, I knew the people who would see my entry were strangers who I would never have to see again, but the concept of parading my novice work as a professional entry made me feel... odd. It certainly gave me a much greater appreciation for the mod creators who confidently pitch their creations into the Internet ether every day.

But more than my irrational fear of Internet embarrassment, there was a much more irrational fear of Internet success. What if my entry was actually good enough to do well in the competition, earning praise and acceptance from my fellow Internet strangers? The pressure would be on to continue creating steps for other songs, adding my skills to the small and growing community of *DWI* fanatics that had gathered around this Web site. Of course there would be no one forcing me to do this, but I didn't trust my inner ego-centrist to let me walk away from something like this.

But I'm probably deluding myself a bit. It takes more than a few weeks plunking away at a keyboard to become an accomplished game designer, even when you're limited to a palette of four rhythmic arrows. When I consider the hours of effort it took me to create what was, in essence, a relatively simple text file, I think of the hours I didn't have to spend creating graphics, sounds, and other gameplay elements that go into even the simplest of games today. In the end, I didn't have the devotion or the determination necessary to even take the first step towards being a game creator.

In the end, I'd rather just dance.

THE HIGHEST FORM OF FLATTERY

by Joe Blancato

...this was a noble mission: We were going to be kings of our domain, benevolently lording over thousands of adoring players.

"Hey, dude," my friend Shawn said. "Wanna be a GM in UO?"

"Does the Pope crap in the woods?" I answered jubilantly.

It was obvious: Our prayers to be hired as *Ultima Online* (UO) game masters had finally been answered. EA rescinded their 18-and-over rule, as well as set aside their "must be willing to relocate" proviso, when they saw our resumes, which we never actually sent. Yes, it was time to celebrate, to tell the folks I'd landed my dream job, to laugh at my other friends who worked retail. Then the trap door opened.

"Ok, great," he said. "I'm going to send you the files you need to host the shard."

What?! I'd heard of a whispered "GM client," originally leaked by a disgruntled GM at EA to clandestine hacking organizations believed to operate outside the States, but there was no way Shawn, barely a credible script kiddy, could get into one of those circles. What voodoo had good ol' Shawn worked?

Turns out it wasn't any sort of bizarre magic; Shawn just uncovered one of the many reverse engineering projects proliferated on the net. My dreams were crushed; how could my friend do that to me? Dangle my forlorn hopes in front of me, only to reveal **we'd** be in charge of the damn server? Wait a minute ... **we'd** be in charge of the damn server! I immediately phoned my cable company to increase my outgoing bandwidth. Sure, we might get sued, but this was a noble mission: We were going to be kings of our domain, benevolently lording over thousands of adoring players. And besides, good luck effecting litigation on two 16-year-old kids hiding within the anonymity of the internet.

It's very Darwinian; if your server sucks, no one plays on it.

This kind of server "emulation" began when id released the source to ipxsetup, which allowed Doom users to connect to one another on a LAN. Suddenly, Doom fans with programming skills could shoot each other from coast to coast. Hosting and lobby services, most notably one called Doomserv, sprouted up and connected people in new ways at no charge to the consumer. Of course, there's no such thing as a free lunch, and tons of the free services collapsed under their own weight. A few of the more popular lobbies are still around, namely Kali, which offers the "fastest and most accurate Internet Game Browser, guaranteed" for a $20 lifetime subscription.

While other communities built the foundation, *Ultima Online's* server emulator community was definitely one

of the more successful ones. The guys who were really into it managed to keep up with EA's patch schedule, and also engineered their own end-user terminals, which allowed aspiring system administrators to alter many of the game's most basic tenants. Want a certain spell to do more damage? Sure. Want to create NPCs to do work for you, and also contribute to your skill gain when you're **offline**? Go for it - just make sure you have a handle on C-based programming.

Some would-be world designers improved upon original designs, but many more managed to completely, utterly mangle good games. Team Fortress Classic server admins (not quite emulators, but player-run FPS servers are a legitimate cousin) loved to futz with the gravity settings, either causing

snipers to float around in the air for minutes on end, or making the heavy weapons specialists squish flat upon jumping off a one-foot stair. You have about a one in 100 chance in finding something that really tickles your fancy, and about one in 1000 chance of finding something with as much polish as the genuine article. The first thing modders learn is how **hard** making a game really is, and fledgling server admins are likely to just throw up their hands and start looking for other places to play. It's very Darwinian; if your server sucks, no one plays on it.

Despite the winner takes all outcome, server emulators were born of a spirit similar to standard emulation movements, like the Underdogs, and a number of illegal console emulator groups. People either wanted to keep

playing only what they liked, didn't like the way it was being run, or just wanted to see if they could do it. The concoction of motives led to communities such as the now-defunct EQHackers.com. EQH worked with a strong anti-corporate mission statement, allowing intrepid users the chance to host their own small *Everquest* servers on local machines. Their goal was to stick it to The Man - they'd host cheat programs in addition to message boards detailing exploits along with emulation literature. The negativity in the place toward SOE, eventually led to a meltdown of internet drama. EQH was lost to the ages sometime in 2002, but other groups carried their momentum all the way to the present.

But emulating someone's intellectual property is technically stealing, right? The owners definitely think so. As

recently as late June, SOE sent a cease and desist order to Winter's Roar, which was known as the largest player-run server in the *EQ* emulation community. *World of Warcraft* already has renegade servers all over the place, and Blizzard is extremely active, tracking down hosts and siccing the lawyers. According to one of the most popular server operators, "*UO* servers only manage to stay alive because *UO's* legal minefield is a tangled mess, so mangled that over the years EA's lawyers have had trouble sifting through it." As a result, player-run *UO* shards dance along the edge of legality by allowing their users to play for free.

But as the mess becomes untangled (whether by EA's lawyers or governmental regulation) they may not continue dancing.

Despite the legality issues, many hackers make the leap to legitimacy. A few job applications ago, I was asked for a resume of the server administration and world building I'd done on player-run servers. I actually didn't make the grade because my "uhh, I dabbled in *UO* shards" wasn't nearly as competitive as my peers'. Rumor has it they hired a guy who ran an entire infrastructure of reverse engineered worlds. Even though

developers seem to cry foul at the thought of people using their technology in ways beyond their control, they still respect the process.

Further, not every developer is fanatical about shutting down servers hosted by enthusiasts. VIE, developers of *Subspace*, officially called their much loved, but poorly publicized efforts a wash in 1997, and players were able to crack game CDs to find server code included on the disk. The community spanned across the globe, diehard fans uniting to keep the game they loved from being lost in the annals of history.

Eventually, two men - one of whom went on to found Kazaa reverse engineered *Subspace* from scratch. They named their project *Continuum*, and it could be patched and updated at will. VIE eventually was able to pick up where they left off, and now host official servers in addition to those run by players.

Subspace's community is a great example of what can happen when good people come together to keep something they love alive. Unfortunately, though, a big chunk of player-run servers are cesspools. No matter the good intentions of their beginnings, they become havens for people too childish or depraved to conduct themselves on a regulation server. The most recent example is a *UO* shard called IPY (In Por Ylem – the power words of a bugged spell, capable of killing people instantly if cast). IPY was created under the pretense of restoring the game's "golden age.," but it fell dramatically short. The admin who ran the shard, Azaroth, ended up having to close the server after disgruntled users began threatening him in real life over changes he made.

Even with examples like IPY, the good, outweighs the bad. For every hundred

bastions of internet stupidity, there is one diamond in the rough that makes up for all the bad experiences. There's satisfaction in knowing live teams aren't the only guys who can hang when it comes to a game they created; that the little man is just as capable as the ones getting paychecks for their work. This is somehow reassuring for the future of games. There are a whole new crop of people out there who can and do create games worth playing.

Speaking of the future, there are no signs of communities stopping, and why should they? As Moore's Law continues to fall behind its curve, home users are more than ever able to create server-like environments in the home. Just think about it, the machine on which you're reading this could, at least passably, keep a few WoW zones up and running, and if you have the bandwidth, you and 100 of your closest friends could tool around Azeroth to your hearts' content. Hey, I may never be a real GM in *UO*, but the brief moment I experienced on my little corner of Britannia was just as good. And as technology slows down and reverse engineering gains more credibility, maybe I'll be able to set my own PvP rules in *WoW* as a consolation prize. The past is dotted with instances of bright-eyed individuals willing to step up, at great personal expense, to keep gaming alive, or to mold it how they see fit, and despite a few hiccups, games have been the better for it.

This is somehow reassuring for the future of games.

the escapist

NEWS BITS

Hot Coffee Roundup

Since GTA: San Andreas received an "AO" rating from the ESRB, things have heated up for publisher Take Two. Its gearing up to fight two class-action lawsuits filed over the Hot Coffee mod, while retailers across America are pulling the game from the shelves. Best Buy and Wal-Mart may not even restock the game once new versions without Hot Coffee are released, furthering the publisher's woes.

Retailers Selling "M" Rated Games to Minors Facing Fines in Illinois

An Illinois bill that would introduce a $1,000 fine to retailers who sell "M" rated games to children has been signed into law. The Entertainment Software Association and other gaming groups have vowed to challenge the law, calling it unconstitutional. Similar statutes have been struck down in previous cases around the country.

Doug Lowenstein, President of the ESA, said, "There is already a precedent-setting ruling from the Seventh Circuit, which includes Illinois, establishing the unconstitutionality of this type of statute - and the facts, the science, the law, and the U.S. Constitution have not changed since that decision."

PSP Firmware 2.0 Impresses with Browser Capability

Sony's latest PSP firmware version has moved it one step closer to being a fully capable portable media system. In addition to a tabbed browser, users can download images, music files, and video for viewing. In Japan, interested device owners have the option to download TV shows in the PSP's native resolution for a fee. The firmware, though only officially released in Japan, works on devices released in the US as well.

Casual Friday

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