

the *Escapist*

pleasurable genres

by Jon Schnaars

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Russ Pitts

What were you doing when Kennedy was assassinated? When Neil Armstrong set foot on the lunar surface? When the shuttle exploded? Where were you “when the world stopped turning?”

Most of us have been asked all of these questions and more. Some of us even have answers. Me? I wasn't even an zygote for the first two events on that list, but the latter two are so ingrained upon my psyche, affected me so deeply, that I'll take the sights, sounds and smells of those two days with me to the grave. There are events - moments - that touch us deeply, tear us out of ourselves and force us to face that which we had previously thought impossible. Planes striking buildings - on purpose - yeah, that fits.

Games, being entertainment, rarely capture our attention in quite the same way. After all, we play them to escape the shock and awe of daily life, not to replace it. Occasionally, however, there are moments - events - in gaming that transcend. Moments which remove us

from our preconceptions so completely that the sights and sounds stay with us for years.

Doom did that to me. *Doom* reached out of my stuttering 486DX2, grabbed me by the head and threw me into the muck, screaming.

I played games with my headphones on back then, and somebody, somewhere must have known that. I remember the moment clearly: I had entered a room, and it was quiet - too quiet. I saw something shiny up on a ledge, and snaked my way across a slender walkway to reach it. It looked to be a health power up, and I was in desperate need. It was torturous work climbing all that way, but I knew that if I didn't go for it, the next encounter might be my last. Then, in the quiet, when my mind was focused on the task of not slipping from that tiny ledge into the lava below, when the pulsing red cross of the power-up was only inches away, it hit me. A screaming, hissing Imp leapt from around the corner and attacked. The tearing sound as the Imp's sharp claws tore through my flesh still echoes in mind to this day; as does the feeling of a little pee coming out as I tore my

headphones off of my head and ran screaming away from the PC.

Moments like these remind me of why we game, and shine like a beacon, casting all misguided criticism of games as lacking in art or relevance into shadow. Games move us and make us feel. Games present familiar things in new and unusual ways. Games make us think.

And pee (a little).

When I consider the debate over games vs. art, I recall a similar controversy over the genre of film now known as “horror.” Makers of horror films have believed for decades that they were at the forefront of a revolutionary new art form, and the world of film criticism is just now catching on. Any list of “top films” containing the work of Kubrik, for example, (And in case you're wondering - that's just about all of them.) must by definition recognize the art of horror. I write this note today with profound confidence that the very best videogame experiences will someday become similarly accepted.

This week in “It Came from *The Escapist*” we explore the artistry of the

horror game genre: Tom Rhodes explains why he loves horror games in spite of (or perhaps because of) the fact that he can't quite bring himself to play them; Cole Stryker takes a look at a rare horror gem, *Black Dahlia*; Jon Schnaars dissects the role of genre conventions in the enjoyment of entertainment (giving us a compelling look at *Resident Evil 4* in the process); and Shannon Drake explores the most immersive games around, Alternate Reality Games (ARGs), in which the line between the game world and the real world fade away completely - by design. Enjoy.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to “Women at the Pinnacle” from *The Escapist Lounge*: I was one of those women designers that Ken and Roberta hired to create adventure games. I did *Conquests of Camelot* and *Conquests of the Longbow* for them. Sierra was great fun in those days, with a wide-open creative

environment the likes of which no longer exist. I was hired along with my late husband, Australian artist/illustrator Peter Ledger, who did the art for the Camelot game.

I also write for TV, animation and comics, so I enjoyed the challenge of bringing storytelling techniques into games. Since then, I've continued to do writing and design for other games, including console and MMOG, but I would dearly the opportunity to create another adventure game. Is anybody listening?!!!

- **Christy Marx**

In response to "The Truth About Little Girls" from The Escapist

Lounge: This discussion brings me back to a project we were pitching to THQ, back when I worked for GameFX, a THQ-owned studio. The game was a platformer for the PS3 (which at the time was still a year or so from launching). There were two main characters and you could control one or the other at your discretion, a la *Banjo* and *Kazooie*. One character was a budding mad scientist, inventing time machines, inter-dimensional portals, rocket shoes, and

so on. He was perhaps 12. The other character was his younger sister, tomboy-ish, perhaps 10.

The feedback from THQ was that no player ever wants to play a character younger than themselves. This was "Unchangeable Conventional Wisdom" requiring no proof. So we kept making the characters older and older until they were well-advanced into their teens, but THQ ultimately killed the project anyway.

I've always distrusted conventional wisdom, having seen it proved wrong so often over the years. After all, who remembers that prior to *Tomb Raider* it was conventional wisdom that male gamers wouldn't want to play any female PC, not no way, no how? I think if the characters are right for the setting and the story, and the gameplay is solid, the audience will follow.

- **Steve Meretzky**

To the editor: [In] regards to Bonnie Ruberg's piece, "The Truth about Little Girls," there's no denying that Lara Croft's ample breasts are a major driving force behind *Tomb Raider's* success as a

franchise, but I'm not convinced she would have been so popular had she not appeared first in a groundbreaking and excellent game. Extremely sexualized women had appeared in games before *Tomb Raider*, but their success as a genre in itself began because of *Tomb Raider's* popularity, which I believe was greatly influenced by the quality of the game, not just the size of Lara's boobs. Is it possible that a truly excellent game featuring a young girl as its protagonist could launch the character-type into the mainstream? I don't know, but I think it's your best bet.

Given the assumption that female characters in games are sex symbols (which is the case in the industry today), I imagine developers are disinclined to feature a young female protagonist for fear of being called Humberts themselves ... and I think the same holds true for gamers ... I think it is the Humbert Barrier that is the greatest challenge to young girls running alongside Link, Duke, Lara and Mario. The question becomes, how do we surmount the Humbert Barrier? How do we convince developers that it's possible to feature a female protagonist that is

not a sex symbol? How do we convince gamers that it's possible to play a game with a girl in it without ogling her polygons?

- **Francis**

In response to "The Truth About Little Girls" from The Escapist

Lounge: It seems that North Americans don't want little girls featuring in their media. Make a list of all movies intended for adult consumption with a little girl as one of the leads; 90% of them are horror movies, because there's something so darn creepy about little girls. But why? Are little girls so strange and inexplicable that the only way we can see them is through the lens of horror? This is certainly not so in Japan, which seems to have a cultural youth-fetish. Anime contains a plethora of young female protagonists, and the majority of girls in video games are probably found in Japanese RPG's

Contrast that to games like the *GTA* series, bestsellers in North America. What can I say, we prefer our women [as] hookers.

- David

In response to “The Truth About Little Girls” from The Escapist Lounge:

Bonnie, time and time again you insist in shoving your views on sex and game protagonists down our throats. Stop trying to fit a round world into your square view and whining about how poor the representation of women (and girls) is in our games. We get it already!

I understand you view the world through a lens that magnifies sex and sexuality, but please try to look around it, or, if you can't, stop repeating the same mantra in every article you write for the Escapist.

- Itamar

To the editor: [To consider] the topic in a different way: Why has it taken women so long to realize that gaming is fun? It's the current player base. Just like the geek in the chat forum might actually be a mature nice guy without socialization problems; its almost impossible to tell as they are surrounded by wankers. This makes separating the diamonds from the filth very difficult.

- Andrew

In response to “Asexuality Actually” from The Escapist Lounge:

This is an absolutely brilliant piece, and I believe the general philosophy behind it extends well to other topics of bias and stereotypes in our culture. I think our entire culture self-obsesses over such stereotypes that we actually end up reinforcing them, rather than beating them down, and John's points in this article and the facts he presents seem to support that.

- GammaLeak

In response to “Asexuality Actually” from The Escapist Lounge:

Great article! I'm a woman, I game, and have been for many years. I enjoy selections from lots of different genres. Women, like men, have individual tastes - I know both men and women who think GTA is sick, but still enjoy plenty of other games.

I don't think gender should be used to stereotype tastes in gaming, or stereotype who plays. Many women gamers overreact to prove they can game and still be sexy or feminine -

hence the use of “grrrl” and group photos with cute matching guild shirts. We should just be proud to be normal women (or men) who play games because it's something we all love to do.

I am not at all surprised that the percentage of women games is at 38% (almost every woman I know games to some degree, and there are plenty more who would if they had the time) - and I expect it will keep rising.

- Grumpator



pleasurable genres

by Jon Schnaars

Genre, as a tool for cinematic analysis, didn't really come into its own until the 1960s. Drawing on their literary predecessors, critics during this period were able to develop and deploy the key tenets of genre theory in their efforts to analyze the Studio Era films of the '30s and '40s. These tools continue to shape our own filmic interactions today, and while few have turned their critical eye toward questions of genre and gaming, there is no better place to start than the survival/horror genre.

While many of survival/horror's conventions can be traced back to early home consoles and arcade cabinets, most consider Capcom's *Sweet Home* to be the first true survival/horror game. Atari's *Alone in the Dark*, which debuted three years later, brought the genre to the U.S. Since *Alone*, little has changed.

In 2005, however, Capcom released *Resident Evil 4*. Both a critical and commercial smash hit, *RE4* lays claim to survival/horror by incorporating the set pieces and themes that define the genre, but goes beyond rehashing what has worked in the past. Game designers drew more liberally from the canon of

generic horror conventions — in essence, creating the quintessential survival/horror gaming experience by mirroring what's made horror movies so successful. It is by examining these generic elements that we can come to a better understanding of how and why *RE4* took such a monumental step in defining a genre and redefining what genre in gaming can be.

Genre is about economy. By sharing a mutual language, creators and consumers agree to communicate things that would only waste valuable exposition time. This concept makes genre an even more powerful tool in gaming because, unlike films, which are passively viewed, the space of the interaction **is** the space of the story. Designers, therefore, must rely more heavily on our shared assumptions when integrating plot into the gameplay.

In genre-based films, we identify with onscreen characters that act against common sense or social norms with an expectation of future actions that either reward or punish that behavior. When our expectations are met, we receive genre pleasure.

Think about how many times you've sat and watched a slasher film with someone only to hear them complain, "Why is she going into the woods all by **herself?!"** In reality, we know why the character insists on wandering off alone. In fact, we expect her to wander off alone, and it is through these expectations and their accompanying fulfillment — when the unsuspecting scream queen gets hacked to pieces — that we derive pleasure from watching genre-based films.

In much the same way, games are developed to match consumers' expectations. In fact, one might argue that virtually every narrative game is built around the idea of affording the gamer as much genre pleasure as possible.

Take *Grand Theft Auto*. We all know that the rampant violence in *GTA* contradicts virtually every moral statute of our society. Nevertheless, when we take control of the character, spraying bullets and performing sordid tasks, we get satisfaction from our actions. This is because, in the game's diegesis, our actions are not just warranted, they're expected. Genre pleasure, that warm feeling you get when you see a dead

hooker on the ground, is our reward for breaking free of our social constraints in an exercise in fantasy.

In film, the ability to provide genre pleasure can be the difference between continued box-office success and failure. Today, the horror genre remains a draw for a number of reasons; chief among these is the theme of the return of the repressed. Horror incorporates many of the hidden desires and drives that permeate our unconscious mind. The death drive, the expression of infantile narcissism and the breakdown of "family values" all have their part to play here. Horror turns a mirror on our innermost fears and anxieties, and by exposing our own frailties, allows us a respite to carry on with our daily lives.

Horror films represent, as critic Robin Wood wrote in his essay, "Return of the Repressed": "at once the personal dreams of their makers and the collective dreams of their audiences — the fusion made possible by the shared structures of a common ideology." This comment rings even truer when we approach the question of horror in games. Instead of being mere spectators

"Why is she going into the woods all by herself?!" In reality, we know why the character insists on wandering off alone. In fact, we expect her to wander off alone.

to a slasher massacre or monster run amok, we are asked to take up the controller in active participation with the nightmare — to not only watch the hero vanquish the manifestation of our repressed anxieties, but to vanquish them ourselves.

When Capcom created *RE4*, one of the first and most important decisions they made was to move the setting to Europe. This opened a great many doors for them, including the ability to create atmospheres that would be wholly unbelievable if the game were set in the modern day United States.

In the game's opening, the scenery provides a clue as to where and when we are traveling. Knotted, barren trees fill the scene as we look through the front windshield of a police SUV jostling down an unpaved road. This type of rural



the *escapist*




the *escapist lounge*

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Critics of zombie horror have long drawn the connection between Marx's proletarian bodies.



wooded area is a popular setting in horror films (think *The Hills Have Eyes*). Rural and sparsely populated land produces the sustenance that drives urban and suburban life. Because of this disparity, horror cinema has been the vehicle through which the subjugated get their revenge by terrorizing the civilized that wander too far into the woods. A version of this theme plays out in the first part of the game.

As the car slows and one of the policemen exits to relieve himself, we are treated to another easily recognizable convention of horror cinema. From a first-person perspective, the camera crawls through the bushes, alerting us to the presence of unseen actors. Because we recognize this effect from virtually every slasher film since *Psycho*, it serves to further heighten our generic expectations.

Once out of the car, Leon, the main character (now controlled by the player), approaches a rundown house. This set

piece again plays to the difference between the urban environment of the previous survival/horror games and the exploited rural landscape. Inside the house, Leon asks a lone man if he has seen Ashley, the President's daughter, who we have been sent to find. The man yells something in Spanish, then picks up an ax and frantically attacks Leon.

Firing at this crazed attacker, we're granted our first instance of genre pleasure. Unlike reality, we can dispatch our problems here with a gun. Approaching the body, we are able to "Check" it. The game tells us, almost humorously, "He's not a zombie." While it may seem like an aside, this information sets the entire plot in motion.

Continued exploration reveals a slew of human skulls rotting underneath the stairs. Leon can only remark to himself that he hopes Ashley is safe. At this point, our escorts are thrown to their death as a group of decidedly un-zombie-like beings besiege Leon. The action takes off and rarely subsides for the remainder of the game.

RE4 is a game cut into three parts: Village, Castle and Island. In each of

these settings, generic conventions culled from decades of horror films and written into our culture continuously shape and reshape our gaming experience. In the Village, Leon encounters *Los Ganados*, "the cattle." We learn that *Los Ganados* are possessed by *Las Plagas*, a parasite unleashed by a Sr. Salazar, under orders by a man called Lord Saddler. Critics of zombie horror have long drawn the connection between Marx's proletarian bodies, exploited by the bourgeoisie, and the possessed bodies of the undead, dedicated to a lifetime of consumption.

Once inside the Castle, a whole new slew of horror conventions confront the gamer. The castle's main hall conjures memories of Tod Browning's *Dracula*. The Gothic architecture works in conjunction with images of the unholy *Los Illuminados* cult (to which Salazar and Saddler belong) to play on various generic motifs.

We learn that *Las Plagas* were released from underground. This, coupled with scenes of Leon battling giant bug-like creatures in the sewer, emphasizes the theme of a rotten foundation, or bad land, below the Castle — a common part

of many horror staples, including *The Black Cat* and, more recently, *Poltergeist*.

The Island setting is straight technological horror. It is here that Saddler's experimentation with *Las Plagas* is revealed, as Leon must dispatch the seemingly invincible Regenerators. The dangers of technology are addressed in many horror films (see any Cronenberg film), which manifest as Leon passes through laboratory areas with half-finished experiments and esoteric, threatening devices.


Perhaps the most important change made in the game mechanics of *RE4* was fixing the camera behind Leon, providing a tight third-person shot through which the player could experience the action. Through this move, Leon has become every protagonist from every horror film ever made. He is the lone survivor; steadily trudging into the dark when all our instincts tell us it's a bad idea. And as the player, it is actually us proceeding into the dark, receiving (when we're not getting beheaded) our genre pleasure.

Genre is a tool that both informs and drives our understanding of a text. In

film, this practice has been commonplace since the 1960s, but as *RE4* demonstrates, genre has its part to play in videogames, as well. By utilizing the economy of shared genre conventions, Capcom was able to create the highest achievement in survival/horror.

Films from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu* to *Devil's Rejects* and *Hostel* allow audiences to face their fears, but games demand more. In *RE4*, we become Leon as we move into an unknown world filled with unspeakable evils. The powers that drive Lord Saddler lurk in all of us, somewhere below the surface waiting to be awoken like *Las Plagas*. Wielding a Punisher or Riot Gun, all we can do is battle back, allowing ourselves a glimpse of the repressed, but no more. We might buy the game for the fright, but we don't receive our true genre pleasure until the sun rises on a new, peaceful day and evil has been laid to rest once again. [COMMENTS](#)

Jon Schnaars is a freelance writer with interests in genre and representation in gaming. He blogs full-time about issues in psychology and mental health for Treatment Online.



The powers that drive Lord Saddler lurk in all of us.



Afraid of the DARK

by Tom Rhodes

I love survival/horror - the creepy B-movie coolness of *Resident Evil*, the disturbing mellifluous nature of *Silent Hill* and even the cyber-terror of *System Shock*. All of them are decked in a richness all their own, while maintaining a whisper, and occasional shout, of the unspeakable darkness that lives within us.

Yet, even as I revel in their unnerving sensibilities, I am a neophyte to them. You see, I'm a Survival/Horror Poser (SHP). I have immersed myself in the plots, timelines and characters of the games all while having never picked up a controller to play any of them. I know all about James Sunderland's terrible secret, how the T-Virus escaped into Raccoon City and why that "bathtub scene" is so shocking. But even as I know these things, I have never experienced them.

Oh, sure, I once thought I was alone, but I'm convinced I'm not. There are others out there, perhaps even reading this very article, now secure in the knowledge that they, too, are not all by themselves.

For the many of you scratching your heads, I don't blame you. The SHP is a

wily and rare breed: the horror fan without the bal- err, constitution to actually go into the games that so fascinate them. In my case, I get very connected to characters in games, especially the ones I control; so when I actually try to enter one of these frightful worlds, I freak out. Even with the lights on, in broad daylight and with people no more than 20 feet away, I simply can't roam those foggy sidewalks or dank tunnels without being forced to set down the controller. Could you imagine what would happen if I turned up the surround sound in the dead of night with all the lights off? I don't really know, but I have a feeling a Tom-shaped hole would mysteriously appear in the side of the house come the next morning.

And this is the real issue for us SHPs. We are just too involved in the games to separate from them. Horror movies have little to no effect on me, and I breeze through Stephen King novels like they were nothing, but put me into a game world where my actions can affect the outcome, and everything goes straight to hell. One could say that this is some deep-seated childhood issue about monsters in the closet or what have you,

but I know the real reason: survival. The very name of the genre defines those who are excluded from it.

Think about it: Once our destinies become interlinked, albeit tenuously, with that of the main character, we grow connected with them. I am not sitting on the couch pushing a stick and watching a three-dimensional character run through dynamically-generated fog; no, I am that character. I feel my legs pumping, the chill of the dark, earthbound clouds hitting my face as I run through them, the sounds of the unknown all around me. What person in their right mind would put themselves in that situation? Are you friggin nuts?

"Sorry, honey, I know you're dead, so there's really no way you could have written me a letter. We loved each other and had companionship, but who needs that, anyway? The only companions I need right now are Mr. Valium and Mrs. Prozac, and what a fine trio we make."

I did fully immerse myself in one game, however; I even got all the way through it (and I was so proud of myself).

Resident Evil 2 was a game I first got the opportunity to play when it was ported to the N64, utilizing "revolutionary" compression technology to fit the audio and video onto the cartridge (i.e., crappy sound and artifact-laden video). Having heard so much about it, I simply had to play.

Readers who recall my fondness for playing as characters with breasts will know that I selected the lovely Claire Redfield to guide me through the hellish post-apocalyptic streets of Raccoon City.

Unfortunately, I can't tell you exactly how it went from beginning to end, because it took me three months to finish, what with all the stops and starts I took. I do remember the moment when a Licker jumped through a one-way mirror in the police station; I just about ruined the fabric I was sitting on. I cursed out all the game developers and the entire disturbed unholy horde at Capcom.

I did make it, though, and that's something for which I am proud. As that last, blocky cinematic exploded onto the screen, I had a real feeling of accomplishment. I, an avid SHP, had

conquered one of the titans of the genre I so avoided. Sure, *Silent Hill* was out of my reach, and *F.E.A.R.* would probably remain just an acronym, but, that day, I was victorious!

Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go see if I can get my nephew to check under my bed. It's dark under there ...

 COMMENTS

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

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slow burn SLEEPER

by Cole Stryker

The mid-'90s endured a glut of *Myst*-like point-and-click adventure games, and not many received fewer accolades than Take-Two's maligned *Black Dahlia*. The film-noir whodunit's big selling point was not its unique storyline or compelling gameplay, but a brief cameo appearance by Dennis Hopper.

The game was lambasted by reviewers, who said gameplay took a backseat to bad storytelling rife with wooden acting and cheesy dialogue.

And yet, there was something magical about *Black Dahlia* that kept me awake night after night. The game employed a Hitchcockian use of "slow-burn suspense." You spend most of your time investigating crime scenes, sleuthing for clues and interrogating suspects. No blood, no gore, no classic "zombie dog jumping through a window" moments. The game's scare technique is similar to the classic *Rosemary's Baby*. And therein lie *Black Dahlia*'s charm.

Loosely based on the real-life butchering of aspiring Hollywood starlet Elizabeth Short, *Black Dahlia* connects her murder to a more sinister story. Adolph Hitler's loveable sidekick, Heinrich Himmler, was

known to be obsessed with uncovering ancient religious artifacts and icons believed to hold supernatural power. During the war, Himmler dabbled in occult mysticism in his effort to achieve global hegemony. In the game, Elizabeth Short was murdered by Himmler's underlings as a human sacrifice to ancient Teutonic gods. Like *Wolfenstein* before it, *Black Dahlia* utilized the scariest combo in the history of humankind: Nazis and demons.

Additionally, *Black Dahlia*'s cinematic restraint sets it apart from other schlock-horror games populating shelves. The lack of high-octane action makes for simmering tension and growing fear. As Alfred Hitchcock would say, "There is no terror in the bang, only in the anticipation of it."

Zombie dogs won't keep us awake at night. The precious few *Black Dahlias*, however, will keep our minds racing and our palms sweating. [COMMENTS](#)

When not pointing and clicking, Cole Stryker writes about music that no one likes at www.screamingmeemies.wordpress.com.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

by Shannon Drake

Breaking the fourth wall — stepping through the barrier between what is “game” and what is reality — is still largely a gimmick. A handful of games push it to the point of *Eternal Darkness* (a jewel from the GameCube’s Island of Misfit Toys, famous for playing tricks on you, the player, in the living world) and actually toy with you, but it’s usually more of a snickering, “aren’t we hip” acknowledgement that you’re actually playing a game. The potential is there, though, for so much more. Games can do what other forms of entertainment can’t. Pennywise cannot actually leap out of *It* and hide in the storm drain, growling, “They all float down here,” as you stroll by. Watch *Psycho* a thousand times, and you probably won’t get stabbed. Games, though, can do more. In gaming, the killer can reach through the barrier between worlds, call you by name, and brush up against your real life.

Electronic games may play with the fourth wall, but another genre of games and their designers take a childlike joy in infiltrating the real world, pushing their game events into players’ lives, and getting into their players’ heads. Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) build

worlds like electronic or tabletop games; however, they also migrate easily into real-space. Your puzzle-solving group can be infiltrated by a mole from a rival group. The killer offs your favorite character and mentions you by name in the recording of the event he makes. Everything becomes part of the game in an ARG. Designers hide messages in posters, in websites and work in the real world as much as they work in their fictional one.

ARGs began as marketing tools and experiments by existing game companies. *The Beast* and *Majestic* are among the scions of the family line. *Majestic* died an ignoble death, tossed on the pyre of post-9/11 paranoia, but for a brief moment, game characters called players in the night, characters had IM screen names and there was a whole conspiracy to get caught up trying to follow. *The Beast* was a marketing tool for the movie *A.I.*, and gave birth to a community of eager puzzle-solvers, using everything from codes hidden in movie posters to puzzles based on lute notation to unravel the riddle at the game’s center. Later came the famous marketing push, *I Love Bees*, but ARGs

are growing up, moving away from experiments and marketing gimmicks and becoming a full-fledged genre in their own right.

Perplex City is an ARG from Mind Candy Design, but it is also a world unto itself, a full-fledged city with a newspaper, design agency, publisher, subway system, bank, rail system, record label and even a high-class ice cream shop. An active community of bloggers (and characters in the narrative) provides news of the world. "And what world would be complete without a vast conspiracy at its heart?"

The Receda Cube was formerly the main attraction at the Perplex City Museum and is itself a mystery. The Cube is a metallic cube that holds strange powers over those who get near it. It is beautiful, it is mysterious and it is missing. The Cube was stolen in very theatrical fashion by a group of conspirators, possibly backed by a religious cult, and is now missing, much to the dismay of Perplex City residents. Where the game breaks the bounds of "fictional world" is in the placement of the missing artifact: The Cube is hidden

somewhere on Earth, and there is a reward offered for its return, to the tune of 200,000 real-world dollars.

As it says on the site, "*Perplex City* doesn't stop when you turn off your computer. It's all around you. It's alive." At the game's core, players unravel mysteries and solve puzzles, which they acquire from events on Earth, various websites or from *Perplex City's* puzzle cards. Puzzle cards come in foil packs and range in difficulty from simple riddles and decoding exercises to fiendishly difficult puzzles nigh unsolvable by mortal men.

The description doesn't quite do them justice, as these are not the "1,000 Super Word Puzzles" books your grandmother got from the supermarket. The game's designers use the cards themselves to toy with you. One example I have on my desk is a card with "The Road Not Taken" on it and a little note that "This is one of Violet's favourite[sic] poems. It's been hanging around her room as long as I can remember ... What is the name of the poet?" The card is named Cold Fission, so all signs point to Cold. This is,

perhaps, mere trickery, as cunning, clever souls (i.e. not me, the PR rep told me) will notice the card has a candle on it. Rubbing your hand on the card, the friction causing the surface to heat up, will make the letters of the poem fade away to reveal a series of letters hidden in the note itself.

On the back of the card is a brief guide to the game: Collect cards, which range from Common (and Easy) to Rare (and Difficult), solve the puzzles and win Perplex points, which get you fortune and glory on the leaderboard, which brings you closer to that huge cash prize.

Solving certain riddles brought me to aspiring supervillain and Ad Hoc Polymath Andrea Philips. Andrea was one of the Cloudmakers — the largest and most active community back in the days of *The Beast* - and now, she works for Mind Candy. When I ask her to explain her title, she says, "This means I do a little bit of whatever it takes to keep the game rolling," be it designing and writing puzzles, or live event coordination.

"Entertainment as a whole seems to be heading toward a more immersive,



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grandmother got from
the supermarket.**

participatory experience,” she tells me when I ask for a bit of background. “It’s happened in little drips at a time, but it’s been getting a lot steadier. The creative teams want to give their audience a way to really affect their experience. So, you have an AOL email address for Homer Simpson,” she says, “Or you have a website for some secret society’s cover business on *Alias*. Or Veronica Mars’ journal on her website. I consider all of these pretty ARG-y in nature, even if they haven’t moved to the full-blown participatory experience, because they’re all moving toward deeper levels of immersion. Videogames are getting at the same thing from another angle, by de-linear-izing a lot. You don’t really get the feeling that in something like *Halo* you’re **really** affecting the storyline, but meaningful branching seems to be an up-and-coming design goal.

“With something like *Perplex City*, we try to pull together the cinema/TV immersion bit with that meaningful choices bit.” They take it a step further than the character blogs by letting player interaction with the “fictional” characters have a real effect on the storyline, so not only can players follow the world and get to know the characters, they can also

become influences on the plot. Rather than rooting for a favorite character, they can actually work to help them (or hinder them, as happened in one particular case).

“I think of what we do as ‘massively multiplayer participatory storytelling,’” She tells me how the Mind Candy team tries to infiltrate their players’ lives and blur the lines between reality and fantasy. “Our latest toy is SMS. We’ve been using that to great advantage to get out breaking news and alert players that real-time events are happening. We’ve also done the creepy phone call bit: Everyone in a crowded bar gets their phone ringing at the same time, with the same vaguely threatening message. Fun stuff.”

They’ve even taunted their players with a real, live black helicopter. “[We did] the infamous live event in London that ended with a mole from a secret society running off and escaping in a shiny black helicopter,” she says. “A real shiny black helicopter.”

On a lighter note, *Perplex City* is the reason 127 people formed a spontaneous conga line in Trafalgar Square, all in the name of puzzle-solving glory. Aside from the Cube

They’ve even taunted their players with a real, live black helicopter.

itself being in the real world, they also use the media, be it through *USA Today*, coded messages in other publications or the “Lost: The Cube” stickers you may have seen here and there.

Not only do they like infiltrating lives, they like getting dark and scary, especially if they can use the player’s actions to make the story take a turn for the macabre. Andrea told me about one of their earlier episodes. “Early on in the game, a character named Monica was killed because of the players’ actions,” she said. “And a few months later, when they were trying to track down a bad guy, they came across the recording of the murder the killer had made for himself.” That was upsetting enough, but when they found the MP3, it was downright horrifying.

“The MP3 had tags in it,” she continued, “Comments: ‘Do you ever have the feeling that someone’s watching you? When the hairs on the back of your neck





stand up, when you know if you turn round you'll see them, but you don't turn round? Are you having that feeling right now?' The album is listed as: 'My Greatest Hits.' The composers are listed as: 'James, Oliver, Chris, Tim, Rob, Jamie, Guy, Ryan, Matthew, Mat, Paul, Lee, Becky, Josiah, Dee' — all *Perplex City Players* who were at Clapham Common [the event with the helicopter] ... The players got the recording by hacking a music label's intranet, and it became clear right about then that the file had been left there pretty much on purpose for them. And that this guy, 'V,' was several jumps ahead of them." A pause for dramatic effect. "How's that for horror?" I allow that it's pretty much perfect and then ask what it's like to plan something like that.

"Actually, it all comes down to getting into the head of your favorite psychotic killer and figuring out what **he** would have done. Part of it was that we really, really loved Monica. We were devastated when she died, and we wanted the recording out there partly so we could do something with that character one more time." It's not just the players who come to love the characters; it's the writers

"Actually it all comes down to getting into the head of your favorite psychotic killer and figuring out what he would have done."

and designers, as well. And sometimes, getting into the head of their favorite psychotic killer is a little scary. She continued, "It's funny, you try to write things in character, and then you're just **appalled** at the things that come out of you." It makes you question yourself, like asking, "'Does this mean, deep down inside, I'm a psychotic killer/weepy annoying emo/oh so blonde?' I've had a couple of experiences by now where I've been writing the same character for a bit too long and took on some of those attributes in real life."

I pressed for an example, picturing an ARG designer stalking around like a method actor, in character all the time and very creepy. "Well," she paused before continuing. "I think I'm allowed to say this. In that Monica arc, the reason she died is because the players set up a meeting between her and another character, Sylvia. Sylvia's husband had

recently been killed, presumably because he'd found out a little too much about these bad guys. And I was writing Sylvia, this woman who had lost her husband. So I kind of put myself in her place, and all of this unrestrained grief just kind of poured out. It's the kind of thing that can be both in character and kind of embarrassing all at once. And I found myself really ... blue ... all the time that I was writing on her. Once you get yourself that down to do the work, it's hard to snap right back up again, I suppose."

We moved on, then, discussing other ways they'd really like to completely immerse their players. Her favorite idea? Kidnapping. She really wants to kidnap one of you. "I really do! And I don't think I'm the only one! In a perfect world, we'd be able to infiltrate your whole world. And the guy you buy your coffee from every morning would slip you a coded note. And then as soon as you call

the phone number it leads to, the power would go out in your house and you'd get kidnapped. These things, they aren't so very practical, but wouldn't that be one killer gaming experience?" She admits that might limit the appeal to some extent, saying, "I think the group of people who like to follow along with a story and boss the characters around a little on email is much broader than the group who would enjoy being actually kidnapped."

They follow a code of ethics, and the rules for puppet masters are fairly simple: Don't get anyone arrested or injured, don't break up any families and don't break the integrity of the story. Just about everything else is fair game. She gives an example that raised my eyebrows, saying, "There was a game run for Audi, *Art of the Heist*. And I'm not clear on the specifics, but they actually 'killed' a player at one point in their game. I keep meaning to ask them how, exactly, they dealt with that." *The Art of the Heist* was actually an attempt at an ARG-thriller, "part *Bourne Identity* meets *The Da Vinci Code*" per their marketing materials, and managed to rack up 125,000 followers during its run.

As to Andrea herself, she aspires to a higher calling: supervillainy. "[It's] a pretty good gig. You hardly ever have to go to prison! And it comes with limitless wads of cash!" Her supervillain touchstone? "I might have to go with Lex Luthor. Except not look like him. All that money and brains, social acceptability, and the diabolical scheming to boot. And Superman never **really** stops much more than the plan du jour. There's nothing like a permanent setback." She confesses she wants a "Supervillain Megabomb." Superheroes, be on your guard.

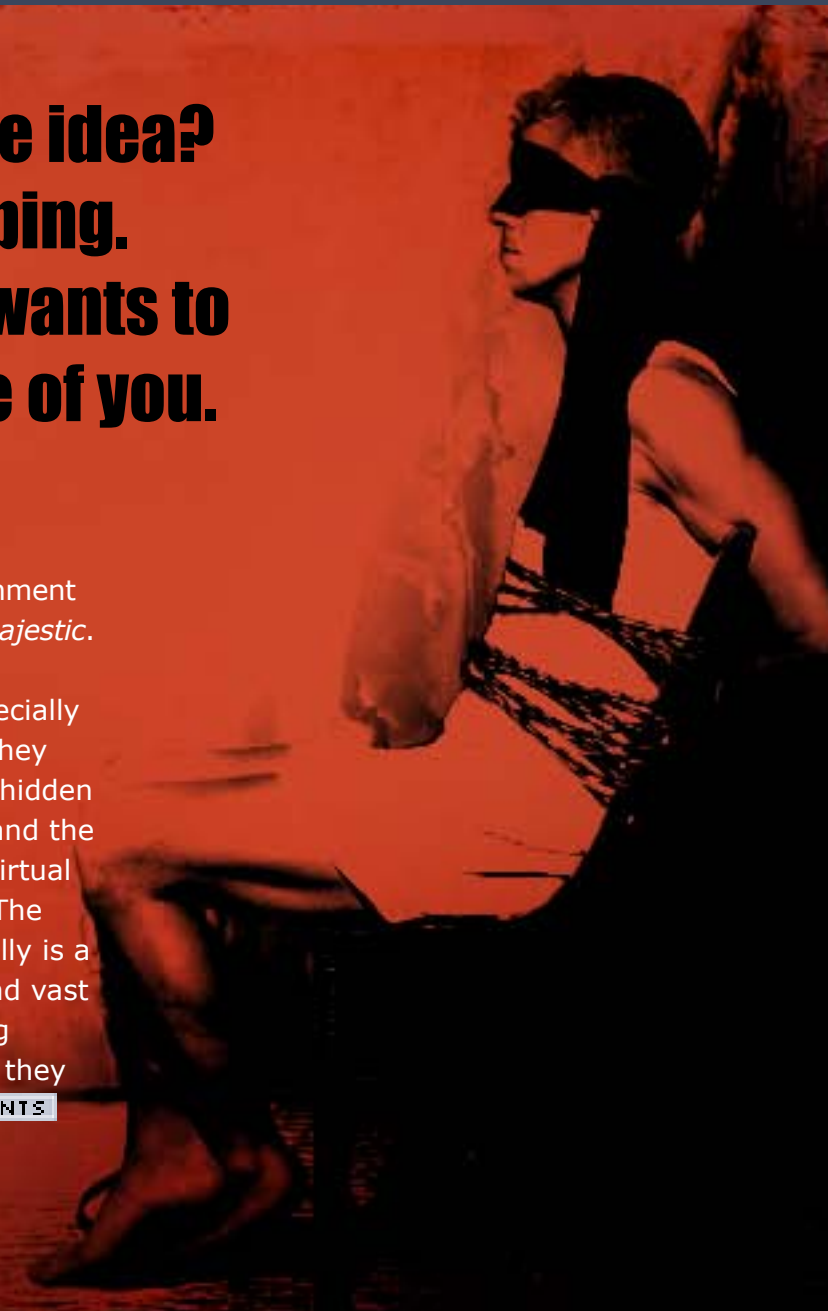
The line between gaming and the real world continues to blur every day, and ARGs are taking the lead in pushing the boundaries to the breaking point. It's easy to see the appeal of gaming-made-real. Playing a game of *Assassins* keeps you on edge for days, even weeks, as your friends get cut down around you. Then, one day, Phil from Accounting pulls the Maverick he's been hiding and your whole body goes electric as, for a few adrenaline-charged seconds, you live in a John Woo flick. Or the killer from your "web game" reaches out and calls you by name. Or you get a frantic late night

**Her favorite idea?
Kidnapping.
She really wants to
kidnap one of you.**

phone call from one of the game's characters, screaming about government agents after him, as happened in *Majestic*.

What gives ARGs their power, especially the power to scare, is the reality they create. Suddenly, there really are hidden messages in the posters you see and the websites you visit. A theft in the virtual world is hidden in the real world. The killer knows your name. There really is a conspiracy working against you and vast treasure to be gained for defeating them. After all, it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you. [COMMENTS](#)

Shannon Drake likes commas and standing out in the rain.



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Return to RAVENHOLM

by Hitchhiker

"That's the old passage to Ravenholm. We don't go there anymore," she says. Why, then, does she let her sorrowful gaze linger just a little bit too long while foreboding music plays in the background, hmm? She's lying, and Valve made her do it. I blame everything that came after that moment squarely on **them**. "I" am not included in the "we," so it's clear that I will have to go where few others dare. What's new, though: This is *Half-Life 2* and I'm the Free Man; exempt from the rules that govern health, time and inter-dimensional travel. Common sense fits into that list well enough.

Having spent the past few hours being chased through a city, down canals on my speedy *Gentle Ben/Easy Rider* motorcycle-type construction and across a wealth of generic industrial estates, I was pretty much ready for some R&R upon reaching Black Mesa East. Yet, the show must go on, and the construction team behind the world I inhabit is meticulous in their design. I get just enough time to absorb events, regain control of my nerves and play catch with the best computer robot friend of **all time**, and then it all goes to pieces again.

The klaxons sound and I'm running away again, but it's different this time. I'm not simply escaping faceless oppression, the long arm of the unjust law and gunships formed from bits of other alien species. I'm running into unknown danger, and Alyx's face tells me it's not going to be pretty.

In Ravenholm, things are, well, atmospheric. Music reminiscent of a dozen 1970s horror movies blasts from the speakers in an unusually overt manner. These aren't the familiar 160 beats-per-minute that helped fuel the initial escape from City 17; it's unfamiliar and disconcerting, only matched in its alien manner by the animal roars that echo through the dusk after the light has long since faded.

A shape in the distance moves, seemingly adopting the aimless lumbering of a zombie. Approaching it, cautiously, it's unclear exactly what it is until I'm far too close: An ex-inhabitant's lower body swings from the tree by its spinal chord. It serves a dual purpose: To let me know that this place is different from the others I've visited and to distract me from the zombie that's

silently lurching to life a few feet away, in the shadows.

I think I actually wee'd myself a little bit.

With a grimace and a slightly nervous feeling in my stomach, though, I manage to defeat him and move on, the familiar area of saw-blades letting me know that it's time to use the mighty grav-gun! "Aha," say I, "have at you and take some of this!" My new found courage lasts for at least a few minutes until the town opens up for me, a mad priest seemingly saves my life and a pair of zombies smash their way through a boarded up doorway and look in my direction.

Ravenholm's sheer excellence is easy to understate. There's no lazy pandering to the obligatory stealth level or any other conventions associated with modern day shooter design. It's a total shift in the game's dynamic that is expertly preceded by a period of downtime to let you phase out of combat mode. Then, the suspense is built up until your nerves are absolutely frayed.

Father Gregori offers potential salvation, the town beating you into submission time and time again only for him to show

up and get you out of there just in the nick of time. His crazy mutterings taunt you at first, but he's just looking after his flock. He's the captain of this ship called Ravenholm, and he'll be staying with her until the end.

Realizing that they've given me a little too much security via the mad priest, Valve taps into my innate fears. They take the familiar, push it through a blender and bring it out of the other side tougher, faster, stronger and smarter. They take the established conventions of

Poison Zombies, looking all too much like humans that have been eaten by spiders for my liking, are harder to put down and throw Poison Headcrabs at me for fun. Zombie Skeletons clamber up drainpipes with a clangclangclangclang leaping at my outstretched shotgun with ridiculous speed. It's just not fair, is it?

It's an entire chapter of a game that just oozes quality horror; every turn leads to the unexpected and every battle for survival is desperate, leaving me shaken and humbled. I'm left with no choice but

**Zombie Skeletons clamber up
drainpipes with a clangclangclangclang
leaping at my outstretched shotgun
with ridiculous speed.**

zombie combat and turn them upside down after a game and a half. Poison Headcrabs, looking and moving all too much like spiders for my liking, emit a strange chattering sound from their crafty hiding places as they quiver in ecstatic anticipation of eating my face.

**It's just not
fair, is it?**

On my first play-through, I managed to get as far as the first Poison Zombie before my nerves got the better of me and I had to quit.

to learn how to use the gravity gun. The wonder-weapon gives me the edge I need: health packs and ammo are flung from one section of the weaving path to the next, and I use my new toy to pull the power-ups toward me. This is continually the small difference between my success and failure. Using the gravity gun to keep me alive, combined with using it to navigate an assortment of traps and puzzles kept things fresh, the challenges new.

It builds to a superb climax, worthy of any horror movie: A last, desperate stand atop a building while waiting for transport to salvation, the clock ticking as your time between quick-saves ebbs away. Finally, you stand next to Gregori, but his rantings no longer appear insane. You've witnessed the true horror of Ravenholm: A town shelled by the combine, the effects of their payload not simply driving the area into submission, but warping all that should be familiar into a grotesque play. A final sacrifice is yet to be made, and with the madman by your side, you battle to escape the horror and leave the wretched place behind. It's only in the last minutes that

you realize you have to go on alone as Gregori stands against his mutated congregation to secure your escape.

On my first play-through, I managed to get as far as the first Poison Zombie before my nerves got the better of me and I had to quit. I spent the next two weeks building up the courage to take on the horrors of Ravenholm again and even then, the only way I could beat it was in a single session that lasted around four hours, leaving me drained and wrecked.

Few games have managed to raise the same levels of fear in me – the *System Shocks* and, more recently, *Resident Evil 4* are the only ones that spring to mind. The problem is I'm never likely to visit anywhere that looks like the locales in any of those games. Ravenholm, though? It's ruined the entire Eastern European experience for me. I'll be sticking to the English beaches, their cold, dirty sands far more welcoming than scenery reminiscent of my entirely fearful experience. [COMMENTS](#)

Hitchhiker is a freelance videogames journalist who spends too much time

playing multiplayer games all alone. It does give him a sense of belonging, though, so that's ok. He hangs out at www.alwaysblack.com.



Dreading the Shadows on the Wall

by Michael Zenke

"[Games] are, in their superior forms, simply by-products of excess intellectuality, which I haven't the honour to possess. In their inferior forms they are of course simply avenues of escape for persons with too poorly proportioned and correlated a perspective to distinguish betwixt the frivolous and the relevant ... "

- H.P. Lovecraft to James F. Morton,
February 3, 1932

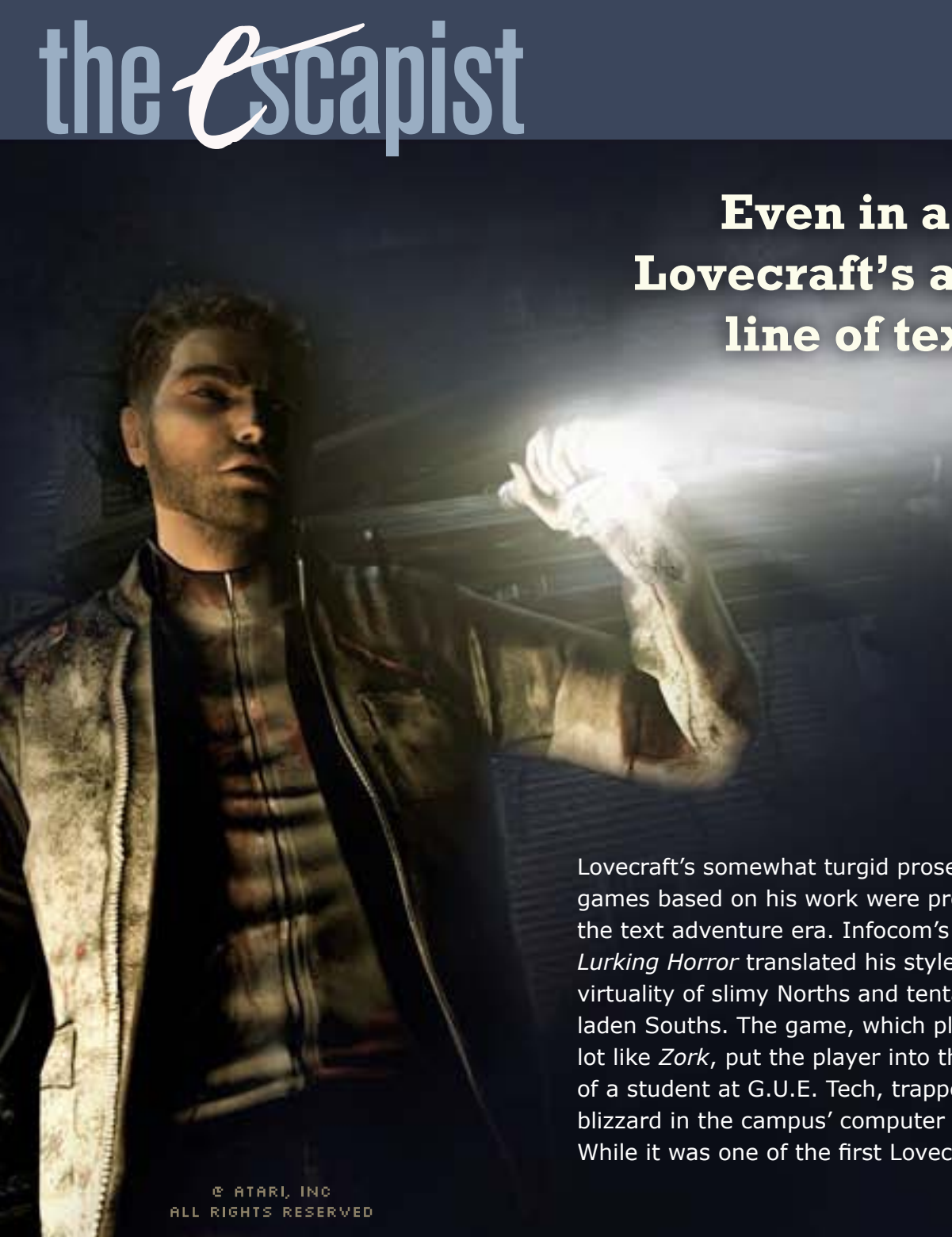
In the 1920s, a young, poor writer would reinvent the horror genre from his home at 10 Barnes Street in Providence, Rhode Island. Misunderstood or ignored in his own time, Howard Philips Lovecraft's work has nonetheless echoed across the arts. Literature, movies and even music have been shaped and worked by the cyclopean terrors and non-Euclidian geometry spoken of in his works. Stunted and twisted like the "Rats in the Walls," Lovecraft's fingerprints join those of Stoker, Howard and Tolkien in shaping the face of modern gaming.

Though we know him today as a master of horror, Lovecraft was almost unknown in his own time and lived a fairly quiet

life. He learned everything he knew through self-study, as he was a very sickly child and was very rarely allowed to attend school. His first published work was "Dagon," which went to print in a 1923 issue of *Weird Tales* magazine. Soon afterward, Lovecraft married Sonia Greene, whom he'd met at a journalists' convention. Lovecraft and Greene moved to New York soon after they were wed, but the relationship was not to last. He returned, alone, to Providence and lived with his aunts until they passed away. After the return to Providence, he finally saw some of his more popular stories see publication. Stories such as "The Case of Charles Dexter Ward" and "At the Mountains of Madness" were published in pulp magazines of the day. Just the same, true success eluded him for much of his life. He died, financially ruined and wracked with cancer, in March of 1937.

From these mentally and emotionally bleak surroundings, it is easy to understand where the unnamed terrors of Lovecraft's writing originated. His fertile mind and an impressive self-taught vocabulary led to a unique writing style, laden with adjectives. Given

Even in a graphical format, Lovecraft's ability to terrify with a line of text rises to the fore.



Lovecraft's somewhat turgid prose, games based on his work were prolific in the text adventure era. Infocom's *The Lurking Horror* translated his style into a virtuality of slimy Norths and tentacle-laden Souths. The game, which played a lot like *Zork*, put the player into the role of a student at G.U.E. Tech, trapped by a blizzard in the campus' computer center. While it was one of the first Lovecraft

adaptations, it failed to impress the world at large. Thankfully, its shortcomings didn't stop other developers from trying to get Lovecraft right. Michael S. Gentry's *Anchorhead* perfectly blended both modern and ancient metaphysical horrors; it's still one of my favorite text-based games.

With the rise of graphical gaming, Lovecraft's writing lent itself to some still-great modern classics. *Alone in the Dark*, from I-Motion, is the single most influential horror game of its era. Ed Carnby and Emily Hartwood traverse Hartwood Manor, encountering the horrors that old man Hartwood has unleashed. Even in a graphical format, Lovecraft's ability to terrify with a line of text rises to the fore. The line, "They will find my body but will not have my soul," from Hartwood's chilling letter still makes me look over my shoulder.

As in a mythosian sacrifice, the essence of *Alone* has been adulterated many times. Despite the game's grandeur and its cultural icon status, Uwe Boll has publicly defiled its corpse on the silver screen, and a new property is in the works for the PS3.

The transition from thoughtful text-based crawls to action/adventure games would be muddled considerably during the '90s. Though specifically Lovecraftian games were few, the hallmarks of "the dreamer in the deep" were everywhere. Shub-Niggurath required a good telefragging in id's original *Quake*, and the entities from Xen in *Half-Life* smacked of terrors between the stars. *Alone in the Dark* has often been credited with being the grandfather of the *Resident Evil* series, and certainly there is a touch of Ithaqua in Nemesis' transformation.

Since 2000, two very notable titles have surfaced on mythos-lovers' radar. *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* filed the serial numbers off of Lovecraft's work to create a truly disturbing experience. A compelling story of old gods and their avatars woven together with time travel and rune-heavy ancient magics made for one of the most compelling story-driven

games in recent memory. The clever use of meta-game trickery added a layer of real confusion to the play experience: As your avatar's sanity declined, your external perception of the game environment was compromised. Like the protagonist of "The Shadow Out of Time," prolonged exposure to horror begets new illusory horrors meant just for the player.


Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth is the most modern mythos-themed title on offer, released just this past spring on PC and last October for Xbox. With yet another nod to *Alone in the Dark*, you take on the role of a private investigator searching for clues in the quiet little town of Innsmouth. Something fishy is going on there, and the protagonist seeks out that which man was not meant to know. *Dark Corners*, a highly underrated game, gets the feel of the mythos correct by forcing players to run when face to face with otherworldly adversaries; in Lovecraft's universe, man was far from the dominant race. It's easily the most "accurate" Lovecraft-inspired game to date.

Beyond the directly mythos-touched games, it's easy to see Lovecraft's

influence on many popular non-horror titles. As with tabletop gaming, horror literature has shaped many of the minds that make the games we play. Homages to Lovecraft have been littered throughout videogames since people started putting code to compiler. The best-selling Xbox 360 title this year, *Oblivion*, even contains its own small nod to the master of horror: The quest "Shadow over Hackdirt" has the player rescuing young Dar-Ma from the "Deep One" worshiping cultists south of Chorrol.

Lovecraft has sparked the imaginations of countless horror enthusiasts since his death. The time you spent dreading the shadows on the wall after reading "The Call of Cthulhu" shouldn't embarrass you. You were affected, changed, by the words of a writer who knew that the shadows were more than they seemed. That night, touched by his words, you saw that there were things you didn't know and were shaken. In a way, your love of gaming today may be because of a writer from Providence. After all, the fun part of gaming is the mastery of the unknown, the conquering of the darkness; the stock and trade of Howard Philips Lovecraft.

"Cthulhu still lives, too, I suppose, again in that chasm of stone which has shielded him since the sun was young. His accursed city is sunken once more ... He must have been trapped by the sinking whilst within his black abyss, or else the world would by now be screaming with fright and frenzy. Who knows the end? What has risen may sink, and what has sunk may rise."

- The Call of Cthulhu  COMMENTS

Michael "Zonk" Zenke is Editor of Slashdot Games, a subsite of the technology community Slashdot.org. He comments regularly on massive games at the site MMOG Nation. He lives in Madison, WI (the best city in the world) with his wife Katharine.

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Beyond the directly mythos-touched games, it's easy to see Lovecraft's influence on many popular non-horror titles.

Handheld HORRORS

by Dan Dormer

It saddens me that it will be some time before I can truly enjoy survival horror in a portable fashion.

Think about it. Just how many bits of handheld horror can you think of? Maybe you remember *Resident Evil: Deadly Silence*, which came out in February of this year, and ... that's it. And while games like *Deadly Silence* may be considered part of the genre, they just don't sit right. They mimic the components necessary to create a survival/horror title, but their digital make-up is completely different.

Unlike the copious amounts action-adventure or puzzle games on offer, survival/horror games on handheld devices just aren't present.

Deadly Silence suffers because its very existence is mired in the normal console-to-handheld porting ideology. You scale down what can be transferred over, and then work on what needs to be fixed to make it playable. This usually leaves you with watered-down gameplay and a husk of the game's original atmosphere. And without the setting and mood to set the player off balance, survival/horror suffers. It's like comparing a monkey's DNA to a

human's: It's that one percent difference that, indeed, makes **all** the difference.

What makes survival/horror games different and harder to translate is that unlike most genres, horror isn't defined by the gameplay. Instead, it's the thematic elements present in a game that account for its inclusion in the genre.

For example, here's a garden-variety survival/horror game: Put one person up against an army of hellish beasts; toss in plenty of conventional weaponry to tip the scale a tad, but limit the amount of ammunition available (You know, so the player must ration their supply and find baseball bats to kill the undead laying siege to wherever he is currently trapped); oh, and make each location a claustrophobic nightmare.

So, why is this experience so hard to replicate on a portable device? Graphics, for one, haven't reached a point where what's going to be on a portable screen is spooky. Additionally, the size of the viewing area makes a difference. While zombies might get someone to jump when they're on 19- to 62-inch screens, two-inch displays don't make for a particularly yelp-evoking experience. It's

The cerebral, mental scares are where it's at, and it's high time to capitalize.

like going to see a \$50 million horror flick and then checking out the haunted house at a local carnival. Is the latter really going to linger in your mind and haunt your dreams for weeks to come?

A player's physical situation also becomes a variable when making the jump from console to handheld. When designing a game for a console, there's no real thought that needs to go into where the player will be. He will be plopped on the couch, on his bed or sitting directly in front of the TV - inside, in a comfortable place. Once things go pocket-sized, though, developers can't count on a player's attention to be focused entirely on the game.

So much goes into making an atmosphere present and noticeable in a game. If you're out in the park in the middle of the afternoon, playing the game while you're on the phone with dogs barking and kids loudly tossing around the pigskin, you're not going to be able to appreciate the full experience.

Sure, zombies running through a city, chasing you while releasing the occasional spine-chilling moan might be a scary thing to you in general, but you're not helping things by playing the game in broad daylight. Light and day are warm, comforting entities. Darkness and night, however, put us on edge and make us more guarded, and thus, flappable.

Remember what it was like when you were a kid, reading Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* under your covers by flashlight, growing ever more fearful with each word you read, questioning if that noise was just the creaking of the bed, or possibly the cry of a being not from this world? We have just as much of an impact on how scary a game is to us, and as such, should put forth an earnest effort to make these survival/horror titles as down-right scary as possible. Perhaps "Play Under the Covers" and "Play After Dusk" should be put on the back of packing next to "Memory Stick Required" and "Wi-Fi Compatible (Ad Hoc)."

Now, developers can't force us to sit under the covers with our Nintendo DS or Sony PSP, but what they can do is rework the way they construct survival/

horror titles on a portable scale. We know the constraints, the fact that the graphics aren't there yet, there isn't a massive amount of support, but we have to stop focusing on the negatives. It's time to innovate.

Just like Hideo Kojima broke the fourth wall in *Metal Gear Solid* by having Psycho Mantis toy with us by reading and commenting on our memory card save files and even making the screen go black like the PlayStation was on the fritz, developers of portable survival/horror need to try new ways to scaring us. Play with our heads a little: Have the brightness shift on the unit to recreate the flickering of lights in a horror movie. Pull photos and music from our memory sticks and insert them into the game; how weird would it be to see pictures of Mom and Dad on the wall when we take a closer look? The cerebral, mental scares are where it's at, and it's high time to capitalize.

There's really no simple way to create practical, portable survival/horror scares. A compromise between gamers and developers has to come about before we can truly enjoy survival/horror in a portable variety. Gamers have to put

themselves in a position to be scared, and developers have to be willing to reach beyond standard convention to scare them. Until that middle ground is reached, we're left with mediocre scares, and paying another buck to go in the carnival's haunted house because the horror movie we want to see is still years away. [COMMENTS](#)

Dan Dormer is a videogame freelancer, who keeps a poorly updated blog at his personal site. He's also afraid of seeing scary movies. True story.



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 was the scariest gaming-related moment you've experienced?"

Jon Schnaars, "Pleasurable Genres"

I was going to go with *AVP*, strictly for the first 15 terrifying minutes of the human mission, but those were more shocks than scares. The most frightened I've ever been by a game had to be playing *7th Guest* when I was 11 or 12.

Tom Rhodes, "Afraid of the Dark"

Getting *Barbie Horse Adventure* from a distant aunt one Christmas. Absolutely horrifying.

Shannon Drake, "Breaking the Fourth Wall"

Getting tapped to write an article at 5:00 p.m. on a Friday with no prior notice.

(Editor's Note: We love you, Shannon!)

Michael Zenke, "Dreading the Shadows on the Wall"

The one and only session of *F.E.A.R.* I played at night with the lights off. You'd think, after *Ringu*, I'd have been

prepared ... and yet, no. Also, the original *Silent Hill* had a background sound in the school courtyard that is still enough to send chills down my spine.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

Half-Life. First encounter with a Headcrab. 3:00 a.m. My high-pitched, little girl scream woke up everyone in the house, including my grandmother. She called me "Nervous Nelly" all of the next day.

Russ Pitts, Associate Editor

I already answered this question. Who writes these things? OK, my **second** scariest gaming-related moment: Venturing out of the house during a weekend-long tequila and *Thief: The Dark Project* binge (to get more tequila) and realizing that I'd just seriously considered hitting somebody with a blackjack and stealing their wallet. Of course my lack of a blackjack stopped me.

Joe Blancato, Associate Editor

Vampire: The Masquerade: Bloodlines (colon colon colon), in the haunted house level. Oh, sweet Jesus, did that scare the hell out of me.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor

I don't play a lot of scary games, but there were a couple of scary moments in *Indigo Prophecy*.

