the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

My brother and I were allowed to open one present, each, on Christmas Eve, a little while before going to our Grandparents' house for family festivities. At first, we were just excited to open a package, any package. As a result, I often went for the biggest one with my name on it and my brother usually went for the one with the paper that said, "Open Me" printed all over it in green.

But this was in our young, and naïve years. We hadn't yet learned that the big packages usually contain clothes, which are not exciting Christmas presents until the teen years, if even then. Also, we hadn't yet realized the "Open Me" paper was a not-so-subliminal message to open the new scarf and gloves set because it's rapidly becoming cold outside and we don't want the fingers to freeze, now do we?

And then, in the late '80s, it all came together. On Christmas Eve, in the afternoon, my brother and I sat by the tree, pondering our packages, trying to decide which one to open, and I saw it.

It was not unusually shaped; it was a box, wrapped neatly in green paper, addressed to both my brother and me. But, I had studied the box of the NES' most amazing controller, The Advantage, in the store so frequently, I was certain this was it.

Naturally, this is the one I chose to open. I had to lobby hard for this one with my brother, as we'd both have to agree to open just this one, but in the end, he, too, saw that this had to be The Advantage. Hours later, my parents had to pull us away from *Track and Field II* because, with The Advantage, the hammer throw was now possible and archery was a breeze.

The holidays are a time of barely contained excitement, with all kinds of new product releases, hoping to capitalize on the gift giving. And I know some mothers are like mine was, reading gaming magazines to find the Best New Thing for the season and then standing in line at 6 a.m. to be sure to have them in time for the holidays. It's because of this excitement that we often have some of our clearest and most beloved gaming memories.

And that's what this issue, Season's Gaming, is all about. Our writers tell of stories and share thoughts about the holidays and games. Pat Miller shares a touching tale of the home he found in gaming and Michael Zenke takes us through a lifetime of Christmases, both his own and others' in this week's Tuesday-only publish of The Escapist.

Happy Holidays!

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: This is the third issue in a row where Bonnie has written another one of her college-student articles on girl-gaming. In the interests of fairness, I'd like you to either keep the girl-gaming articles to the girl-gaming issues or include alternative viewpoints. Whenever Bonnie tells us about the girl gamers (or girl games), I'd really like to hear about homosexual gamers, transgender gamers, hispanic-american gamers, asian-american gamers, black-american gamers and irish-american gamers. If we're going to start segmenting the gamer community along gender lines, we should go all the way. If we don't, then we're elevating girls to a level we don't allow for any other minority. And I don't mean one paragraph per group - go out and hire a writer to include a full article from the perspective of each of those demographics for every single issue.

Just do the readers of *The Escapist* a favor, though, and when you get writers from those demographics try to find ones that aren't still playing with the basics of literary and social criticism like a kid with his (or her) first bee-bee gun. The only thing worse than the splintered and divisive nature of Bonnie's articles is her writing itself.

Nathaniel Givens

To the Editor: I've really been enjoying *The Escapist* for some time now. I just happened upon the article "Hardcore Casual" by Joe Blancato, and found it to be perfectly in-line with my current state of thinking.

I've started my own indie game development company and have recently been debating in my mind the overall usefulness of our products. Reading an article like Joe's shows me that there Are people who, like the four of us, desire games that are fantastic in gameplay value, but not entirely focused on the hardcore audience.

Jesse

From The Lounge: [Re: "Obscurity Below the Radar" by John Szczepaniak]

The black market of gaming is the new hunting for the more "civilized" person. Think about it. Hunting was all about having the rarest species hanging in your living room or turned into stuffed animals, maybe to brag about it, maybe for just self-satisfaction, any reason you can think about. The rarer the animal, the better – even better if it was an endangered one. And there were hunters who killed those animals because there was a market, an obscure and hidden one sometimes. But there were always people buying them (and they still do, shame on them)

And now? Collecting those special hardware items, getting the rarest software around, I feel is the same thing. They've traded the guns for consoles, gun cartridges for game ones. It's all about getting what others can't, and keep it, or sometimes share it (with the consequences shown in the article).

I call it human nature. It will always happen with any kind of activity that brings some emotions and excitement into people, and recognition among peers. Hunting, gaming, is the same. At least now we're not killing innocent beings for them (I hope not).

Very interesting article!!

A. Appel

From The Lounge: [Re: "Sisyphus Gaming" by Simon Abramovich]

I have to say, your association of Sisyphus to gaming is very interesting, and that myth's metaphor is, I think, very important for game designers to appreciate. If you know a bit of computer science, Sisyphus' recursive labors are reflective of the inherent uncertainty of whether or not a given algorithm will halt, or go into infinite recursion (what's called the Halting Problem). The philosophical benefits of understanding that in relation to games is includes an important lesson about crafting a player's experience: The player is not a punching bag, you should send them to heaven instead of hades.

P. Dugan

Season's Goodbyes
by Pat Miller

Have you ever really looked at an arcade cabinet? Most casual arcade-goers don't. We may notice the sticks and the buttons and the coin slot because that is what we need to interact with to start our game. They're **huge**; tremendous **colossi** of wood and metal and plastic. And there are all kinds; they start out small with the *Japanese Astro City* cabinets, that look like little plastic dwarves, and then there are the proper American upright cabinets that we are used to, with their narrow build and their 17" screens, and there are gigantic 33" cabinets that demand your utmost attention. I've been a frequent arcade-goer since I was 15 years old, and I can't say I ever really looked at them. Not until today.

Two years ago, I came back home to a pleasantly chilly San Francisco Bay Area for Thanksgiving break from my freshman year of college. They say that the first time coming home is the hardest; for all the growing up and maturing we're supposed to do when we leave home for the first time, we will inevitably return home to discover that the weeks we spent feeling like real adults mean approximately zilch. Instead, we find that home has been doing just fine without us, thank you, and don't forget to empty the dishwasher after dinner.

But "home" for me was not limited to "home" in the traditional mom-and-pop sense of the word. Yes, I would be coming back to see my folks and gorge myself on turkey and do all sorts of Thanksgiving things. Maybe I'd even find the time to kick it old-school with some of my high school friends, and do whatever it is we do after spending a few months away at college. The "home" I was most excited to return to, however, didn't have my bedroom or my father or my car or any of the features we normally associate with home.

The home **I** loved was poorly lit and kind of out of the way, covered in the ugly attention-whore colors college students use for their advertisement flyers. Instead of a dining room, it had a pair of pool tables and a dozen barstools; instead of a TV, it had a few dozen arcade cabinets; and instead of my folks, it had a bunch of UC Berkeley students - anywhere from 10 to 30, depending on the time of day. The home I came back to was the UC Berkeley BEARcade , and it wasn't until I settled into the familiar *Capcom vs. SNK 2* arcade sticks that I really felt like I was back at home. So I came back, played some games, lost some, won some, caught up on new techniques with old friends and eased back into being at home.

Now, I am once again sitting behind the BEARcade's counter. It's different now, though, and not just because I'm two years older, or because the games are different, or because the old-timers keep on graduating and making way for the younger ones. I am playing the same games of *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*, but there is no line of tokens waiting to challenge me; the place is completely empty, except for me and the manager, one Bihn Kim, and the *Third Strike*

cabinet, which stands lonely against a bare white wall that used to be full of fighting games vying for your attention.

I had never noticed until now how loud each machine is; usually the arcade is so loud that long-time regulars get used to leaving with momentary deafness, but now the only noise in the room is coming from the *Third Strike* machine and it feels as though I'm being rude by disturbing some kind of sacred silence. I am sitting behind the same register, but I'm not doling out change to hands eager to exchange their cash for tokens; it's not even on. Instead, I have to watch as the hopeful faces of Berkeley - everyone from Berkeley college students to high school students and even a few elderly locals - fall as I tell them what should have been already painfully obvious from the dimmer-than-usual lighting and the flyers plastered all over the windows; sorry, guys, we're not open. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever.

The story itself is hardly unusual. The arcade-going population of 2005 is a fraction of what it used to be in the days of *Centipede* or *Street Fighter II*, and the BEARcade's was no exception. Its location on the Berkeley campus, dim

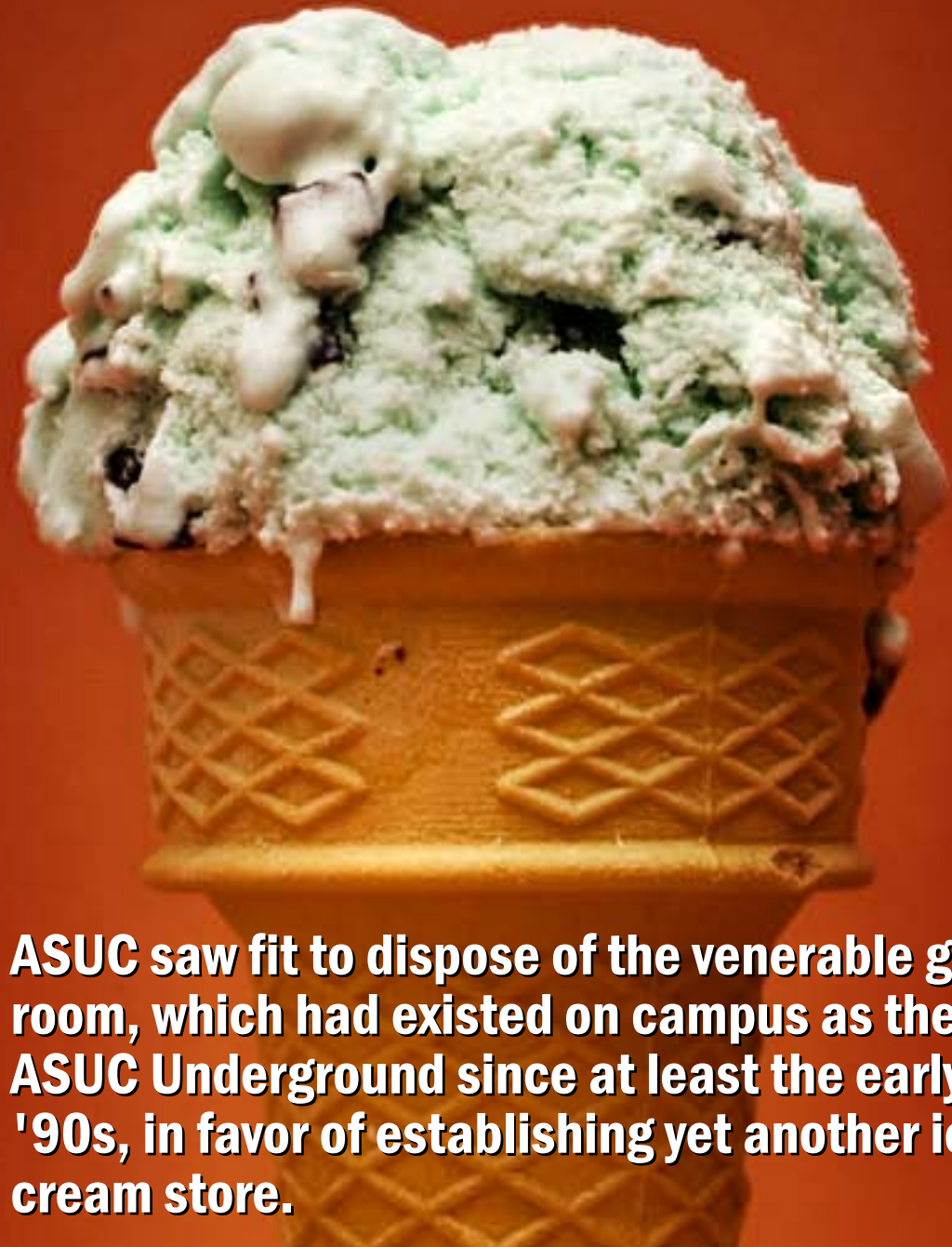and inconvenient as it was, remained desirable to school interests, and for years people struggled through the student government - known as the Associated Students of the University of California, or ASUC for short - to replace it. Even while in high school, I occasionally picked up rumors that it would have been turned into a pearl milk tea house, or a LAN cafe, or a day-care center for the children of UC Berkeley's oh-so-illustrious graduate students.

This semester's plan for the BEARcade was to use the space for an upscale gelateria. Despite grassroots efforts - including repeated coverage and letters in the campus newspaper, the *Daily Californian*, and a two-day petition drive that yielded over six hundred signatures - ASUC saw fit to dispose of the venerable game room, which had existed on campus as the ASUC Underground since at least the early '90s, when it gave rise to some of the USA's top tier *Street Fighter II* talent, in favor of establishing yet another ice cream store.

To say this was a slap in the face to the regulars, employees and casual passers-by alike was an understatement; to sacrifice their holy grounds in the name

of profit seems to run counter to the goals of any academic institutions, and one would think that Berkeley's reputation for encouraging individuality and alternative expression should have granted the BEARcade some special consideration. Certainly it felt as though the dozens of students who came into the arcade on any given day weren't given any significant thought; anyone on campus who seeks gelato - **from the same gelateria that is replacing the arcade, no less** - need only walk a few blocks from the arcade proper, while a trip to nearest arcade of comparable quality would require over an hour's drive into Sunnyvale.

But I don't think that adequately explains why I can't help but feel, as I sit here and choke back tears, as though I have lost something particularly important to me - something that feels more like home than simply a game room. Perhaps it becomes more apparent if I explain that it was the great people who I met through the BEARcade over the last five-odd years who have watched me grow up from a punk-ass high school kid to someone a little bit smarter and a little bit wiser that I will miss. Those who led me to my first

ASUC saw fit to dispose of the venerable game room, which had existed on campus as the ASUC Underground since at least the early '90s, in favor of establishing yet another ice cream store.

actual job where I got my first actual paychecks. Those who looked out for me, even if that meant spotting me cash for dinner or driving me home when it was out of their way, just so I could be included with everyone else. Those who offered me a place to stay and escape the pressures of an alienating school and a periodically unstable family life, even long after the arcade's 8p.m. closing time. Those who taught me that all I can do when I lose is put another token up and keep playing until I win. It's Thanksgiving, and all of a sudden it seems like I don't have quite as much to be thankful for this year.

And now I am helping Bihn push the arcade cabinets, one by one, into a Penske truck waiting to take them to their new owners. Some of them are going to San Francisco State, he tells me, and some of them to San Jose. Huh. It's funny, you know, they look so much more, well, **naked** when they're unplugged and their flashing lights and loud noises are turned off.

The rhythm games are first; we begin by disassembling *Dance Dance Revolution's* gargantuan, pure steel machine into its component parts and wheeling them out,

bit by bit. Next comes *Drummania V* and *Guitar Freaks V*; they're both newer cabinets, and while they don't stand quite as tall as *DDR*, they're still heavy enough with their idiot-proof black steel frames, and the speakers for *Guitar Freaks V* are two separate units, so we have to load each one separately. It seems so inefficient, now that we have home consoles - and even portable consoles - that can drastically outperform arcade machines, that we spend so much space and time making arcade cabinets as large as they are.

Last for the day is *Guilty Gear XX*; it was one of my personal favorites, and I have to redouble my efforts to withhold tears as I see one of the many machines that I have become very personally attached to, whether I was pounding it in frustration or celebration, gutted and neutered. But into the truck it goes. Before I know it, the day's work is done, and I gather my things and cast my eyes around the place I called home one more time, hoping to burn its dusty, dimly lit majesty forever into my mind. Then I kiss my hand and slam it on the counter one last time and walk out into the sunlight. Goodbye, BEARcade. It was fun while it lasted.

Stable. Just like home should be. Arcade cabinets can't just be big because they need to be, we want them to be stable so we can feel at home.

I spend the rest of the day in a depressed funk, trying to revisit all my other old Berkeley haunts - Desi Dog, Buffalo Exchange, Sweet On You - but it just doesn't feel right any more. The BEARcade was the lynch pin that held it all together for me, and without it, the city I once loved had fallen apart. From the looks of it, I'm not the only one suffering from arcade withdrawal; the few regulars I've seen around have all had equally empty stories to tell. Some have caught themselves instinctively walking toward the arcade after class, perhaps trying to catch a peek from outside to see if any familiar faces are around. Others have tried to fill the void with *Mario Kart DS*; alas, it just isn't the same.

Jokingly, I asked Bihn what he was going to do now that he didn't spend hours and hours at the BEARcade every day; he turned and looked at me with a hint of genuine existential bewilderment and told me that he really didn't know. Later,

something triggers the memory of heaving those gigantic metal lumps I've grown so fond of into the truck, never to be seen again, and I cry, pretty confident that I'm not the only one doing so.

And then something falls into place, hours later, while I sit sobbing quietly to myself outside a train station. I think about Thanksgiving, and good friends, and ... well, arcade cabinets. They're just so solid, and heavy, and big, and **stable**.

Stable. Just like **home** should be. Arcade cabinets can't just be big because they need to be, they're big because we become attached to them and we want them to be **stable** so we can feel at **home**. The BEARcade taught me that I can be at home sitting down at an arcade cabinet hundreds of miles away from the San Francisco Bay Area. That random strangers can quickly become close friends. That I can teach others the way those random strangers taught me,

in the hopes that something as positive for their lives will come out of mere video gaming as it has from mine. And it has given me a dear group of friends who persist outside of the confines of the arcade. Yes, there is a time to be mournful for Berkeley's loss; we really had something good there before they took it away from us. But I have plenty to be thankful for.

So thank you, all you employees and managers, students and teachers, regulars and passers-by, for making the BEARcade what it was. I, for one, will miss all of you.

R.I.P BEARcade
November 18, 2005

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.

A FINE FANTASY

by Patrick Dugan

Videogame Christmases gave me childhood obesity, and they were worth it. Every year on December 25, while my family celebrated togetherness, giving and the birth of Jesus, I celebrated only gaming. Looking back on the history of gifts received, my Christmas mornings line up like a gallery of classic plays: *Metroid Prime*, *Ico*, *Metal Gear Solid 2*, *Half-Life*, *Fallout 2*, *Castlevania: Symphony of The Night*, *Resident Evil*, *Donkey Kong Country*, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, *Super Mario Bros. 3*. The eagerness for the holiday intersected the anticipation of the games, annually spinning into a mad typhoon of awe and dopamine. Birthdays and Christmas were the major temporal landmarks of the calendar year, weighted with raw ludic ore. This was the form and ritual of growing up geek.

The one Christmas morning that mattered most, leaving the greatest impression on my memory and appreciation of game design – was dated 12-25-1994, the year Squaresoft released *Final Fantasy III* in the U.S.

The earlier fantasies were analogous to medieval literature in both setting and structure, their lineated sagas seemed brave and unique back when a few plot twists, an evil wizard, a major character's sudden, permanent death and some crystals were all you needed to whip up a storyline. These narratives seem contrived in retrospect, largely because their conflicts between ancient demons and magical heroes lacked much indication of human feeling. This emotional indifference might be attributed to the limitations of graphics technology, or the fact that the real meat of playing a *Final Fantasy* involves picking off blue menus and watching numbers bounce over screen. Yet *Final Fantasy III* was both graphically limited in terms of emotive representation and based on a gameplay foundation of numerical dynamics, but somehow, for the first time in the series (the sixth installment in Japan), the narrative transcended the hero's journey model centered on a young male protagonist and his friends.

Final Fantasy III marked the videogame analogy of baroque symphony, featuring a steam-punk setting laced with intoxicating, almost impressionistic, sprite-based visuals and impressive MIDI orchestral tracks. The game opens on the plight and manipulation of a woman at the hands of power-hungry men, and expands to examine a large and varied cast inhabiting all walks in life. In sheer technical terms, these characters were nothing but bins for learned spells and optimized equipments, but interspersed moments of drama, the majority written as vaguely interactive cut-scenes, provide a subtext for the character's motivations, hopes and weaknesses, providing a glow of meaning beneath the random battles.

The prime example of this interweave between game mechanic and story aesthetic is the opera sequence found

early in the storyline's second act, now almost famous in the canon of classic game moments. Celes, a major female character lamenting her past misdeeds as a military leader, receives the lead role of an opera production for her resemblance to the star actress. Digitized voice tones sing out the story within the story while the player attempts to select the correct lines. Meanwhile, the rest of the team hurries to stop a sabotage of the production, racing against a five-minute clock while being slowed by battles. A sense of passive appreciation clashes with the active rush to save the day, building to a rupture of the in-game opera within the flow of the greater narrative.

Final Fantasy III is also notable for its treatment of female subjects. Most games, over a decade later, are entirely bound into a male avatar consumed with goals of conquest and exploration. But *Final Fantasy III*'s most prominent heroes are its women, and its primary goal is returning balance and peace to a world diseased with conflict. Terra, the initial playable character, and later Celes, offer examples of strong women who are not overly sexualized, and the platonic relationships with male characters never

become romantic. While the player manipulates them, the aim of that manipulation is to combat the greater malfeasance of a society that encouraged their abilities and then attempted to impose monstrosity on their otherness. Terra and Celes are in a way emblematic of patriarchal society's

attempt to control strength in women: They begin as weapons of war, but in fighting back and leading the team in its rebellion against the evil empire they become radical agents, ultimately equalizing the injustices that produced them and providing hope for survival and freedom.

FINAL FANTASY III
marked the videogame analogy of baroque symphony...

If Terra and Celes are the jewels in the game's crown, the use of multiple perspectives is certainly the alloy that supports the overall structure. Halfway through the first act, the team disperses across the continent, and the player must choose to play each of three character's missions in whatever order he likes. In this way, the player can express their preference to play the beguiling romantic, Locke (who may be an allusion to humanist philosopher John Locke), the motherly heroine Terra, or the macho martial artist Sabin. Each scenario has a distinct feel to it, and each character brings their own attitudes and worldview, providing a range of perspectives to the party and the player.

This multiplicity expounds in the memories and dreams of each character, sprinkled amidst the gameplay. Locke, we find, seeks the power of the Phoenix to resurrect his comatose girlfriend; Cyan, the chivalrous knight, writes love letters via carrier pigeon to a war widow so as to re-live the love of his dead wife; Setzer, the gambler, reflects on the death of a female airship pilot, the only woman he ever loved; Terra tends to a group of orphans and learns what it means to be needed. But, the sharpest of these

moments belongs to Celes, who, stranded on a lonely island with a scientist named Cid (a recurring name in the franchise) must try to nurse him to health by catching fish. If the player cannot do this task, which is balanced to be difficult, then Cid dies, and Celes reacts by jumping off a cliff in despair. She awakes on the beach, washed up from her attempted suicide, and a brilliant flash of the interactive medium's potential shines through – Celes' despair is of the player's failure, and thus stings even more sharply.

Midway through the game, the general antagonism of the empire gives way to a very specific figure, a man produced as a weapon by society in the same manner as Terra and Celes, an androgynous, perverted, wicked little clown: Kefka. Somewhere between Shakespeare's Falstaff and King's It, Kefka is one of the most memorable *Final Fantasy* villains because he isn't distant or mysterious, he is present and taunting, he has personality and catchy orchestral tunes to match. Kefka, like Dostoevsky's Underground Man, is an unforeseen, unwelcome mutation that not only exists, but must exist, considering what civilization is based on. Kefka is the

necessary bi-product of technology run amok, an Anti-Christ with a surreal laugh. He is a figure of moral abandon and apocalypse, and in this manner the game's third act takes place.

Kefka betrays his king and unleashes Armageddon unto the world. That is why, when his combat sprite finally descends onto the screen as a flamboyant mock-angel, and the team defiantly pummels him with unceasing ultima spells, his destruction is not just an obligatory end-game ritual, but a meaningful triumph. Without Kefka, the soaring airship tour over the end credits would be a tack on, just another RPG closeout; with him, it is serene and satisfying, a glorious conclusion to one of the greatest games ever made.

Final Fantasy III's greatest fiction, besides its escapism for overweight geeky nine-year-olds, was a brave portrait of an enduring humanism. The game implied in its rules that individuals determined to stand outside the system and challenge its inequities must prevail, given enough level-ups and reloads. It depicted with Dostoevskian poise how such individuals, collaborating as equals, could best the worst offenses of

industrial greed, environmental degradation and technological misuse – to a child or adult, this is a fantasy worth entertaining.

Patrick Dugan is a ludosophist. He runs King Lud IC, a blog regarding game design theory, memetics and interactive storytelling. He looks foward to prototyping with Chris Crawford's Erasmatron, and to pioneering socially-oriented narrative challenge.

Kefka, like Dostoevsky's Underground Man, is an unforeseen, unwelcome mutation that not only exists, but must exist, considering what civilization is based on.

THE GAMES OF CHRISTMAS PAST

by Michael Zenke

Chicago, 1985. A young man made it known to his parents that he had only one interest this holiday season. Word of mouth at school and television commercials had alerted him to the launch of a videogame system by a company called "Nintendo." The Nintendo Entertainment System was the hottest "toy" of the year, and a young Michael Zenke made it clear that despite his interest in *Transformers, Ghostbusters* and a band of mutant reptiles, there was only one item on his Christmas list this year. My father was less than enthusiastic. Persistence, though, won out in the end, and the hunt for a console began.

By November, the October release of the NES had generated such a consumer frenzy that stores in southern Chicago just could not keep units in stock. My mother is nothing if not resourceful, and after a three hour drive to a newly opened Wal-Mart in Indiana, there was a beautiful grey and black box waiting for me under the tree on December 25th. Little did she realize back then, but those three hours were time well spent. Christmas 1985 changed the course of my life forever, thanks to my mother and a little plumber named Mario.

Regardless of your feelings on the holiday season, the end of the calendar year in the United States is a tremendous time for gaming. Every company makes an effort to outdo their fellows with big releases and splashy announcements. For gamers, this means the Christmas tree will almost certainly have at least one form of electronic entertainment tucked beneath it. Christmas gaming in the formative years is a powerful thing, with time off of school, some extra money and parents in an unusually lenient mood.

the escapist

The family television, that first Christmas, never even had a chance to show off the floats. Once the genie was out of the bottle, it was all I could do to contain myself until the console was hooked up and running the included copy of *Super Mario Bros.* I don't remember precisely what I thought the first time I heard the 8-bit strains of that now-familiar theme, but the rest of the day is well mapped inside my head.

It was the first time I'd ever played a videogame, and it took me a while to master the controls. With my younger brother looking on in awe, I began to gain the skills to make it through the perils of the swinging trees in 1-3, and the watery dangers of 2-2. Dinnertime required me to be physically pulled from the grip of the controller, and after dinner was spent showing bemused and confused older relatives this phenomenon that my parents had allowed into our home. That night I went to bed reluctantly, images of squashed Goombas and turtle shells dancing in my head.

That Christmas Day was the foundation of a long relationship with gaming that has, at this point in my life, gone far beyond a simple hobby. Those first fumbling experiences with the D-pad were my first steps into a world made of pixels and sprites. I didn't know this would be the case at the time, but since that day, gameworlds have been a constant companion. In time, gaming would bring many surprises into his life.

One happy surprise was that I discovered games are a great way to make friends. My knowledge of *Metroid* level layouts, my understanding of the insatiable need to *Hunt the Wumpus* and a keen fashion sense dictated by comic hero Howard Philips delivered me into the good graces of fellow social rejects as a grade schooler.

I had one of my first real arguments with one of those friends during the Christmas Holiday of 1991. I was at a sleepover at my buddy Eric's place, and we got into a serious tiff over *Super Mario World*. We had played through the game two-player, and he was angry that I ended up being the one to defeat Bowser. In the end, Eric and I made up, of course – we gamed together. You have to be friendly with someone to play all 128 levels of Data East's *Rampage*.

As my circle of friends grew around gaming, my experiences with gaming expanded. By 1991, I was into other gaming styles, as well, having received my first table-top RPG sourcebook *(Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Other Strangeness)* as a Christmas present the year before. I would receive a *Dungeons and Dragons* player's handbook that Christmas.

In 1992, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* was at the top of my Christmas list. I spent hours in combat with the minions of the dark world, and a few months into 1993, I found myself actually confronting Ganon for the first time. This final battle to the ironically titled game has forever been etched in my memory. Despite the time and distance, I'll never forget that battle or the moving cut-scene that followed.

"There are plenty of holiday gaming moments I'm fond of, but it really all comes down to one for me. It was, if memory serves, 1976 and I was nine years old. Among the presents that Christmas morning was a Sears Telegames machine - one of the first home *Pong* machines. I quickly learned to hook it up to the TV (use a flat head screwdriver to loosen two screws in the back of the huge cabinet TV, replace the rabbit ears antenna which was attached to those with the adaptor for the Telegames machine, tighten screws, turn to channel three, cross fingers the connection was properly made and turn on machine). It was my first real exposure to videogames and I was hooked. Perhaps smartly, my parents saw that my enthusiasm over videogames was pretty intense, so opted against buying an Atari 2600 or future machine. That, obviously, never dampened my enthusiasm, though."
- Chris Morris (CNN's Game Over)

"I distinctly remember having my best friend Mason over for the pre-fast dinner on Yom Kippur 1991 (I think that was the year, anyway). I had received a Super NES and *Super Mario World* for my birthday a few weeks earlier, and needless to say I was totally hooked. Mason and his family arrived a few hours early, so we got some quality time with the game before dinner was served. I remember reluctantly trudging upstairs when called, and barely touching my food in between excited chatter with Mason about the amazing, state-of-the-art experience waiting for us in the basement. We pleaded to be excused after about 10 minutes of picking at our plates - our baffled parents insisted that we couldn't be full so quickly. They eventually relented, and we spent the rest of the night conquering Twin Bridges and the first part of the Forest of Illusion. I remember being extremely hungry during the next day's fast. It was worth it, though."
 -Kyle Orland (VGM Watch)

You see, if I had wanted to, I could have paused that climactic engagement and looked outside my family's apartment window to see my father pack his things into his mother's car. I could have watched him prepare for a journey that would move him out of my life for a very long time. My father's losing battle with clinical depression left him unable to act as a husband or a father, and he sought help in the home where he had grown up. I, instead, chose to remain in the safety of the cool, green Overworld screen. I was a young man in his early teens, and at least that day, Ganon's firebats and spinning trident seemed far less painful than what was happening outside my window.

The Holiday season has changed a great deal since that first game's Christmas, in 1985. Videogaming, like me, has matured over the years. My cousins don't have to explain to their older relatives what the funny box hooked up to the television is. Indeed, years of practice ensure that my brother and I can school any of the younglings who might care to challenge us to a round of *Mario Kart* during their time in town for the Christmas holiday. Though I am still comparatively young, high school students can't believe I was born before the U.S. NES launch. The PlayStation was the New Thing for their early Christmas wishes, and if it was given as a gift, it was just as likely to be for their parents as it was for them.

That day, Ganon's firebats and spinning trident seemed far less painful than what was happening outside my window.

"A number of years back, when *Majora's Mask* first came out, both my brother and my then-boyfriend received it for Hanukah. Neither of them spoke to me for two weeks. And they - who had never had much to talk about before - were suddenly on the phone exchanging tips for hours each day. Of course, eventually, the frenzy stopped. Even holiday gamers need to come up for air. Anyways, by then it was January. "
- Bonnie Ruberg (Heroine Sheik)

My Mom regularly had to navigate a forest of N64 cords to leave her house in the morning.

In 1999, the best year in videogaming, I was able to return the favor my parents did for me 14 years earlier by purchasing a game for a cousin. *Pokémon* for the Gameboy was the hit of the season , and I was able to pass on some of the nerd to a young woman completely deserving of the socially impairing gift. The year of *Half-Life* and the Dreamcast was also the year I received *Super Smash Bros*. for Christmas. With me in college and my brother only a year away from graduating high school, my mother had moved into a house and made the mistake of making sure I felt at home. She regularly had to navigate a forest of N64 cords to leave her house in the morning, my

friends and I still beating the crap out of each other at 7a.m. For the record, fancylad Link wins over DK, Fox and Yoshi every day of the week.

This Christmas is no different, though the faces on the boxes have changed and the hit console has nothing to do with a Japanese company. Gaming is still very much a part of my life, far more than I ever could have dreamed that first gaming holiday. I asked my wife to marry me on the seventh anniversary of our first date, and in addition to a ring, I gave her a gift that she had been wanting for some time: a Gamecube. Last year, the cousin for whom I bought the *Pokémon* cartridge asked for a

Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook for Christmas. When my brother was in Japan last summer, the care package I sent him included Doom 3 for his laptop. Even my father, despite not being a very large part of my life, talks gaming with me during the few conversations we have each year.

Christmas gaming means a lot to me because, in a way, it reflects what can happen during the course of a lifetime. You open a present, not really knowing what's inside. Your parents, meaning well but not always on top of the particulars, have already taken it out of the packaging; you can't return it. You pop the disc into the console and

"As the youngest child of the family, my collection of hand-me-down gamingware included broken Colecos, a barely functional Intellivision and an Apple computer with a monitor so lethal, I still have the cathode glow burned on my retinas. I'd like to thank my family for that. Several years ago, I decided that for Christmas it was high time that my brother's children were introduced to the wonders of addictive gaming. (This was not revenge motivated. Really.) A tradition that began with a solitary Playstation 2 console has gone on to include the other consoles, various online game subscriptions and two Alienware beasts. My brother will frequently complain now that his kids sneak into *EverQuest* late at night on the weekends. I believe he has me to thank for that."
- Foton (AFKGamer)

start to play. Some people get fed up with the game, while others can't put it down. There are low scores, high scores and lots in between.

However you get from game start to the end credits, the important part is that you play. Despite the sometimes puerile or vulgar nature of the subject material at hand, good games make you a different person than you were when you started. Better marketing, prettier graphics and bigger budgets have brought gaming to the mass market, but the reason gaming is so successful is that it is special. The really great games change how you look at the world around you as drastically as any book or movie. Once you let them into your life, you can't ever let them go.

Christmas Holiday, January of 2000. I'm back at my dorm in Olympia, Washington, enjoying the last days of break. I'm at my PC, and I've just finished installing a gift I picked up for myself while I was home in Wisconsin. I've heard good things about it, but a busy end of the year and a tight budget

stopped me from getting my hands on the title when it was first released. The loading screen fades away, and I'm standing in what appears to be a subway car. A voice chimes in overhead: "Good morning, and welcome to the Black Mesa transit system. This automated train is provided for the security and convenience of the Black Mesa Research Facility personnel. The time is 8:47 A.M."

Merry Christmas.

Michael "Zonk" Zenke is Editor of Slashdot Games, a subsite of the technology community Slashdot.org. His long-standing personal site can be found at Randomdialogue.net. He lives in Madison, WI (the best city in the world) with his wife Katharine.

However you get from game start to end credits, the important part is that you play.

Merry Christmas

~~Happy Holidays~~

Felicitous
Non-Denominational
Fourth Quarter

Exile in Midgar: A Holiday Story

by Sean Fischer

For 12 years of my life, I dreaded the first week of January. Many north of the equator will probably assume it has to do with horrid weather, but it was not this. My dread of this period was centered around the end of December to the end of that first week of January. You see, I've never celebrated Christmas, or Hanukkah, or any of the other winter holidays, due to my family's religious background. And those 12 years during which I dreaded that week in January were of my time in the public school system.

Now, most people would probably equate such dread with the fact that, unlike all of the other children, I never got any presents. That's not really it. It was more a general annoyance of having to explain to people that I didn't celebrate holidays and exactly why I didn't celebrate them. I didn't miss holidays any more than a person could ever "miss" something they'd never had. It was simply something that happened to other people that didn't happen to me.   At the same time however, I feel that one cannot view a world from the outside without being caught up in the lives of those on the inside. While I hadn't celebrated it personally, I had seen the spirit of it, and in some ways I couldn't help but feel it, even if I was distanced from it.

In December of 1997, my family and I went to the annual gathering of our extended family for the holiday season. Although we had never celebrated the holiday, it did offer us a great chance to catch up with everyone in the family. I usually looked forward to seeing everyone, even if I knew there would be some awkward moments throughout the evening. My family was one of the first to arrive, so my brothers and I immediately set about exploring my grandparents' house for the requisite candy and entertainment that we usually found during that time of the year. We stumbled into my Aunt's room on the other side of the house and found her fussing over her new Sony Playstation. I had played with the Playstation before, so it wasn't some foreign beast, especially since I'd been playing videogames for almost my entire life. We immediately took up the controller and started playing demos of Parappa and other early Playstation notables. Among the available games was one alien to me. The title read Final Fantasy VII. I was immediately enamored by the look of the game and its casing, and once everyone else left to enjoy the rest of the festivities of the gathering, I put in Disc 1.

I was immediately immersed. From the lolling arpeggios of Uematsu's "Prelude", to the silhouetted Buster Sword on the main menu screen, to the awe inspiring cinematics I saw as the game opened, I was completely astounded. I navigated Cloud through a Midgar reactor, examined the surroundings and was entranced by the conversations I had with the characters. I was captivated by the distance of Cloud's personality, and how although he was working with the group, Avalanche, he didn't really feel like part of it. One of the members, Barret, frequently mentioned this isolation in the beginning of the game. Despite that, the game served only to make me forget about the distance I was experiencing myself—I had quickly forgotten the party I had come there to attend. That is, until they called me in for dinner.

During dinner, I got to thinking about my foray into Final Fantasy. There I was in the midst of a party celebrating a holiday that I had no part in, further distancing myself from everyone else by playing a game instead of socializing. But at the same time, I was gaining a whole new world and perspective. It was odd to me that I could feel so distant from the events around me, yet be affected by the warm atmosphere they provided. This warmth certainly enhanced my wonderment of the new world that I was experiencing in Final Fantasy VII. I watched my grandfather as he quietly sat, pushing his food onto his utensils, slowly eating. In the previous year, he had suffered a stroke, and he'd not been the same since.

I still remembered playing with him as a child. The gifts and collectibles he would give to me and my siblings are still lying around the house. But at the same time, there was an intellectual side of him that was gone, just as soon as I was old enough to appreciate it. As I sat there, I drew parallels between his calm, relaxed manner, and myself, immersed in gaming. The same atmosphere that had allowed me a feeling of wonderment was at the same time giving him a feeling of comfort. We were both isolated in our own ways from what was happening around us, but at the same time we both belonged. I have never forgotten what I saw in him that night, and it is a lesson that I've always treasured, especially now that he has passed away.

> We were both isolated in our own ways from what was happening around us, but at the same time we both belonged.
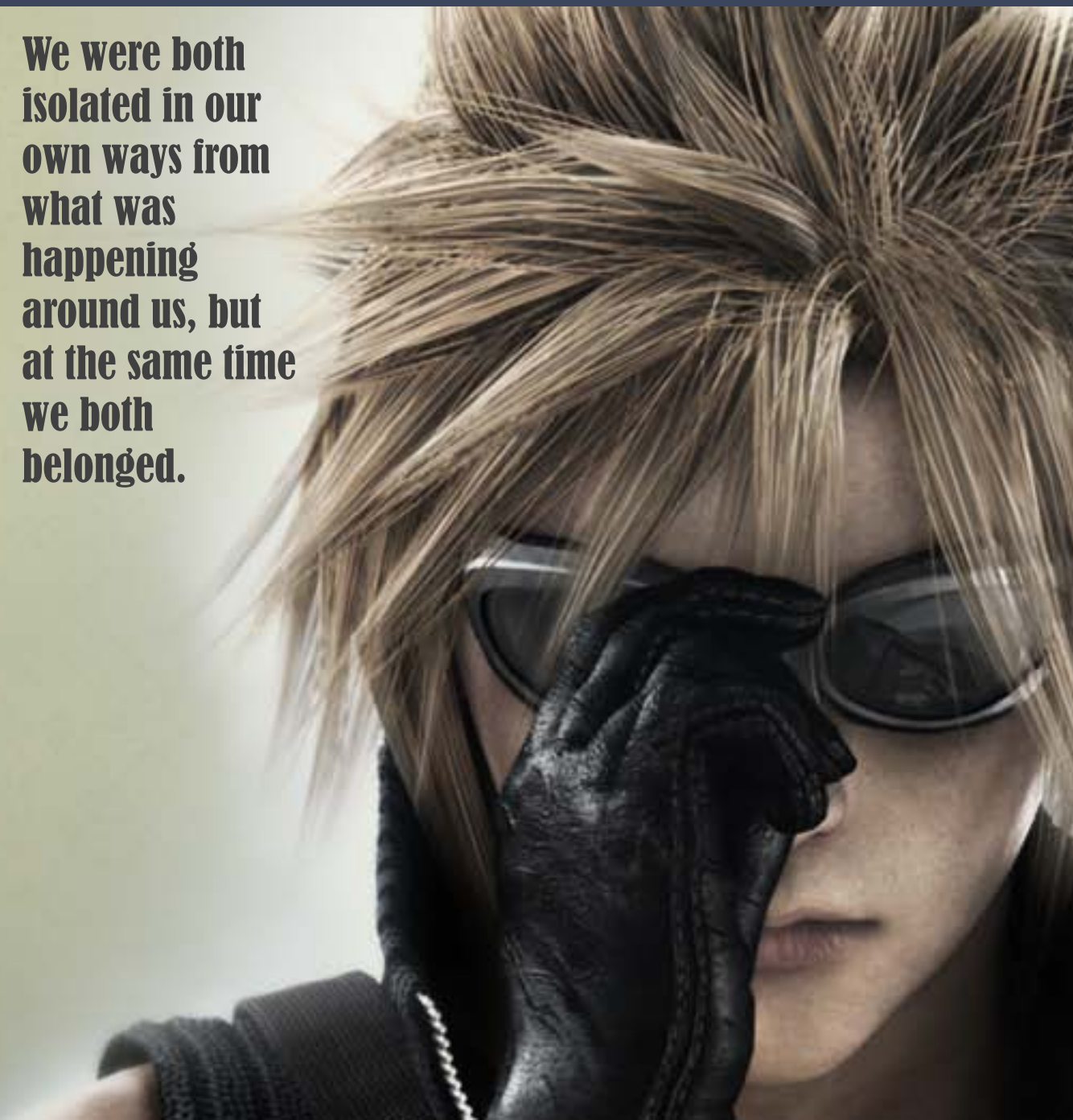
From that point on, I looked more closely at those around me. I thought about what simple things like holidays and family meant to them. My other grandfather, who had also suffered a stroke, had lost his ability to speak, but whenever I saw him with family, every glance, every movement he made spoke volumes. I learned something about people that Christmas. It doesn't really matter what's actually happening around us, so much as it's the feelings we got from the events, whether it was holidays or vacations or hobbies. I understood that the quality of an experience isn't measured only by objective values and quantities.

Later that night, I went back to Final Fantasy VII, and played further along into the storyline. My fascination didn't decrease with my furthering progress, but rather intensified. It's always been that way for me with games. A lot of the times when I enjoy games, it's not because of the way it plays or how good the graphics are; it's usually about how the game made me feel, from giddy to amazed. Games have always provided a means of isolation or escapism for their players. But I've always felt that no matter how isolated we are from

anything, the feelings we get from what we are doing—reading, gaming, watching movies, anything really—they're the real part, they're the ties that bind.

We can be isolated from common realities and still feel real and breathtaking emotion in what we're doing. Gaming is really just an extension of our lives, maybe in a different realm or a different reality, but what we feel through them is still just as poignant as anything we feel in the real world. No matter how isolationist gaming may seem to some, this is a reality that is inescapable for gamers: It's because of these feelings, and this legitimacy, that we all love playing videogames. 🅴

Sean Fischer is the Editor-in-Chief of www.allrpg.com

...what we feel through games is still just as poignant as anything we feel in the real world.
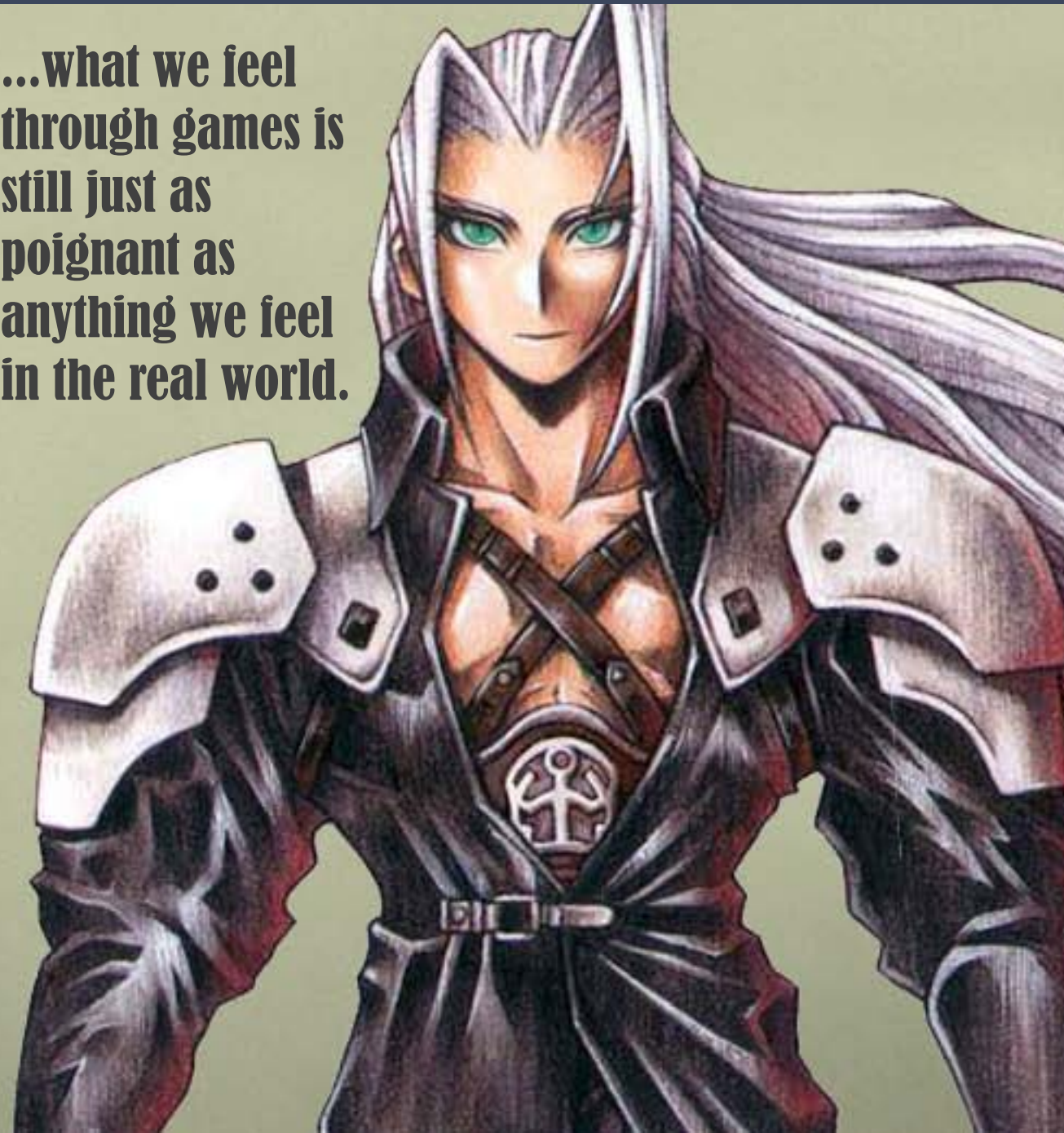
Video Game Merchandise:
Fandom, Gender and Gamers as Shoppers

by Bonnie Ruberg

It's that time of the year again. Winter has arrived, and with it has come all the trappings of the holidays: snow flakes, hot chocolate and department store Santas. What's the main thing on everyone's mind? No, it's not peace on earth and good will toward men. It's shopping. Because the holidays, we all know, are a time to buy.

The gaming community is no exception. Gamers like presents, too. Sure, the most obvious gift for the videogame lover in your life is, well, a videogame, but the options hardly stop there. After all, why settle for a mere game when there's a whole other world of possibilities out there, the world of game merchandise.

Call it what you will: swag, merch, it's all the same. Either it gets your little

gamer heart racing like a school girl's, or it just unnecessary frivolousness. Whichever side of the swag fence you're on, it's hard to deny that videogame merchandise has a considerable social and economic presence in the American gaming community - even if, as an industry, it goes more or less ignored. True, merchandise doesn't have any impact on the actual experience of gaming, but it has become an important element of videogame culture nonetheless.

Just look at the variety of merch available online: *Soul Calibur 3* action figures, N64 controller key chains and plush Nintendogs with super-deformed heads. And I haven't yet mentioned Dreamcast tissue holders, Famicom-shaped cushions and, last but not least,

a *Dead or Alive* pillow, complete with Kasumi's stuffed, protruding breasts.

Who's really buying this stuff? It's hard to tell. Of the 15 gamers I talked to on the subject, most seemed interested in more traditional merchandise, like t-shirts, soundtracks and figures. Even those who said they weren't really interested in merchandise tended to have purchased at least something that qualified, though often these were items that tied into their specific, personal interests, such as art books or concert tickets. But when asked about the coolest merch they'd ever bought, it was clear that uniqueness played a big part in determining cool. Answers ranged from game music piano scores to a *Metroid Prime* studded-leather wrist cuff.

Even if your average, everyday gamers aren't buying merchandise with the same dedicated vivacity with which they purchase games themselves, they're still interested, fascinated even, by swag - so much so that's its mere existence has become news. Sexy statues, adorable dolls, talking, robotic pokemon - gamers might not own them, but they still want to know what's out there. There's a certain excitement that surrounds game merchandise. Just think of all the ecstatic swag pics that circulate around the internet each year after E3. But what are people so excited about?

For a lot of gamers, merchandise isn't just about merchandise; it's about fandom. You can buy games, you can play games, you can beat games, but what then? "Collecting something obsessively is what makes someone an otaku," says Brian Ashcraft of Kotaku. "If you're into gaming, owning gaming merchandise is simply an extension of that." Merch identifies you as a fanboy (or girl) even after you've put down the controller.

Though the gamers I spoke to were careful to point out the line between a fanboy and a hardcore gamer (who might not care as much about swag as his fanboy counterpart), many expressed a belief that gaming merchandise supports not only individual fandom, but a general sense of gaming community. "Manpurse," a female gamer, wrote, "I love being able to show my love for a game – or its characters – with swag. By having swag, I not only fulfill my need for stuff, but I also can proclaim my love for certain games to the world at large (and hopefully attract the eyes of fellow fan)."

Of course, not everyone looks at merchandise in the same way. When asked what they thought when they saw strangers wearing game-related merch, gamers' responses were mixed. Some said they were eager to strike up conversations. Others admitted they were suspicious, and assumed initially that these strangers were only "posing." Certainly, with the introduction of video game merchandise to more mainstream

commercial venues like Target and Hot Topic, the threat of pretend fans has confused the image of the true fanboy. Who's who anymore? Anyone can buy a game shirt.

As online games radio show host Vince Scalabrino points out, "There is definitely a direct correlation between the amount of swag one has and the amount of games said person plays. But just

For a lot of gamers, merchandise isn't just about merchandise; it's about fandom.

because a person has swag, doesn't mean they are a hardcore gamer. And yes, fanboys deceptively wear swag, too. Which makes it all that much more difficult for us real gamers who are just trying to be real."

It's especially hard to talk about a sense of community inspired by merch if your merch never leaves the house. Unlike more public items of swag, like T-shirts and stickers, a good percentage of videogame merchandise is intended only for private viewing. When buying merchandise, says Ashcraft, "I think about things like how the goods will look on my shelf." True, such items aren't totally hidden from the light of day. Overall, though, they move swag consumers further from concerns of fanboy representation and community, and closer to the realm of collecting.

But why do we collect? Is it just to show our pride, or does it also allow us to display our individualism? As Ashcraft mentions, there's "something surprisingly comforting about it. Say you have a *Nintendogs* mini garden. Now, it

if were a regular garden, would it still give me some sort of happy feeling? No. I don't even like gardening. But, it's a *Nintendogs* garden. That makes it suddenly cool."

It seems the largest appeal of videogame merchandise is its ability to extend the gaming experience. Even simply aesthetic, non-useful items acquire a use: They let us continue the enjoyment of playing into non-playing. A poster, a stuffed animal, a keychain: These can make us smile no matter what we're doing. They allow us to take control of our gaming and our gamer-hood by physically manifesting our appreciation.

As always, some gamers would beg to differ. They do not see merch as conducive to their serious gaming identities. Says gamer Ola Mork, "I think playing games is being hardcore. Everything else is fluff ... It's not the clothes, it's not the stuff. It's living and breathing the games." Other non-collectors label videogame merchandise as childish - a common American

conception of the colorful toys, dolls and figures that often make up swag piles. Gamer Patrick Dugan asserts, "When I was 14 I got some *Resident Evil* figures of monsters that were cool. Now I'm 20, so I'd rather spend my money on music, beer, DVD's and games. If I'm going to be a geek I want to be a geek who invests in information, not dollies."

You might think that, like other supposedly childish elements of videogame culture, gaming merch would be more often associated with women gamers than men. Yet, that isn't so. Why? Of course, some of it can be explained with the old stereotypes. For example, if collecting is linked to hardcore fandom, then it can't be a female thing, because women (so the thinking goes) are not hardcore fans. Plus merchandise that sells through sex appeal is much less likely to be aimed at female gamers. And that may just be one of the major draws of gaming merch. As mentioned above, it helps extend the game experience past gameplay itself; in this case, it extends the game experience into sexual fantasy.

In the end, that's what we swag-lovers are: shoppers.

In other ways, though, the cultural phenomenon of videogame merchandise defies gender expectations. It offers a platform, however seemingly trivial, for women to stand on equal footing with men in the eyes of the industry. After all, purchasing power is purchasing power, regardless of the gender of the consumer behind it. Fittingly, interviewed women and men seemed interested in essentially the same products. And though it's clear that the companies who make swag are a little slow on the uptake, a girl can finally get a decent, fitted video game shirt in this town.

Moreover though, game merchandise brings into question expectations for male gamers. Cuteness, no longer abhorrent and "girly," but aesthetically pleasing, becomes an important, male consideration. And men have entered whole-heartedly into what, in larger society, we consider to be an almost wholly feminine realm: shopping.

Because, in the end, that's what we swag-lovers are: shoppers. Whether we do it online or in real life, we're members of an economy before we're members of a culture. Even when dealing with non-purchasable merchandise (Take, for example, gamer Scott Jon Siegel who has "a *Star Fox 64* box sitting in [his] basement that's roughly the size of a toddler," which he took from a local Electronics Boutique.), we are consumers.

Often we're so caught up in gaming that we forget to think of ourselves this way - perhaps because, strangely enough, the things we consume are not consumable, like figures that sit on a shelf and cannot be used up. This is perhaps even more a reason that we are not defined as gamers just by the games we play, but by the things we buy, by the merchandise we keep.

Bonnie Ruberg is a video game journalist specializing in gender and sexuality in games and gaming communities. She also runs a blog, Heroine Sheik, dedicated to such issues. Most recently, her work has appeared at The A.V. Club, Gamasutra, and Slashdot Games.

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MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

"What is topping your gaming wish list this year?"

Bonnie Ruberg,
"Video Game Merchandise"
A bouquet of DS games, one for each night of Hanukkah. Gluttonous, yes. But that would really light **my** menorah.

Patrick Dugan,
"A Fine Fantasy"
Its hard to get excited about Christmas like I used to, but one game I'm honestly stoked for is *Anito: Defend a Land Enraged*. I've seen about one really quality RPG come out every year for the past few, and the companies that produced those games, Bioware, Troika, Interplay, have all gone out of business or been gutted by the suits.

Sean Fischer,
"Exile in Midgar"
There are a ton of good games this holiday season. Luckily I was able to pick up a copy of *Dragon Quest VIII*, but I'm still looking forward to getting *Shadow of the Colossus*, *Soul Calibur III* and *We <3 Katamari*. There are almost too many great games this holiday season, but then again, too many great things isn't really a bad thing.

Pat Miller,
"Season's Goodbyes"
A working Sega Saturn and a copy of *Street Fighter: The Movie: The Game*. The classics will never die.

Joe Blancato,
Contributing Editor
MS Word for the Mac. That's a game, right? The amount of time I spend in it would put some hardcore *WoW* players to shame.

JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor
I'm trying to track down a copy of *Rifts: Promise of Power* for the NGage. Maybe a USB Xbox 360 Controller for my PC. Other than that, there isn't really anything this season that is carbonating my hormones. Twenty-one inch LCD Monitor would be nice, too.

Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor
Dragon Quest 8. I've been a long-time fan of the Dragon Warrior/Quest series. I tried the demo a little while back before it was released and the controls were so elegant and intuitive, I look forward to playing. Hopefully, I'll get it.