

the Escapist



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by Mark Wallace

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

by Alexander Macris

The year 2005 is ending on a down note for many videogame companies. Electronic Arts and Activision both announced that fourth-quarter earnings would be well-below expectations. Take Two's *The Warriors* failed to deliver the sales the company had hoped. Microsoft shipped far fewer X-Box 360s than expected. And the year's ten best-selling titles were almost exclusively holdovers from last year – this year had no mega-hits to compare with 2004's best-selling *Halo 2* and *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*.

But a purely financial focus would blind us to all that was good about 2005. We all got addicted to *Lumines* even though none of us pronounced it the same. Then we wove action and story together in *Indigo Prophecy*, the best adventure game in years. We found a new best friend in *Nintendogs* and found old friends on the *X-Box Arcade*. What ties these disparate products together is their collective broadening of the audience for games; their offerings of gameplay that

can be enjoyed in sixty minutes rather than sixty hours. New ways of thinking about genre combined with new uses of technology to make games more accessible rather than more ... of the same.

And of course, 2005 was the year we launched *The Escapist*. In the past six months, we've grown to over 100,000 monthly readers and brought out 25 issues, with over 200,000 words of feature content from some of the best voices in the industry. As the game industry matures and grows, game journalism must mature and grow with it. It's our hope here at *The Escapist* that we have contributed to this growth, and can continue to do so into 2006 and beyond.

I'd like to give thanks to our faithful readers, our inspired writers and contributors, our savvy editorial staff, our diligent production team and our progressive advertisers. Happy New Year and we'll see you in 2006!



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I would just like to say that I thoroughly enjoyed Fischer's "Exile in Midgar" piece. I thought it was a thoughtful peek behind the curtain at the life of a gamer. It was an interesting angle and carried through with heart and honesty.

I think it is a great example of the quality of content in your publication. Never have I been so instantly impressed by any journal online or otherwise.

Keep up the good work.

Justin Holmes

To the Editor: I've never read anything posted on your website before, but I did read all the year-end articles written by various individuals and I'd just like to say thank you. Thank you for saying everything that I ever wanted to say in appreciation for being born in a time when I could experience the same things that those who wrote of their Christmas memories did. Thank you for allowing



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me to pull myself back to a time when all I had to worry about was how to get past the next boss. Thank you for helping me relive a part of my childhood that I'll carry with me into the afterlife.

I could honestly cry myself a river thinking about how my life has been all the better for having parents who sacrificed past due bills in order to make sure I had a NES from Santa. God, I feel like the people who wrote these pieces somehow had access to my deepest thoughts, especially the one about *Final Fantasy VII*. *FFVII* is by far my favorite game. I could write a book on how that game altered the course of my life.

I sit here at my computer at 3:15 a.m. and wish I could give every child a way to live out my childhood. There's nothing that anyone could give me that could possibly come close to replacing those days. Even now as a young adult, I wish somehow I could turn back time and be back to when I first learned how to play my NES. When I have my own child, I will do everything in my power to instill in him/her the value of connecting with games the way I did.

I'm really at a loss for words and I don't know what else to say. You have a new fan, this I promise. I just wanted to write you and let you know that you stirred up in me something I haven't felt in a long, long time.

Thank you, thank you so much. I am so grateful. Merry Christmas and God bless.

Josh





Trust Me

by Mark Wallace

As we all know by now (and the rest of the world is rapidly learning), the imaginary currencies that are earned, spent and traded in massively multiplayer online games and other virtual worlds are anything but virtual, themselves. While no government authority stands behind them to insure their value, a seal of approval isn't needed for a currency to become "real." A *World of Warcraft* gold piece is worth as much as you can get for it on the market - about \$0.10 at the moment. The U.S. dollar derives its value in exactly the same way.

The people who inhabit virtual worlds have long realized this. Out-of-world sales of gold and other virtual items have been going on since the early days of text-based "multi-user dungeons" and other online spaces, in the late 1970s. And "real-money trade," as it's commonly known, can be an emotional issue, generating harsh conflicts between players who feel it's just part of the landscape and those who feel it ruins the integrity of their games, and between game companies and those who engage in the practice.

But as *The Escapist* looks back at 2005, it seems virtual worlds have reached a new level of sophistication and complexity where commerce and economics are concerned. In *Second Life* - a world in which real-money trade has the explicit stamp of approval of Linden Lab, the company behind the world - an avatar named Anshe Chung gained worldwide renown this year for her clever (and profitable) play of *Second Life's* real-estate market. It has reportedly garnered her hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of *SL* currency - which is, of course, freely convertible to hundreds of thousands of dollars in cold, hard cash.

But even in *SL*, trade in the virtual currency known as the Linden dollar has generated controversy. For more than a year, a web site called GamingOpenMarket.com, created and managed by *Second Life* residents, was the most trusted exchange for buying and selling Linden dollars. Residents listed their L\$ buy and sell orders there, and received payments in the world, or through PayPal. But when Linden Lab opened its own currency exchange to compete with GOM, that era ended. Unwilling to go head to head with the company that was printing the money itself (and who can blame them?), GOM closed up shop.

GOM built a service that *Second Life's* residents trusted and used. Despite there being nothing wrong with it, Linden Lab pulled the rug out from under the venture, rather than supporting it. The excuse the company gave bespoke an alarming lack of confidence in the residents of its virtual world. "We want to ensure that new residents have easy access to additional L\$ without having to take yet another leap of trust to sign up and give payment information to a third party," said Linden Lab economic czar Lawrence Linden. But residents had

already taken that leap of trust with GOM, and been rewarded. What Lawrence Linden's statement essentially boiled down to was Linden Lab telling its residents not to trust each other. The company didn't seem to trust them, itself.

It remains to be seen what economic strides (if any) can be made in such an atmosphere. But in virtual worlds where trust and responsibility **are** placed on the shoulders of residents, 2005 proved remarkable things are possible. For my money (virtual or otherwise), the biggest story of the year in virtual economics took place deep in outer space, surrounded by the harsh player vs. player realities of an MMOG known as *EVE Online*.

EVE lets its players run wild through a single, non-sharded virtual world that sometimes sees more than 19,000 people logged on at the same time. Most of the time, those "pod pilots," as they're often known, are shooting not at computer-controlled enemies, but at each other. Of the more than 5,000 interlinked star systems that make up the *EVE* galaxy, only about one-quarter of them are patrolled by non-player-

Unwilling to go head to head with the company that was printing the money itself (and who can blame them?), GOM closed up shop.



character police who will shoot down any PvPers in the vicinity. The other three-quarters are known as “alliance space,” a vast and lawless region where groups of player corporations known as alliances vie for control over vast tracts of space, destroying each other’s starships on a daily basis, fighting for dominance over space stations, star systems, moons and important travel routes.

With the game’s most valuable resources located in the dangerous reaches of alliance space, *EVE* hardly seems an encouraging place to launch a business. But in October, two enterprising pod pilots did just that, transplanting a real-life business structure into the virtual world in an unprecedented fashion. The remarkable thing is, no game mechanic allowed them to accomplish it. Instead, it was made possible by one of the rarest resources of virtual worlds: trust.

Count TaSessine and Serenity Steele are the heads of an alliance known as the Interstellar Starbase Syndicate. Twelve hundred pilots strong, ISS is unusual among the *EVE* alliances located in lawless space in that it’s a “carebear” organization, for the most part - i.e., its pilots are more interested in mining,

hauling ore, and manufacturing ships and ship components than they are in popping other players’ pods and claiming sovereignty over star systems (though ISS does have a combat wing). Still, ISS located its business in the heart of one of *EVE*’s most dangerous regions. So far, it’s been a success.

Their business plan is an ingenious one: Rather than engage in the wars that rage through alliance space, ISS has chosen to take a neutral stance, building a huge player-operated structure known as an “outpost” that provides repair, refitting and marketing services to all comers. In a star system known simply as KDF-GY, ISS has established a little Switzerland in space, where pilots of rival corps and alliances can dock to do business, sell loot and kit out their battlecruisers for the next engagement. And according to Martin Wiinholt and Shayne Smart, the 30-something players behind Count TaSessine and Serenity Steele, respectively, business is good.

But business is good only because it’s not actually ISS that owns the outpost. An ISS corp operates the outpost (and technically, within the game’s mechanics, owns it), but real ownership has been

vested with the pilots of *EVE*, through what has become the first publicly owned company in the game.

Via an in-game initial public offering in October, ISS sold 3,600 shares in the outpost, at a price of 10 million InterStellar Credits each, or about \$2.25 a share at prevailing eBay prices. That’s a whopping \$8,100 in ISK to support a business that earns money through *EVE*’s game mechanics, charging pilots for services such as docking and factory rentals, spaceship repair and the clones that must be kept at the ready, should a pilot’s life-support pod get popped by an enemy. Players and investors don’t seem to mind that the company is entirely virtual; shares in the outpost now trade for anywhere from 16 to 20 million ISK each. For many investors, ISS has already doubled their money.

Getting the outpost up and running, though, wasn’t easy. To protect against hostile pilots, the entire operation was carried out under a shroud of secrecy. Construction was begun during the weekend of the *EVE* fanfest and at an hour when the galaxy’s server cluster is commonly at its lowest ebb of population. On October 24, two weeks

...you can't go very far alone in EVE...

after the IPO had been completed, the outpost went into operation.

Taking the ISS outpost public through a sale of shares was not just an efficient way to raise money, though; it was also a way to insure that the outpost itself would remain unmolested. The outpost is not a for-profit business thirsty for pilots' money, but a publicly owned corporation that pays its operating margins back to shareholders. The ISS business plan projected enough traffic for investors to see a monthly dividend of about 470,000 ISK per share, a return of about 4.7 percent on the IPO price. After two months, dividends are running at about 4.3 percent - not bad for a company doing business in the middle of a war zone.

When the IPO closed, almost 100 different players from various corporations had bought shares. ISS also made pre-IPO deals for many of the major player corps that surround KDF-GY to establish an office in the outpost

that would give them access to more services there. All of this was done to give pilots ownership, both real and figurative, in the venture. You're less likely to train your battleship's railguns on an outpost that's not only providing you with services, but actually earning you money, after all.

Despite - or perhaps because of - the fact that no real-world money is changing hands here, Interstellar Starbase Syndicate's outpost IPO is the most important economic event to have happened in a virtual world in 2005. *Second Life* has seen similar investment schemes pop up, but never one that was backed by an in-world business. Anshe Chung's real-estate operation has been a smashing success, as have other residents' businesses, but the viability of those ventures is due to the business acumen of their proprietors, not to the collective investment decisions of 100 or more of the world's residents.

The fact is, no other venture in any virtual world has come as close as ISS's to bringing the real thing into cyberspace. The interesting question is, what made an operation like this possible in *EVE*?

EVE's software and overall design provide the basic conditions under which ISS is able to operate. The resources found in the world of *EVE* (i.e., the ships, modules and commodities, etc., that are used in everyday gameplay) range from Civilian Gatling Railguns that cost a piddling 1,000 ISK each on up to 36 billion ISK outposts and enormous ships that reach similarly ridiculous levels of expense. But they are distributed in a different manner than in most MMOGs. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, everyone at the same level has access to more or less the same range of loot. You could solo all of Azeroth and the only thing you would miss would be killing a few boss dragons that require a raid group.

In *EVE*, by contrast, **most of the game** is closed off to the pilots who choose to fly solo. Just taking a tour through alliance space can be a fatal mistake, unless you're in the company of corp-

mates you trust - and who can fight well enough to defend themselves against pirates and hostile alliances. And the most high-end stuff in the game (those 36 billion ISK outposts, for instance), as well as a great deal of content that is almost as formidable, is nearly impossible for a single pilot to construct, maintain, operate or even afford.

Because you can't go very far alone in *EVE*, social interaction takes on an important role in the galaxy. The benefits of belonging to a corporation or alliance are very real: You can do things, go places and get stuff you wouldn't otherwise be able to, to a greater degree than in most other games. Trust and cooperation are a valuable resource. Without it, very little would be possible.

After two months, dividends are running at about 4.3 percent - not bad for a company doing business in the middle of a war zone.

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That trust works in a couple of different ways. Though *EVE*'s software is what makes a neutral outpost a viable idea, there is no game mechanic to support an IPO. Investors in the project are taking a risk; ISS could simply walk away with the cash, as has happened before.

Trading shares in the secondary market is another risky venture; they cannot be placed in the interface trade window, but have to be swapped in a two-part transaction: I give you my shares, and I trust you to send me the money. To get around this, ISS has enlisted a third-party corp to hold shares in escrow for buyers and sellers. But then, there's the question of whether you can trust the bankers. There's no game mechanic for

it, but in this case, pod pilots seem to trust each other, nonetheless.

Just as important is the fact that CCP Games, the Icelandic company behind *EVE Online*, trusts its players. Cons and scams are an expected and accepted part of gameplay in the *EVE* galaxy, according to the game's FAQ. While that might at first seem like a reason to trust no one, it also indicates that CCP is providing one of the most important resources of all in an MMOG: freedom. Without that, ISS might never have attempted its venture in the first place, and the virtual world might never have seen what is an important example of top-to-bottom emergent social gameplay. The fact CCP does not step in

to muck about with such player ventures is what allows them to thrive.

When Linden Lab opened the currency exchange that put GOM out of business, on the other hand, the widespread reaction among residents was that perhaps it wasn't even worth trying anything new. By simply looking on as ISS gets going, CCP has told its players they are free to try what they like. There is no better quality in a virtual world than that.

And *EVE*'s players are not stopping at just one outpost. ISS is currently considering doing the whole thing over again, but this time in an even more contested part of the galaxy. The KDF-

GY outpost has brought new pilots to alliance space, pilots who might never have considered leaving the protection of the NPC cops. Now, ISS sees the opportunity to spark a similar economic development in an area that's not yet securely under any one alliance's control. If their venture succeeds, it could change the face of the metaverse, not just in *EVE*, but wherever avatars look on and trust that yes, these things are possible.



Mark Wallace can be found on the web at Walkering.com. His book with Peter Ludlow, Only A Game: Online Worlds and the Virtual Journalist Who Knew Too Much, will be published by O'Reilly in 2006.

The Gaming Industry Beyond Thunderdome

by Shannon Drake

It was November, and America's retail stores beckoned, singing a siren song of next generation's gaming goodness. As the masses queued outside major electronics retailers like Soviet peasants waiting for their bread and vodka, rumors flew of shenanigans afoot. Microsoft was creating the shortage just to boost their hype. Best Buy was advertising consoles and selling only bundles. An Elkton, Maryland Wal-Mart became Thunderdome as crazed shoppers battled in the aisles, and all of it just for a gaming console. As the holiday shopping season gets another day older and the American consumer goes deeper into debt, it's clear that the world, at least our world, has changed. When they're fighting in the aisles at Wal-Mart because of bombardments on television, magazines, MTV and the Internet, gaming has finally arrived as a major cultural force for everyone, not just for a diverse gaggle of enthusiasts.

The launch of the 360 marks the end of an era. Parents waiting to take heads in pursuit of the Hot New Christmas Toy weren't the only one's suffering winter's

icy kiss. A significant chunk of the people in line outside America's retail stores wanted the consoles entirely for themselves - or for eBay - and not so Little Jimmy would have the Best Christmas Ever. What was once the treasured item for eager kids on Christmas morning, and the occasional nostalgic adult, is now the must-have item for everyone. It was once a geek status symbol. Now, an Xbox 360 is something the Wal-Mart-going hordes of Middle America will riot for, the ultimate cultural icon in a society that worships entertainment.

Moving beyond the Wal-Mart Thunderdome means an adolescent gaming industry is going to have to grow up. Thousands of non-gamer barbarians pouring through the walls with wireless controllers in hand will force a Renaissance of creativity in a moribund industry chasing sequels and the Next *Halo* dream. Thousands of educated adults, which are what economists call "market forces," aren't going to buy games calibrated and aimed at the currently coveted "Males, 13 to 25"

demographic. All it's going to take to cause a violent, shattering earthquake in the industry is one game, and that game is coming sooner than we dare to dream.

When someone dares to challenge the game-jock mindset - which states that games have to be cool to gamers and their gamer buddies - and makes a *Katamari Damacy* for the non-geeks buying the 360, they will never have to work again. The people fighting in the aisles for the latest consoles aren't just geeks. They are the dread casual gamers. Or they're parents who grew up with the NES and won't mind the sprouts grooving out to the latest Mario offering, while they spend hundreds of dollars downloading old-school Nintendo games on their Revolution. They are, in other words, The Adults. Your mom just came into the gaming party, picked up a PBR tall-boy, and started shaking her ass on the dance floor. And she called every single one of her friends.

If they haven't bought one yet, they will. The cultural penetration is only going to increase, especially when youth-



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ONCE IN A WHILE A GAME COMES ALONG
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The hordes are just over the horizon, bringing with them vast changes to our shared gaming culture...

worshipping Boomers turn their eyes to the latest toys of their kids. Fortunately, the tools for hitting this new audience are already in place, they're just being used incorrectly. As it stands, developers are using Swiss Army knives as simple hammers. *Half-Life 2* shipped with a groundbreaking physics engine, and after years of development, the most interesting thing anyone could find to do with it was create really advanced crate puzzles - which we've seen for years -

and gimmick gravity guns. They spent five years developing a little red Corvette, and now they take it out on the interstate and drive 55 with both hands on the wheel.

Open up your mind for a little bit and possibilities emerge. Imagine the *Half-Life 2* engine used with a *Lumines* model to create a gorgeous casual-oriented puzzle game with to-die-for physics and a triple-A budget because the millions of people that make *Bejeweled* a hit will play games like that. Imagine MMOGs built around actual social fare and interaction rather than spending 60 hours killing the same monster over and over again, because parents can't schedule their lives around spending 10 hours in a dark cave hoping for a rare drop. How about games where "cooperative play" doesn't mean "two crosshairs on the screen so you can both gun down the hordes of aliens," but it means you have to, you know, cooperate and work together to make something happen? When someone realizes the third dimension is a (forgive me) new direction of its own, instead of just being where you bunny hop to avoid incoming

fire, we might even see crazy zero-G sports games. It's a whole new gaming world.

It's not going to happen overnight, but the invisible hand of capitalism doesn't care if your game-jock friends laugh at you for developing a game the regular Joes going Russell Crowe for a 360 will play. Someone's going to look at all those adults with adult salaries buying 360s, run the numbers and realize that adult salaries equal hats made of money. The vanguard of the mainstream is upon us. The hordes are just over the horizon, bringing with them vast changes to our shared gaming culture, and possibly a new golden age of creativity. Onward. 

Millionaire playboy Shannon Drake lives a life on the run surrounded by Japanese schoolgirls and video games. He also writes about anime and games for WarCry.



2005: A Massively Multiplayer Odyssey

by N. Evan Van Zelfden



This is the year that MMOGs changed. No one quite knows why (or even how), but it always comes back to *World of Warcraft*. This little game has confounded an entire industry.

In late January, developer Scott Miller made a post to his blog. Miller decided to give *World of Warcraft* a try. "You see, I've never played an online MMOG and I picked *WoW* as my first experience, just to see what the attraction is.

"I started playing about a month ago, during the Xmas slow period. And now I have over five full days of play time - we're talking 120+ hours of game time. I've never played a game for this long before, and never thought I would. But something about *WoW* keeps me coming back."

After such an admission, the confessor then always takes a step back. "First off, the game doesn't have a story, and I've always been strongly attracted to story-driven games, so this has me puzzled."

This is followed by a personal explanation: "But, I think the thing that keeps me logged in is that I keep finding new areas. I have an explorer personality, and boy does this game feed that part of me.

"If you had to name the one single aspect of this game that keeps you coming back, what would it be? I'm curious what draws other players, though." There is no single aspect. There are many elements that have made *WoW* a phenomenon...

Tracking the Storm

World of Warcraft launched back on November 23, 2004, at a Fry's Electronics in Fountain Valley. Nearly 7,000 fans showed up to stand in line for purchase the game. And that's pretty much how it was. All the MMOG kids played *WoW*, saying it was the coolest game ever.

That wasn't so remarkable. But something happened. The game began to gain real momentum. As more and more people played it, more and more developers became transfixed by it. They began to watch what the game was doing in China, because they'd never seen anything like it.

On April 10th, 2005, a promotional tour for *WoW*'s Chinese Beta Test began with an 11 city opening. Like a swarm of locusts, crowds began to gather. Lines began forming. They would go on to purchase every pre-order disc in mere

hours. The press covered stories of their camaraderie, of their waiting and of their epic numbers...

By the time the all-access beta closed on June 6, 2005, 500,000 Chinese had participated.

On July 20, 2005, just 45 days after launch, Blizzard announced 1.5 million paying subscribers in China. By November 8, 2005 the game had reached 4.5 million subscribers worldwide. It continued to gain subscribers, in North America, in Europe, and most of all, in Asia. This game has become a tidal wave that threatens to sweep us all away.

Eye of the Storm

At the Austin Game Conference in October, there was an overwhelming sense of desperation. Trudging through the halls, sitting in the sessions, all

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World-wide.

developers could do was talk about *World of Warcraft*.

In an insular world, *WoW* was a breakout game that left the competition anything but speechless. The fact that Blizzard didn't attend the conference only fueled the fire.

Several major publishers talked about what their plans for the future. Turbine recognized the need to engage in marketing, and move beyond the old retail model. NCsoft placed an emphasis on retail, calling it paid marketing, and expects to continue to use it. Sony Online Entertainment has plans to go in a completely new direction. They intend to go worldwide and cross-platform. Talking heads speculated as to whether or not this was a good idea. But SOE delivered this plan with such grim determination that they might succeed, not on the merits of their vision, but by virtue of grit alone. As one SOE executive said, "We're going to try everything we can, and see what works."

But still, everyone's question remained: "Why is *World of Warcraft* so popular?"

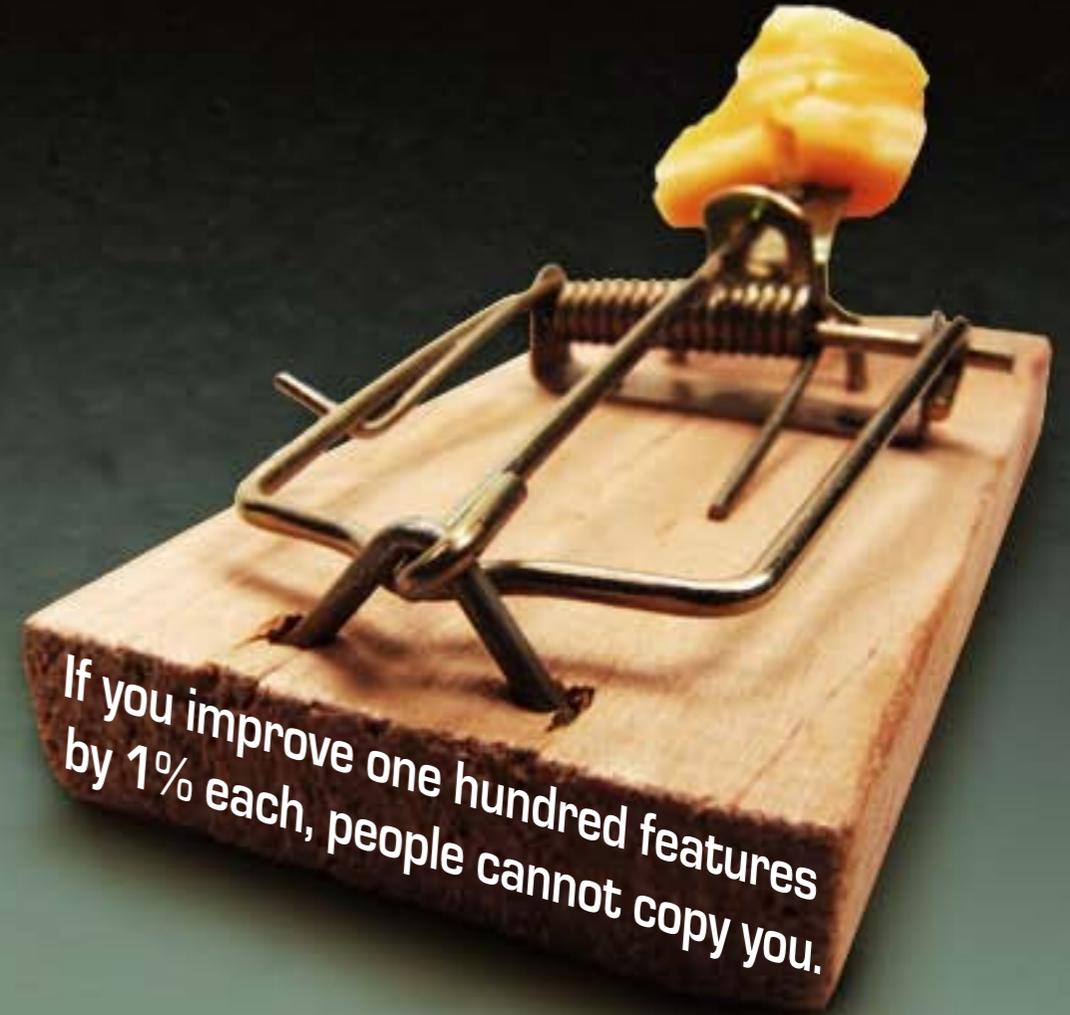
The Better Mousetrap

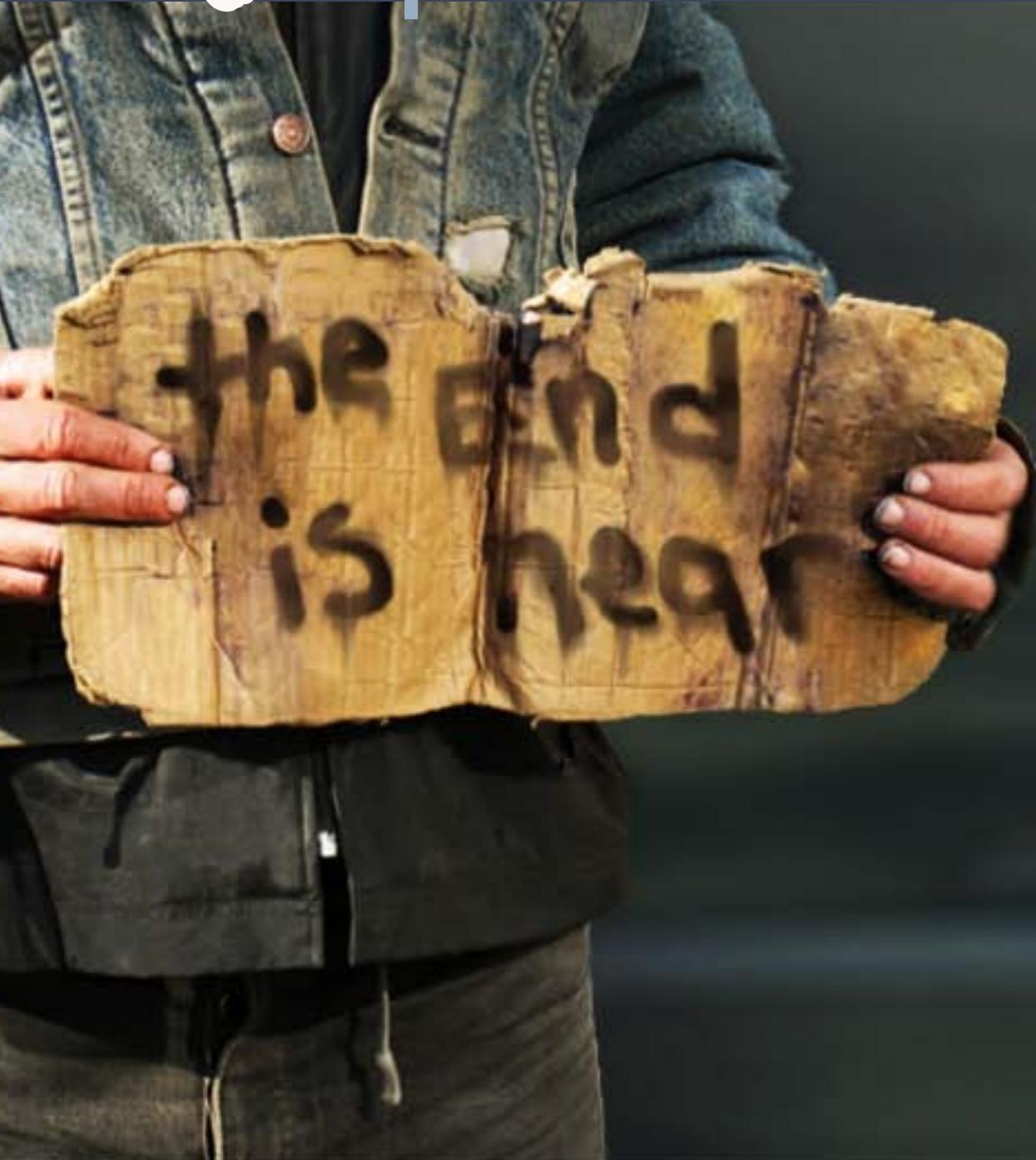
The secret to Blizzard's success is this:

A Good Product. *World of Warcraft* truly is an improvement over previous games in the genre. If you expect to make your game 100% better by introducing one feature, that feature can be copied. But if you improve one hundred features by 1% each, people cannot copy you.

A Valued Brand. Gamers who would never have touched an MMOG before, were willing to trust Blizzard, and to finally see what MMOGs were really like. And once they took the leap, they found a polished experience.

And Some Marketing. This title had **some** marketing. And to achieve commercial success, your marketing efforts need only be a **little** better than the competition's. Barring a few





exceptions Blizzard has had no serious competition. If another MMOG company comes along with a focus on strategic marketing, Blizzard will be in trouble.

If you truly want to make a successful MMOG, you must remember that nothing draws a crowd like a crowd.

Upward and Onward

For every sidewalk prophet with a cardboard sign of doom, there is a fresh start, a second chance, a new hope. At the closing session of the Austin Game Conference, beloved developer Gordon Walton spoke about what these really drives these games. "The thing that we're up to here, is creativity."

He added, "We're trying to do something that the customers want. And as a customer, what do you want? You want something delightful. You do want something that will titillate you in a way you're not titillated by the stuff you're already consuming.

"And we see so little of that, particularly in MMOGs. Because the stakes are

higher. This higher stake thing has driven us to be more and more risk averse. And we've got to get past this, or we're doomed to have this ever shrinking pool of hardcore, crazy customers who get the vision of what online can be."

It all comes down to that vision of what online can be. Walton's closing words sum up this years chapter in the history of games. "Why do we build this stuff? **We probably had this moment where we got the vision of what this can be. This is change the world kind of stuff that we get to work on.**"

N. Evan Van Zelfden expects great things for the future of games. Games are the greatest art form to date, he asserts. This is why he plays games, writes about them, and continues to work in the industry of games. 

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The Year of the Turtle

by Dave Thomas

Dear Videogame Industry:

Don't look at me. It's not my problem. I wasn't the one who spewed out product all year and bragged about how great the future would be. It wasn't me who promised immersion and delight and mind blowing experiences that would put whatever Brad and Angelina do in a hotel room to shame. And it's sure not my job to try and pull it all together now - make some sense out of the chaos, say what it means and make it fit into a shiny tale of how games will walk the earth like gods among men.

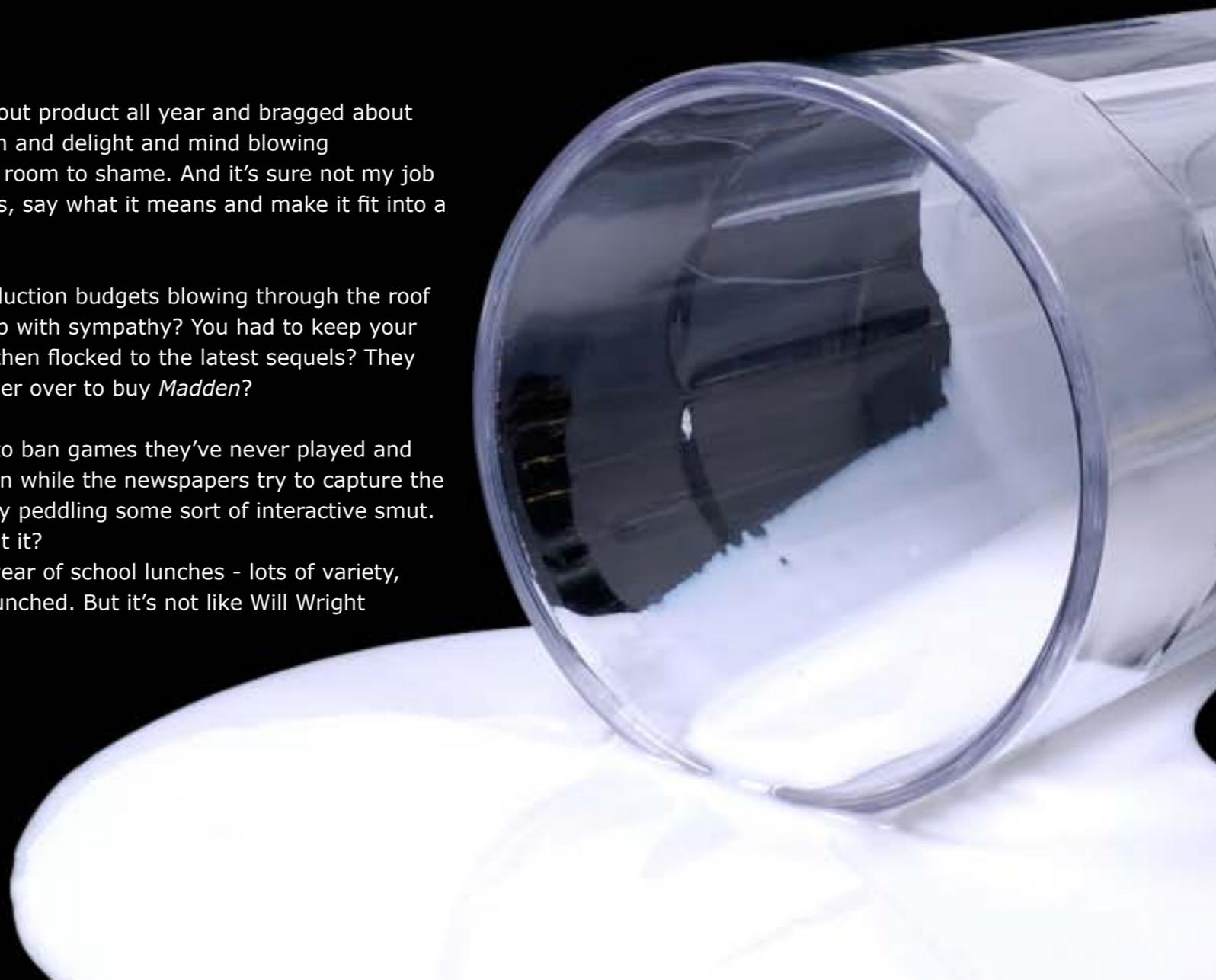
What? It's not your fault, either? You were too busy dealing with production budgets blowing through the roof and work weeks that make speed freak Gulf War fighter jet pilots gulp with sympathy? You had to keep your eye on the bouncing ball, as your fans bleated about innovation and then flocked to the latest sequels? They complained about licenses and exclusivity and then knocked each other over to buy *Madden*?

And, I'll admit, those politicians certainly haven't helped. They want to ban games they've never played and waste time passing laws that judges laugh out of legal existence, even while the newspapers try to capture the story by suggesting to the world your little development team is really peddling some sort of interactive smut. Sure, you've had a hell of a year. But what am I supposed to do about it?

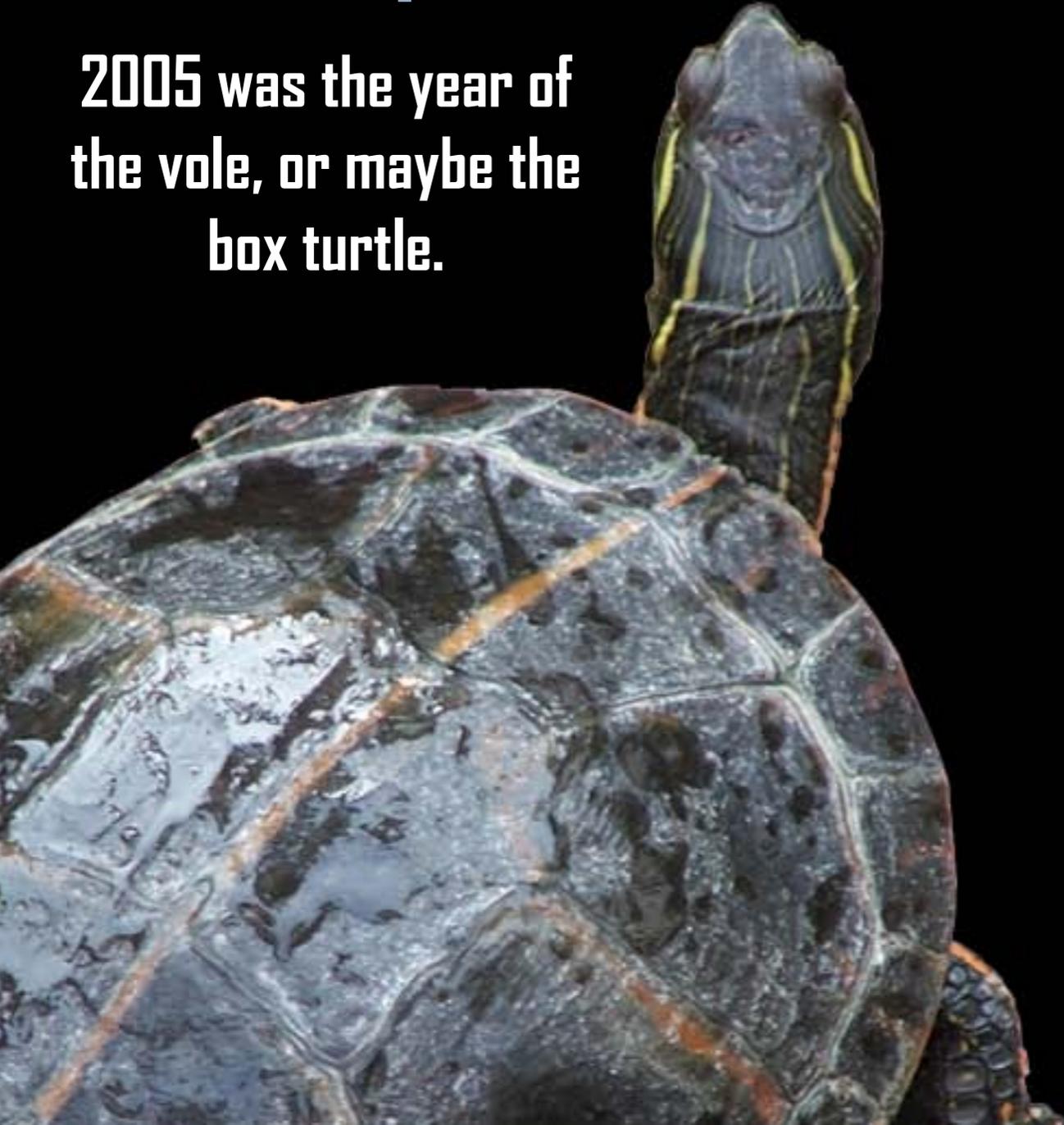
I mean, it's not like I can just say, "Videogames in 2005 were like a year of school lunches - lots of variety, some surprises and way too many corn dogs." Sure, the Xbox 360 launched. But it's not like Will Wright shipped *Spore*.

But I guess that's why you're asking me to bring it all together.

Alright already. If you'll stop crying, I'll do it. But this is the last time. Next year, you better get your act together. Next year, you guys make the year make sense, yourselves. This is the last time.



2005 was the year of
the vole, or maybe the
box turtle.



The Year of Living Extraneously

According to the Chinese calendar, we are finishing up the year of the rooster and heading into the year of the dog. This may mean something to someone, somewhere, although what that might be certainly escapes me. Still, I like the idea enough to suggest that for games, 2005 was the year of the vole, or maybe the box turtle.

Now, I am of the opinion that we should take Chinese things seriously because a) They have 10,000 year-old culture; and b) I'm pretty sure they made all of my clothes and most of the parts in my computer. To me, this translates into some form of cultural wisdom I'd like to tap into. Also, there's this other thing I've noticed: They have their own calendar and their own New Year. This is something I think the videogame industry should seriously consider, because as far as I can tell, we only pretend to follow the old January 1st to December 31st routine in the first place.

Sort of like Jewish families setting up Christmas trees just because everyone else does, gaming journalists trot out end of the year roundups and best-of's and sagely nodding retrospectives while

they know good and well that gaming's New Year's happens in May. The Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles is what marks the birth/death cycle of the gaming year, and its New Year's bash is always the Sony Party.

Like those booze-soaked New Year's most people celebrate at their local Quality Inn, the gaming world celebrates the new gaming year by loading up on drinks and making big promises about the upcoming year. Game people just do it in some parking lot in L.A., while a midget band dressed like KISS rocks out a few tunes.

Looking back to E3 2005, I really should have known the year would turn out like it did. This was the year that an industrial/tribal pyro act skirted fire codes and filled the convention center with the smell of gasoline promoting a game that still hasn't launched; where zombie women drew more attention than booth babes; the Gizmondo defied the odds by building some buzz; and Nintendo irked everyone by pushing the Game Boy Micro and shrugging at suggestions that they really ought to talk about the Revolution. This was the year that Rockstar put their games in tour

busses; put the tour busses in the convention center behind chain link fences and then apparently didn't let anyone actually see the games. This is same E3 that, after feeling like I was punched in the face by the overload of Sony's PlayStation 3 presentation, I turned to the head of the International Game Developers Association anti-censorship group and told him maybe the industry had gone a little too far with the violence thing.

This was also the year I met Steven Spielberg. And by "met," I mean I stood next to him and tried to eavesdrop on what he was saying.

So, like a box turtle, this year was alive, but just sort of sat there. It wasn't noble like a horse; it wasn't fleet like a panther. It wasn't even peculiar and fascinating like a jellyfish. As best that I can tell, 2005 will go down as the year that just sort of crawled along on the ground.

Steve and Me

One of the more peculiar E3 rituals involves "behind closed doors" meetings. At first glance, this seems like a great idea. Give select press limited access to

products that are kept away from the prying eyes of the general public. Of course, letting, say, the New York Times into a darkened room filled with comfortable couches tucked away from the noise and chaos of the E3 show floor and presenting your game in soothing high definition video really doesn't qualify as keeping things under wraps. It's more like PR streaking. But the press likes "closed doors" because that is generally code for "free bottle of water." And trust me, haggard game journalists will do just about anything at E3 for a cold drink or a Powerbar in the middle of the day. And that whiff of exclusivity a door can give a meeting is the closest thing most of us will ever get to real celebrity.

It was during one of these closed-door meetings that I met, or more accurately, ran into, one of biggest celebrities I will probably ever encounter in my life. I was touring EA's booth, running behind Chris Morris of CNNMoney when our PR guide asked if we wanted to see the company's upcoming Godfather game. "Of course," we replied, eager to see if videogame-dom could do to a classic piece of cinema what the movies so willingly do when defacing our beloved game franchises.



The trouble was, in this particular demo room, there was a group of people standing in a clutch, in front of the Godfather game, blithely blocking everyone. As we shouldered through the rude throng, Morris proved that, while he's probably a better journalist that I am in a 100 different ways, being observant was the most important one.

"It's Spielberg," he whispered as we pushed through the gauntlet of bodies to reach to the demo.

Turning around, I gawked like a hayseed in the city. "Golly gee! It was Mr. Steven E.T. Spielberg, right there!"

Double taking and checking again, I was sure it was Spielberg because, besides the fact that he looked like Spielberg (he was wearing one of those Navy ball caps that all directors of a certain era seem to favor), he was surrounded by a phalanx of EA suits. And anyone who is not a pretty girl in a short skirt surrounded by people wearing suits is, by definition, important.

Now, just because I can't recognize a celebrity when I run into one doesn't mean that my basic reporter's curiosity

suffers the same lameness. So, while pretending to listen to the *Godfather* spiel, I tried to hear what Mr. Hollywood was saying. Sadly, even though I was close enough to pick the wax out of his ears, I couldn't hear a word. I could only watch the smiling, adoring faces of the EA crowd soaking up whatever marvelous things he was offering. In the end, I have no idea if the *Godfather* game will be any good because I wasn't paying attention; one of the EA executives was waving his hands while exclaiming, "Steven, why don't you make a game for us?"

Of course, months later, EA announced that Spielberg would be working on games. And who is surprised?

Upon reflection, the whole scene was ironic enough to make it into a *Saturday Night Live* sketch. How else does one describe two reporters who muscle past the biggest name in Hollywood for a chance to see a demo of a game made about an Academy Award-winning piece of cinematic history?

I Walk the Line

People like to talk about the "console wars" as if the videogame industry was

If there is a front in this war, it's a carpeted aisle filled with milling fans.

some sort of giant strategic simulation produced by Avalon-Hill. You can almost envision the game box, with Mario decked out like Rommel, peering over an embankment with a pair of field goggles. Sony would have the black pieces, Microsoft the green and Nintendo the red. The game would play out on map of the world, and domination would be determined by a roll of the dice.

In reality, the Nintendo booth at E3 sits next to Sony's. Microsoft holds court in an entirely different hall in the convention center. If there is a front in this war, it's a carpeted aisle filled with milling fans. This year, it was also filled huge lines.

People like to imagine the mythical length of Disneyland lines in the summer. But these E3 lines were longer. These were the kind of lines you see on the news when Wal-Mart gives out free

hams; when *American Idol* auditions come to town; when you promise fans a glimpse of the next generation of games and hardware.

This year, I noticed a line of what must have been four or five hundred people queued up on the side of the Nintendo booth. I asked a fellow in a black Zelda t-shirt what he was waiting to do. "Zelda trailer," he offered flatly. He was there to sit through a few minutes of videogame footage and a taste of game play. His fellow-line waiters shared a glazed look and plastic bags filled with the promotional flotsam and jetsam you accumulate during a visit to E3 - T-shirts, magazines, posters and the occasional thing with a blinking LED. The line looked like a cross between political refugees at a boarder crossing and Rolling Stones fans camping out for tickets.

My curiosity, or maybe just morbid fascination, led me to the back of the line. A cherry group of fans anchored the

tail of the line - so far from the Nintendo compound, you couldn't even see it.

"How long will it take you to get to the front?" I asked I guy who, I swear, was also wearing a Zelda shirt.

"Oh, about three and a half hours," he chirped.

"Just to see a three minute clip of a new game?"

"Well, that's what we came here to see. So, we're not going to leave until we've seen it."

The fans around them murmured in agreement. And I wandered off wondering if the game business deserved fans that loyal. I considered, for a moment, whether the industry was a little too dependent on a core group of people that absolutely, and fundamentally, believe games matter; that games were more than frivolous bits and plastic boxes.

I asked. Four hours to see a few minutes of PlayStation 3 promo footage.

Across the trenches from the battle-hardened Nintendo troops, a few scant feet of carpet away, the weary Sony warriors crouched in their own line.

I asked. Four hours to see a few minutes of PlayStation 3 promo footage.

And the lines inched forward like a parade of turtles.

The X Factor

I know you'd like me to say 2005 is the year of the Xbox 360. But I'm not going to do that. Because I think Nintendo WiFi at McDonalds is, frankly, bigger news than Microsoft's new console, as far as Q4 '05 business news is concerned.

But I wouldn't bet against Microsoft. In the strategic buildup of PR armaments, you have to look at who stockpiles what to get a sense of how things will go, as the war wears on. And Microsoft is definitely putting supplies in the bunker. In fact, they've spent a fair amount on the bunker, itself.

I suppose, when you consider Redmond dropped somewhere around \$4 billion on the original Xbox, it's not that surprising that when asked, the MS PR people told

me that they'd spent about \$4 million on the new 360-themed E3 booth.

"But we'll use it for the next four or five years," said my source.

Exactly. If Microsoft gets out of the game businesses, it won't be until they've lost another \$4 billion. And like Richard Pryor discovered in the classic '80s comedy, *Brewster's Millions*, it takes a long time and a lot of effort to spend a towering pile of cash.

This leaves me with a wait-and-see attitude about the 360. And other than a handful of game fans who would swear they bleed Xbox radioactive green if you cut them, most everyone else feels the same way I do. We need more than *Kameo* and *Project Gotham Racing* to change the game world. And so far, the world the 360 envisions is exactly like the current one, with a little TiVo and an expensive HDTV thrown in.

Nintendo, on the other hand, may be going through the biggest corporate freak out of all time; a core value questioning that will make New Coke seem like a smart move. Or, maybe they are the only sane console maker left in

the game business. For now, it all comes down to whether or not you think hooking up wireless games for free in a McDonalds is the greatest thing since McGriddles, or whether this more along the lines of a tofu Big Mac.

Me, I see Nintendo in its experimental college phase. They're trying new things, testing the waters and seeing what feels good. Whether this fling with Mickey D's will last or end up as a funny story told over wine coolers to friends years later, we'll see. But for now, Nintendo seems to have a little bit of libido in an industry that has become almost puritan in its preservation of the status quo.

Hot Topic

The funniest thing that happened all year? Hot Coffee, of course. Oh, I'm sure Take 2's comptroller was weeping bitter tears onto the ledger books when Rockstar had to recall all those *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* discs that contained unlock-able acts of mild nastiness.

And I know there's nothing like oral sex to get would-be game censors all whipped up into a sexually repressed frenzy. I should probably be a little

Nintendo WiFi at McDonalds is, frankly, bigger news than Microsoft's new console



concerned about all this. But I just think it's funny, because it **is** funny.

It's mainly funny that anyone cares. It's funny that two crude, low poly characters pushing the limits of a game engine's collision detection system passes for sexual congress. Besides, if you want kids to not have sex, you should show them this game. When they are done throbbing on a few buttons, they will wonder what the fuss was all about. These impressionable youth, if they have anything in them that can still hold an imprint, will be left with the very

I'm telling you. If you don't want kids to have sex, let them see sex. Give them a tape of hard core Danish bestiality and lock them in a room. When they are done, they'll just want to take a shower to clean off the icky feeling. Or let them play Hot Coffee. They might still have sex. But you can be very, very sure it's not because of this game.

The Shell Game

So here we are, with E3 2006 a few months down the road, idling away the remaining days of the year of the box turtle. And it's probably worth noting at

popular culture, dunking into their collective shells when trouble comes by.

Then again, outside the magical world of Mario, turtles haven't done much. Evolution doesn't seem to be their strong suit. They haven't changed much in a zillion years. They don't wear pants and haven't invented the George Foreman grill. That is, they just sort of stopped developing in any dramatic way. These days, most people don't even eat them. Or keep them as pets. We just sort of ignore turtles.

out to *Half-Life 2* over *Katamari Damcy*. I groaned. I don't make games and really didn't care how technically excellent *HL2* was. It just seemed like a bigger, slower turtle to me. It was just a fatter, more massive, more monumental and just-as-doomed brontosaurus. *Katamari's* pink-nosed, furry mammal peered out from its hiding place as the giant lumbered on stage to collect a prize for being very much the same as other games. Then, it turned its furry, little tail and headed back into the safety of its burrow and wondered when the big, stupid lizards would just drop dead.

And that's it. As the year of the box turtle waddles out from under our feet, let's hope next year's gaming mascot holds a little more promise. For next year, maybe we'll get a lion, a silver backed gorilla, a falcon or a pit viper. Meanwhile, I'll just keep hoping for the year of the Sexy Cybernetic Extraterrestrial. 🦎

David Thomas is the founder of the International Game Journalists Association. He also provides commentary and criticism at buzzcut.com.



strong feeling that grown ups are screwing with them again.

"That's it? That's what you didn't want me to see? You don't want me doing that? THAT was boring."

this point that turtles have been around since the time of the dinosaurs, in one form or another. It gives me some comfort to think games can keep creeping along the muddy banks of

We just sort of ignore turtles.

And that, more than anything else, is the warning of the year of the box turtle.

Last year, the Game Developer's Choice Award for best game, the award given by developers for developers, was handed

Puppies Aren't for Sissies

by Bonnie Ruberg



Everyone loves *Nintendogs*. You know it; I know it. Sales figures don't lie. The videogame world has gone crazy for puppies. We've come to take that for granted. But before we get caught up in our dog-owner pride, let's turn back the theoretical clock a few months and think the likelihood of this one through.

Say you never played *Nintendogs*. Heck, you've never even seen it. You've been hearing the rumors though, and they go like this: A new, somewhat quirky title about raising puppies has come out in Japan. There's no real game involved, but you'll need to care for your dogs on a regular basis, cleaning them, feeding them, and giving them love. And don't think that these guys might grow up to be hardcore hounds. No, they're just puppies – amazingly adorable puppies – and they'll stay that way forever. So why stick around if there's no way to win? Because it's fun! Plus, you can stock up on fuzzy, real-life merchandise. Needless to say, this simple, accessible "game" and its offshoots could be appreciated by a wide range of consumers, even ones who don't usually run with the "serious gamer" crowd.

What's that, you say? Cuddly animals? No clear objective? And not a single weapon in sight! Does this sound like a typical American bestseller to you? Of course not, it sounds like one more cutesy Japanese sim, ignored by the big boys of the industry, enjoyed by a few less-judgmental gamers, and then promptly forgotten in the wake of more dramatic titles, only to turn up a few years down the line in the bargain bin at your local gaming retailer.

Except it's not. It's *Nintendogs*. It sold a quarter of a million copies in the United States in the first week after its release – and that's not even taking into consideration the huge number of fans who imported the Japanese version months earlier. Its success in Europe, not to mention Japan, has been, on a relative scale, just as stupendous. The world's mass puppy love has inspired numerous packaging deals, official events and even unique social phenomena. In short, *Nintendogs* has defied all the expectations such titles normally face in the videogame industry and its

A quick review of the average “serious” American gamer – both what he’s like and how he wants to be perceived – quickly reveals the innate improbability of *Nintendogs*’ U.S. success.



communities: expectations of finance, of culture, of consumer age, of hardcore vs. casual ideologies, and of gender.

A quick review of the average “serious” American gamer – both what he’s like and how he wants to be perceived – reveals the innate improbability of *Nintendogs*’ U.S. success. What does such a gamer appreciate? First off, technological innovation: in a technical sense, precision, in an aesthetic sense, realism. He likes racers and action adventure titles, but prefers, above all, first-person shooters. He enjoys a certain amount of competitive, in-game violence. He’s drawn to the accouterments of manliness, such as images of attractive women. What he dislikes: surrounding himself with cuteness. Doing so might make him seem weak.

Of course, in some sense, this supposedly average player doesn’t exist. That’s to say, no one is so uncomplicated as to unwaveringly meet these stereotypes. Nor is this description meant to imply that “serious” gamers can’t be completely the opposite.

Everyone is different. This is merely, and literally, an averaging of current cultural prescriptions, which for better or for worse come together as an incredibly strong force in the consumer market. Sentiments like the ones outlined above make, break and shape games because they determine sales.

Yet, the unacceptable is happening – en masse. Gamers across the country are playing *Nintendogs* and loving it despite, or perhaps even because of, its adorable content. It’s almost as if an unspoken rule has been lifted. Suddenly it’s OK to turn to your fellow gamer, male or female, and pour out story after story about your puppy’s good graces. You can like what’s cute without the risk of being uncool.

True, some people are still stuck on the old stereotypes: Puppies are for girls; puppies are for sissies; puppies are for non-gamers – the kind of forum trash talk we’ve all waded through. And there was certainly plenty of reluctance to support the title before it (and its rave reviews) came out in this country. But for the most part, *Nintendogs* has made

converts of straight-faced gamers. They continue to be hardcore, but now, at least, they can smile.

At the same time *Nintendogs* is defying hardcore expectations, *Nintendogs* its defying expectations of gender, as well. In one sense, it's bringing into question the idea of gendered game subject matter. If anything could be considered traditionally female content, taking care of adorable puppies is it; yet the title's vast male following has obviously uprooted that assumption. The game is also defying expectations for types of gameplay. Generally, men are believed to be attracted to linear, goal-oriented play, whereas women are normally the ones more interested in fostering gradual progress and growth – the idea at the root of puppy care. Not to mention that *Nintendogs* is a “non-game,” and would usually be pushed to the fringes of the gaming landscape, where girl games also reside. Despite the odds though, *Nintendogs* has been totally mainstream-ized.

Why has *Nintendogs* been able to survive – to flourish – in this way when

so many of its sim predecessors have gone the way of obscurity? In part, it's because of its status as a non-game, one allowed to sidestep some of the heat of stringent analysis, both technical and cultural, to which other titles are subject. Perhaps it's also because the game strives for certain elements of realism, a common criterion for greatness in the view of the American gamer.

More important, though, is the overall quality of the game. No matter the social factors, fandom of such epic proportions would never have sprung up for a shoddy title. And this title is good – very good.

But the number one, most crucial factor in the game's success is undoubtedly PR. *Nintendogs* has had all the right publicity. It was made by Nintendo, acclaimed by reviewers at top publications, and hyped all across the country. One thing led to another. Word spreads quickly in this town.

And once the thumbs-up was given, all bets were off. The social restrictions previously surrounding this game were

The number one, most crucial factor in the game's success is undoubtedly PR.



This isn't a matter of
changing the world;
it's a matter of
changing the
gaming
community.



revoked by a mandate from above to start liking, of all the things, simulated puppies.

How could *Nintendogs* help but become a hit? Such an occurrence is the opposite of peer pressure; it's peer release. It's peer acceptance. It's like knocking down a dam, and then letting everyone have a grand old time playing in the watery aftermath. Liberated by the examples provided by trend-setters and marketers, gamers were free to adore their puppies, even to feel proud of them and of themselves. Blocked from the constant interrogation beam of expectations, they were able to have a blast discovering that a cute non-game could be acceptable, too. One by one, these gamers have made a new standard, one in which a guilty pleasure is not an unacceptable blunder, but a ticket into a gaming community collectively discovering new sides of itself, feeling its way through the puppy-dotted dark.

Because, really, this isn't a matter of changing the world; it's a matter of changing the gaming community. Ask a

non-gaming, American adult, and he's still likely to laugh at the image of a grown man playing with virtual puppies, even if you try to explain that, by videogame standards, those are some very high quality puppies. Ask a gamer, on the other hand, and whether or not he's a *Nintendogs* fan, he'll be able to tell you about the game, about its popularity, about the praise it has received throughout the industry.

As in society at large, cultural expectations in the videogame world are a complicated thing, and they won't be exploded by any one game, however adorable. But expectations can, and should, be challenged. *Nintendogs* has planted a seed in our community for rethinking expectations, as well as rethinking ourselves. 🐾

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.

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:

“Do you have a New Year's Resolution? If so, what is it?”

Bonnie Ruberg,
“Puppies Aren't for Sissies”

Sleep more; play more; have more fun; work up the courage to finish Fatal Frame; kick a nasty burrito addiction; find a really kinky pair of Second Life boots.

Mark Wallace,
“Trust Me”

I make the same boring resolution every year: Work harder, play harder, eat better, smoke less. Gradually, it seems to have sunken in.

Shannon Drake,
“The Gaming Industry Beyond Thunderdome”

1280x1024.

Dave Thomas,
“The Year of the Turtle”

I resolve to secure a sense of safety for the nation, bring home the troops and to balance the budget. Oh, wait. That's someone else's job. Instead, I resolve to play at least one game from each of the following genres: Fighting, wrestling, fishing, poker, NASCAR, college football and an I Love Raven title.

N. Evan Van Zelfden,
“2005: A Massively Multiplayer Odyssey”

Next year, I must always keep in mind why videogames are so important. It is all too easy to get caught up in other things, and let it slip. But immersive art is too powerful to forget. And art that employs the imagination is too urgent to ignore.

Joe Blancato,
Contributing Editor

I resolved a few years back to never make another one. So far, so good.

JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor

I should probably mention the obligatory “self-improvement” clause here. Then get into specifics, where I state that I might work on maybe deciding to purchase a gaming console that doesn't have an “X” in its name.

Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor

I tend to keep them to myself. They mean more to me that way. I will say that I think this year will be a lot of fun.

