the eScapist

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

This issue is not exactly about retro games. Despite the name, "Groovy Games," we aren't going to wax poetic about all of our childhood favorites. Sure, there will be a little of that, but mostly we're looking at retro themes and designs, and the games that demonstrate those.

It sounds a little esoteric, but it's there and games aren't the only media or art to do it. Take fashion: Every 20 to 30 years, some variants of the same style are in fashion – haven't you noticed the pant legs **inside** women's boots of late? And this a few short years after everyone was wearing boot cut pants, flared at the bottom specifically to fit **outside** boots. That's right, we're heading back to the 80s. Pull out your teal and hot pink.

This recycling of old material and ideas accomplishes two things. The first thing, revisiting old ideas with fresh eyes. They were good ideas once, they're probably still good ideas, especially when new tech is applied. Take computer mahjongg. It's based on an old game, a good game, but there are just so many tiles … Put it on a computer, and **click** they're reshuffled and rebuilt.

The second thing is a bit more complex. Art, media and entertainment are often produced in reaction to the times. Wars, economies and politics are reflected in the art and entertainment of a people. Part of this is "painting what we know," literally reflecting the world around us. But part of this is attempting to make sense of the world around us, and to make a connection with others trying to make sense of the world around us. A theme or idea re-emerging in media suggests that there's still a need to dissect and understand, whether because time has allowed a new perspective or because the issue has crept up again.

Games are no different than any other art medium in returning to old ideas. And this is not a bad thing. Hence, the subject of this week's issue, "Groovy Games." Russ Pitts debuts this week and discusses his need to deal with "preteen thanatos" from growing up during the Cold War in America and how games helped. Also new this week is Richard Aihoshi, sharing one of his favorite pastimes and how it got a new lease on life in the past few years, due in part, to the internet. And, as you can guess from our cover, Joe Blancato speaks to Matt Soell, the creator of *Stubbs the Zombie: Rebel without a Pulse*, a great game smacking heavily of '60s zombie movies, but with something to say. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I just read my first issue of *The Escapist* and I have to say that I am very impressed by it. You have certainly gained a new reader from now on, and I intend to encourage my friends to check it out as well.

A little bit of background on me: I'm a white male age 20 (i.e. the target demographic of most game developers) who works for a GameStop (formerly EB games *sigh*) and has been playing on consoles since before I could walk. One of my favorite opponents to go head to head with is one of my friend's girlfriend. She routinely whoops the hell out of me at *Soul Calibur 3* and a few other games, yet when I try to convince stubborn male customers at my store that female gamers do exist, they are left unswayed. I am glad to finally have a website/ezine to send them to. Thanks for writing an

excellent publication and please keep it up!
-D.C.

To the Editor: First things first: You guys do a great job writing *The Escapist*. So good, in fact, that if you took a look around the office here at LDA Games and noticed that we all have two monitors on our desks, you'd be led to believe that the primary purpose for our second monitors is to showcase your magazine.

With that out of the way, I wanted to let you know that I don't find your RSS feed very useful. The reason for this is that I use Thunderbird as my RSS aggregator, and it only displays the first page of each article, making me open it in Firefox if I want to read the rest of it. But I'm not writing to complain; I'm writing to let you know that I've come up with a solution. If you subscribe to this feed, each article will be displayed in one page, with all your beautiful formatting in tact. I admit it's a bit of a hack, but it works. So if anybody else complains about your RSS feed, feel free to pass it on.
Cheers,
-Rick Yorgason

To the Editor: The women in gaming features were all brilliant. I really enjoyed the magazine issue, it was great to have acknowledgement that we play for once. I play *Guild Wars* and the "Girls don't exist on teh interweb!!!1" article was pretty much spot on. And funny.

A few other girls and I formed a *Diablo 2* (Open + Closed Dueling) clan, the first (and I think the only) all female *D2* clan back in 2000 after meeting through an online community. At the time we had a) Lesbian comments b) You are not girls comments c) You are boys pretending to be fat lesbian comments (these were interesting) d) You are girls and must therefore suck or have someone else fight your battles for you comments e) You might be girls, but not hot girls comments. Recently some of us got accused of "cyber-sexing" (I kid thee not) our way up to admin positions in a web forum. The clan is called POA (Pieces of Ass) and still going pretty strong despite ridicule online and deaths, divorces, kids and marriages offline. It's cool, and all the men on our home gaming communities are respectful and appreciate we have our place there because we've earned it. **Boys** under the age of 20 on the other hand.. but oh well you can't have everything!

Thanks for the articles!
-Cat "Glory POA" D
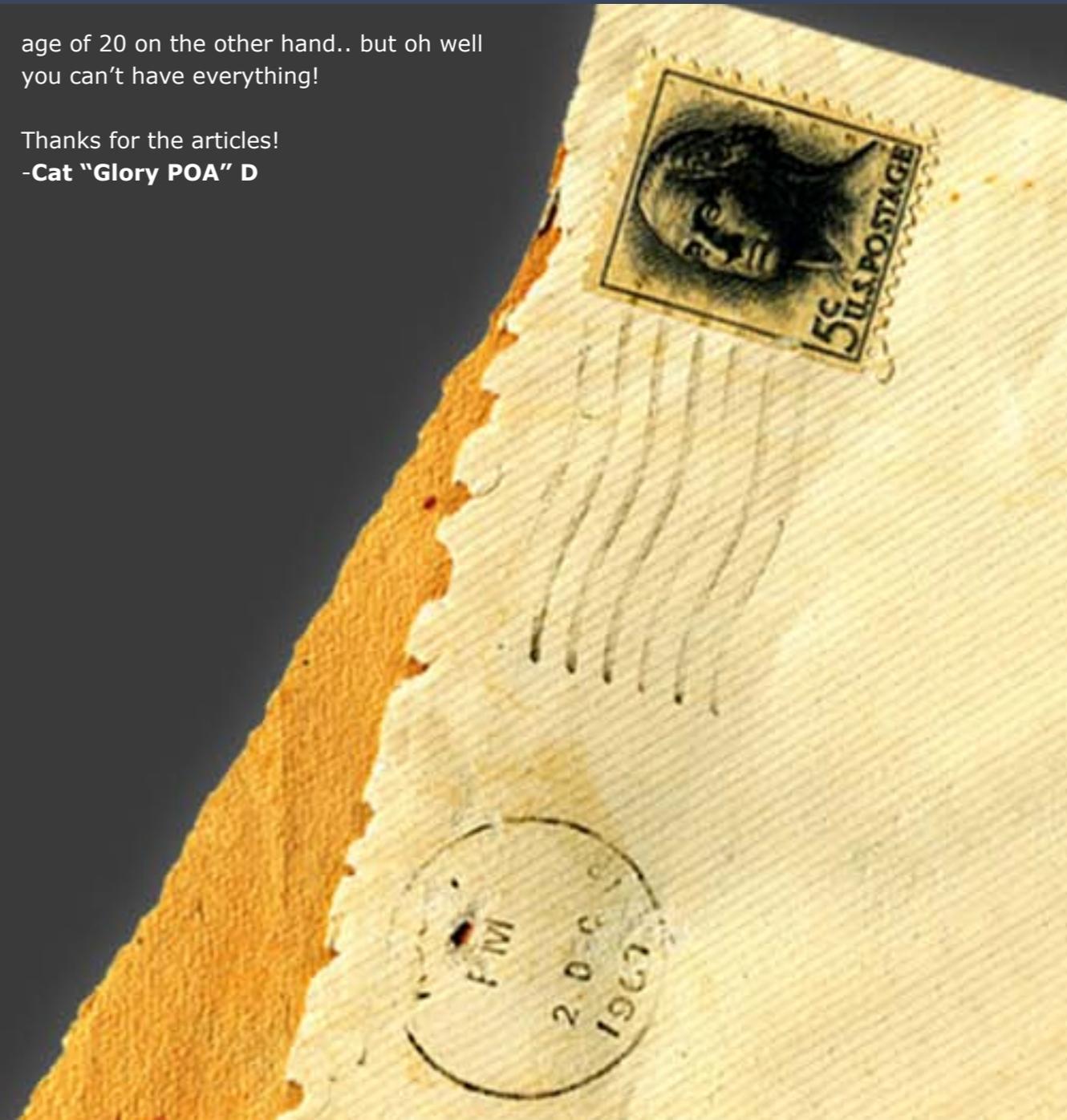
GREAT ZOMBIE DEPRESSION

by Joe Blancato

Retro eventually gives way to parody. Think about it. The latest '80s movement is about to fall flat on its face because no one can pop his pink polo shirt's collar for much longer than a year before realizing how stupid it looks. The words "disco is back!" are a punch line, but 15 years ago, they sent people in search of designer bell bottoms. The transition from serious high fashion to giggle-inducing is just part of the underlying cultural understanding that you can't go home again. Despite the cyclical nature of western culture, entropy finds a home in too many hearts to let us repeat ourselves verbatim, and no throwback in the world evades a comic gaze for very long.

But what about when someone creates a throwback complemented by a wink and a nudge? How can you make fun of retro when it's already making fun of itself? *Stubbs the Zombie: Rebel without a Pulse* dared me to answer that very question when I put on my fedora and popped the CD into my Xbox last October.

I was able to get in touch with Wideload's Matt Soell, *Stubbs*' creator, and talk game design, specifically retro

gaming. Of course, the first thing I ask him is when *Stubbs the Zombie* was born.

"Wideload began life in early 2003," he tells me. "The initial incarnation consisted of three people - Alexander Seropian, Mark Bernal and myself. We had a lot of conference calls because we didn't have office space yet, and Alex was still spending a lot of time at home tending to his just-born first child. We'd been kicking a bunch of ideas around but we hadn't come up with anything we really liked yet. After one conference call on a Saturday morning, during which we all shot down each other's ideas, I was pacing around trying to will a good idea into existence. Nothing was coming, so I gave up and took a shower. That's when the raw idea for *Stubbs* came to me. I seem to have most of my good ideas in the shower or in the car. Aspiring writers should drive and bathe often."

If you're unfamiliar with *Stubbs*, here's some perspective. It's 1959. All of the outlandish advances promised in those corny "the future is now!" type videos have been delivered by Andrew Monday, and they're all available for everyone to enjoy in his newly created future city,

Throughout his journey, he encounters every 1950s stereotype you can imagine.

Punchbowl. Robots take on menial tasks usually performed by the working class, the police force's numbers rival that of a fascist state, and the elite special ops team charged with protecting Andrew Monday and his mother doubles as a profane barbershop quartet - it's Joseph McCarthy's wet dream. But there's a problem. Punchbowl is built on the shallow grave of Stubbs, a newly undead insurance agent from the Depression era, and he's tired of being trod upon.

"The Roaring Twenties were basically a big party to which Stubbs was not invited, and the Great Depression was the aftermath in which Stubbs somehow got stuck with the bill," Soell says. "Just when he thinks his life is finally turning around, someone blows a basketball-sized hole in his gut and buries him in the middle of nowhere. Twenty-odd years later, he wakes up in the middle of a rich man's city to discover that he's still dead and some whiny little punks are eating hot dogs on his grave. It's a pivotal moment for Stubbs, the point where he realizes that he's doesn't have to let people walk all over him anymore."

For the next few hours, hilarity ensues, as Stubbs romps through Punchbowl, turning its citizens into a zombie horde that takes on the U.S. Army in the game's final stages. Somewhere in the middle, Stubbs gets into a dance off with the chief of police, and later develops a love interest with one of Punchbowl's celebrities. Throughout his journey, he encounters every 1950s stereotype you can imagine; it puts *Back to the Future* to shame. *Stubbs* did what so few games can: It let its content shine right next to its gameplay. But the retro/parody content didn't just shine, it **said something**.

"One of the underlying themes in *Stubbs* - which I lifted from Poe's 'Masque of the Red Death' - is the idea that you can't build a wall big enough to keep entropy out," Soell says. "Andrew Monday doesn't like poverty and decrepitude and unpleasantness, so he builds a city where luxury is a birthright and everyone can relax because bad things only happen to lesser people in lesser cities. Then Stubbs shows up, and he's not just poor and decrepit and unpleasant ... he's **undead**. He stands in direct opposition

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Imagine James Dean with green skin.

to everything Punchbowl is about. And he wears a really ugly tie."

A man with hubris meeting his nemesis isn't a new theme. Now, mash that into a zombie a movie where the zombie **isn't** a conformist and you're treading on unfamiliar territory. "There are a lot of games about zombies attacking humanity, but in our game, the zombie is the hero," Soell says. If no examples come to mind, think about the original *Dawn of the Dead*, where everyday mall-goers turned into brain-eating zombies. In *Stubbs*, the only non-conformist is a zombie; imagine James Dean with green skin. However, for a reanimated noggin-chomper to be the least zombie-like person in the world, Soell had to create a city full of '50s automatons. "Having made that one crucial inversion, it seemed natural to make a few more. Instead of setting our grisly antihero in a gritty modern-day city, we put him in a gleaming, sterile environment – the sort of city that never really existed except in flights of fancy."

But Punchbowl was just one of the elements Wideload created when they brought *Stubbs* to life. The game's

soundtrack features a myriad of modern-day bands covering tunes from the '50s. Cake covers "Strangers in the Night," The Raveonettes cover "My Boyfriend's Back." Soell says, "Because it's a city of the future, we figured there might be some very forward-thinking bands interpreting the songs. Pop music from that era had a lot of low-hanging fruit for the story we were telling – there's an intensity of emotion, but also an innocence that provides a pleasant *frisson* when placed into the context of an over-the-top zombie game. 'Earth Angel' and 'My Boyfriend's Back' certainly took on some new undertones." But it wasn't a simple task to compile an original soundtrack when "a lot of publishers would hear the words 'zombie game' and slap together a bunch of throwaway tracks from nu-metal bands with misspelled names," he tells me. If it weren't for the Herculean efforts of Zach and Chad at Aspyr Media, *Stubbs*' publisher, all of Wideload's hard work to create a pseudo-period piece might've been disrupted by Mudvayne.

Matt's nu-metal comment strikes a chord with me. Nowadays, even bands like Cannibal Corpse and GWAR - while

they're not really nu-metal - draw little more than awkward glances from concerned parents. But in the '50s, Buddy Holly and Elvis had entire committees trying to get them thrown in jail for being social deviants, corrupting our youth and turning them into serial killers. Sounds a lot like the videogame industry, only Buddy Holly probably got more girls than John Romero. I ask Matt what our next demon will be.

"I don't know what will be next. If you look back at the things that inspired that kind of public outcry, it seems like they bubble up from subcultures that are already stigmatized to a certain degree," he says. "Punk rock, *D&D*, Lenny Bruce, hip-hop - or indeed any musical form pioneered by African-Americans ... all of them were easy to demonize because they came from subcultures that were - and still are - actively denigrated by the mainstream. At the risk of sounding pompous, those who want to predict the cultural flashpoints of tomorrow should probably look at the stereotypes and prejudices they hold today."

As our conversation comes to a close, I ask Matt to gaze into his crystal ball and tell me how people will perceive us 50 years into the future, since he did such a great job of encapsulating the past. "In 50 years, these will officially be the Good Old Days. Our technology and culture will seem quaint to the point of amusement, but there will also be a sizable group of fogies and blowhards whining that everything's gone to hell since then. And of course they'll need something to blame it on – but it won't be videogames, it'll be something new," he says.

His last thought makes me think on the drive home. When I make it into my apartment, I load up *Stubbs* again, this time trying to keep up with all of Soell's deep references and stereotypes, only to find myself unable to actually keep up with the game. I push down my fedora, crank up the volume, and by the time I'm dancing against Punchbowl's chief of police, I'm back at the top of my game. I guide Stubbs through Matt's world a while longer before realizing it's 2:00 a.

m. and long past my bed time. I put the game back in its case and decide to place it on a bookshelf, away from where I normally store my old games, because this one crossed a barrier; it **said something**. COMMENTS

Joe Blancato is a Content Editor for The Escapist Magazine.

DUCK & COVER

by Russ Pitts
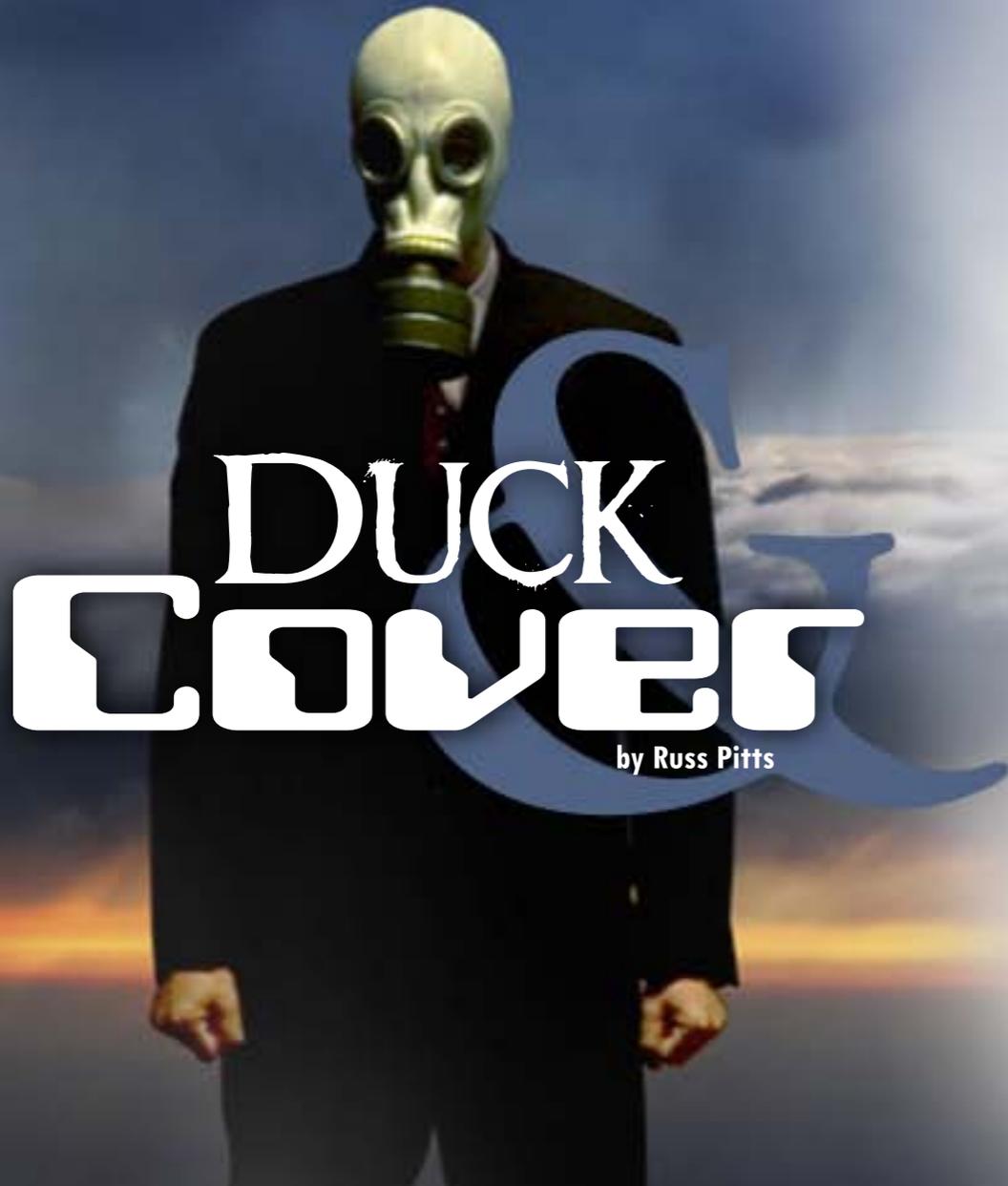
On November 20th, 1983, ABC broadcasted a made-for-television movie called *The Day After*, starring a number of notable screen actors and directed by none other than Nicholas Meyer of *The Wrath of Khan* fame. The marketing for the film featured a number of pithy, **historically meaningful** blurbs, including the mysterious suggestion that the movie was "Beyond imagining …" which, if you think about it, sounds ridiculous for a number of reasons.

In the film, world politics turned ugly overnight and somebody, somewhere pressed **The Red Button**. Missiles roared skyward, the Russians vaporized Kansas City, civilization broke down, soldiers abandoned their posts, farmers locked away their daughters and Steve Guttenberg got radiation poisoning. Basically, the sum of all fears.

Every filmmaker, to a greater or lesser degree, wants his or her film to change the world. The artists responsible for *The Day After* practically demanded this outcome. The epilogue of the film says it all:

"It is hoped that the images of this film will inspire the nations of this earth, the peoples and leaders, to find the means to avert [nuclear war]."

In other words, the filmmakers wanted their film to serve as a wake-up call to world leaders (who were assumed to watch lot of TV). They got their wish. The film was a monumental success and, combined with Sting's powerful, lyrical hope that the Russians loved their children (too), formed the nexus of a cultural revolution which apparently convinced all self-respecting, music-loving, TV-watching nuclear powers to reconsider the whole Cold War thing and sue for peace. Walls fell, evil empires collapsed and the nuclear arsenals of the U.S.A. and U.S.S.R. were wheeled into the basement. For the world, it was a happy ending. For myself and many like me, it was but the beginning of a lifetime of neurosis stemming from a childhood of unrealized terror.

Author and filmmaker Daedalus Howell calls this particular neurosis a "preteen thanatos," likening the post-traumatic stress of viewing *The Day After* as a

child, and his ensuing lifelong melancholy, to Freud's theory that the realization of one's own imminent death induces within one an urge to (and here I paraphrase) get the hell on with it, prompting violent and/or self-destructive behavior. In this case, however, we are talking about thanatos on a cultural scale. *The Day After*, coming as it did, at the height of U.S.-U.S.S.R. Cold War tensions, catalyzed the volatile atmosphere of nuclear hysteria in the U.S., terrifying an entire generation of American children into fervently doubting the possibility of ever reaching adulthood, while at the same time inducing those in power to abandon the very course of action which might have led to the realization of that terror. In other words: thanatos interruptus.

Those of us at the cusp of Generation X should have rejoiced. We did not. Deep down, we felt a sense of profound sadness - of loss. I, for one, had made plans. Following Armageddon, I'd been counting on the chance to explore the ruins of Western civilization, dreamed about my future as a hero and savior rising from the ashes to lead mankind to

salvation and literally salivated at the prospect of convincing Jenny Cartwright to let me touch her breasts before the bombs fell - I'd been cheated, in other words, out of the best parts of my as yet un-lived life. More than 10 years would go by before I'd begin to figure out how to deal.

The brilliant *Impossible Mission*, from Epyx, started the journey, putting me into the mysterious tights of a mysterious man on an even more mysterious (and impossible) mission. Armed with only his wits and a fantastically rendered somersault trick, the mystery man managed to maneuver his way through a maze-like secret complex, avoiding deadly traps and thwarting evil robots along the way. The absence of other human beings in this complex, yet abundance of human **objects**, suggested a bustling installation which somehow, and for some reason, had been rapidly evacuated. Either the designers at Epyx had brilliantly conceived this game as part of a long-range plan to soothe my shattered ego, or my imagination was humming at just the right frequency to

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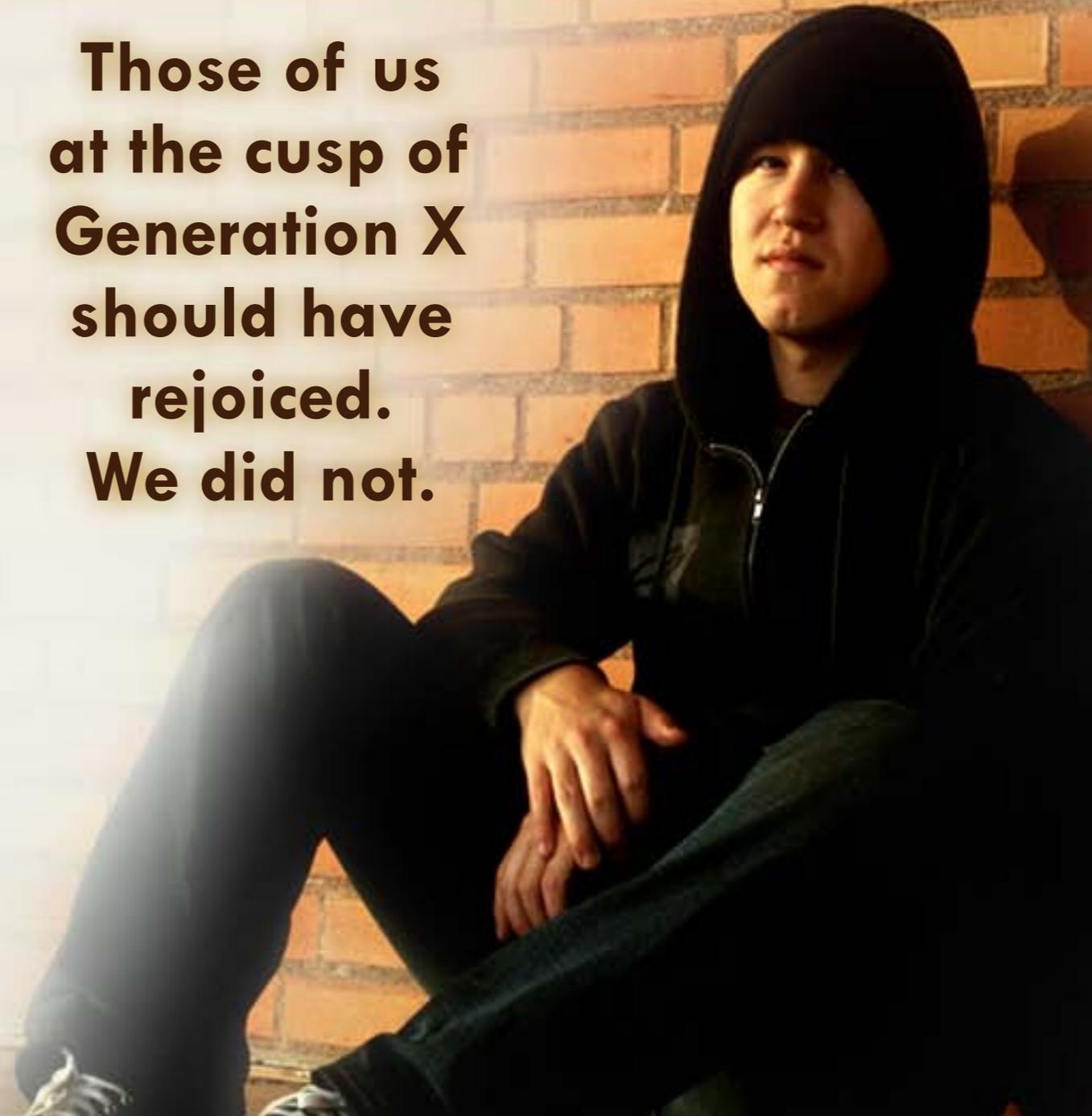
... finally forced me to face my darkest fears.

perceive *IM*'s empty hallways and eerily unpopulated work stations as **post apocalyptic**. Either way, the game's sense of atmosphere moved me profoundly.

I hesitate to mention *Mad Max*, for the NES, because it is honestly not that great of a game, but it did make the Apocalypse seem fun. Fast cars, half-naked women, vast desert landscapes (all imagined, of course - the graphics looked terrible); for a kid with an apocalypse fetish, it was a must-have. I had it. It helped. Let's move on. Like that girl at that party that night that I was upset about that other girl going off with that guy, it's best we don't talk about it in any great detail. Someone bought it for me. Or maybe it came with my NES. Please, let's just move on.

Many years later, I found the bright, shining champion of post-apocalypse gaming. *Half-Life*, with its brilliant artificial intelligence, engaging story and near-perfect immersion, placed me into the suit of a man just trying to survive the unimaginable in a way no game had ever done before. Crawling out of the shattered passageways of the Black

Mesa complex was like crawling out from under half a lifetime of repressed fears and barely-remembered emotional scars. I'd been waiting for a game like *Half-Life* for a very long time. It brought me one step away from completing my journey.

Fallout, Black Isle's innovative post-apocalyptic RPG, finally forced me to face my darkest fears. In *Fallout*, the world has been reduced to rubble - yet you survive. You begin the game inside a community fallout shelter called a "Vault," where you have lived for your entire life. The Vault Elder informs you that there is a problem. The water purifier is failing, and the elders have decided that someone has to go outside to find a new one. They've chosen you.

Not since the heady days of Glasnost and Infocom text adventures had a game begun with a more pitch-perfect set-up. The massive door of the Vault opens and you are unceremoniously thrust out of the only home you've ever known and into … well, *The Day After*. Only, in the game, it's actually been decades after. And, as bad as we've been led to believe the world will get in the days following World War III, in the

years following that, it's become much, much worse.

To paraphrase the character played by John Lithgow in *The Day After*, who was, in turn, quoting Albert Einstein:

"I don't know how World War III will be fought. But I do know how World War IV will be fought - with sticks and stones."

The desolate imagery and desperate sense of hopelessness in the face of unimaginable tragedy make *Fallout* a difficult game to finish (especially for a *Day After* Kid), but it is precisely the ending of this game that makes every moment of pain and frustration worthwhile. Watching the *Fallout*'s ending cut-scene rendered me utterly speechless. I literally could not summon the words or thoughts to describe my emotions. I had experienced this sensation only once before, on November 20th, 1983.

As the final *Fallout* credit rolled up the monitor, and the screen turned black, I slowly regained control of my faculties. I got up from my chair, stumbled out into the garden and stood silently for the remainder of the afternoon, listening to the sound of the world and contemplating my existence. I felt an almost indescribable sense of calm. I'd been Gordon Freeman, saving the world with a crowbar. I'd been the nameless secret agent, cart-wheeling my way through the laser beams. I'd been the Road Warrior, refusing to just walk away, and saving the juice for all mankind. Now, finally, I was the Vault Dweller, kicking ass and chewing bubblegum in my blue jumpsuit. I'd finally gotten my chance to experience the challenge of surviving in the radioactive maelstrom of post-nuclear America, and had not only survived - I'd conquered. It was, as ridiculous as this may sound, the first time in my life that I felt completely sure of who I was, and of what I was capable.

COMMENTS

Russ Pitts is the former Head Writer for The Screen Savers on TechTV. He now writes for gamerswithjobs.com and The Worcester Pulse, and is the Producer and Host ofGamers With Jobs Radio. His website is insomniacorp.com.
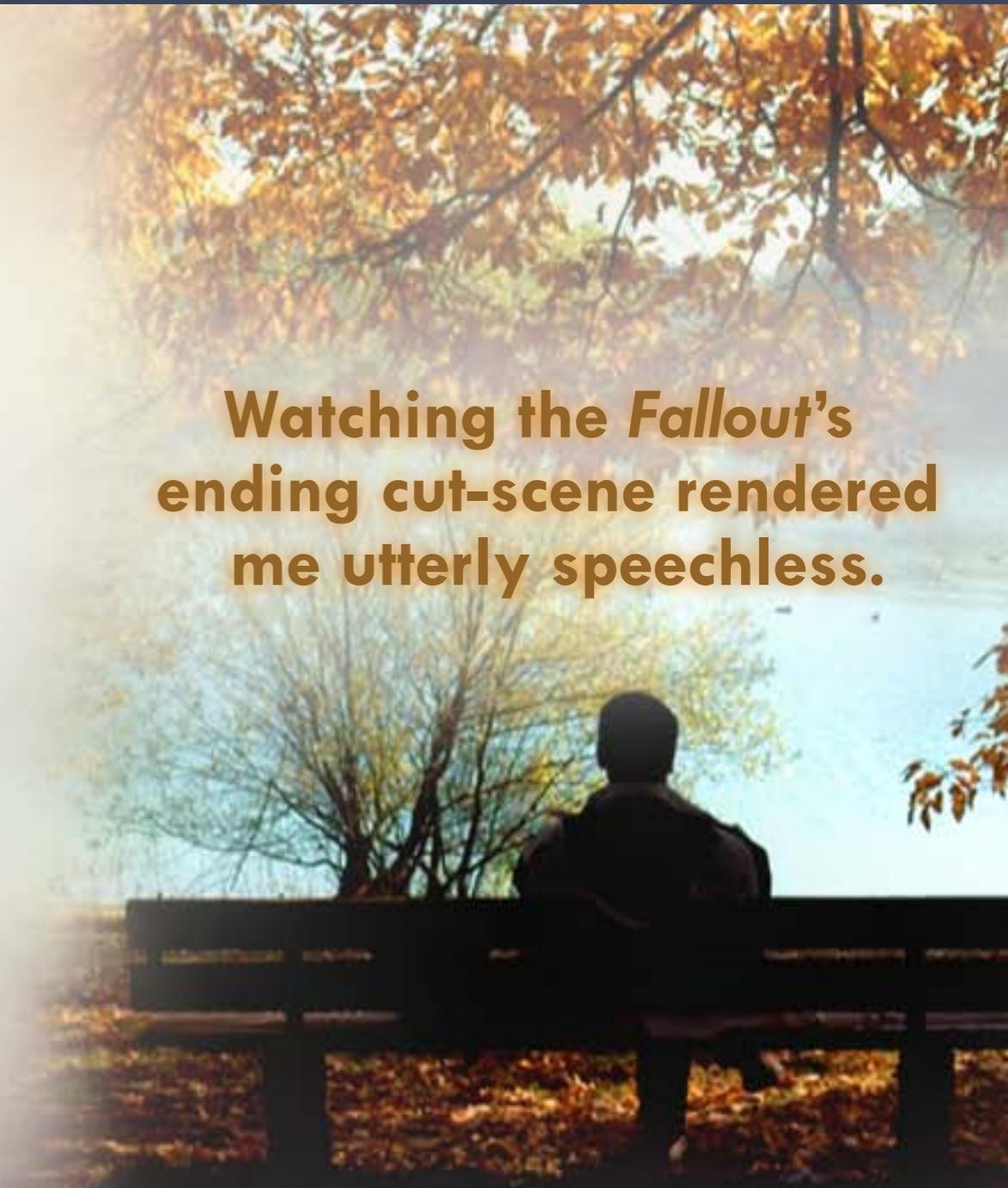
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Money for Nothin'
AND CHIPS FOR FREE
by Richard Aihoshi

The year was 1985. U.K. band Dire Straits released the landmark album *Brothers in Arms*, which ultimately sold the almost unbelievable total of more than 30 million copies. It yielded multiple hit singles, one being *Money for Nothing*, from which the title of this article is adapted; the actual lyric is "chicks." Music was, of course, a huge entertainment medium.

That summer, Bill Smith outlasted 139 other players to capture the main event at the sixteenth annual World Series of Poker (WSOP) in Las Vegas. Having paid $10,000 to enter, he pocketed a tidy $700,000 from the total pool of $1.4 million. Outside poker's own insular world, virtually no one noticed. As a form of entertainment, poker was completely off the radar.

Flash forward to the summer of 2005. *Brothers in Arms* remains a landmark British recording, one of the all-time top sellers. Music is still tremendously popular.

At the WSOP, Joseph Hachem took part in the main event. The entry fee was still $10,000, but the field and the prize money available had grown considerably. With 5,619 competitors, the total pool was an almost unbelievable $52,818,610. When Hachem emerged victorious, his share was a more than tidy $7.5 million. He also became an almost instant celebrity with endorsement deals and representation by the famed William Morris agency. Of the nine competitors who made it to the final table, six won more than the entire $1.4 million paid out 20 years earlier. All nine took home at least $1 million. It also didn't hurt poker's visibility when the WSOP ladies championship was captured in dominating fashion by Oscar-nominated actress Jennifer Tilly.

As a form of entertainment, poker has exploded within the past few years. Around the world, millions have taken up the game, and when they're not playing, they can watch more than a dozen poker shows on TV. And although it had already started, the boom is perhaps best defined and symbolized by a moment that took place in the summer of 2003. An accountant, the fittingly named Chris Moneymaker, won the WSOP main event.

Be The Quintessential Poker Newbie
Tips for showing what a rookie you really are

1. Understand advanced poker odds
The uninitiated may think a hand being "the favorite" means its probability of winning exceeds 50 percent. For example, consider a hand of two eights (88) against a single opponent holding an ace and a five (A5). According to conventional mathematics, the pair will win about 70 percent of the time. Simplistic nonsense! When 88 is dealt to you, it should prevail against A5 every single time. Well, almost. Once an eon or so, the poker deities will conspire to let the other hand triumph. When this happens ...

2. Make sure everyone knows what just happened
It's silly to think the other players at your table are actually watching the action so it's your sacred duty to make sure they know they just missed a once in an eon occurrence. A common way of accomplishing this is to type something like "amazing luck!!!!!" or "what an incredible suckout!!!!!" into the chat box. The use of multiple exclamation marks is highly recommended, but not mandatory.

3. Learn and inform by asking
Using the same example hands, the obvious question to ask is something like, "You called me

As they improve, they start to win, often by beating the next wave of newbies.

Unlike Hachem, he didn't put up $10,000 to play. Instead, he paid about $40 to enter a so-called "satellite" online tournament in which the three top prizes were entries. After getting in this way, he then proceeded to win the big one, which had a top prize of $2.5 million that year. Ironically, he stated later that with four players left in the satellite, he considered playing to come fourth because it paid $8,000 in cash.

Moneymaker's win demonstrated that an amateur could beat the top professionals to win the game's most coveted championship. Of course, not everyone would turn $40 into $2.5 million, but how hard could it be to become good enough to make a few bucks?

With such thoughts in mind, it's very easy to give poker a shot. Most poker newbies pick an online site, deposit some money - $50 is typical, but the minimum requirement is usually lower - and start playing. Quite a few lose it all. Some quit, but others consider it "paying their dues" while learning, or figure that hobbies usually cost

something - and at least with poker, there's a chance to profit. So, they deposit again. As they improve, they start to win, often by beating the next wave of newbies. How long it takes to become a winning player varies significantly from person to person; some never do.

JonM (online poker alias) took a different route. In his first year playing, he made well over $1,500. What's more, he did so without ever risking a cent. How? By playing in "freeroll" tournaments that cost nothing to enter but pay cash to those who place highly. Most of the estimated 250 online poker sites offer them, usually with prize pools of $50 or less. However, at least a few each month pay out $1,000 to $5,000.

Occasionally, far larger amounts are available. JonM says he has played several events that paid out $20,000 each and one that had a pool of $100,000. He also entered three satellite tournaments where the high finishers qualified to play another freeroll for $1 million or more.

with A5?" - in case you were only 99.99% sure. The advanced usage of this concept is to inform the other players what happened (see #2 above). The recommended style is a single question mark, so this is especially good to know when your fingers are cramping up from repeatedly typing multiple exclamations.

4. Share your wealth of knowledge at the table

You know the opponent's A5 will lose to your 88 almost 100 percent of the time. However, since that's an advanced odds concept they may not grasp, don't go into details. Settle for something like, "You have to be careful with A5 in case you run into a medium pocket pair." This is actually a form of reverse psychology. Given that your 88 is virtually guaranteed to win, you definitely want them to bet with A5. But who's going to take advice from someone who's playing in a freeroll? It's far more likely they'll do the exact opposite.

5. Bet "all in" as often as possible

On TV, you see the pros bet all their chips quite often. Sure, they're late in tournaments, playing with high mandatory bets at tables where only a few opponents remain, whereas you'll usually be playing at full tables of nine or 10. But so what? If once every 10 hands or so is good enough for them, more often must be even better. You may not always have strong hands like 88, or even A5

While it's not all that difficult to get started freerolling, sites have their own schedules and entry requirements. This means it can take some time to figure out where and how to begin. According to JonM, who has played on more than 25 sites, opening an account is pretty easy. You have to be legally an adult wherever you live, and you must

provide basic information like your name, address and phone number plus a valid e-mail address. In most cases, you also have to enable the account for real money play. This is generally just a formality that does not require giving a credit card number or actually transferring any funds. Certain sites do oblige you to deposit before you can withdraw your winnings. However, you don't have to bet the money; just let them hold it for a while. JonM suggests leaving any sites with more complicated requirements until you're past the raw beginner stage.

One site at which he has played offers several $100 freerolls every day. They are open to all money-enabled players

and capped at 1,000 entrants, of whom the top 15 win amounts ranging from $20 to $5. Withdrawals may be made without depositing, and JonM says he has cashed out about $50 in winnings from these events. Another site has approximately 35 cash freerolls on its daily schedule. The prize pool is $50 split 18 ways among 2,000 contestants, with the winner getting $10 down to $1. This site is one that requires a deposit before withdrawing; the minimum is $20. JonM reports cashing another $50 or so from his successes there.

Clearly, the probability of winning anything in such large tournaments is pretty small, as are the prize amounts. So, how did he manage to amass over $1,500? The vast majority came from private freerolls where the numbers can be much more favorable. In an admittedly atypical example, he played in one that had only 11 entrants vying for nine prizes. What's more common is to play for the same $50 or $100 as above, but against far fewer opponents, often 50 to 150 rather than 1,000 or 2,000. These smaller events
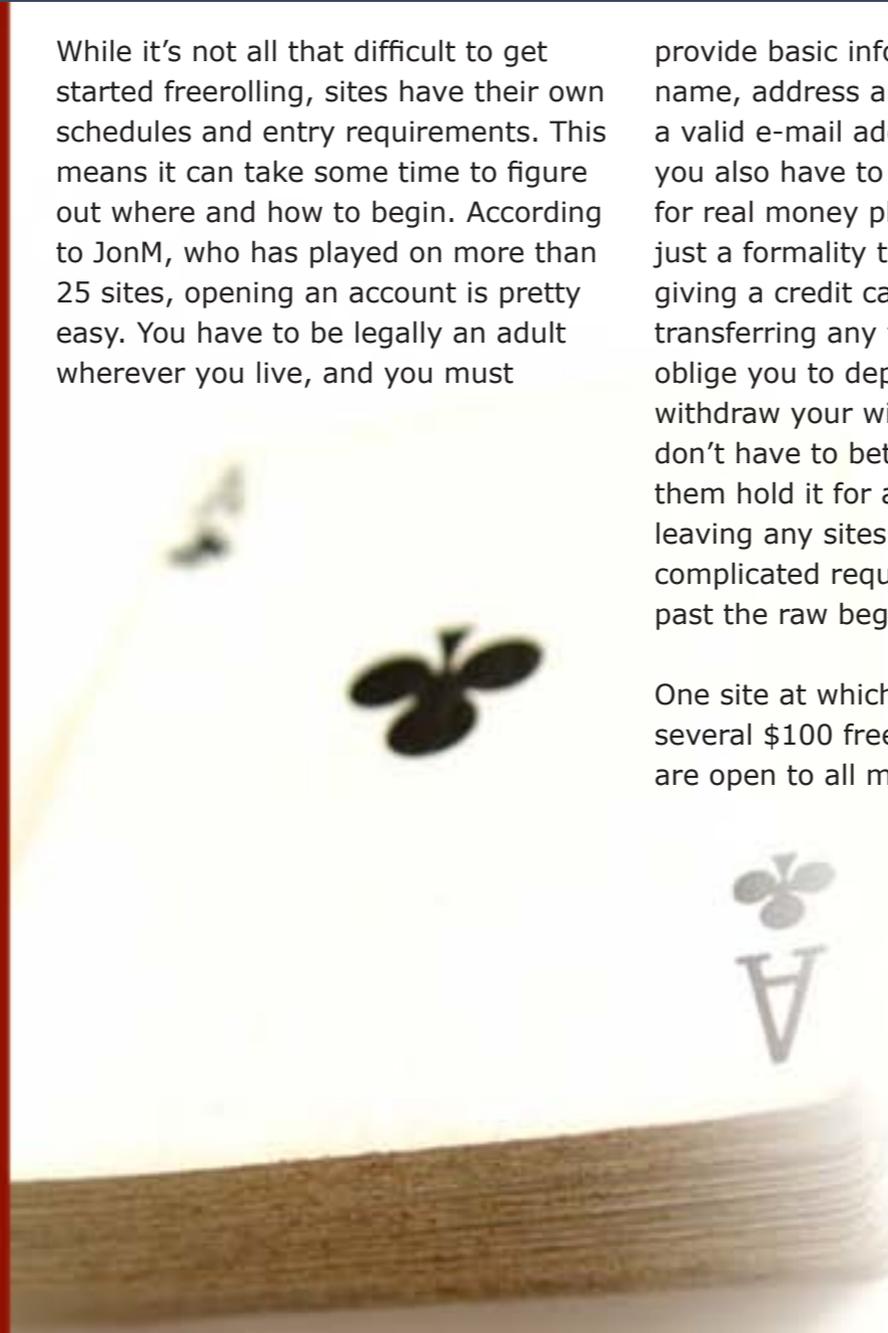
though, particularly if you go all in every hand, so you'll have to …

6. Bluff big

Naturally, all in is especially good. Wimpy bluffs are for … well, wimps. If the opponents fold in terror and you win with your 72 or 53, great. It's especially satisfying when you bet 1,000 or 1,500 chips to win a pot that holds 15 or 25. For even more self-gratification, pat yourself on the back and gain the instant respect of the entire table by showing your two little cards. And, on those rare occasions when someone happens to hit the "Call" button by mistake and you lose, you can …

7. Get emotional

This is a natural reaction. After all, you're playing in a freeroll that cost you nothing to enter, and you've invested precious time that you could have spent … um, reading *The Escapist*. Also, if you stay emotional long enough, there's a cool bonus. The next time you bluff big, which may have to wait until your next tournament if you busted out, you can really hammer your mouse button. The other players won't know, but you'll get a little rush of self-satisfaction. And if someone happens to hit the "Call" button by mistake and you lose again, you'll be primed for a bigger rush next time. And the time after. And the time after …

tend to pay the top nine, 10 or 15 places. This means an average player will cash about 10 percent of the time, and JonM says he does better than that. As above, the individual prize amounts are small, frequently $2 to $5. However, he plays almost every day and occasionally wins larger sums - $200 is the most so far - and every little bit adds up.

JonM does warn that looking at his total winnings doesn't give a complete picture. By his own estimate, he plays about 20 hours a week, which means he made about $1.50 an hour. He also

spends at least a few hours each week reading up on how to improve his game, so his overall rate is even lower. The fact he makes anything at all is a nice bonus since he plays as a hobby, so don't expect him to quit his job and turn pro any time soon.

It has been estimated that this year's WSOP main event winner will receive as much as $10 million from a total prize pool that will almost certainly exceed $60 million. A few people who play for this enormous jackpot will have won their way in through freerolls. So, although the odds are

very slim, JonM could turn out to be 2006's Joseph Hachem. In any case, he'll happily continue to enjoy winning money for nothing while playing as a pastime. And yes, he has also gotten a set of poker chips for free.

COMMENTS

Richard Aihoshi has been writing about a different form of online gaming, massively multiplayer online worlds, for nearly a decade. His interest in poker is more recent. He started playing several months ago and has made a few dollars from freerolls himself.

Every little bit adds up.

RETRO LIKE YOU'VE NEVER SEEN IT BEFORE

by Pat Miller

Dim lights, loud techno music, bleeps and bloops, intricate wire-frame models of exotic spaceships, and obscenely high scores; this scene could be any one of dozens of pizza parlors or game rooms of the '70s and '80s, featuring staples of the times from *Battlezone* to *Galaxian* with everything in between.

Except it's not. It's my bedroom. The dim lights are my own fault, and the rest is coming from a game called *Gunroar*, released an ancient seven-odd months ago. And it's not part of any *Midway Classics* collection or some such nonsense either. *Gunroar* comes courtesy of ABA Games, a one-man operation run out of Japan by one Kenta Cho.

Gunroar is the latest entry in a veritable pantheon of classic arcade-inspired titles. The vast majority of ABA Games' releases fall into the shoot-'em-up genre ("shmup" to the initiated) which usually includes both horizontal-scrolling (*R-Type, Gradius*) and vertical-scrolling (*Strikers 1945, Raiden*) ship-based shooters, as well as one-man-army shooters like *Contra*, *Metal Slug,* and *Gunstar Heroes.*

It's no secret that the shmup genre has fallen well out of the scope of the mainstream in a steady downward spiral that probably began around the release of the PlayStation, and the fact that arcade shoot-'em-ups are being made by independent developers is hardly newsworthy to any follower of the industry. Indeed, aside from a few relatively high-profile releases like *Ikaruga* and *Gradius V*, the shmup scene is largely a niche that caters to the hardest of the hardcore (as in, the people willing to shell out a few hundred U.S. dollars for *Radiant Silvergun*) and not many others, and so the vast majority of new titles have been coming out of independent developer associations, mostly in Japan, who give their dedicated fans what they're looking for - generally in the form of ever-increasing waves upon waves of bullets.

Mr. Cho's games are *different*, somehow.

To be sure, every ABA Games title boasts an impeccable audiovisual experience; each title offers its own modern re-imagining of the arcade games from which it draws inspiration. The graphics

Usually you'll control a plane or something that has to negotiate swarms of lesser enemies before making it to a climatic boss battle.

range from game to game, but inevitably consist of a series of abstract wireframe and polygonal models that, at first, remind you of *Asteroids,* until you take a look at a gargantuan boss ship in *rRootage* and realize how painstakingly animated each vector is. In other cases, the art is childishly simple, like the player's own ships, for example. Your beloved gunboat in *Gunroar* is a mere five-line drawing that approximates the Platonic form of a boat, and the spaceship (if it can really be called a ship) in *rRootage* is an odd little abstract thing that consists of a small box surrounded by a set of transparent, parallel rectangles. The repetitive electronica soundtrack's thumping bass lines keep your adrenaline flowing, so you can focus at the task at hand, which usually entails dodging lots of bullets and laser beams of various sorts.

All of this is neat. Very neat, in fact.

But the true artistry running through Kenta Cho's games isn't located in a well-written storyline (there aren't any), or the graphics, or the music, or any of that. His games don't fascinate us with explorations of videogames as a vehicle for post-modern narrative or a study of human behavior in an immersive online environment. All they do is dissect some of the assumptions that arcade games make, and as it turns out, playing with the standard rules of the arcade game can yield some pretty interesting gameplay mechanics.

Let's think about some of the conventions we've grown accustomed to seeing in a standard ship-based (or airplane, or penguin, or whatever you want) shoot-'em-up game for a second. Usually, you'll control a plane or something that has to negotiate (read: blow up) swarms of lesser enemies before making it to a climactic boss battle. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Now, try *rRootage*, which throws you into elaborate, multi-stage boss battles - the kind that tend to be the most

Lather, rinse, repeat.

challenging and most interesting part of the shmup genre - and nothing else. If you're bored with your smart bombs, *rRootage* gives you alternative gameplay modes that can have you absorbing same-color shots for additional firepower *a la Ikaruga,* or charging up your shield meter by flying dangerously close to enemy bullets. Or, give *Gunroar* a shot; as it turns out, being in a boat instead of a spaceship makes all the difference. This, you see, is because *Gunroar* leaves the rate at which the game scrolls vertically through the level almost exclusively to the player.

Be as cautious as you want, but you're not going to get the high score without a decent score multiplier, which only increases if you light a fire under your ass and book it through the level. Suddenly, the ability to control the direction of your weapon independently of the direction you're moving in is critical - all your enemies are **behind** you. Well, maybe that's not **such** a big deal. Try *Gunroar's* Dual Stick mode, then, where you have to control two boats, one with each hand, and the

direction that they collectively fire at is determined by the right angle that runs perpendicular to a line segment drawn from one boat to the other. **Yeah, that's what I thought.**

Things only get more interesting from here. *Tumiki Fighter* has you piloting a toy airplane through a cartoony looking toy land where everything is made of blocks. Don't expect enemies to merely explode and vanish when you're done with them, though, because you're supposed to catch them with your own plane. That's right - once disabled, you can graft enemy planes (even bosses!) on to your own ship to turn into a gigantic, awkward, flying katamari-esque ship, complete with significant score and firepower bonuses. Or try *Torus Trooper*, which borrows a little bit from shooter-on-rails shmups and a little bit from *Tempest* to get you hurdling through vector-tunnels as fast as possible without colliding into enemy craft.

It is Kenta Cho's intimate knowledge of the internal risk/reward mechanisms employed in the shmup genre that,

somewhat perversely, reawaken the hardcore arcade gamer in anyone who plays his games. Maybe it's something about surviving a seemingly impossible barrage of bullets, or hovering oh-so-close to a lethal laser beam to charge up your super meter, or breaking that high score barrier by staying planted right at point-blank against an *rRootage* boss because you know that's the quickest way to beat it, or encountering any one of hundreds of other equally death-

defying experiences that manage to instill an appreciation for the shmup, in all its masochistic glory, in the breast of even the most grizzled gaming veteran. It's one thing to make a game that is merely difficult, I think, but it is another thing entirely to be able to make games that make me want to be a better gamer.

COMMENTS

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.

the Escapist

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Childhood lost

by Tom Rhodes

I entered the gleaming white store with trepidation. A cardboard box, previously used to store wrapped, uncooked chicken legs, was held tightly between my arms. Inside of it, dozens of gray plastic squares slid back and forth with the sway of my body.

The automatic doors closed behind me with a whoosh as I felt the overhead air system blow down onto me. I was miles away from where I had been three steps back.

At the front counter stood a bored young woman, her red smock stained in the lower left corner. Coffee? I didn't care. Beside me stood my oldest sister, who was home visiting from school. I don't remember what she wore, only that her eyeshadow was dark blue.

The girl at the counter turned and gave a halfhearted smile as I approached, which was further dulled by the gum that smacked around between her teeth.

"Hi there," she said. I went to speak, but my sister interrupted.

"Hello!" she responded enthusiastically, doing that voice of hers that I hate. You know the one, the voice you make when you're trying to be polite to someone you just met, the one that doesn't sound anything like your own. It further added to the phoniness of the situation.

I strolled over to the counter and set down the box, peering over top of the rim. Behind the counter, the floor was raised, giving the girl this king-like view of the entire store.

"What can I do for you folks today?" Folks? Was she kidding me?

My sister went on gabbing as I frowned, wondering what I was doing here.

***

A few weeks before, I had seen the ad on television: *Zelda*. The first *Zelda* for the N64. I was ecstatic, having been waiting for this moment for a long time. Oh, it had been hyped before, especially in the *Nintendo Power* subscription I had received every month like clockwork for

damn near seven years. This was **the** game to have, and if you didn't, you sucked.

While kids at my school were giddy about the upcoming dance, I was gibbering about Link with my merry group of nerds, geeks and outcasts.

"Did you see the graphics?"
"Yeah, what about the story?"
"I dunno, it's gonna be awesome, though."
"Oh, definitely."

These were the substantive comments made during lunch period. At the table across from us, a gaggle of girls were discussing the stud-factor of the football quarterback. Beside us, more fellow classmates were passing notes to those girls. (**Do you like me? Circle Yes, No, Maybe.**)

Let them have their crushes and notes. I had *Zelda*.

When I went home, I spoke to my parents. I told them about it, how cool it

was going to be, etc. They, however, had bad news.

Now, I had known we were having financial problems; but, like all situations of that kind, my parents tried shielding it from me. I was, after all the youngest (a.k.a., the "baby") of the family. Little did I know that this thing I craved was not to be mine, because we just couldn't afford it.

I was crushed. More than that, though, I was angry. I was to be denied this? Who did they think they were? Didn't they know how much I wanted it? How much I **needed** it? They must have known, but decided to go into debt just to spite me.

As I sat sulking in my room, my gaze drifted to the box in the corner. I had been asked to clean out my closet, and most of the clutter I had grudgingly taken out was in there.

"That's it!" I thought. I scrambled over to it and beheld the treasure trove of yesteryear. The box was filled to the brim with NES games. Back when my
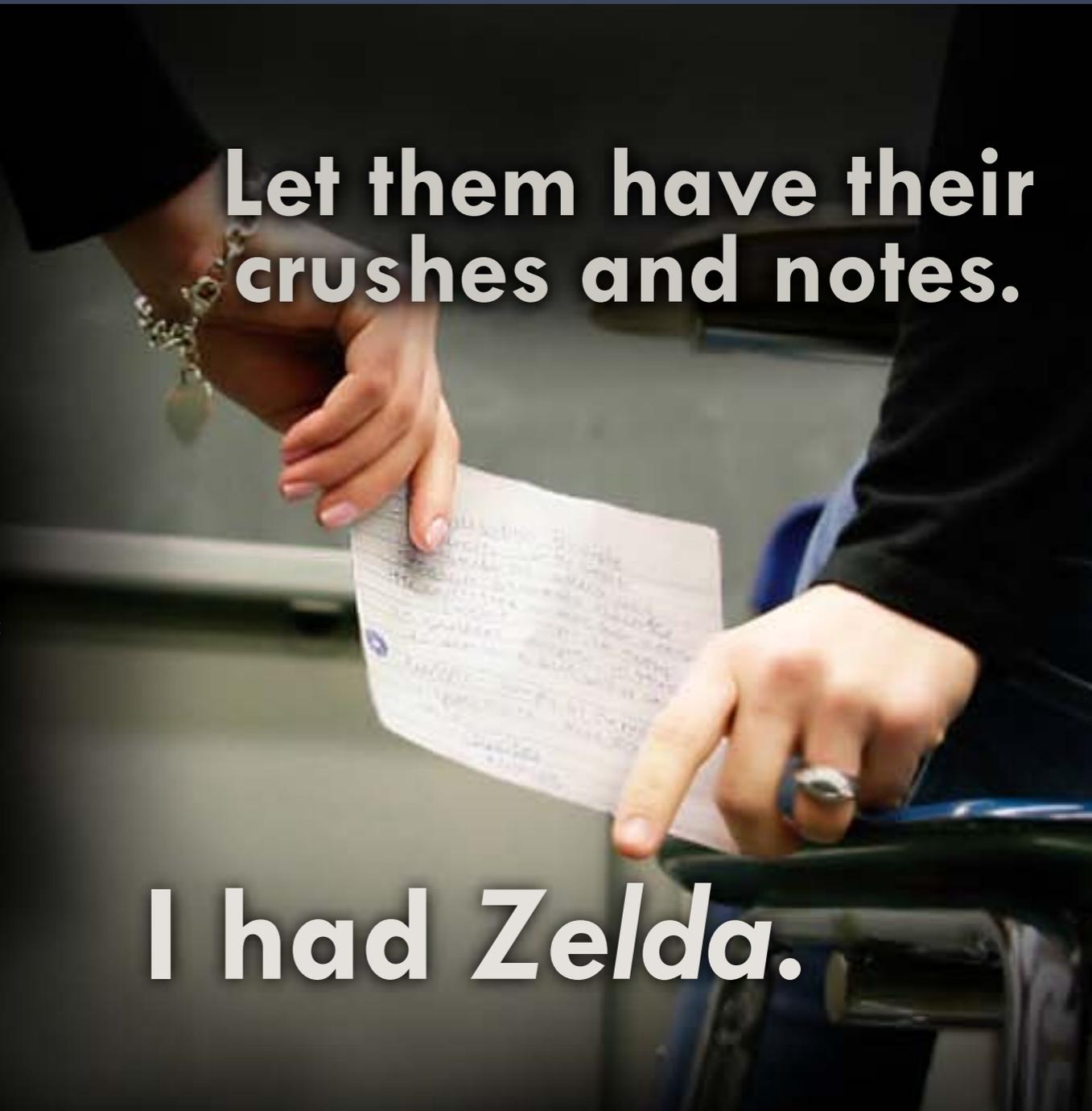
Let them have their crushes and notes.

I had *Zelda.*

parents had a thriving business, they spoiled us kids rotten. *Bubble Bobble*, *Mega Man*, *Batman*, *Castlevania* and more!

I remembered that Toys 'R' Us had a program where you can exchange old games for store credit. This was my chance! I ran down to my mom and explained what I wanted to do, and she said it was fine with her. I was giddy. Hundreds of old NES games, at a few bucks of credit apiece? I was going to have it all!

At least, I thought so.

***

The box was half empty and I had racked up a total of $150 so far. Into the entrance of the store walked a man, a brown trench coat dangling around his ankles. He noticed what we were doing and wandered over to us.

Apparently, he wanted to buy the games for actual cash. My sister, the savvy big city girl she had become, was eager to have an actual monetary transaction

occur. I was confused. Why was she talking to this man?

He reached into the box, looking at the wondrous toys before him. His eyes lit up as he went through them, each one bringing more and more joy to his face. I just thought he looked creepy.

"Well, I don't have a problem with it," said the manager to my sister, who had been called over. "You just can't do it in the store, that's all."
"What about the parking lot?" she responded.
"That would be fine. Just no outside money transactions inside the store."

As they bickered, I saw him pick up something I didn't even know was in there: the original NES game –– *Super Mario Bros.* and *Duck Hunt.*

What was I doing here? How could I have been throwing away the past like this? Was I really going to let her give my formerly prized possessions to some weird guy in a trench coat in the parking lot?

How could I have been throwing away the past like this?

I tapped her on the shoulder.

"I've changed my mind."
"What do you mean?" she asked.
"I don't want to sell these anymore. Let's go."
"But-"
"No arguments, let's just go."

She could tell I was serious, and possibly a little upset at this recent turn of events. So, we quickly got the receipt for the store credit from the girl, I pulled the games out of trench coat man's hands and exited the store, quickly rushing to the car to go home.

There was a sudden change of heart in there, but really, wasn't I just shoveling out the old for the new? Once upon a time, these were the top tier of home entertainment. Doc Wiley and Mega Man, Mario and Luigi, those weird dinosaur things from *Bubble Bobble*, these were the hit-making characters of the day, all in glorious pixilated 8-bit resolution.

Now, of course, Mega Man is hardly the star he was, now known more for an anime series than his games. Mario and Luigi have their own games, and the most recent ones don't even reflect that for which they were best known. And *Bubble Bobble*? Ha!

In our society, it's all about the new and exciting, the shiny and freshly wrapped, the ones with the multi-million dollar marketing campaign attached to them. And I suppose that's just how things go.

But we must be careful, for in our attempt to seek out the latest and greatest, we may sacrifice that which made us who we are, and lose a piece of ourselves forever. Otherwise, we may all end up as old men, looking through cardboard boxes, wondering what happened to our childhood. **COMMENTS**

Tom Rhodes is a writer and filmmaker currently living in Ohio. He can be reached through Tom.Rhod@gmail.com.

I pulled the games out of trench coat man's hands and exited the store quickly, rushing to the car to go home.

GEEK
ON YOUR
SLEEVE

by Kyle Orland

Wait long enough, and everything comes back in style. It's true in fashion. It's true in videogames. So, why shouldn't it be true in videogame-based fashion?

Gamers everywhere are appreciating the games of yesteryear through compilation discs, legal and illegal emulator downloads, and even upright cabinets at the local mega-arcade/drinking establishment. The trend has been echoed in an explosion of apparel, mainly T-shirts, featuring designs inspired by or ripped straight from the most popular games of years past.

Now, for the first time since elementary school, you can proudly wear Mario on your shirt again. Except this time, Mario is offering "mustache rides." Or offering to clean your pipes. Or offering not so subtle drug references on your boxers.

Back then, Mario was your digital best friend. Today, Mario is your homeboy.

"It's a quick punch line versus an elite club of recognition," says Michael McWhertor, author of the *Geek on Stun* blog, about why he doesn't like shirts, like those mentioned above, that use familiar videogame images as a jumping off point for some ironic gag slogans. "Why does it have to be a joke? I'm semi-comfortable admitting in public and in front of peers that, yeah, I'm a gamer. But if Kuribo's Shoe is a good design or aesthetically pleasing, why can't we start there?"

McWhertor is reluctant to call himself an expert on videogame T-shirts, but he is the only person I know who compiled a list of the best videogame shirts of 2005. His choices for the awards reflect a preference for shirt designs that "incorporate a part of that [videogame's] aesthetic and manage to make it smarter." In other words, shirts that are inspired by games rather than dependent on games. "I don't think there is anything wrong with nostalgia, but it doesn't have to hit you over the head with a sledgehammer."

"People act like shirts have to be funny or they're pointless," says Nathan Smart, author of satirical videogame news site *The Game Rag*. Smart says shirts that try too hard to be funny end up having the opposite effect. "Usually, a funny shirt falls flat, or a million people have it … so, no one thinks it's funny anymore. I don't want a dick joke on my shirt. Why can't a shirt just be cool? Why can't I just have a shirt with Luigi on it?"

You aren't likely to find the kind of shirts McWhertor and Smart are talking about at your local Hot Topic, but many amateur and professional designers are using the internet to sell their own shirts that evoke the memory of long lost games without eviscerating them.

"[The] big great daddy of the pitfalls [in designing gaming shirts] is trying too hard to be arch or trendy or 'down with the kidz,'" says Richard Hammond of *Way of the Rodent*, an online videogame magazine that also happens to sell shirts. "Our very best-seller, for example, is a very simple *ICO* tribute. It's that emotional connection that's important: Shirts that prick the part of a gamer's

brain marked 'Happy Memories' always work."

"Some people use their shirts to make a connection with others. Smart says a simple red Shigeru Miyamoto shirt from GameSkins can be a great icebreaker."

"Whenever people ask me about the Miyamoto shirt, I always tell them it's the guy that invented Mario, Donkey Kong and Zelda, and they really love it." For Smart, the more esoteric the image, the better the shirt.

But Smart says he often runs into a different kind of gaming shirt fan. "[When I see someone else wearing a gaming shirt,] I think I should say, 'Hey, I like Nintendo, too.' But, I'm always wrong in my assumptions of the person - they just wanted a cool 'retro' shirt. People [who wear gaming shirts] don't even have to like videogames anymore," he says.

SplitReason's Arciszewski thinks gaming companies are passing up a big opportunity to market to people like Smart who are looking for smarter, more
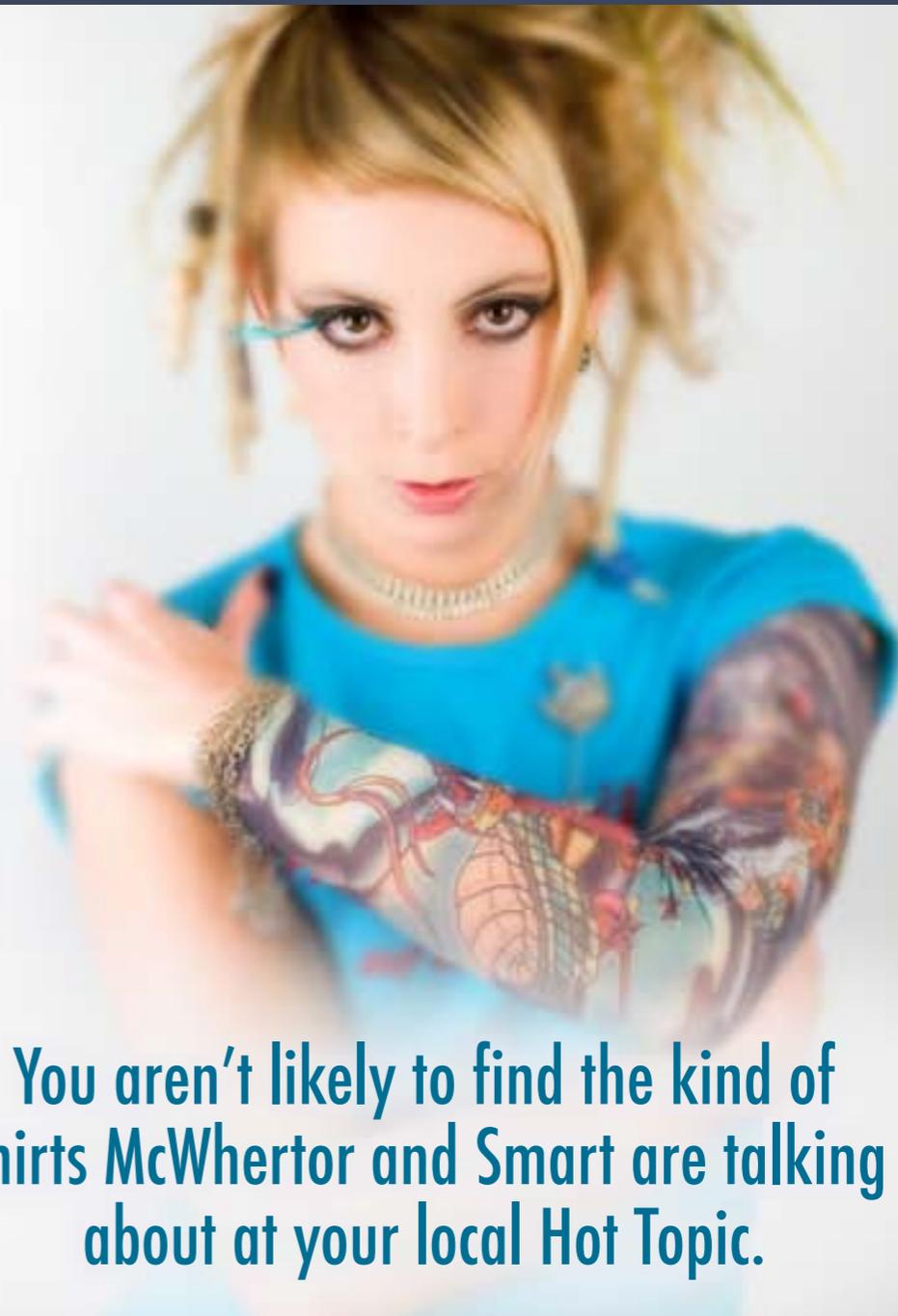
You aren't likely to find the kind of shirts McWhertor and Smart are talking about at your local Hot Topic.

esoteric licensed shirts. While companies like Nintendo are flooding the market with licensed merchandise (and inspiring plenty of bootleg knock-offs in the process), Arciszewski says other developers and publishers "are not in tune with the tremendous merchandising opportunities facing them … Imagine a company like EA or Blizzard offering a free official *World of Warcraft* or *Battlefield 2* or whatever t-shirt to everyone that buys one of their games. Would that help combat piracy? Absolutely … "

For the gaming T-shirt business to grow, Arciszewski says game companies are going to have to work more closely with the companies that peddle videogame apparel. *Geek on Stun*'s McWhertor agrees, and hopes companies will start to work with smart designers to push an untapped market of serious game fans. "I think it's a missed opportunity for publishers to **not** do this kind of thing."

So, is the trend in gaming T-shirts just another retro fad, or something that will become a more permanent part of low

fashion? That depends. McWhertor says the market needs to grow with the audience, offering shirts that appeal to fashion as well as nostalgia. "At some point, the T-shirt wearing crowd will age beyond the point of people who wax nostalgic for Mario," he says.

Hammond from *Way of the Rodent* feels that there will always be a market for apparel that brings about memories of old games. "Gaming is mainstream, has a history and a strong future. Just as people like to reference other mainstream cultural icons - film, music, TV, books even - they will continue to enjoy referencing videogames."

But *The Game Rag*'s Smart is less optimistic. "I think once the 'thrift store' look goes out … once the '80s revival dies down … the big chains will drop those shirts. Retro doesn't get old, it's already old." `COMMENTS`

Kyle Orland is a video game freelancer. He writes about the world of video game journalism on his weblog, Video Game Media Watch.

Is the trend in gaming T-shirts just another retro fad, or something that will become a more permanent part of low fashion?

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:

"If you could live in any past era, which would you choose?"

Kyle Orland,
"Geek on Your Sleeve"
It's a toss up between the Roaring '20s and the Renaissance. Maybe the Roaring Renaissance?

Richard Aihoshi,
"Money for Nothin' and Chips for Free"
Since my primary focus as a writer and editor consists of RPGs and MMOs, I spend a considerable amount of time living in the fantasy versions of past eras, mostly pseudo-medieval in nature. That's close enough for me. Going back in time would mean giving up too many modern benefits and comforts.

Tom Rhodes,
"Childhood Lost"
Past era? Why would I want to be there? Higher disease, death, lower standard of living, videogame technology was far less advanced (or worse, nonexistent!). No, I'd prefer to live in the future. Not far, perhaps fifty years or so; just long enough so I won't have to see the day when we surrender to our machine overlords. All hail the overlords!

Russ Pitts,
"Duck and Cover"
The '70s. For sure. Bell-bottomed pants, high-heeled shoes, gold medallions, exposed chest hair … little would change about my physical appearance. I'd just look cooler. I'd be able to blast my BeeGee's CDs at high-volume from the stereo of my … oh wait. A flaw in my plan has just appeared.

Joe Blancato,
Content Editor,
"Great Zombie Depression"
The 1950s. I'd like to meet Jack Kerouac and stop him before writes *On the Road* for the good of humanity. I could also meet up with Hemingway and kill *The Old Man and the Sea* for the same reason. Jesus, it all went wrong after *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor
The Revolutionary War period of American history. Being able to socially engineer my way into the Continental Congress and add some key words in portions of the Constitution in order to make certain government actions impossible and certain personal freedoms without question would be my greatest contribution to mankind. Or I could just kill butterflies in the Jurassic Period.

Jon Hayter,
Producer
I wouldn't really, I think. I'm kind of a futurist, so picking a favorite "passed time" (har har), isn't really something I can just **do**. TO THE FUTURE!

Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor
Well, I couldn't go too far back as I would not enjoy nearly the freedom or equality I do today, being female. If I could have that, and still go back, I'd need to check out ancient Greece in its heyday. Hey! I was an ancient history major.