

the *Escapist*

A **Marginal** Business

by Max Steele

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

This week's issue, "Walton's World," was originally intended to be about Wal-Mart and its effect on gaming. You know, the place that distributes only the New Hotness games to the masses; the home of The Bargain Bin; the store that is likely responsible for making *Deer Hunter* one of the best-selling game franchises in history. Seems important, right?

I asked a few people if they'd write. The response?

tumbleweeds and a lonely wind howling

Anyone?

"Yeah, I, uh ... hey about the issue the week after, I'm good for that one."

Apparently, no one had much to say on Wal-Mart's effect on games. Or perhaps, it's just not safe to talk about it here, wink wink. Either way, we pulled back a bit and decided to look at games retail as a whole – GameStop, Blockbuster's

Game Rush, Best Buy and yes, even a little bit about Wal-Mart.

And so, with memories of long lines and miserable crowds fresh from the recent holiday season, we offer this issue on retail and gaming. Max Steele returns this week to shed some light on the used games business and what it might mean for retail outlets. Bonnie Ruberg discusses how changes in the retail channel may herald a new era in games history. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: In response to Shannon Drake's optimistic look at the Xbox as marking "the end of an era," I have this to say: The end is waning, but the 360 ain't everything its marketed to be. The gameplay content of the launch line-up, the hardcore primary buyers and the

derisive treatment of the launch by the mainstream media all show that the 360 isn't giving the "mainstream" what it really wants. I'd like to propose a running bet with Shannon, who presumably being Irish, will be up for some gambling: If the Xbox 360 has more global sales than Nintendo's upcoming console by the end of 2008, I will pay Mr. Drake 50 USD, or vice versa. Put your money where your mouth is.

Patrick Dugan

To the Editor: I love the aesthetics of your publication and I think you have a solid basis for content. Great job.

However, I'd appreciate it if your writers would actively seek accepted authorities on the subjects they write about. With each new issue, the publication feels more and more like an elitist-gamer-rant site, than a publication with content.

I get turned off by articles telling me what a casual gamer wants when the author has no credentials allowing him to speak about a market or even game development. I get turned off by articles telling me how girl gamers really do exist. I had no idea where Mrs. Butts



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was coming from. I've never, ever seen such things happen outside of a group of children ... and if you're playing with children, I would obviously have to ask why you'd subject yourself to such a thing. I get turned off with articles telling me what makes a game good or what the industry needs to do to make everything rainbows and roses for it's creatives, when the presented solutions are incomplete at best and totally flawed at worst.

While there have been a number of wonderful articles, it seems more and more are simply becoming editorial. There's too much of that with game journalists, it seems. I would absolutely adore seeing authorities cited or even presenting a wider assortment of opinions, takes, and viewpoints when writing articles.

Mr. Costikyan's writing is a prime example of the type of article I'm thrilled to read. He, himself, is an authority on the topic he spoke about. He gave his thesis and a fantastic argument to back it up. I would so love to read more of this type of thing in future issues.

Just my two cents. Cheers on *The Escapist*, and may it be a great success.

Eva

To the Editor: This should hopefully be one of many emails telling you to all keep up the good work, and that the topics discussed in your magazine are really a fresh breath of air, miles away from the stale hyperbole of many games mags and sites. I've been reading for a few months now and felt like it was time to congratulate you all.

One idea (you probably have already thought of, in your infinite wisdom) is maybe to publish a compilation of all your issues so far? Certainly would make good coffee table reading. Also, good idea to bring in adverts, I'm sure you make some much needed cash from them, and they don't intrude on the reading at all.

Again, thanks!

Rich



A Marginal Business

by Max Steele

The used game business works like this: A gamer shows up at GameStop with a few games he's tired of and wants to trade in. GameStop offers him a lowball price – much lower than what he'd get if he sold his games on eBay, just high enough to keep him in the store – and since he's already there and wants the cash, he accepts it. More than likely, since he's a gamer in a game store with cash in hand, he spends the cash on something else, maybe something secondhand that he can pick up for \$20. Meanwhile, GameStop marks up and sells the used games it just bought for three times what it paid for them.

GameStop executives describe this as a “margin growth” business – because they make a much higher profit margin on the sale of every used game than they do on the comparable sale of a new game. And in the highly competitive retail trade, margins matter. How much?

“Used games are keeping the entire ship afloat,” a vice-president of marketing for Electronics Boutique tells me. “EB and GameStop make basically no money from new product.”

No money from new product? But everybody knows the retailers are the real profiteers of the interactive entertainment industry, brutally extracting marketing development funds and ruthlessly returning product in the name of the all-mighty dollar.

Right?



The Savagery of Sellthrough

Throughout most of the entertainment and media industry, when publishers want to make sure first-run entertainment sells in droves to the public, they charge what's called "sellthrough prices" – and for virtually every form of media, including books, movies and music, that price is between \$15 and \$25. You can get the brand-new *Feast for Crows* hardcover for \$16.80, the *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* DVD for \$17.98, and Madonna's *Confessions on a Dance Floor* for \$18.98.

But you have to pay \$49.99 for *Perfect Dark Zero*, or any other new release videogame. In comparison to its closest substitutes from other industries, videogaming isn't priced to sell through.

And yet, selling through is the one thing a videogame **must do**. Videogames suffer from the shortest shelf life of any media. You can walk into a record store and buy CDs from the '60s, '70s, '80s and today. You can visit Barnes & Noble and pick up books written in the Renaissance. You can buy movies made in the black and white era. But you would be hard pressed to find a GameStop selling more than a handful of

games older than a couple years, and the vast majority of shelf space will be for titles released in the last six months.

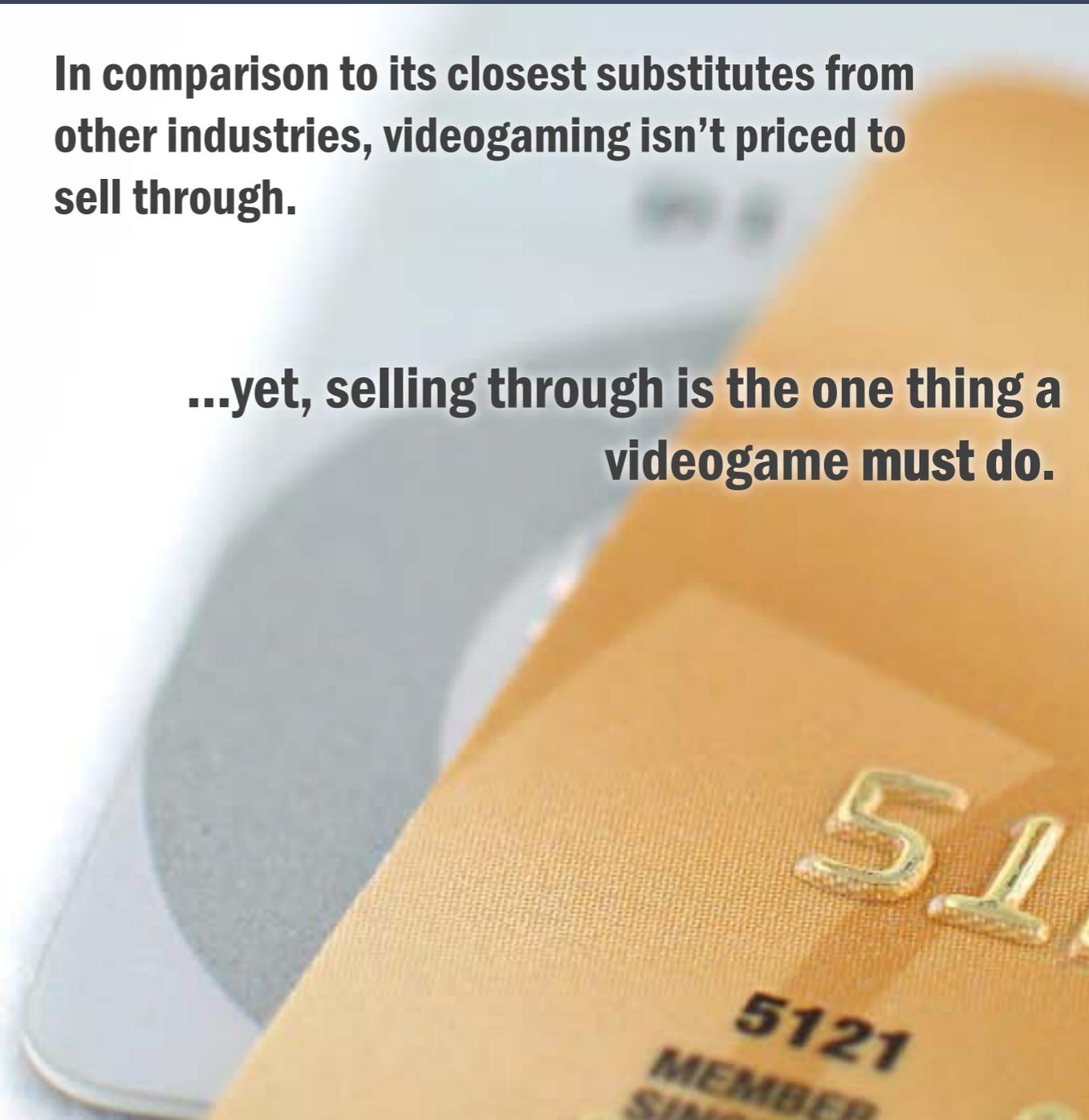
Facing this short shelf life, game publishers have strategically adopted a tiered pricing model. They start the games off at the highest price point they can – right now that's \$49.99 – and they extract as much money as possible from the avid, got-to-have-it-now consumer. They then drop the price to hit the next tier of consumers and keep moving units.

The tiered pricing model works well for the publishers, and if they can convince enough consumers to buy at the \$49.99, it works **really well**. Think *Halo 2*. It's great for big box retailers like Wal-Mart, too. Wal-Mart only takes a title that is a proven seller, and any title that doesn't sell gets dropped instantly. Wal-Mart doesn't care if it has the biggest inventory of games, or covers every genre of game. It just sells the big hits.

For specialty retailers like GameStop, the tiered pricing model sucks. GameStop can't compete on price with the likes of Wal-Mart, so to differentiate itself, GameStop has to take risks on unproven

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new product, and keep a wider inventory of older product. But unlike music and book sellers like B&N, GameStop has no evergreen products that it can reliably keep on the shelves. So, its inventory management is a constant struggle, with price points continuously adjusted, and product constantly moved around the store depending on its age. GameStop ultimately suffers because its shelf space is devoted to games that are, by definition, less popular and lower priced than what Wal-Mart stocks.

So, imagine you're running GameStop. Imagine you owe \$36 wholesale for \$50 games, leaving around \$14 profit. And imagine you owe \$12 wholesale for \$20 games, leaving around \$8 profit per sale. Obviously, you'd like to sell more \$50 games than \$20 games, and so you're going to organize your storefront to push the hot new product as much as possible. But to differentiate your business, you **have** to keep that broad catalogue of older, cheaper games around – otherwise you're not offering anything different than Wal-Mart or Best Buy.

In adopting used games, GameStop is alienating its customers, infuriating its suppliers and arming its competitors.

Now imagine that with used games, you only pay \$3 for your \$20 games. Suddenly you make **more money** from a \$20 game than you do from that \$50 copy of *Perfect Dark Zero*. This is the solution to all your problems. You can offer a wider inventory, stock older games and even still profit! Set the prices right and you can even manage to do trade-in and resale of brand new games for really big profits.

Got that? Good. Now you understand why GameStop is transforming itself, right before your eyes, from a specialty boutique into a secondhand store.

Biting the Hand

It's a transformation fraught with peril. In adopting used games as the solution to the inexorable logic of the new game retail business, GameStop is alienating its customers, infuriating its suppliers and arming its competitors.

Let's start with customer. As a specialty retailer, GameStop has long catered to the enthusiast. The enthusiasts' desires are simple. He wants to be able to buy new games for a reasonable price. If the games are good, he wants to keep them. If the games are worth playing but not worth keeping, he wants to be able to trade them in. And if the games are bad, he wants to be able to return them and get new ones.

Unfortunately, today's retail marketplace offers no way to return bad games and limited value on trade-ins. Barnes & Noble will give you store credit for opened music and DVDs if you have a receipt, but GameStop will just offer to buy an opened game from you for a few bucks – even though they're going to turn around and sell it for \$30.

When used game sales were a minor aspect of the GameStop business, it was easy for regular customers to overlook

the trade-in to sale price ratios; no big deal. But as every consumer purchase is presented with a potentially money-saving used game purchase, those consumers have a constant reminder of exactly how much a used game is going for – and, by comparison, how little the consumer gets on trade-in.

Hardcore gamers are nothing if not web-savvy, and eBay is out there as a viable alternative to trading in. Exposés on the economics of trade-ins have already begun to erect the virtual equivalent of “Keep Out” signs on GameStop. As consumers become more informed, GameStop will either have to increase its trade-in values, or watch its inventory

supplies of desirable used games plummet.

An even more pressing problem comes from GameStop’s suppliers, the videogame publishers. The relationship between game publisher and game retailer ranges from Détente to Cold War, with continuous low intensity conflict over “price protection,” “marketing development funds” and “return rate.” Used game sales threaten to make the Cold War heat up – because publishers see no revenues at all from the sale of used games.

Is it really worth fighting over? It’s interesting to note that both Activision and Electronic Arts are reporting that fourth-quarter revenues will fall well below expectations due to unexpectedly low sales. Meanwhile, GameStop has announced “strong margin contributions supporting forecasted earnings” because “used videogame sales growth continues to solidly meet our goals.”

And so the war drums have started beating. In an interview with Computer and Video Games, Mark Rein of Epic Games was blunt:

“If you walk into EB in the U.S., they try and sell you a second hand version of a game before a new one. **I think that’s bad. It would be fine if they share that revenue with us.** They can also be marketing partners with us, as well. We can have an official refurbished games policy. That’s the problem. Those resold games use server resources, tech support. The majority of guys calling up saying “I don’t have my serial number,” I’m sure a lot of those are resold. It costs us money. Those customers think they paid for it, and they’re entitled to support. The reality is we didn’t get paid. They didn’t pay us.”

Of course, GameStop doesn’t have to.

“It is 100% legal to re-sell videogames. The publishers have no leg to stand on,” explains Jason Schultz, staff attorney at the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Because of the First Sale doctrine, publishers have no legal right to get paid for used games, anymore than book publishers get paid from secondhand bookstores, or music companies from used record sales. This won’t stop them from finding another way to strike back at GameStop, however.

...publishers see no revenues at all from the sale of used games.



Even as the publishers make war-plans, Best Buy and Blockbuster have joined the fray. Most Blockbuster stores now not only rent videogames, they buy and sell used games, too, usually offering significantly better trade-in values and charging less. Blockbuster is largely ignored in discussion of game retail, but it needs to find a new business as TV on-demand catches on, and looks willing to fight hard for games revenues.

Best Buy is still testing a pilot program for used games, but industry insiders seem to expect it to go forward. As a big box retailer, Best Buy isn't suffering from the tiered pricing model the way GameStop is, and it can accept lower margins on used games. And if Best Buy succeeds with used games, Target, Wal-Mart and the rest might follow.

What does it all mean?

The New Model

GameStop's margins in the used game business are almost certain to erode, as consumers seek alternatives, whether peer-to-peer like eBay, or from competitors such as Blockbuster and Best Buy.

At the same time, the uneasy alliance of retailer and publisher that has long dominated the interactive entertainment industry will crumble. This, in turn, will open the way for publishers to aggressively embrace digital distribution. Up until now, the publisher's fear of channel conflict with retail has obstructed their adoption digital distribution. By "striking the first blow," retailers open themselves up to a digital distribution counterstrike.

These two forces – used game sales and digital distribution – will have strange and conflicting impacts on consumers. The higher the price of new games, the more likely the consumer is to buy it used for less. A flourishing used game market will drive prices lower. But the more the used game market flourishes, the more publishers will race to adapt digital distribution. With digital distribution, publishers can prevent resale and used game trade, both legally and technologically.

"You are already seeing with Xbox Live and Valve and these ties online, they are trying to use the online hook as a way to enforce their business model. You're going to see more of a trend towards

that," says the EFF's Schultz. "It's part of an overall battle that's going on in all the content industries."

Here's what's likely to emerge as the new business model: Publishers will release new titles exclusively in digital format at a premium price. Big box retailers will carry the most popular titles in physical form at a sellthrough price point. There'll be little margin left in used game sales, but it'll survive with pricing similar to your local Blockbuster's secondhand DVDs.

And as for GameStop? If you want to know what's in store, head over to your local college and find the students' favorite used record store. There's not a 100% profit margin in sight.

 [COMMENTS](#)

Max Steele is an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. When not actively being mysterious, he passes his time manipulating time and space to fit his plans for world domination.



Mainstream Shopping, Mainstream Gaming

by Bonnie Ruberg

“Where Are the Goddamn Tissues?”

Specialty Knowledge in the Mainstream Wasteland

Have you ever tried walking into Wal-Mart and asking a question? Not a difficult question, just something simple, something a salesperson should know. Something along the lines of: “Excuse me, where can I find the tissues?” It’s a fun way to spend a half hour, as you dart from aisle to aisle, salesperson to salesperson, demanding over and over, “Just tell me where the tissues are!” – only to end up, once again, in the same old row of blenders and over-sized wooden spoons, not a box of tissues in sight. Then, of course, you stumble across them on your way out the door, on the other side of the store. Try it. Works like a charm.

If paper goods are that hard, imagine what it’s like shopping for videogames.

Let’s make it even worse; let’s say you go to Wal-Mart, not in search of something specific, but to seek out advice. What game would be best for my daughter? My husband? My mother-in-law? Exactly how does the Xbox 360 define itself as next-generation console? If I don’t take care of my *Nintendogs*, are they going to die? Such questions don’t go over too well. In fact, they go downright poorly. The only successful game-related transaction I’ve ever had at a Wal-Mart involved picking a game off the shelf, walking to the front of the store, and handing someone my money. End of story.

Not that, as shoppers, we’re normally looking for good advice, big smiles or even high-quality service when we head out to the 24-hour Wal-Mart wasteland. What we expect: convenience and low cost. What we get: what we pay for. And

at a place where prices – and wages – are always being slashed, that’s not much. Why? Wal-Mart has come to epitomize the economic white-washing of America. With its wide-sweeping arm it has successfully felled small business after small business, along with national respect for craftsmanship and skilled laborers. Don’t blame the employees who can’t answer videogame questions, or even the ones who don’t know where the tissues are. They lack specialty knowledge and/or training, and the incentive to acquire them. It’s just one more side effect of the Wal-Mart way: mass marketing, mass availability, mass mediocrity.

Back down to Earth: When Gamers Lose Sight of Consumer Reality

Of course, there are better places to track down game advice than Wal-Mart. As with any shopping experience, it can

be a matter of luck. Good salesperson, bad salesperson; friendly day, grumpy day. Sometimes you hit it big and find an intelligent, helpful fellow gamer toiling away in some city-block of an establishment. For the most part, though, the rule of thumb is this: The smaller the store, i.e. the higher the



level of specialty, the better chance you have at talking to someone who's actually in the know. It's like rock/paper/scissors. Target beats Wal-Mart. FYE beats Target. Electronics Boutique beats FYE. To be sure, I've had plenty of frustrating encounters with each that I could relay to you. But you don't need to hear it. You've been there.

Even stops like Electronic Boutique – the smallest little slivers of shops, slipped into the leftover edges of malls – have become, it seems to me, more and more disappointing. Sure, you'll run into the occasional energetic fanboy who wants to have a showdown of stats in front of the lady on-lookers, but even that is getting rare. Or, if enthusiasm and genuine interest is too much to ask, what about simple familiarity with the product? I was in my local EB a few months back; I asked for a copy of

Kirby: Canvas Curse. Simple enough. It's a big game. Been out for a while. Everybody's heard of it. Right? The sales clerk looked at me, grunted, and disappeared into the backroom, only to come back moments later and ask, "Wait, what are you looking for? 'Chubby: Kansas Cuss?'" I don't think we've got that." He was definitely not joking.

I suppose one of the things that makes encounters with these guys so painful is how much better we feel we could do in their shoes, and how much fun we imagine we'd be having. Working at the mall: It's a high school right of passage that, I admit, I, too, lived through. And I know I, for one, sat and drooled over my GameStop application – dreaming of minimal hard work and maximum time chatting about games. Where did I end up? Stuffing teddy bears and shouting

"Happy Birthday!" on command. That's probably why videogame store cashier-dom still sounds so glamorous to me.

Beyond our idealistic projections of employment stardom (because, quite honestly, it's probably an enormous pain to work at a games store in the mall, just like it's an enormous pain to work at any store in the mall), there's something deeply jarring about the indifference we meet when we shop for videogames. Many of us are gamers in more than one sense; we play videogames, certainly, but we're also involved in an online gaming community, one hosted by innumerable news sites, blogs and forums. We might easily spend hours each day reading about and discussing videogames. When there's an important title on the horizon, it gets everyone talking. To us, these things are crucial. We feel comfortable, substantial, within

our own social bounds. We've developed our own way to understand life, to measure the importance of events: by posts, by hits, by Slashdot.

Then we go out into world, to the one other place we feel certain videogames should be a big deal: a videogame store. Yet, once there, instead of camaraderie, we're met with the lifeless stare of our own consumer status, as our hobby, our passion is knocked down to size by its real-life reflection, by what it really is: disks in boxes that can be purchased. After all, you can't have gaming without shopping. What then, if the experience of shopping is empty? Again, you can't blame the employees; they may be working in a small space, but the reach of their company is huge. Still, the visceral impact of that divide – the seemingly un-navigable fissure between meaningful, virtual community and meaningless, physical reality – can only be described as a feeling like falling.

Too Cool for School: Hardcore Culture in Defiance of "Mainstreamization"

What could simultaneously dissolve that unsettling disconnect and fix our good advice problem? What would make

shopping meaningful again? How about a store where videogames actually **were** important, where the clerks – and the entire establishment – were themselves part of the gaming community.

Somewhere you could go to browse, to ask questions, to enjoy being a gamer. Somewhere you weren't reduced to a mere consumer, where you could hand over your money without feeling like one more cog in the big business wheel. Somewhere not yet sterilized, depersonalized, by the gaze of pure capitalism. Somewhere, in short, that doesn't exist anymore: local fanboy shops.

You know the ones, run by your neighborhood geek squad, always a little dusty and a lot over-crowded, but loved by a dedicated few just the same. When was the last time the world saw one of those? We still have similar stores here and there dedicated to other "dorky" (and equally wonderful) interests, like tabletop gaming and comic books. But these subcultures, lucky as they may be to still have unique, lovingly run shops to offer their patronage to, suffer from other setbacks. For one thing, the physical components of their cultures can be hard to come by if you aren't



fortunate enough to live near one of these fanboy shops.

But the biggest obstacle standing in their way is social stigma. Both tabletop gaming (as represented to the masses by *D&D* and *Magic: The Gathering*) and comic books are still considered extremely nerdy. Videogaming, on the other hand, has found safety from ridicule by going to bed, in a sense, with the enemy – by joining mainstream consumerism and mainstream culture.

Perhaps the process has been a gradual one, but it does seem that all of a sudden videogames are everywhere. Everyone plays them. Everyone wants them. They're nothing to be embarrassed about anymore. In fact, if pulled off with the right sense of humor, being a gamer can even be cool. Popular as we may be now, we're paying the price for our new-found acceptance. We're giving up our subculture, and becoming like everyone else. Or, more likely, everyone else is becoming like us. Either way, we're losing our identity as gamers.

Walk down the halls of a high school, a college, a mall. More people than ever

are wearing videogame merchandise – t-shirts, wristbands, shoe laces – whatever Hot Topic has churned out this week. And that's just the thing: We, as genuine gamers, don't feel camaraderie, we feel suspicious and cheated. Our community has been made a fad. Or at least, we're afraid so. We don't really know. Because now that everyone and anyone identifies as a gamer, we can grasp less and less what that term means when we apply it to ourselves.

Not everyone is playing along, of course. In fact, this mainstreamization has forced into being a new videogame subculture, one which is at the same time both shallow and totally understandable, namely the culture of "hardcore" gamers. The self-identification of hardcore gaming is a clear automatic reaction to the invasion of the mainstream, of potential posers, of an uncertainty of identity.

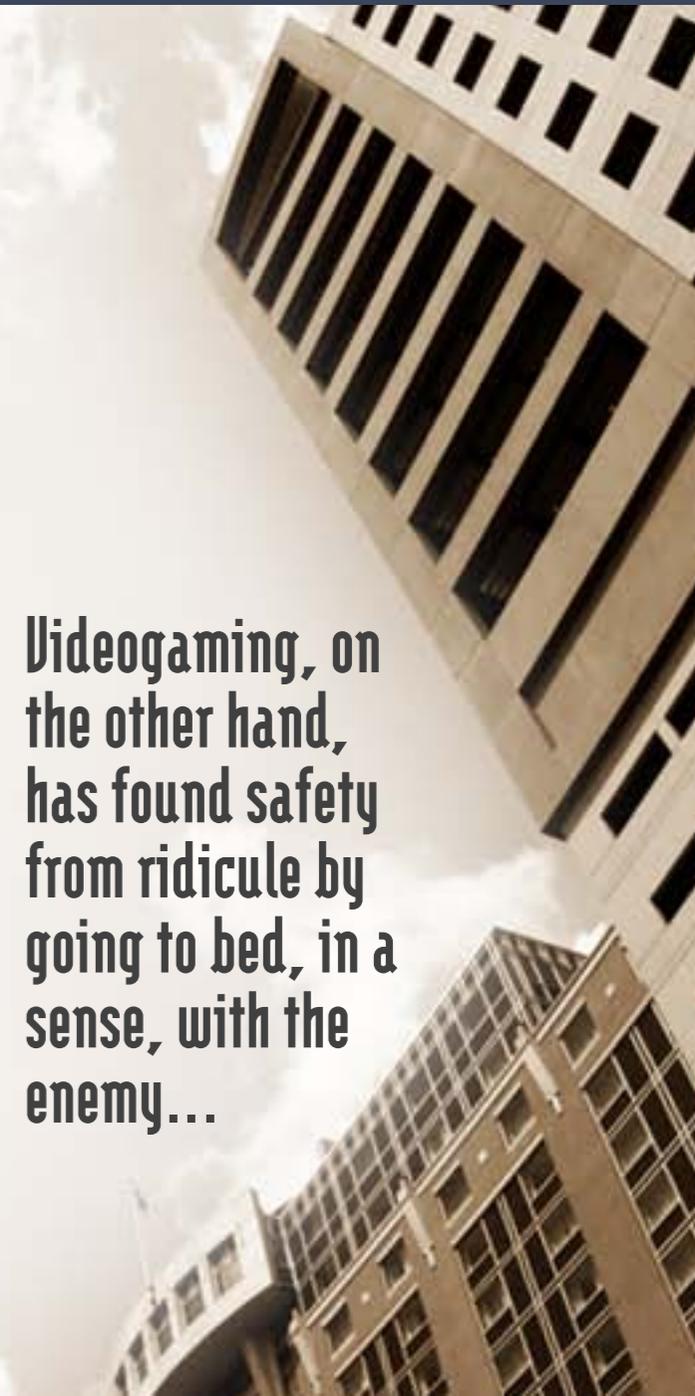
The entire point of hardcore culture is being the real thing. Whether you find your community in clans, guilds, forums, whatever, it's no easy feat to work your way in, to prove yourself. You have to play, and play, and play some more, but you also have to know. You have to be

able to pass tests of your knowledge in the form of challenges and ridicule. Hardcore culture is elitism, plain and simple, because that's what it has to be remain certain of its purity, certain of itself. But as the specter of mainstreamization constantly lurks, mainstream culture becomes also about chauvinism, about constantly proclaiming your own worth and veracity, time and time again.

Starving Artists: Money, Microsoft and America

While mainstreamization may seem like the natural next step in the evolutionary process of the games economy, the fact of the matter is that this cultural dilemma of ours is in many ways uniquely American. While in France a few months back, I spent some time checking out the gaming scene. There, it seemed to me, videogames were much less an element of mainstream culture than here in the States. Yet, because there's no mass outlet there for game appreciation, the fanboy subculture thrives. You find one-of-a-kind shops all over.

What makes America different: big business.



Videogaming, on the other hand, has found safety from ridicule by going to bed, in a sense, with the enemy...

It's only one of a number of issues, but it's true that in joining the world of mainstream culture, videogames have also joined the world of mainstream business – though it's arguable which came first. In certain situations, however, the cause-and-effect is clear. Take, for example, the case of Microsoft, pioneers of the all-American console, with plenty of money and weight to throw around in order to get things done. Of course, there are plenty of employees at Microsoft who are genuinely interested in producing a quality system and positively impacting the videogame industry. But the company's overall goal is to make money off a market that has gone largely unexploited: the mainstream. They'd like an Xbox 360 in every living room. They'd like your mothers to play. And your

They'd like an Xbox 360 in every living room. They'd like your mothers to play. And your wives. Anyone. Everyone.

wives. Anyone. Everyone. Which pretty much sums up mainstreamization itself.

Maybe Microsoft's approach would be easier to swallow if they seemed to be saying to the country, "Hey, videogames are great, and more worthwhile than you think. Everyone should try them!" But that's not the message here. This seems to be a matter of money, of expanding the market, plain and simple. It seems Microsoft is passing up subculture for money. And it hurts.

But should it? Aren't videogames, like any other industry, innately driven by money? Money equals sales equals popularity, and, in the industry as we know it, popular demand determines the shape new games will take in the future. Games can't be developed without money. Game publishers flock to it. So why shouldn't creators?

Here's where the question of artistic integrity comes in. Capitalism can inspire creation, certainly, but often the best art is produced in defiance of monetary restraints, of realistic business models, of preoccupation with worldly gain. If mainstream videogames will always be defined by the ebb and flow of supply

and demand, perhaps what we need to take risks outside the system, for the sake of art. Because, in a way, that's

...perhaps we're equally to blame if the American public hasn't latched onto the association of videogames and positive, quality interaction.

what raises a work from the level of entertainment to the level of art, even if it's not successful art – the hope to get something more out of it than money. Mediocre books are made all the time; they're usually the best-sellers. That doesn't mean there's no such thing as literature. As with games, originality often lies outside the restraints, both economic and cultural, of the mainstream.

Going Public: the Need for Acceptance, the Fear of Sublimation
Then again, the question of artistic value almost becomes a null one without mainstreamization – that is, there's no one around to view it. A videogame doesn't need public recognition to be good, but the lack of audience would be

frustrating, for sure. Which brings up the larger question, not just of a game, but of games in general: Can videogames

actually be art if the general culture doesn't appreciate them as such? And don't we have to, inevitably, sell out our subculture identity, and delve into the mainstream in order to catch society's eye? Even then, our success in the quest for respect is hardly guaranteed. We face snide remarks, criticism and reluctant thinkers. Videogames have been getting more and more big media attention as they've become more mainstream, but it hasn't all been good attention.

And perhaps we're equally to blame if the American public hasn't latched onto the association of videogames and positive, quality interaction. They expect a certain stereotype – the gamer who sits in front of the TV shooting haplessly, who refuses to think of his experience as

anything more than indulgent entertainment – and we do little in day to day life to refute it. We gamers think about videogames all the time, but as a community we still have an unwillingness to **think**, to validate our interest in a meaningful way mainstream intellectuals could understand, and in time, come to respect.

Then again, if you like to game, and thinking is not your thing, who says you should jump through hoops to show off for other people? We're been tugged from each side. Do we want mass recognition and validation, or ourselves? There's no easy answer.

From a cultural analyst's perspective, it's almost painful to watch a unique, complex subculture get swallowed up in America's hegemonic mainstream. Something may be gained, but something will definitely be lost. But before the community as we know it goes altogether, there will be (in fact, there already is) a process of eating away, an invasion by the norm. And whether or not that, in the long run, is a positive thing, our knee-jerk reaction is one of self-protection, of defense against outsiders, of clinging on to our gamer

identities before they get sublimated once and for all in faceless, mainstream swell.

Riding the Sea Change: the Death and Rebirth of Subculture

What's a gamer to do? Mainstreamization is sweeping away the subcultures both of videogame shopping and videogames themselves, but this flood isn't one we can fight. Hiding in our basements, pretending our community isn't disseminating won't change anything. Then what?

Let it go. The fanboy shops. The fanboy culture. Gaming as we know it. Let it disappear. Mainstreamization is at our doorsteps, and it won't stop there. Don't close your eyes; watch the process closely. Watch things change. Watch as more and more people play, as being a gamer means less and less - just as calling yourself a movie-goer nowadays would be banal, almost absurd. Watch as big business feeds mass culture, as games are developed again and again from the same stagnant pool the public demands. But don't worry. Let the mainstream have their mediocrity. Something better is coming.

Let it go. The fanboy shops. The fanboy culture. Gaming as we know it. Let it disappear.

Something better is coming.



In the wake of our loss, we will shake off all the baggage, all the fluff that currently weighs us down. That will be left behind with the mainstream. We will form an entirely new subculture, one forged in the sea of mainstreamization, a more thoughtful subculture because it will have had to define itself from other, less deliberate forms of gaming. By first facing a crisis of selfhood, we will form a truly meaningful self. We will be, in short, the indie scene - the force that breaks away from mainstream commercialism and creates significant, and still recognized, pieces of art. As for the economic side of things, some among us are already breaking new ground, breaking from the big business of game publishing. Soon, we may find our beloved fanboy shops, once obliterated, reawakened online all around us. [COMMENTS](#)

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 Wired.com, The A. V. Club, and Gamasutra.

RETAIL PRIMER

by Nova Barlow

With the abundance of good (and not so good) ideas floating about, it appears just about anyone with enough willingness and a little bit of money can make a game these days. But then how does that game get to the shelf you see in GameStop or Target or Wal-Mart? Who makes that decision? As it turns out, the answer is not as complicated as you might think.

According to one of the managers I spoke to at “a larger game store chain,” all the decisions regarding what gets put on the shelf are made at the store’s corporate level, and trickled down to each of the stores.

The first personal observation the anonymous store manager shared with me about the process is that game developers have no control what happens to that game in the retail world. This, not surprisingly, is in direct opposition to the publishers who have a lot of say. Anyone who has read Costikyan’s “Death to the Games Industry” is keenly aware of the pressures on developers to create a title that will attract the attention of a large-scale publisher. He describes a common decision process,

When a developer goes to a publisher to pitch a title, the publisher does not greenlight it because they play it and

say “what a great game!” [...] Glitz, not gameplay, is what sells the publisher.”

This same lesson can often be applied to the retail space as well. The two main influences on the retail channel are pre-orders (which determine consumer desire for a particular game) and money, specifically how much of a publisher’s money is being spent to push a particular title. When it comes to getting a title onto the retail shelf, “the more the merrier” is a good rule of thumb – especially when the “more” part comes as marketing and publicity funds.

Strong, proven brands also tend to have priority from a publisher standpoint, and

the marketing funds of the publisher are skewed to reflect this. It is no surprise that the retail chain follows right along. After all, everyone is in the process to make money – the publisher needs to recoup what they’ve already spent on the developers, and the retail side wants to generate as much revenue as possible to stay in business.

What is a mild surprise is the employees most connected with the customer have no say in the process. “I just get an email with what to sell and what to push,” the store manager mentioned emphatically. She further revealed this extends to the quantity of units per store. So despite the fact Store E in City

D may not have a grand history of success in selling the "Triple Sports XXXtreme" series, it doesn't get a choice. It has to do what it can with what it gets.

Inevitably some games get left behind in the stampede to and fight for attention on the tightly packed retail shelf. Within a month or two of release, "Triple Sports XXXtreme" 2006 sits languishing in the bargain bin while employees hail the praises of another title, which is the "flavor of the week." Did you want "Triple Sports XXXtreme 2005?" That's so "last week" – here is a different title you should spend your money on. If you want something different, don't bother with brushing them off; just let them get through the speech and flash them a sympathetic smile as you pick up something else.

Like the much touted homogeneous experience at Starbucks, where a mocha here is going to be pretty much the same as a mocha 1000 miles from home, the only thing that looks different from one retail game store or department to another is the face of the employee who cheerfully greets you as you enter. The delivery of the "Hi! Is

there anything I can help you with?" is the same every single time, even down to the pitch. The recommendations are also similar, whether you're picking up *The Sims* or *Halo 2*. Even the shelves look the same, but the fun is supposed to be inside the package, not in the retail experience getting it – right? The store is really a means to an end.

There are alternatives for developers who do not wish to go through the traditional retail method for whatever reason, such as self publishing using digital distribution. Valve Software's Steam "content delivery system" is one of the more noted attempts to move content directly to the consumer – and revenues directly to the developer – as opposed to through publishers. The problem there is one of getting attention – conventional releases secure that attention by being there in the consumer's face, through widespread mass marketing. Gamers still assume that a game that doesn't have a retail presence must be an inferior product.

Also, there are a few stores – hobbyist game stores, cybercafes and comic book stores – that aren't affiliated with chains. These are the roads off the beaten path

and take a more personal touch to get into. While not likely to be as profitable, they do help build a loyal fanbase or are ideal for more "niche" products.

There are other steps between the publisher and the retail shelf: the packaging, the wholesalers who sell those CDs to burn upon, the paper to print manuals and the shippers to get the product from here to there. These are logistics generally handled on the publisher's side before even reaching the retailers' radar. But these roles, both those of the retailers and publishers, will get a little more interesting with the rise of some of the newer alternatives for distribution and it will certainly be interesting to see how it plays out for us, as consumers. [COMMENTS](#)

Nova Barlow is the Research Manager for The Escapist and Playerbase Solutions. She is also a regular contributor to WarCry.

Like the much touted homogeneous experience at Starbucks, the only thing that looks different from one retail game store or department to another is the face of the employee who cheerfully greets you as you enter.



The Other Side of the Counter

by Joe Blancato

OK, I'll admit. I only lasted a month behind the sales counter of a major gaming store. But what a month.

Let me paint a picture for you: We're a four-man operation, smack-dab between a high school, middle school and elementary school; we've been strategically placed to ensure we're on the walking routes of each institution. I normally worked from 2:00 p.m. until closing, which meant I got to babysit every child with a lazy parent in a three-mile radius for \$6.50 per hour, in addition to trying to sell games to good people trying to mill through a maze of loitering adolescents. Pile on the accusatory looks from my manager, obsessed with "shrink" and its reduction, and his romantic liaisons with the underage co-worker, and it made for a very interesting 30 days.

But it wasn't all bad. It was one of those "learning experiences" everyone has to experience at the tender age of 18. I learned a lot about communicating with random strangers, and came to understand some people just don't want to be helped. Working as a low-level member of the gaming industry, in addition to being a retail goon, also lent me the realization that no, there's no such thing as a dream job where you play videogames all day, no matter what the guy who interviewed me told me.

And hey, I'll never look at a guy wearing a tucked-in collared shirt, standing behind a counter the same way again.

I got the chance to talk with a veteran of gaming retail, a veteran who lasted more than a month and endured Black Friday and Christmas and lived to tell the tale, and ask him for some insight into the rarely understood, hellish-yet-rewarding world of videogame retail. His name is Brian Rubin, and he worked at an Electronics Boutique in Los Angeles for a year.

Here follows some of our stories.





“The best part [of the job] was the software discount as well as the customer interaction, which was fun most of the time.”

The Good

Like most forms of retail, videogame sales is a very thankless job. In most circumstances, a “good” day is one where you haven’t been yelled at. However, after a few years have passed, some quiet introspection reveals a few incredibly positive experiences for us vets to share with one another.

“The most interesting customers I met were those that had a good sense of humor, and some of these were awesome,” Brian tells me. “There was one guy who came in asking for an Xbox. I got him one and asked him if he wanted anything else, he smiled and said, ‘What ya got?’ I started piling on games, controllers, batteries, pens, you

name it, and we just laughed and laughed. He did buy a bunch of games and accessories too and was very cool about the whole thing.”

He goes on to say, “The best part [of the job] was the software discount as well as the customer interaction, which was fun most of the time.” Funny he should mention that everyday customer interaction was normally fun. Looking back, I realize he’s right. But I also have to wonder why it’s so rare I think about “arguing” with a regular about why *Final Fantasy* wasn’t all it’s cracked up to be, or beating the guy who won our monthly *Street Fighter* tournament in a 15-second match. Maybe it’s just human to remember the negative aspects of life when it comes to work.

Looking back, though, I’m able to remember one day I went home feeling better about the world around me, in particular.

A family, which I later learned was from Argentina, walked into the store. They were an American nuclear family in every way – husband, wife, an older brother and younger sister – except they didn’t speak a word of English. I had

only a tenuous grip on Spanish, and the guy working the counter with me was even more clueless, so I drew from my year of conversational Spanish in high school and tried not to sound like too much of a Gringo.

I managed to get the gist: They wanted a PlayStation game both the brother and the sister could play, preferably used. I picked up a few games – *Banjo Kazooie*, a *Spyro* title and one of the earlier *FIFA Soccer* versions. In hilariously broken Spanish (“Son muy agradable para los niños!”), I was able to help the parents find a game suitable for their family.

The Bad – Also Known as “Christmas,” “/Madden/ Day” or “How Much was Stolen?”

These stories are always the most fun; just ask anyone on the receiving end. Be it the creepy guy who refuses to stop talking about the “jiggle factor” in *Dead or Alive 2*, the angry mother who demands a refund because you sold a kid a copy of *GTA* her ex-husband purchased for him or just a troupe of bored kids who decided your store was the best hangout in the world. The days that grate the most are always,

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ultimately the most rewarding, at least in a literary sense.

Everyone who's weathered Christmas can tell you it's all about finding your calm, chewy center, and hiding there while angry customers barrage you. "The Christmas season was like partaking in a big dance, or conducting a large orchestra," Rubin says. "People had different needs at different times and you had to prioritize what to do when, moreso than any other time of the year."

What's more, neither the boss nor the customers care the store sold out its inventory of "New Hotness 3" four hours before you showed up to work. "Juggling the needs of the customer and the corporation became more important as the stakes became higher. As you know, that's the time of year when most of the games are released, and expectations are huge, both for the customer and the corporation. As the salesperson, we're in the middle of that, trying to make everyone happy. This is true throughout the year, of course, but during the holidays it gets amped up exponentially."

Christmas can bring out the worst in anyone, even those of us behind the

counter. The holiday takes us all to the breaking point, and videogame stores seem to be a focal point of despair, and only those born under a good sign are able to survive the affair. But even the unruly masses yield to the spirit of the holiday. When it's all over, you can go home with the knowledge you just helped make countless families happy.

While I never had to endure a Christmas, my meager 30-day employment must have been some sort of humanity boot camp the Fates wanted to inflict upon me. While my story didn't actually happen to me, it happened to my co-worker on my day off, and it's one I just gotta share.

One of our more annoying regulars – we'll call him Paul – had a weird ability to get under anyone's skin. Everyone has their version of Paul; kind of a small kid, dressed out of his element, ultimately wanting to be accepted by someone, **anyone**. He's someone entirely tolerable, if slightly pitiful. We let him hang around the store, because, like so many other kids who spent time there, he had nowhere else to go.



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It was a busy night, and Paul was hanging out, as usual. My co-worker was manning the store alone. He was a new hire at the time, and was in way over his head. According to him, there were 30 people in the store, all banging on the glass and demanding his attention. Someone asked to look at a GameCube, which we kept on a high shelf, so light fingers couldn't walk out of the store with a \$120 console. My co-worker grabbed a ladder and placed the Cube on the counter. Then, he made a fatal newbie mistake: He went into the back room to grab something for another customer. He heard a bit of a racket and went back into the main area, just in time to see a familiar form racing out of the store with a GameCube tucked under its arm. Paul, the snake, saw an opportunity, and he took it. The problem is, everyone who worked there knew Paul, and we had his address in our computer system.

The best part? We didn't have the heart to press charges. It would've been like sending Gollum back to Mordor.

The Ugly

If The Bad was just too run-of-the-mill for you, The Ugly should be right up your

alley. These are the stories that don't just make you shake your head or give you silver lining to discover, they just leave a bad taste in your mouth.

As with normal retail, gaming retail is extremely numbers-driven, but since the returns on the majority of new items sold is so low, we're forced to "up-sell" anything we can. This is why we try to sell you strategy guides you don't need. "The worst part was the numbers game, trying to kowtow to the corporate machine," Brian tells me. "You had to sell a certain amount of product to get some average that determined how well you were selling.

"You always had to get more items per sale, and due to this, you had to try and push stuff on people that they never wanted, like strategy guides and accessories. I hated trying to push stuff on people that they didn't want, but knew I had to, just so I wouldn't be bothered about it. There were other ways they tracked your performance, like selling discount cards and magazine subscriptions. I basically just wanted to give the people what they wanted with no fuss, but taking on this extra crap seemed contrived and greedy to me."

And he was forced into it. It's hard to fault the corporations for trying to promote incentive sales, but when your employees call it "contrived and greedy," you have to question how they're spreading that message.

While I remember the same pushy managers as Brian, the ugliest thing I ever witnessed working where I did centered, again, around Paul.

Paul was in a gangsta phase when I worked at the game store. He wore baggy, baby-blue velour and talked like he didn't enjoy the same upper-middle class upbringing everyone in the area did. We mostly laughed at him and let him talk a big game to the girls who wandered into the store, but one day, he crossed a line none of us ever quite expected.

Paul was walking up to kids younger than he, staring them down and demanding they buy him stuff. What surprised me the most was kids only a couple years his junior were running away; I mean, a stiff breeze could take down Paul. By the time one of the kids came over to me and whispered, "He's got a knife," it was too late.



What keeps you going in games retail is knowing, at the end of the day, you helped a guy find a game his little sister would love.



I heard a loud crash, followed by the angriest string of obscenities I've ever heard bellowed by someone who wasn't in my immediate family. One of the display cabinets, housing about \$1,000 in hardware, was toppled over, and Paul was feverishly backing away from a guy who had to be 6'4" and weigh 250 pounds soaking wet. In the big guy's hand, I saw a huge damn knife.

Luckily, it was closed; the big guy was content with scaring the crap out of Paul rather than actually killing him. He then used Paul as a small wrecking ball, slamming him into two display cabinets before someone had the good sense to call the cops. A few statements later, Paul was taken away in the back of a squad car. So ended Paul's status as a regular at the store. Last I heard, he was doing two years for assault.

Coda

While these tales are mostly of woe, they're but a slice of retail gaming life. For every story Brian and I told, we have others that are similar, but with slightly different endings. And the funny thing is, other than the really hard, trying moments, each day ended positively. What keeps you going in games retail is

knowing, at the end of the day, you helped a guy find a game his little sister would love.

"Despite the fatigue and stress, I did gain a new appreciation and sadness for the retail worker, because they have to put up with a lot of crap," says Brian. "Irregular hours, low pay, and so on, so now I'm much nicer to retail employees (not that I wasn't nice, but you know what I mean).

"The job also helped me learn a bit more about the console side of gaming ... Also, I had some wonderful co-workers whom I still keep in touch with. I'd say it was positive overall due to these factors that outweighed the crappiness."

And besides, a job like this gives you anecdotes you can tell at parties forever. And what good is anyone without a few stories to share? [COMMENTS](#)

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THE CONTRARIAN: SAM'S CHOICE

by John Tynes

I'm willing to give even awful things a fair shake as long as they can provide a moment of complete absurdity. Wal-Mart did that for me once, so let us pause to remember. It was the spring of 1992 and company founder Sam Walton had just died. I was shopping in a Sam's Club, Walton's big warehouse chain, along with all the other pasty cart-pushers with our six-packs of canned ravioli and gallons of chocolate syrup. As we made our way through the aisles a recorded voice came on the PA system. "Attention Wal-Mart and Sam's Club Associates and Shoppers," it boomed. "One week ago today our founder, Sam Walton, died. We would like to take a moment of silence to remember him."

We all stopped pushing our carts and looked around awkwardly. Was it appropriate for us to keep shopping? Was walking around disrespectful? I stood there, boggling, unsure of what to do. The six-pack of canned ravioli in my hand got heavier and heavier. The tension rose. I think if in that moment someone had so much as snickered, we all would have burst out laughing to relieve the stress.

Then the voice came back on, thanked us for our observance of their dead god, and we resumed shopping as usual.

I like to think Sam Walton would have hated this, because any minute that people in his stores weren't shopping was a minute wasted. Had he clawed his way out of the grave and staggered, *Stubbs*-like, toward the PA system, I imagine he would have said something like, "Buy some more crap ya lazy sunsabitches!" (Then he would have gone on about **brains**.)

That pleasing thought aside, I can only think of two things Wal-Mart has done for gaming. It made computer game boxes a lot smaller, which we can all be thankful for, and its successful distribution of budget hunting games gave us amazing titles like the new *Cabela's Dangerous Hunts 6: Kill or Be Killed*, the cover of which depicts hunters desperately brandishing their rifle stocks while being leapt upon by jaguars and bears. It looks like *Frank Miller's Animal Crossing* and I love it already, though I will surely never play it.

The truth is I don't shop at Wal-Mart, I don't live near a Wal-Mart, and I have nothing much to say about Wal-Mart and gaming. So let's dispense with this issue's theme for a couple pages and talk about something else. After all, I didn't get to be a contrarian by being agreeable.

I complain a lot in this column about what's wrong with games. Rather than complain this time, I'm going to tell you about a game I would like to play. This game doesn't exist. The technology exists, the audience exists, and thanks to services like Steam, the distribution exists. The only thing that doesn't exist is the will to make this sort of game, and that saddens me. But I'm going to close my eyes and hope for the best. It's a new year and maybe wishes will come true.

The game I want to play is called *Embedded*.

Here's the high concept pitch: It's *KOTOR* meets *Call of Duty*, but the only thing you shoot is a camera. You're a freelance journalist embedded with an American infantry unit in Iraq. You need to win over the soldiers, get the scoop

and stay alive. Marketing bullet points include cinematic action, branching-tree conversations, relationship management and a very fun, very gamey photography feature. The game is released in serial chapters via Steam with cross-chapter saves and uses the Source engine for its facial expression capabilities.

The game is played from a first-person perspective. At the start you have a cheap digital camera. The first chapter is your orientation to life on the base and an introduction to the squad you'll be reporting on. Each soldier has a distinct personality, personal history and fluctuating opinions about his fellow troops – and you. From the start, they distrust you and only cooperate grudgingly. They're here to fight a war and keep each other alive, not baby-sit some reporter.

Your assignment in this chapter is to file three articles profiling one soldier apiece, articles you're going to sell to their hometown newspapers. You can do the articles on any of the soldiers in the squad. As they go about their duties you find opportunities to ask them questions and get them to open up. If the situation is right, they will. If it's the wrong time



Rather than complain this time, I'm going to tell you about a game I would like to play

or the conversation goes poorly, their opinion of you drops. But as you persuade some of them, they may come into conflict with their fellow soldiers whose opinions of you haven't changed yet. You need to find opportunities to get them alone where their buddies won't razz them for talking with you.

Conversations don't just improve your relationships. Successful dialogues unlock Sound Bites, which are moments when the soldier says something particularly interesting or revealing. Even soldiers who dislike you can supply sound bites, though they are likely to be colorful ones.

A thriving black market can supply you with cigarettes, magazines, videogames and other trinkets you can share with the soldiers to improve their opinion of you or just distract them so you can talk to someone else alone. You need to earn money to shop on the black market, though, and you can do that with the photography feature.

Starting with your default camera, you can take two kinds of pictures: Photo Ops and Opportunity

Shots. A photo op is a situation the game stages for your benefit. It might be a group of soldiers playing poker on the hood of a jeep or a young Iraqi kid drinking Coca-Cola. The photo ops are scripted to happen in certain locations and times. At the beginning, you only get brief notice of an impending photo op and only when it's close by. As you advance through the game your proximity radius and early notice of photo ops both improve, but they also become more challenging to pull off. They become little mini-games where you have to race through the base, solve a climbing puzzle to get the right perspective for the shot, or use your black-market trinkets to distract the guards who won't let you through. Once you're in the right place at the right time, you line up the shot with the viewfinder and snap the picture.

You can take opportunity shots at any time. We apply scores to elements in the game such as soldiers, vehicles, civilians, even particle effects, and then rate your photo on the basis of what elements are present in the viewfinder at the moment you snap a picture. Situations modify these scores. Six guys and a tank sitting in the



the Escapist

base doesn't make for a great photo, but six guys and a tank in a firefight is worth plenty of points. Since we're using Source for the facial expressions, we know at any moment what emotions are on screen and so we can even apply scores to those – angry, cheerful or heartbroken soldiers are worth more. Over time you can buy better cameras and accessories on the black market so you can zoom, use dramatic depth of field, and get low-light shots. These accessories unlock even more photo ops that aren't available to you otherwise.

As the first chapter unfolds, you go on a couple of missions with the squad. They're initially pretty quiet, fruitless searches and desert patrols, but soon firefights erupt. These are great for opportunity

shots and it's even possible to improve your relationship with the troops while under fire. But these are also the dangerous portions of the game, as careless play can get you shot. You have the ability to draw attention by yelling, which you can do if you need help or if you want to warn the soldiers about something you can see. When you're injured, you black out and wake up back at the base minus some money.

To finish the first chapter, you need to file those three stories. To file a story on a given soldier, you must have at least one sound bite relating to that soldier. The more sound bites you've collected, the more the story is worth. Depending on your relationship with the soldier, the story has a Spin: positive, neutral or

negative. A story with a high positive or negative spin gets a payment multiplier. The spin, in turn, affects how the soldier reacts to the story after it's published. You might have a great collection of sound bites from a soldier who really dislikes you, and with that negative-spin multiplier the story is worth big bucks. But filing that story is going to further poison your relationship and will have similar effects on soldiers who like the subject of your story, turning them against you as well.

You can earn bonuses on a story by sending photographs along with it. Each such photo, whether it's from a photo op or an opportunity shot, must contain the soldier who is the subject of the story. You can always sell photos without a story if you

need cash, but photos sold with a story are worth more. However, as soon as you sell one photo, other photos with a similar matrix of elements drop sharply in value. You can't sell 16 photos of the same thing. In addition, the value of unsold photos decays over time because their newsworthiness diminishes.

Making these kinds of decisions is an important part of the game. If you need money to upgrade your camera, you can file a negative story for quick bucks – but you'll then need to work harder to repair your reputation with the squad. A great photo is worth a lot, but if you haven't been doing the legwork to get a story on the soldier in the photo, you might want to sit on it for a while until you get some sound

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bites so that it's worth even more. Selling other, lesser photos in the meantime may diminish the value of that great one – but so will sitting on it too long.

Once you've filed your third story, the first chapter initiates the climax. A militant suicide bomber gains access to the base and starts shouting threats and brandishing his explosives. The soldiers react and so do you. You can yell to warn people, access risky photo ops, and of course, try to stay alive when the bomb goes off. In the aftermath of swirling smoke and injuries, your actions can dramatically affect the soldiers' opinion of you while also giving you opportunities to rack up material for a fourth and final story. In the heat of the moment, you demonstrate who you really are to everyone. The story you file can make you famous, but the real story is in the choices you make and the consequences that result.

Subsequent chapters build off the first. The aftermath of the suicide-bomber story is the first thing, as your newfound journalistic success gets you access to better media clients and equipment. The

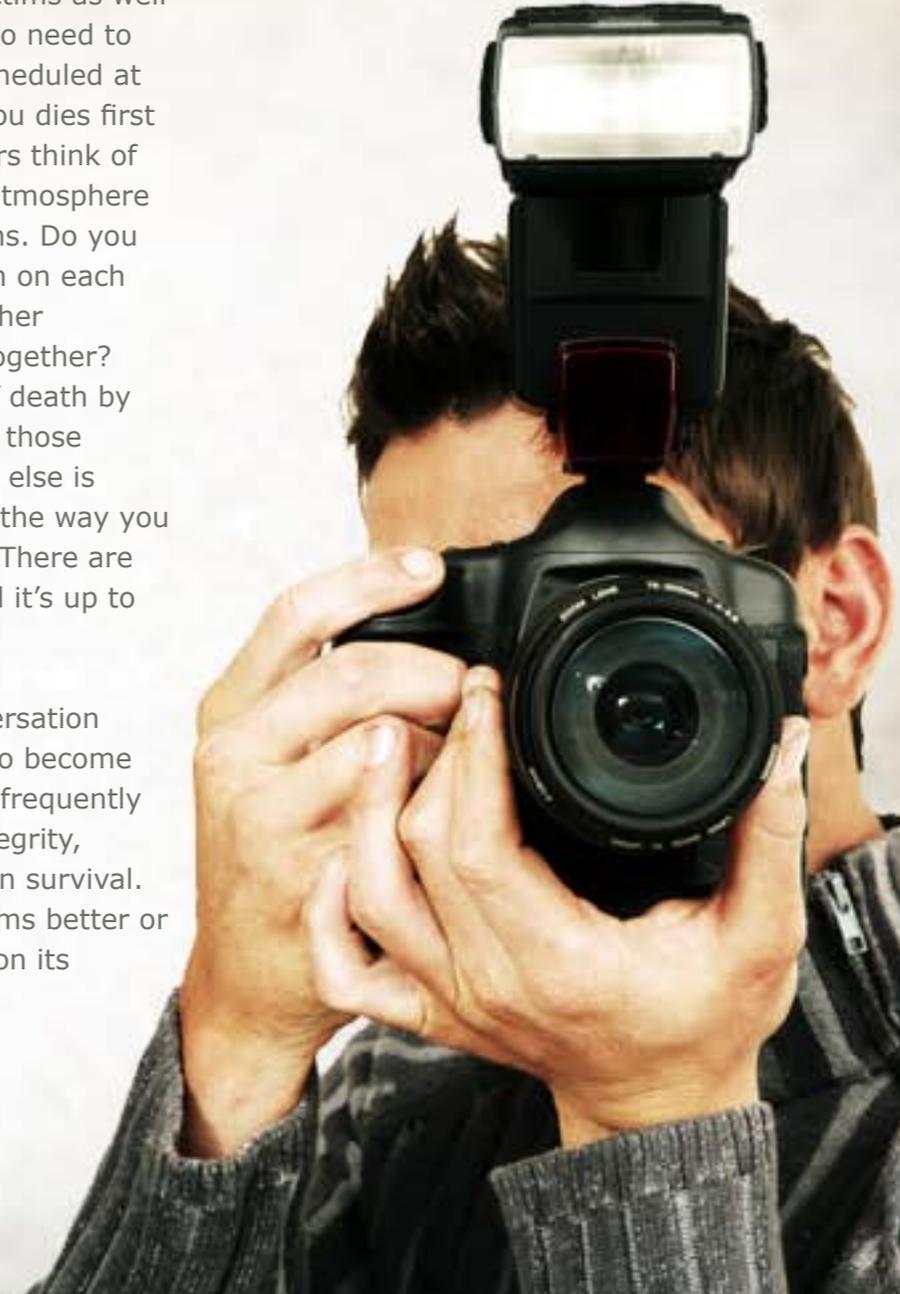
choices you made during the climax also set the stage for your relationships this time around, and a couple of new soldiers join up to replace ones lost. The bulk of the second chapter is a major offensive against a town overrun by militants, a combat-heavy and very cinematic sequence. You won't be able to file stories during this sequence, so you need to do the best you can with the tools you've got. At the end of the chapter, you should have a lot of stories and photos to file.

Another chapter focuses on the Iraqi civilians. One soldier in the squad has befriended a local family and he introduces you to them. You learn their stories, working through guides you hire to translate your conversations. This ordinary family has been greatly affected by the war and the oldest son is considering joining the militants. Your interactions can affect his decision, and indeed the fate of the family at the end of the chapter is very much in your hands.

The most unusual chapter deals with your kidnapping by militants. Your hired car is stopped and seized and your guide and several other journalists are also

taken hostage. While kidnapped, you converse with your fellow victims as well as with your captors. You also need to stay alive. Executions are scheduled at intervals and which one of you dies first depends on what your captors think of each of you. This hothouse atmosphere leads to challenging situations. Do you and the other abductees turn on each other when it's time for another beheading, or do you stick together? Potentially, you can stave off death by manipulating the opinions of those around you so that someone else is chosen to die first – if that's the way you want to play your character. There are multiple ways to escape, and it's up to you to figure them out.

In every chapter, deep conversation trees give you the freedom to become the character you want. You frequently make trade-offs between integrity, expediency, success and even survival. The squad as a whole performs better or worse in combat depending on its





**Sam Walton understood.
People like choice.**

internal relationships, which you can affect. As the game goes on, you become wound tighter and tighter into this group of soldiers who will either bond and thrive or fall apart disastrously.

So: *Embedded* is a game with moral and ethical choices, a dramatic setting, crunchy gameplay, character development, powerful dialogue and real excitement. Is there a place for this kind of game in the market? I sure think so. But the console generation that is now coming to a close brought us surprisingly little innovation, as publishers became locked into tighter and tighter game-design boxes.

Sam Walton understood. People like choice. The choice in our hobby right now is between run, gun, drive, fight or jump. That's not enough. The use of a joystick or mouse to shoot people has

become so refined there's nothing left but a few more permutations of genre. You can already shoot people in space, in the old west, in a haunted house, in the jungle, in the desert. This direction is going nowhere. I'm not proposing that we do something radical, like throw it all aside and make an MMOG based on *Rez*. I'm just making a simple suggestion: Put all that high-powered technology and razor-shen production value into a game that's a few steps to the side of what we're used to.

We can attenuate or we can innovate. I'm hoping for the latter. [COMMENTS](#)

John Tynes has been a game designer and writer for fifteen years, and is a columnist for the Stranger X360 UK and The Escapist. His most recent book is Wisser Children, a collection of his film criticism.



The Cost of Gaming

by Jason Smith

If you've been reading *The Escapist*, you've read of how the market is moving toward the mainstream, and you've read about how the retail channel is about to undergo a cataclysm. But the industry isn't ready. Like the music industry in its resolute defiance of digital distribution, the games industry will hobble onward, ensuring by its own actions that these don't come to pass until they have absolutely no choice in the matter.

It comes down to mainstream acceptance, and the industry isn't set up to allow it. In fact, they're practically doing everything they can to prevent it. There is one critical problem, and most developers, publishers and retailers don't want to see it. **Gaming is too expensive for the mainstream.**

Looking at the Future: Movies

To get a glimpse of the future, just look at film. The 2005 version of *King Kong* cost somewhere around \$200 million to make. While the costs

for *King Kong: The Official Game of the Movie* are more elusive, we can be certain that it wasn't close to that. Yet, movie tickets are less than \$10 each, and the inevitable DVD release is unlikely to retail for just over \$20. But the film will make a profit off those alone, not even counting the promotional tie-ins and the sale of pay-per-view, cable and television airing rights. It can do this for two reasons:

1) Many, many people watch movies. Really, just about everyone does - all ages, all demographics, across most of the world. Gaming isn't there yet, but it's heading in that direction. For some titles, like *The Sims*, it's really close.

2) The buy-in is low. It's very easy for many people to purchase a DVD or go to the movies without serious consideration of the cost (as long as you don't get popcorn, ouch!).

The business around DVDs is the example to look at, here. You can get a DVD player for \$20

at many grocery or convenience stores these days - it may not be a great one, but it will play DVDs. You can't get any modern game console for significantly less than \$100, and definitely none with games currently in production.

Lower prices + greater volume is what happens as an entertainment medium heads into the mainstream. And **lower prices have to come first** - for both the hardware **and** the media - before the mainstream will latch on. It's going to require a shift in the way the game industry does business - consoles aren't going to be able to become obsolete in five years, and games aren't going to be able to disappear in six months.

The Long Tail

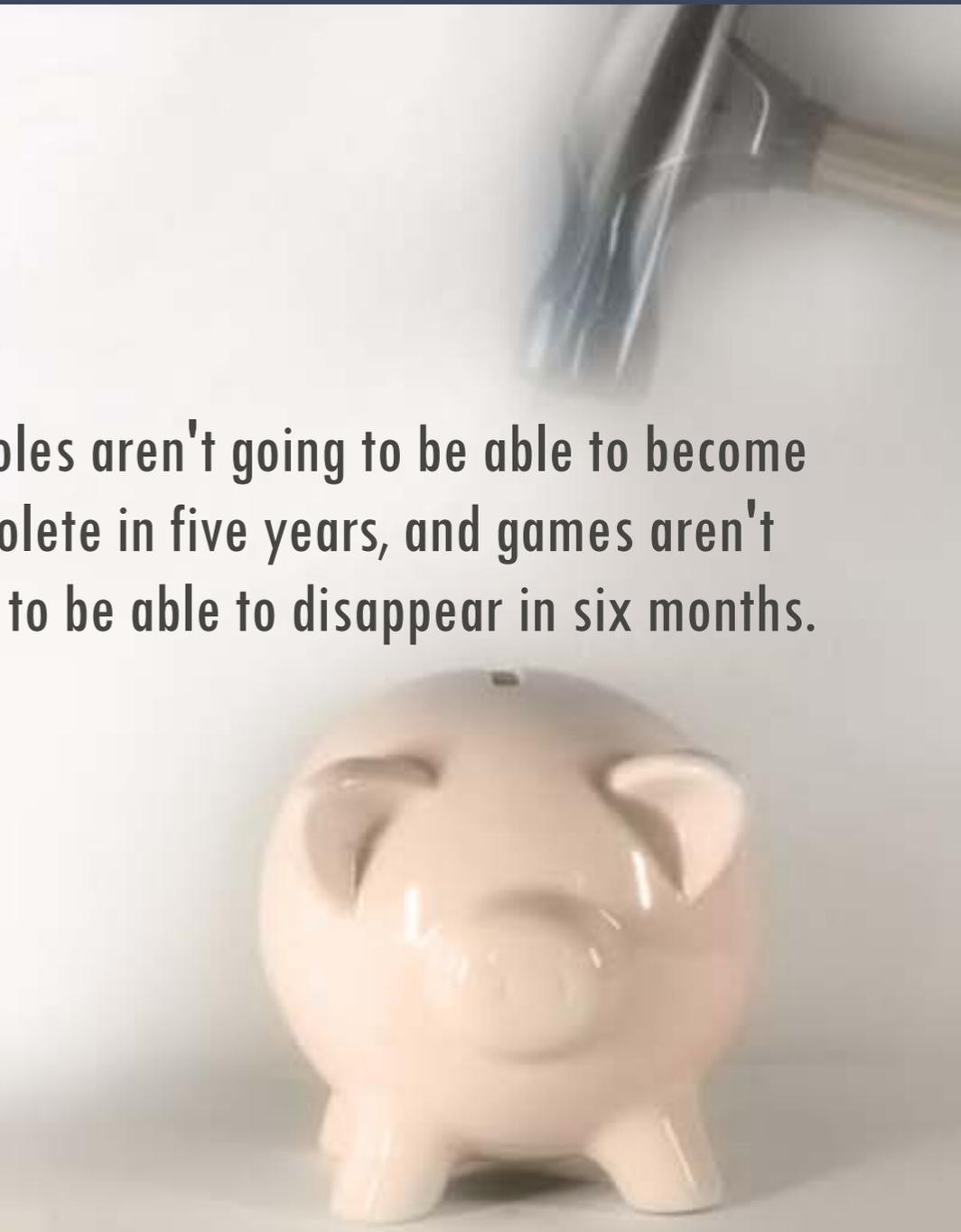
Games can do this. There is **no good reason** why games cannot have a shelf life longer than six months. You can play *Final Fantasy IV* on a GameBoy Advance today, and it's just as good as it was 15 years ago, when it was originally released. Any gamer that has been playing games for

that long could think of a dozen other titles that are still just as good today - just like a quality film, a quality game doesn't become obsolete with age.

This is one way quality books, music and movies continue to make money over time - they're still available for purchase, and (in the case of the latter two) they're in standard formats accessible on modern equipment. This is one way Amazon succeeds, they sell a lot of media that isn't brand new, and may not be available in retail, but is still relevant.

This isn't the case with gaming, and can't be under the existing system. To play *Final Fantasy IV* these days, you would need to either find a SNES and a copy of the game on eBay, or purchase a re-released port for another system. For a game that doesn't have a port available, like the equally classic *Secret of Mana*, you're probably out of luck. And the constant cycle of console replacements will even make ports obsolete in a few years.

That cycle needs to change.

A photograph of a white piggy bank in the foreground and a silver hair dryer in the background, both on a light-colored surface. The piggy bank is in sharp focus, while the hair dryer is blurred.

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Trip Had the Answer

Trip Hawkins had it right with the concept behind the 3DO, it was just too early and too costly. His concept was to create a game platform and license it to other consumer electronic companies as additional hardware to include into their product. Had it worked, all modern-day home theaters might have an integrated gaming system. They don't, but someday they will.

Imagine if, five years from now, the hardware production cost of the

Nintendo Revolution is in the \$20 range, and instead of completely switching to a new console, Nintendo licenses production rights to Phillips, Magnavox, Samsung and other non-gaming companies. These companies then integrate the hardware into their other offerings - televisions, receivers, DVD players, what have you.

The device would be able to play Revolution and GameCube media, as well as access N64, SNES and NES games via download. Millions of mainstream consumers would get the

platform as a bullet point feature on a new piece of entertainment hardware, and could then access a vast library of games for five different systems. Having the ability to play the games, even if it wasn't a selling point, would get the consumers to look at the games, if only because they're now usable.

By that time, the development environments for all of those platforms would be mature, bringing development time and costs down, allowing cheaper software. Developers would still be able to develop games based on the

GameCube and the Revolution platforms, because they would know millions of consumers had the hardware in their entertainment centers, and all they'd have to do is develop a good game to reach them. This hardware wouldn't go away, either - it could be sitting in the living room for another five or 10 years.

Retailers wouldn't ignore such a huge potential market. Like movies, they would need to have a wide variety of games, spanning a wide variety of genres. They'd need older games, just like they need older movies now, to



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round out the selection. And knowing this, they would make sure there was always some quantity of acclaimed older games available for purchase. Just as you can always find a copy of *Princess Bride* and *Lord of the Rings*, you should always be able to find *Street Fighter II* or *Ico*.

Will it Happen?

If the game industry wants to reach the mainstream, it will, eventually. A huge variety of games at a low cost is what the average consumer will buy into, and it's just not going to happen under the current regime. To truly be called mainstream, gaming must become ubiquitous, and current platforms just don't have enough time before the next console comes to take over.

More likely, the game industry will continue to do what it does now, and

slowly the world will catch up – game prices haven't increased much since the NES was introduced, while inflation has. At some point, the overall cost for games will end up going down, if for no reason other than gamers won't pay more. But if the industry is serious about expanding, about reaching the mainstream, they aren't going to get there by doing the same things they've been doing for the past 20 years.

COMMENTS

Jason Smith is chief techno-whatsit for The Escapist.



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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 haven't you been able to find at Wal-Mart?”

Max Steele,
“A Marginal Business”

A 5.56mm bullpup-configuration assault carbine with extended magazine and under-mounted grenade launcher. What's that? It's on sale in sporting goods? Oh. Thanks.

Bonnie Ruberg,
“Mainstream Shopping, Mainstream Gaming”

Tissue boxes. Why? Why!

JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor

Explicit lyrics.

Joe Blancato,
Contributing Editor,
“The Other Side of the Counter”

Employees belonging to a collective bargaining association. That's right; I said it.

Nova Barlow,
Research Manager,
“Retail Primer”

Some of my current favorite music selections can't be found at Wal-Mart, but then again there is something good to be said for indie music.

Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor

I have never found that if you go to Wal-Mart late enough they will look the other way while you play on the pogo sticks and ride the bicycles around the store. That, and a white tablecloth that doesn't look like curtains.

Jason Smith,
IT Director,
“The Cost of Gaming”

Ninjas. For that you really need to go to Kanki, the excellent Japanese steak restaurant across the street. You could probably find a pirate in Wal-Mart though.

