the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

I went to Disney World a few years ago. I had one of those package deals where your hotel, food and entertainment are all included. I stayed in the themed hotel. I went to all four of the main parks. I went to the luau, complete with fire-twirling dancers. I had open access to all the little "side attractions" associated with Disney, things like Blizzard Beach (one of two water parks on site), mini-golf, and Disney Quest.

Ahhh, Disney Quest.

Of all the wonders at Disney World, Disney Quest, the Indoor Interactive Theme Park, is my favorite. Perhaps it was because the air conditioning inside gave a most welcome break from the mid-90 degree heat outside, mid-June in Florida. Perhaps it was because I had no idea what to expect upon entering. Or perhaps it was that I hadn't expected to catch a glimpse of the Future in my trip down Memory Lane.

This is not to say that Disney Quest did not offer nostalgia in its own way--I spent the better half of an afternoon hopping from one classic arcade game to another, all rigged for free play. *Galaga*, *Burgertime*, and all of the *Tron* games were ready and waiting, among dozens of others, taking up nearly half of the second floor in the large facility. It was every game lover's dream.

But Disney doesn't stop there; they take the videogame goodness up a notch. My next stop was in the "Explore Zone," and it was called *Aladdin's Magic Carpet Ride*. It would change my view, literally, of the future of games.

The set-up was much like that of a motorcycle, but without the tires. Rather, the body was suspended by cables from the ceiling, as was a helmet with a visor. After a few moments of strapping the helmet on and familiarizing myself with the controls, the world of Agrabah

opened up before – and above and behind – me. While the other three people with whom I was playing zoomed off in the distance, I hovered in midair on my magic carpet. I looked up at a blue, cloudless sky; I looked behind me to see more shops lining the road; I looked down, leaning as far forward as I could on my hand-rests, at a rapidly approaching brick in the road until I pulled up out of my accidental nose-dive into the street below.

Once I had righted myself from the near-disaster of playing chicken with the road, I was off. I flew through the game, collecting floating jewels and racing through a maze of a temple. While the helmet was heavy and floating jewels aren't exactly realistic, it was the most memorable gaming experience I have ever had. It was innovative and, I felt, a clear look at the future of games.

Which brings us to this issue, *Fast Forward 2020*. It's a look into the near future of gaming. Rather than pie in the sky ideas of what's coming, our authors have extrapolated on current technology and trends: Jim Rossignol ponders the future of MMOGs and what really drives their success, while Dana Massey examines the role of genre in the evolution or stagnation of gaming. And John Tynes returns in his monthly Contrarian column to share his view on what the path of growth for games should be. Please enjoy these articles and more in this week's issue of The Escapist.

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor - Congratulations on being the most intelligent and well written gaming related mag out there.

So, what do you guys think the next step for gaming is? By my reckoning, graphics and presentation will have reached the real-life, picture-perfect plateau in about another ten or fifteen years. Then what? Virtual Reality? Sweaty nano-tech body suits and huge gyroscopic balls to spin around in? Or maybe metal head plugs or fleshy bioports? Is it too soon to preorder my holodeck?

-Tobi & Nick

To the editor - First off, I want to thank all of you at The Escapist for creating a truly quality piece of literature for those in the gaming community who have a deeper agenda. Your magazine has helped to assure me that there ARE others who are looking at gaming as a true culture rather then just a foolish pastime or hobby.

I write to bring you and your readers aware of what I believe could be an epidemic within the gaming community. Recently, Hilary Clinton, in a speech, condemned video games, particularly Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. It is her belief, amongst other politicians', that video games encourage violent acts among children, and she suggests putting stricter censors on them.

I have nothing against parents wanting to protect their children from violence and sex. But the restrictions that are currently in place, I believe, are good enough, and should be left alone. The ESRB's rating system accurately labels video games and warns potential buyers of the content. My concern lies in the fact that sales of popular, more 'adult' videogames will plummet if restrictions are tighter and developers will begin to cut down on production of these games. I know that sales of games such as Half Life 2, Doom 3, and the GTA series itself

are so high production wouldn't stop, but rather be tamed, so that lower ratings would be placed on the games thus producing higher sales. Producers such as EA may force these restrictions on developers.

I would hate to see the process of creating a video game be halted because of some politician's rant about one particular game. Let's be careful as we watch these events unfold.

-Carl Wojciechowski

To the editor - I enjoyed Jason Smith's article on Player Created Content in Issue #4. However, I thought perhaps there was a missed opportunity here.

In gaming there is, of course, much Player Created Content. Whether it's Unreal mods or Second Life activity spaces, players have the tools, the time, and the talent.

However, there's also Player Directed Content, assets created by developers but the use of which is determined by the players. Good examples are games like Star Wars Galaxies, Ultima Online, or A Tale in the Desert. Players play mini-games in order to "unlock" specific content they then can "direct" around the game world.

For example, a player can decorate their SWG house with countless items as almost every item in the game exists as a 3D model. However, in order to get these items, players must build them,

find them, buy them, or loot them. UO was similar. ATITD uses much more detailed mini-game systems, to the point where every item in the game starts as ingredients and requires long multi-step processes to turn into final goods.

The benefit with this approach is two fold:

1- Nowhere near every player has the time, desire, or talent to truly create content from the ground up. They do, however, all enjoy some amount of personalization and customization.

2- In persistent virtual worlds, developers have more control over the content that players are allowed to play with.

-Darniaq

To the editor - I dig the magazine, and I really like the design - the layout is beautiful. I like what you guys are doing a lot (so far).

Just a quick note - perhaps it's possible to put some easier next/previous navigation? Larger buttons, somewhere on the sides (esp. the previous button)? I like the minimalism thing, and I wouldn't want to destroy the design philosophy, but it would be quite annoying if print magazine could only be flipped by holding a tiny corner in one specific place, and otherwise they'd just be stuck.

Hah. Keep up the good work. You guys inspire me to write.

-Ilia

To the editor - I've caught some of your stuff on the web, and I really like it. The writing quality is the best that I've ever seen in anything related to gaming--it's sorta like the New Yorker of gaming.

Anyway, I just had a few questions/suggestions:

1. I find it really hard to actually read the articles. When I read a site like NYTIMES.com, I usually click 'single page format' and scroll down. I like having articles on a single page. I'm working off of a high resolution laptop, and usually when I read stuff on the web, I find myself increasing the font size. Unfortunately, when I increase the font size on your magazine, it overlaps the borders and that makes it hard to read

2. Will this ever be available in print? From the format of your website, I take it that its layout is magazine-like. I would suggest an exclusive web format, maybe like slate.com, for the website, because reading pdf files on the computer is tiresome due to scrolling issues.

-Vincent

ESCAPING THE BOX
innovation and genres
by Dana "Lepidus" Massey

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the Nintendo Entertainment System. In 1985, the legendary gaming console was released, irrevocably altering the gaming landscape with such iconic franchises as *Super Mario Brothers*. Over the last twenty years, a lot has changed. Gaming has gone from being a toy industry to a multi-billion dollar entertainment industry that, more often than not, markets to adults over children. Over the next fifteen years, gaming must continue to evolve. Game developers, publishers and media alike must strive to ensure that we continue to innovate and bring imagination to life.

In recent years, development budgets have increased, freezing out hobbyists, and the new age of corporate gaming has emerged. This was never more apparent than at E3 2005, where big gaming companies erected quasi-corporate mini-cities, teeming with projection screens and publicists, and had the audacity to call them booths. The neon-green themed Microsoft booth had overhead traffic and felt more like a mall than a temporary trade show structure. While the fine folks at EA treated media, fans and developers to the image of various sports stars spouting company slogans on a three-hundred-and-sixty degree screen. Atari even chose to erect a full-on "exclusive" club/ lounge that could rival the best nightspots in my hometown. Gaming has never been more lucrative and corporate. These days, games do not enter production unless guaranteed to sell hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of units. How do you know if a game will be **that** successful? One way is to look at history. This kind of logic has led to a slew of sequels, movie tie-ins and remakes. Admittedly, many of them were fun, but where does this leave those of us who seek something new?

Too often, game companies begin production with a blanket statement such as "we wish to create a third-person action adventure game set in a sci-fi world." Immediately, they have pigeonholed themselves. More companies and individuals need to step back, forget genres altogether and consider only who they wish to entertain and how to do it. Namco's *Katamari Damacy* did just that. A description on IGN.com begins with "Ever wonder what it would be like to roll around and collect everything you touched in one massive heap?" Of course not! But in *Katamari Damacy*, that's what you'll find. Players roll a ball that expands as it collects anything it rolls over. You roll through diversely sized environments, starting out with a Katamari the size of a dustball in what appears to be a child's bedroom. Eventually the ball grows into a giant nearly the size of the big city in which you're gathering "stuff." In multiplayer mode, you can even frantically race to pick up junk while bashing into your opponents in an attempt to steal their girth. "Whimsical," "Silly" and "Bizarre" are words that I would use to describe this game. Most importantly, even though it is completely and totally ridiculous, it remains fun, challenging,

competitive and highly original. What more can you ask for from a game?

At their root, games are about escapism. As settings have become more and more clichéd, developers need to remember this basic premise: Gamers want to experience things that they cannot in real life. Whether this experience is a crime spree in *Grand Theft Auto* or the role of NFL player, coach and GM in *Madden 2005*, these popular games cater to that desire. All too often, developers forget this basic need or, nearly as fatal, allow players to escape to worlds they have explored many times over.

At E3 2005, I found myself under-whelmed. Several games touted **refinements** to various genres, but almost none left me with a burning desire to play them any time soon. There was an exception and from an unlikely source. I was looking forward to my viewing of *Jaws Unleashed* about as much as doing my taxes. Hooray, another movie-based game! Guilty of not doing my homework, I knew nothing about the game and cynically assumed I would be hunting a shark through a series of movie tied-in missions. How

wrong I was! The game took a step back and, despite the unoriginal license, came up with a rather original approach. In *Jaws Unleashed*, players control Jaws himself and take up the task of wreaking havoc on fish, wildlife, and unfortunate boaters. Eventually, another anxious gamer had to kick me off the machine, though not before I had eaten everything
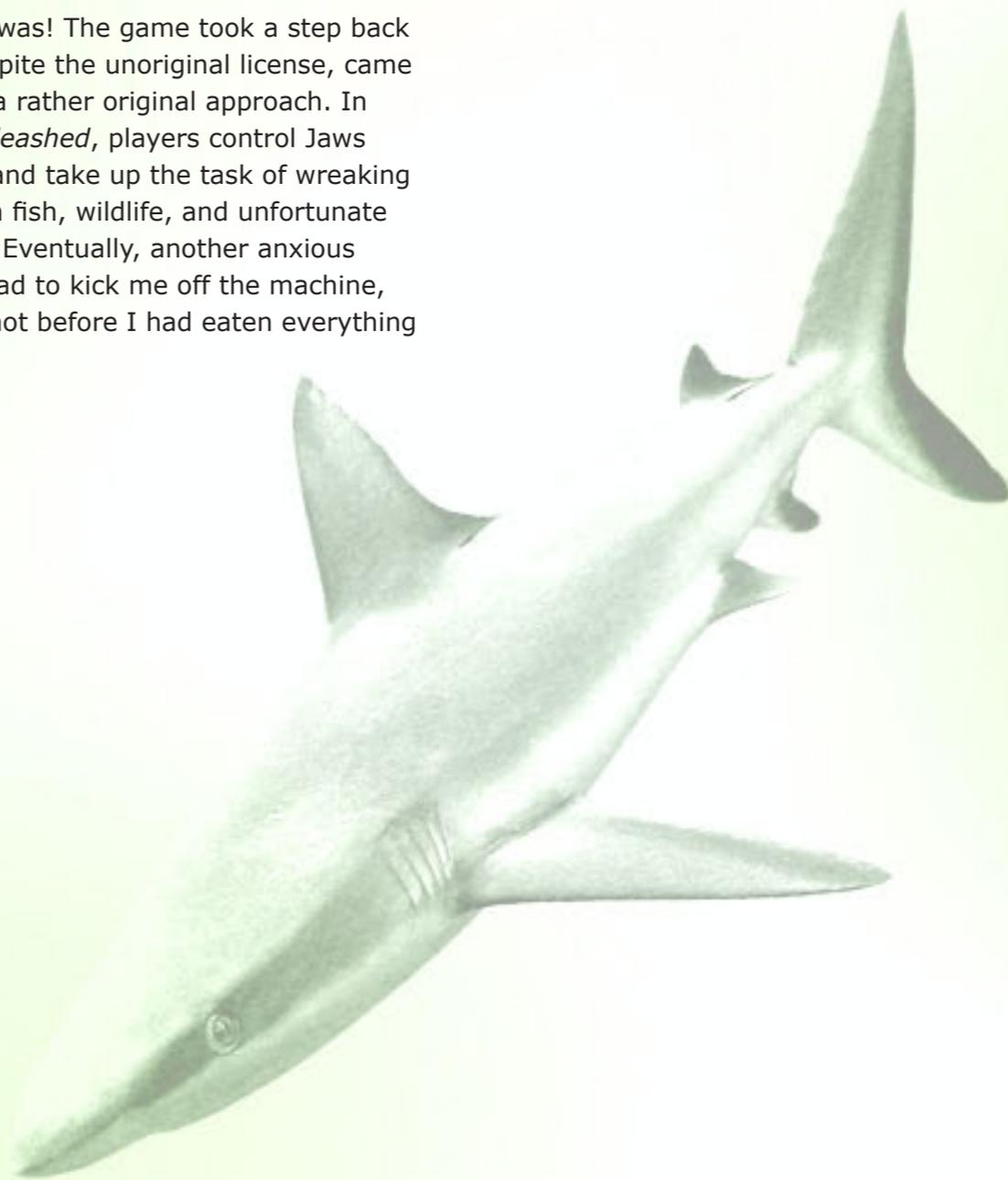
in the level. Jaws reinvigorated me and instilled hope for the future. It would have been easy to make a simple third-person action-adventure title, but they chose instead to take a step back, go outside the box and create something fun.

The movie and game industries have much in common. Both produce mass entertainment and often cross-pollinate content with movie-inspired games and game-inspired movies. In recent years, film has suffered from the same plight as gaming. Often movies are sequels, remakes or formulaic. At the same time, celebrity directors, producers and actors command more leeway than the unknowns of their craft. It is a shame and tragedy, in many ways, that a new face cannot get a chance without first being a proven success on Hollywood's terms. However, at the same time, it goes back to the idea of a guaranteed return on investment. Unknowns are risky and the gaming industry, like the film industry before it, has realized this. This realization means that just as famed film writer Charlie Kaufman may be free to pen out-of-the-box films like *Being John Malkovich*, people like Will Wright will be granted much more creative

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independence than a first, second or even fifth-time game designer.

It is with people like Will Wright that another branch of innovation may soon explode. Just as he pushed the envelope with the various *Sim* titles, which spawned several new genres (and maybe the only ones in recent history), he looks to do it again with the genre-blurring title *Spore*. For all the hype about procedurally animated characters, and sandbox gameplay - which admittedly have me salivating like everyone else - it is instead the concept of genre-defying game design that gives me hope for the future. If *Spore* comes to market and is the commercial success EA hopes for, suddenly there will be a string of investors willing to fund games that capitalize off its success. Does this capitalization on success sound like innovation? Not at all. Yet, in an industry that demands a guaranteed return on investment, this may well be the way of things. Some developers will be inspired

by the basic gameplay model, some by the underlying technology, and some by the basic concept of thinking outside the genre box. This third group promises to be the most innovative and important in the coming years, a bright light on the gaming horizon.

Once game designers and publishers become more comfortable with the idea of combining genres, the possibilities seem endless. Aside from *Spore*, this mentality has slowly been creeping into a number of blockbuster titles. *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* blends action/adventure and mini-games with a Hollywood-style story experience; *Pirates!* offers mini-games, turn-based war strategy and RPG elements; and in the near future, *Age of Empires III* will build RPG-like character advancement into the popular RTS franchise. While there is not an original property among the three - a sign of the times - all three do take tentative steps towards becoming cross-genre epics. The idea is

not to taunt convention for its own sake, but to not be afraid to think outside your category and in so doing, create something new. Currently, game developers are taking the first baby steps in this direction. I look to *Spore* to blow the doors wide open.

The mere concept of genre does not offend me. I do not suggest that every game must be its own category. To not expand on brilliant gameplay ideas would be like halting a dig when you discover the first bone. Every genre has its "father game," such as *Doom* to first-person shooters. Had we said that was enough, we would never have experienced the wonders of *Half-Life* and the slew of other unique titles that have blazed new trails while still maintaining their FPS roots. The problem lies in the stagnant nature of genres, which I argue are becoming **fewer** rather than more.

To not expand on brilliant gameplay ideas would be like halting a dig when you discover the first bone.

Genres like the platform adventure (e.g. the **Mario** series) are rapidly spiraling into oblivion, while nothing comes forward to replace them. In some cases, gamers and gaming companies - or perhaps just retailers - suffer from some leftover Victorian need to classify everything. IGN listed *Katamari Damacy* as a "third-person action" game. Technically, they may be correct, but can that be accurate when it is unlike any game I have ever played? It is precisely games of this nature that forge new paths and hopefully one day a genre will owe its genesis to *Katamari Damacy*.

The tired and often-kicked gift horse that is the RPG genre could specifically benefit from innovative thinking. By definition, RPGs offer advancement systems. However, too often, especially in the online medium, this is limited to a bigger stronger character with a bigger sword. Already, some companies have begun to look beyond this. The upcoming

Gods and Heroes from Perpetual Entertainment promises to incorporate squad combat, thus taking the step of letting player characters grow from lone warrior to commander of many NPC allies.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Imagine a game where you begin as a single character, alone in the world, who completes mundane tasks for money and food. Eventually, you gain an entourage of characters to aid you in more complex tasks, incorporating tactical and social elements. Over time, this entourage becomes an army, at which time you sit at the head in an RTS-style interface. Then take this a step further, and position the player as the monarch over an entire nation, as in *Civilization*. Now, combine all of this into an online game. It sounds like a lot of fun, at least in its hand-waving infancy, but some will say that the idea is unwieldy and impossible from a production standpoint, at least on any kind of realistic timeline.

Who are we to declare what will be possible? Gaming breeds imagination. We should be the last industry to be confined by what is "possible." The inability to agree on anything is the hallmark of the gaming community. Some lament that games have become too complex and these people would rather see more basic, simple ideas made into reality. Others advocate larger, more complex games. Unfortunately, gaming suffers from a lack of innovation on both fronts. Sticking to formula, relying on sequels and capitalizing on trends will lead to a decent but unremarkable string of titles. The goal is to identify whom the game is supposed to entertain and do so by any means necessary. Whether this means forgetting all assumptions and making simple, yet fun and addictive games, or cross-genre epics, the effect is the same. History will only remember those that take a chance and create something truly remarkable. *C*

Who are we to declare what will be possible?

ALL YOUR SENSE ARE BELONG TO US

by Robert Coker

A futuristic urban landscape complete with mile-high skyscrapers, flying trains, outdoor elevators and passageways looms behind a young man dressed in space-age clothing. He gingerly handles a glass ball with an alphanumeric identification symbol etched on its side. After careful examination, he splits the ball open, releasing a school of tiny bulbous spores that float out of the ball and into the boy's nose. These spores find their way into his cranial cavity and burrow into the fleshy walls of the young man's brain. He has been probed by the future, enabling his body to define an environment for himself and to allow him to experience interaction with all five senses without any sort of interfacing with a physical environment.

It isn't so much the technology that defines the future, but rather what can be done with the technology. From the beginning of interactive entertainment, to the very essence of the industry we know today, there have been technological advancements that have garnered the support of gamers. It's the driving force behind the industry: innovation. But throughout the years of mainstream gaming, our experiences have been restricted to three of the five human senses. We view gaming pleasure through our eyes, we hear gaming pleasure through our ears and we control gaming pleasure with our hands (and feet, if you're bold enough to do so).

So, what about the two dormant senses otherwise neglected in the world of gaming? We live in a visually oriented world, where the vast majority of our attentions are focused on what we can see. Most of us have become so accustomed to the dominance of visual stimuli that we don't really think about it anymore. We take it for granted that most of the information we use to understand our world comes though through our eyes. It's normal to us. But our other senses may be languishing.

It's All In the Nose
Smell is one of our most powerful senses. It's directly connected to the part of our brain that processes memories and emotions. In the future, as the technology becomes available, the possibility of including unique and environment defining smells into any gaming experience would open up a new level of immersion that is otherwise unachievable with typical sensory interaction. Imagine strolling through an adventure game, a detective on the trail of a notorious mob boss, when you come to a typical dark, desolate alley. Only, the alley comes to life as you smell the trash left behind, its fate set to rot before the mist. As you move down the shadowed corridor, you gather a whiff of gun powder and know you're heading in the right direction.

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Ok, so maybe the idea of smelling garbage isn't too appealing, but it's an immersion factor that can be tailored for nearly any environment and any situation. It triggers an emotional response, calling upon personal memories and adding a level of depth that alienates the player from reality and sets them into a world defined by their thoughts, their memories and the environmental intentions of developers. And that is, after all, the purpose of video games – to take the player outside of reality and into a world where there are no worldly restrictions.

Taste the Digital Rainbow

Directly linked to smell is taste, as both taste and smell interact with each other to better define the other. There have been a number of discussions over the course of the previous few years claiming that gaming has reached a point at which innovation can no longer be achieved, as everything has already been accomplished in one form or another. Adding the ability to actually taste within a game adds an entirely new realm of possibilities that have yet to have been explored.

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In the past, a slew of "tycoon" games found their way onto the market and offered gameplay revolving around everything from amusement parks to pizza artistry (because it's become politically incorrect to simply make pizza; it's now an art). But what if the object of a game was to perfect a taste, or provide a variety of tastes to achieve a certain goal? Envision the possibilities of crafting in certain role-playing games, where you are given the ability to create herbal remedies and the like, but the only way to make sure they're perfect for consumption is to taste them yourself. No longer would you simply rely on game mechanics, but also your own intuition and the millions of taste buds that instruct you on what tastes identify with what materials. It may sound like nothing more than a simulation or some sort of scientific experiment, but in the end it adds a level of realism to a game's experience, while not decreasing imaginative value.
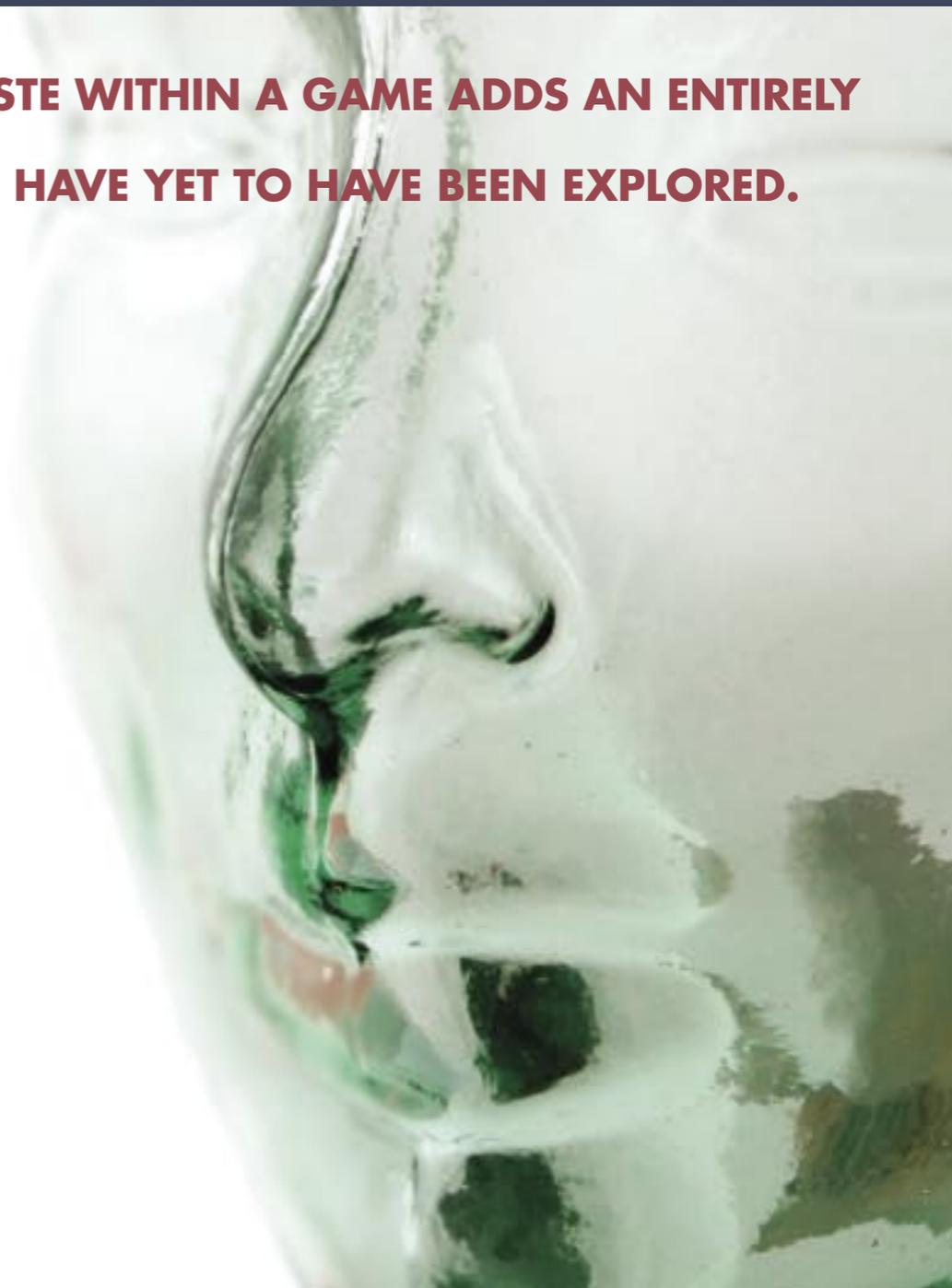
Touching is Good

As the potential of our senses are pushed beyond what is thought possible, the manner in which we already utilize them will be seen in a separate light. At this point in time, our sense of touch is the control element for gaming, but its prospective attributes shroud our current realization of gaming and offer an endless amount of possibilities. We don't feel games, we control them. We press buttons and we move analog sticks to achieve a desired effect. There is no immersion, other than being the controlling factor of the events unfolding before your eyes and ears, and for some this is enough. At some point in the future, however, this will fail to entice and a higher level of immersion will come into play. Virtual reality has attempted to eliminate the need to touch, and institute the need to feel, but has not garnered a wide acceptance among gamers due to a number of pressing controversies, namely the price it costs to operate a virtual reality simulation.

As technology advances, controllers and input devices will inevitably cease to exist and one will be subjected to the game's nature through the sense of touch. Our imagination will come into play and our experiences will define our environment. Imagine the ability to overcome the need of controllers and use your mind to not only control your interactive destiny, but also feel it. It is typical of horror games of the day to induce fear through shock factor, but with a more expressive method of touch, a more fearful method of fright is capable. Place yourself in a dark corridor, a hallway of sorts, with doors on either side of you. As you begin to traverse to your hidden fate, you feel something brush against your arm, raising the hairs on your neck until they stand on end. You are genuinely scared, but at this point you need to remind yourself: It's only a game.

Scientists have only just begun to unlock the mysteries of the mind, and as time passes, gamers will get a hold of their knowledge and exploit it to provide new entertainment value to their passion. Today's science fiction is tomorrow's science fact. Gaming will evolve with technology and each of our senses will be shown equal attention. Prepare yourself for total immersion, as your eyes, ears, nose, mouth and "touch receptors" receive digital acceptance in tomorrow's interactive entertainment.

future imperfect

by Jim Rossignol

So they ask: What is the future of the massively multiplayer game? And I think: More importantly, how long before that future gets here? I've been waiting for **ages**. Surely with all that soul searching and "post-mortem analysis" the developers can't be far from that elusive next-gen ideal? Surely someone will spot all the best bits and make a game to end all games?

Won't they? Ach, maybe it's hopeless. How can I really **know**? How can I predict what games are going to do in a year, let alone a couple of decades? Who could have predicted the rise in professional gaming, or the importance of mods, or the black-market virtual cash cultures, or the thronging game cafés of the Far East, where people can lose their lives in arguments over virtual items?

Ah, yes. Amid all of this unexpected and bewildering new culture lies my answer: The future of massively multiplayer games is **gamers**. Amid the chaotic genealogies of games there lie some hidden trends, and it's these subtle patterns that give us some clues to the future: A future in which games rely not on **them**, but on **us**.

There are two types of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). The first type is essentially just a single-player game stretched to fit this new "online" way of doing things. You'll often hear a complaint about games like *World of Warcraft*, that they are too focused on soloing or lack decent player cooperation. You get into the game, you hit stuff, you get bigger statistics and head out to hit stuff with even bigger statistics; there's not much more to it than that.

In the case of *WoW*, this has happened because Blizzard has taken the single player RPG, *Diablo*, and bolted the template over online technologies. If player vs. player combat is poor, or the capacity for self-creation is limited, then it's because this was a game that took old standards of what makes a game successful and applied them to an entirely new way of interacting. The game is inflexible, focused on the individual and acutely reliant on content provided by the developers to keep us entertained. Sure, Bob is with you, and his dwarf looks funny, but you're not exactly getting anywhere. There's nothing unique here; you are, as one Icelandic games developer memorably said to me, "just queueing to be next on the theme park ride." It's empty, and you can't do much to fill it up.

Of course this model hasn't exactly proven unpopular, and my own six months as a slave to the perpetual monkey-finger collection is a testament to that. The sheer beauty of games like *World of Warcraft*, combined with an appetite for the familiar from a majority of players, means that their ilk will probably still be around in 2020, and still be raking in the cash. Just a brief glance at the MMOGs scheduled for release over the next five years confirms this thought. We want beautiful worlds given to us neatly packaged, and we're going to get them.

But as time progresses, the ol' Darwin effect kicks in - the second type of game has already begun to appear from the primordial ooze: games like *Second Life*, *A Tale in the Desert* and, to a lesser extent, *Eve Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*. All these titles have glimpsed the possibilities of alternative method, although none of them provide a satisfactory example of it. This second kind of game is one where players begin to have to make their own fun, rather

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than have it provided for them. Some examples of this include the way in which *Eve Online* players have naturally grouped into unofficial "alliances" and have begun to monopolize areas of their world. Initially there wasn't much to do in game, so player interactions provided the most interesting possibilities. Wars, politics, trade: it all opened up very quickly.

The developer, CCP, suspected that this kind of thing might happen, but really had no idea how to implement it. Why would they? No one has tried open ended gaming on such a scale before. Instead of trying to provide any kind of concrete guild system they've provided a framework for shooty spaceships and a consumer economy and let the players fight it out. Providing players with resources to struggle for meant that they would do just that, and instantly the challenge of taking on human beings with other human allies becomes more interesting than battling crap AI trolls for another pot of gold. In time *Eve* has seen socioeconomic systems emerge spontaneously. Once the larger dynamics become clear, then extra support can be coded into the game.

If this analysis sounds a bit clinical, then I should say that it's all very earthy and practical on the ground. Players want to be rich, to blow stuff up, and to have friends, so that's what they do. The natural tendency for tribes to form to keep strangers out and to fulfill these desires has made the game as interesting as it is today. CCP have nurtured this tendency and they have benefited from allowing human nature to find its own way to make and break the game world. Any game that learns from its players in this way is going be far less one-sided than our first type of game.

It's a symbiosis, one of nature's most successful systems.

I could talk about space war and galactic capitalism all day, but the point is that this provides a powerful example of developers using the biggest resources: the social inclinations of their players. Players want to fight, consume and **build**. So let them.

The entirely peaceful ancient civilization MMOG *A Tale in the Desert* takes the building impulse further, turning the whole game into a communal effort. It's a collaborative relationship between the developers who provided the tools for building, and the gamers who built inside the game itself. When the first run of pyramid building had come to something of an impasse, players and devs alike agreed that it was time to reset ancient Egypt and start from scratch. And so they did. It was a better game for it.

Of course, this idea of communality between gamer and game isn't an easy thing to define and there are going to be lots of misadventures as this terrain is explored. The game that currently takes the building idea to its most absurd extreme is the MMOG *Second Life*, which

The possibilities are boggling and far beyond the creative capabilities of any single development team.

essentially throws the tools for creation out into the community and tells them to get on with it. Rather than the ready-made *World of Warcraft* or even *Star Wars Galaxies*, first-time visitors to *Second Life* find themselves in a vast sandbox mishmash of things that other people have made. It's a fairly crude-looking MMOG and seems to be more of a glorified 3D modeling tool than a game - it's clunky, difficult, and awkward. Hell, even **movement** seems ill executed. What is this game playing at? What's to like? Well it's this: *Second Life* is a game that has a little piece of the future in it. And the future of games is **gamers**.

Second Life relies purely on its players for its content. They create the buildings, the clothes, the vehicles, the jetpacks, the books and the guns. Almost everything aside from the most basic tutorial hubs has been created by gamers. There are some incredible examples of what they've been able to

achieve with the flexible scripting - naturalistically flocking fish, rock concerts, even an internet inside this game inside the internet. The possibilities are boggling and far beyond the creative capabilities of any single development team. Walking its blocks and ghettos is like walking a kind of trash-littered dreamland - the shared imaginations of hundreds of players. *Second Life* is demonstrating, albeit in an ugly work-in-progress kind of way, just where players can take their games if they're given the tools. With a little bit of clever game design, developers can make their players do all the work and, potentially, come up with something a little more special than what the team might have produced on their own.

This is the vital link to the future within MMOGs. While many developers are trying to provide their players with the best-looking world, the biggest dragons to slay and the tallest mountains to

climb, really they're missing an opportunity - the chance to make the game exist as a collaboration with players, rather than a straightforward production. Yet, looking at *Second Life* you might see something of a dead end. It's interesting to visit, but it's not exactly a game that you'd want to play excessively. It's just too much like hard work. Too fragmentary. Too weird.

But perhaps the game that really allows player and developer to work together in the most productive way hasn't yet been properly conceived. The first inklings of how this might work have come not from an MMOG, but from Will Wright, the creator of *The Sims*. His GDC speech "The Future of Content" argued that developers simply **have** to let players create, both thanks to spiraling development costs and from the sense of satisfaction derived by the players

Games must find better ways to enable the player to build within the game world.

themselves. His solution was *Spore*, the apogee of the God-game concept finished off with a neat idea: mediated player-made content. Wright wants his players to be able to create new and unique objects for the game that can shared and downloaded from the internet, but without the undesirable messiness of *Second Life*. His game provides an easy-to-use editor that allows players to build diverse creatures from a set of adaptable prefabricated parts. Minor adjustments in the editor are dealt with procedurally by the game, so that weird new buildings and animals can be made to "fit" within the game shell. Because *Spore* provides definite limitations within the game space, while at the same time offering multiple variables to play with, players can't break the game or introduce anything incongruous. They can, however, play endlessly as they build. It's akin to Lego - there are multiple toys you can build with any one set of bricks.

This, then, is where I see MMOGs going: deciding on what set of bricks you want to play with, or, if you're a developer, deciding what set of bricks you want to provide. Games must find better ways to enable the player to build within the

game world. This will partly come from the likes of, say, *City of Heroes'* character editor, which allows players to simply dress up in ever more imaginative ways. Or it will come from *Guild Wars'* concept of "instancing," but with players building, hosting and populating their own dungeons, into which unwitting strangers may wander. But it will also come from player's interactions with each other - using social and "economic" investment in a game to create content, as *Eve* does with its alliances and player-run businesses.

The challenge for developers is not to build the most beautiful game world, but to allow players to feel that they, themselves, are investing in something beautiful and with more depth just than killing enough blue goblins to get that brand new level-35 Stetson. Sure, the casual hat-coveting gamer will need to

be catered to as well, but why not let the more dedicated players create that hat for him? Why not allow the player to set the quest himself, because he actually **needs** five hundred goblin toes?

Perhaps, if game engines ever manage to be truly approachable, then players will be able to customize almost everything about their worlds. A democratic, mediated customization - a little like how we live in the real world.

The wikification of games, anyone?
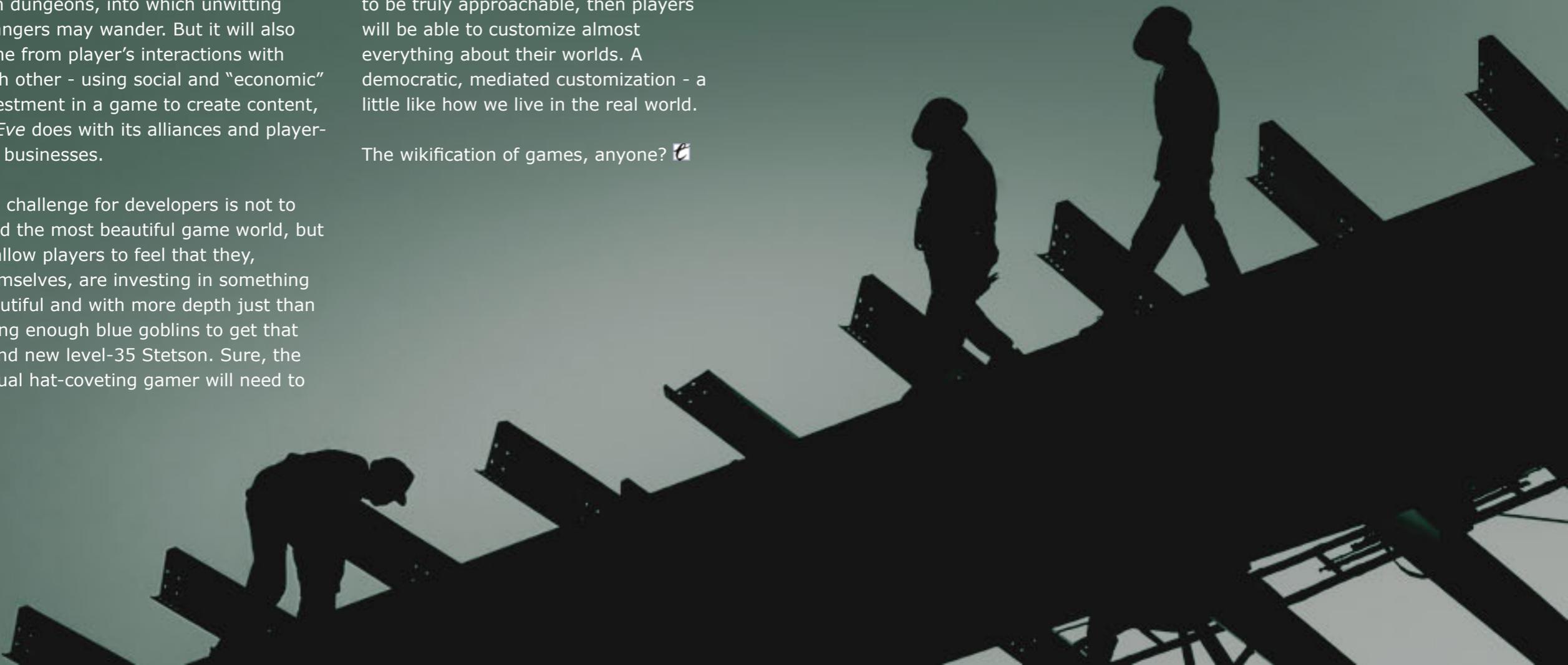
ALARMISM 2020

by Joe Blancato

Little known fact: CDs burn at 451 degrees, too.

At least that's what the manual from my Congressman's office said. In the late 2000s, a bipartisan legislature decided to make the ESRB and MPAA regulatory bodies, after learning violent and sexually explicit media proved harmful to the nation's youth. Years later, kids were still coming into contact with perverse media, and another bill was passed, officially labeling movies, books, and games more extreme than Walker Texas Ranger as "snuff;" possession became an arrest-able offense, and a sprawling black market was born.

Scientific evidence challenging the notion that suggestive topics and content don't turn children into sociopaths was published by leading news organizations. Children were found reading these arguments, and became agitated by the findings. Clearly, mainstream media that disagrees with the government was instilling a rebellious faction among the nation's youth, potentially turning our precious children into domestic terrorists. Congress and the Supreme Court agreed: anti-government sentiments weren't protected by the First Amendment, because their very utterance could be construed as assault upon the public.

Alright, that's enough of my own alarmism for now. But if we don't pay attention to what's happening just beyond our living rooms, a scenario similar to my descent into tin foil hat-wearing conspiracy theory might not be as preposterous as you think. Alarmist leaders and community members have been around long before Chicken Little was dreamt up in folk lore, but modern day politicians and special interest groups have evolved from a simple "The sky is falling!" to sensational rhetoric more akin to "Incoming! We got Charlie all around us and artillery shells are exploding overhead!"

"Modern" cases of entire generations unnecessarily fixating on harmless fun go back to the Prohibition Era. By claiming its negative effects were detrimental to society, members of a group called the Temperance Movement were able to bully politicians into nationally banning the production and sale of alcohol. This movement declared that the only way to save America was to rid it of the scourge of alcohol completely. The inevitable rise of organized crime eventually led to the ban being lifted. It turned out that the negative effects of Prohibition were

worse than the negative effects of alcohol..

Fast forward 25 years. The same young, white people who ended the Prohibition got older, and began fighting a new demon the Temperance Movement never could have dreamed of: rock and roll. For the first time, white kids were being exposed to black music on a grand scale, setting the older generation on edge. Buddy Holly's plane crashed; Elvis was drafted and returned a country singer; and Frank Sinatra called them both communists before the dust settled. This tentative truce stayed in place until the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) formed in 1985 and had it out with Frank Zappa on C-span. This time, the dust never completely cleared and the people who fought music that brought joy to many, learned from their battles.

So here we are, 50 years after rock and roll, and we're faced with a terrible, new "threat" to our culture: gaming. True, gangsta rap is again exposing white kids to dangerous black music, but this time children are protected by a black-and-white label reading "Explicit Lyrics." The V-Chip is on hand to protect kids from Christina Aguilera videos. But that

mysterious Xbox is a den of inequity with no protection in place at all. Just ask Jack Thompson and his new ally, Hillary Clinton.

Both of them, along with their crew of lobbyists, are flaunting questionable studies and scary soundbytes in order to further their agendas, which at this point don't seem to extend beyond "I'm personally offended by the expression of others." They ignore the fact that violent youth crime is at an all-time low, and began dropping rapidly at the same time violent games became a staple of every

It turned out that the negative effects of Prohibition were worse than the negative effects of alcohol..

teenager's diet. If you're one of those numbers people, here they are: The ten-year period between 1992 and 2002 yielded a 66% decline of violent crime committed by children ages 10 to 17 (http://home.earthlink.net/~mmales/chap-4.htm). That's almost twice the rate of decrease of violent crime among Americans in general, which only yielded a 35% decline (http://www.fbi.gov/filelink.html?file=/ucr/Cius_97/95CRIME/95crime2.pdf). It hardly seems gaming has transformed our children into the violent little devils some might have you believe.

Of course, these pragmatic real world numbers are easy to push aside in favor of laboratory tests that judge "violent behavior" by grading answers to a questionnaire. Much like the old Pharaohs who divined the will of the gods by the rise and fall of the Nile, it feels as if opponents of gaming are selectively representing information to cloud the issue. But "bubbling toil and

trouble" is what gets you into the headlines.

Read Thompson's (http://www.stopkill.com) website. Thompson et al are appealing to the tired working man who just wants to make sure his kid doesn't turn into the Zodiac serial killer, and people like Thompson are remarkably good at scaring everyday people into believing their sensational agenda. Even the name of his site, "Stop Kill," is political maneuvering at its finest. But you know what? It works, and the Democrats are finally catching on.

Make no mistake; regulating the game industry into the ground is going to be a bipartisan affair. The left needs an opportunity to prove their commitment to "family values" but they can't go after their benefactors in the movie and music industries. Game companies, on the other hand, why they hardly donate to the Political Action Committees at all! Meanwhile the right is happy to let big

government step into the picture in support of social conservativism. And games will suffer in perpetuity in the name of this alliance

Amidst all this forthcoming legislation, senators are missing the mark. If we really cared about what's causing violence among youth, all we really need to look at is their parents' paychecks. It may be a political rough spot, but poverty and socioeconomic disparity are the leading contributors to all crime, including that of our precious offspring (http://www.preventingcrime.net/library/Causes_of_Crime.pdf). But the ill effects of poverty aren't something we like to talk about, and targeting things that don't extend as far into the roots of our society - like games - is far easier.

To top it off, these alarmists aren't even looking at the right games when they extend their gaze of suppression against products like "Hot Coffee." There are **hate groups** out there creating games in which players accrue points by killing blacks and Jews While perhaps even these games are covered under the scope of the First Amendment, they're far more deserving of heat from people like Thompson and Clinton. But until a

Once again, sensationalism gets in the way of rooting out century old problems.

White Power party writes a killer app for two consoles, they'll continue along under the radar. Once again, sensationalism gets in the way of rooting out century old problems.

The only way to prevent this insanity is to become part of the process. Older members of the gaming generation are to the point where they can conceivably run for office, and many of us could conceivably vote for them. If even a few gamers on either side of the political spectrum were to stand on Capitol Hill and proudly proclaim the fact they played *Thrill Kill* - and haven't attempted to murder anyone to date - they would throw a monkey wrench into the cogs of the insipid anti-expression movement in Congress. Even writing letters to current lawmakers could have a noticeable effect. Once these people realize their constituency is onto their ruse, they'll change their tune. Free speech and expression - even violent and sexual speech and expression - are sacred ideals in western culture. In order to avoid a dark future in 15 years, people need to defend the media that's

constantly under attack. These "squeaky wheels" rattling off bad facts and propaganda only benefit from silence.

I really don't want to know at what temperature CDs really burn.

THE CONTRARIAN
FIGHT THE FUTURE
by John Tynes

When Microsoft's J Allard told developers the Xbox 360 would ship with half a gig of RAM, they whooped and cheered. It meant more headroom for high polygon counts, detailed textures, and bigger levels. But when publishers looked at the resulting development budgets of $15 or $20 million to pay all those additional programmers and artists, they flipped out.

Three years ago, persuading a publisher to sink $5 million into a non-franchise title was an uphill battle; now that same game could cost five times as much, but units sold and retail prices haven't risen accordingly. Only a half-dozen or so games per year break into the world of multi-million unit shifters. Just as in Hollywood, a small number of tent poles support all the projects that fail. When EA wanted to make games more like the movies, this is **not** what they had in mind.

Welcome to the future of gaming.

Three years ago, I flew to Montreal and knocked on the door of an office I'd never seen before. After I was inside, a technician put little sticky, colored dots all over me and took digital photographs of my front, back, sides, hands, and head. Some men typed on keyboards. A few minutes later, there it was: a complete 3D model of me from head to toe, with photographic color textures already applied. There were plenty of glitches, but the result was nonetheless amazing. A full-body, high-resolution scan, geometry and texture, ready for cleanup and use in a game. It wasn't even one of those whirring, revolving laser things. They just took pictures, connected the sticky dots across the images, and the software interpolated my entire form. For a couple grand, I was my own avatar.

It was the summer of 2002, and we'd all seen the early screenshots from *Doom 3*. The world got its first big look at normal mapping, a technology where you start with a high-polygon model, generate lighting data, and then apply that lighting data to the in-game low-polygon model. The result is me, right there on the screen: a two-thousand-polygon playable character that looks almost indistinguishable from the two-million-polygon original. It's the kind of innovation that happens when you only have 64MB of video RAM. The developers I worked for engineered their own normal mapping code, from pipeline to playback, and I was their guinea pig. When I saw myself looking back from the screen in our game engine, photo-realistic and dressed exactly as I'd been that day in Montreal, I thought I was looking into the future.

Two years later, the future arrived. *Doom 3*, *Half-Life 2*, *Halo 2*, and more. Characters were lifelike, environments were vivid, lighting was dramatic. Compared to the games of 2002, it was a quantum leap in technology, a real moment of future frisson.

And the games - well, they were okay.

That's not an easy sentence to write. But "okay" is about where they ended up. *Doom 3*? Some nice intensity, a lot of zombies in closets, and one measly design innovation: in the dark you could shoot or you could see, but you couldn't do both at the same time. (Most gamers hated that.) *Half-Life 2*? Amazing characters, impressive production, and

the most tiresome and annoying physics-based jumping puzzles ever conceived. (Valve never got the memo that jumping puzzle + FPS = misery.) *Halo 2*? Plenty of two-gun fun, but no ending, and embarrassing cut-scene glitches.

If years of effort by some of the best developers in the business can result in a beautifully normal-mapped shrug, it's time to rethink this future business. Because now that we've seen it, maybe we were better off in 2002 - once upon a time, when we were profitable.

Last year also brought us a game that you probably didn't play. I don't blame you. It had a terrible title, little hype, and unremarkable sales. Yet in a year that brought us *Doom 3*, *Half-Life 2*, and

Halo 2, I had the most straight-up fun with *Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy*.

No, really.

Psi-Ops had its own Exciting Technology in the form of the Havok physics engine. If you don't know what Havok is, cast your mind back to the summer of 2002, when videogame characters who died on stairs would project outward from the particular step on which they fell, hovering in midair, because their death animations ended with them flat on the (virtual) ground. Thanks to Havok, those same characters now sprawl on the stairs in a heap because Havok's physics code can let them actually fall, strike the ground, and lose momentum.

Havok is one of those Next Big Things that actually does get a lot of use. Valve couldn't shut up about it, trumpeting their physics-based gameplay in *Half-Life 2*, which actually consisted of operating cargo cranes and falling repeatedly off of wooden palettes into toxic sludge. *Max Payne 2* was all about the Havok, insofar as when you ran through a level, constantly sliding along the furniture (like you do in every game), all the chairs, bottles, dishes, and cigarette packs hopped like Mexican jumping beans. Poor Max Payne, Drunken Sailor

for Hire, couldn't get through a single room without knocking the furniture over. If this happened in *Splinter Cell*, Sam Fisher would be the noisiest spy in the business.

By the time *Half-Life 2* finally made it to stores, its Havok thunder had been stolen by a kick-line of physics-ridden games. We'd seen it on display in *FarCry* and *Max*, and even in two consecutive psychic-power games where you could pull a Yoda and make your luggage levitate. One was the so-so *Second Sight*, and the other was that obscure title from Midway called *Psi-Ops*.

Psi-Ops is where Havok found its home. Havok gave *Psi-Ops* the muscle it needed to become the most entertaining game I played in 2004.

That's qualified praise. Not even I, the best friend *Psi-Ops* ever had in the media, am willing to say it's the best game of 2004. Setting aside the cheesy title, there's a pointless storyline, a confusing game-save UI, and some lackluster level design. If you rented it for a weekend and gave it a couple hours, you'd probably be justified in handing it back to the clerk at Blockbuster without a second thought. But give it a few more hours, unlocking more psychic powers, and *Psi-Ops* hits its stride. And then you'll have more fun than you did in *Doom 3*, *Half-Life 2*, or *Halo 2*.

Let me paint you a picture. You jump on a crate - yes, there are crates - and you look down. (It's a third-person game.) You target the crate you're standing on and levitate it. Now you're flying, driving the crate you're standing on, shooting at people as you do so. With practice, you can levitate a crate directly in front of you as you charge into a room, protecting you from incoming fire. But

why stop there? You can set a guy on fire **with your mind**, then levitate the burning, screaming man and hurl him off a catwalk and into a combustible barrel - yes, there are combustible barrels - where his burning body detonates it, catching three more guys on fire. Then while they're burning and screaming, you pick them up and throw them off a cliff. Two left? Just possess one and use his body to shoot the other. One left? Sneak up behind him and suck his soul until his brain pops out of his head and gives you a power boost. Closed door? Astral-walk through it and see who's waiting in ambush, then turn the tables on them with one of their burning, screaming friends flying around the corner.

Satisfying. So satisfying.

Psi-Ops is a smorgasbord of every goofy psychic power you've ever heard of, and the levels are just excuses for you to plunder your mental toolbox to come up with cool, creative solutions to tactical problems. They give you the Swiss army knife and turn you loose.

The level with the missile silos? I played that same level for **two hours** straight. I

could have finished it in a quarter of that time, but I stuck around because I was having **so much fun**. The bad guys kept re-spawning, and I kept coming up with new and exciting combinations of pyro-kinesis, telekinesis, brains-popping-out-of-their-skull-kinesis, **and** a dandy assortment of firearms. I really couldn't get enough of this gameplay, and every situation was worth waiting for a re-spawn just to do it again, differently. There's even stealth, for Pete's sake.

Typically, a developer starts with a laundry list of features and a fat stack of content ideas. As they go, they get hung up on the content ("we gotta have twenty levels") and start cutting features. *Psi-Ops* is the opposite: they put in every single feature they possibly could, and then let the levels shuffle halfheartedly into existence. But it doesn't matter, because the feature set provides so much gameplay and exploration that the levels are just sandboxes.

Titles like *Psi-Ops* should be the real future of gaming. The developers' great innovation had little to do with technology; Havok was already standard operating procedure by the time they got

their mitts on it. What made *Psi-Ops* the most entertaining game of 2004 was its design, the real sense of play that comes when someone gives you a sandbox and a sack of toys and says, "Have fun!" When I played *Psi-Ops*, I did.

That day in Montreal, I saw myself converted from flesh to bits in a matter of minutes, the kind of *Tron* moment we'll all have someday, so that when our brains pop out of our skulls we can just download them again. But the hours I spent playing *Psi-Ops* made it clear where game developers should really put their dreams. **The game's the thing**, and no normal-mapping, HDR-lighting, virtual-reality foofarah is ever going to change that. 🖻

NEWS BITS

Bully Picks Up Where Hot Coffee Leaves Off

Bully, premised upon a child growing up confronting schoolyard bullies and other violent scenarios, is already ruffling feathers on a grand scale. Whatever is said about *GTA: San Andreas*, it was never protested by a youth group. Rockstar's newest upcoming title had youth organization Peaceaholics so upset they marched on the company's New York headquarters earlier this week. Protest signs read "Stop Bully Now!" and "Prosecute Rockstar Games. They are felons" among other things. *Bully* is currently pending an ESRB rating.

Xbox 360 Pricing Predictions

Research firm Piper Jaffray completed a study on the future of the Xbox 360, and has said two versions of the Xbox, one with a hard drive and one without, will retail at $399 and $299 respectively, and 1.6 million units will ship globally.

The firm also suspects the console will launch with 15 titles, priced at $59.99 each. If one were to purchase everything available on release day, he'd pay $1299. It's no small wonder the games industry has grown so rapidly.

EQ2 Player Makes Thousands Duping

An *Everquest 2* player was able to uncover an item duplication bug, which he was able to exploit to make thousands of platinum pieces, the game's highest currency. He then sold the money via an online virtual property market. His story has bounced around various mirrors over the past two days, and on one particular iteration of what is quickly becoming a legend, he mentioned he made $70,000 in the span of a few months. SOE offered no comment on the official message boards, but took their servers down to address the issue, banning any players suspected of exploiting this particular bug.

Casual Friday

CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!

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