

the Escapist

IONA'S
other game
by Shannon Drake

ALSO:

EDITOR'S NOTE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STAFF PAGE

**A PRAYER
FOR PREY**

by Matt Forbeck

Bethesda:
THE RIGHT DIRECTION

by Joe Blancato

FREE FALL:

Running with armadillos

by Russ Pitts

CHAOS:

Battle OF THE Wizards

by Kieron Gillen

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Joe Blancato

So really, what were the odds I'd be writing this note to you, dear reader? Really, I owe it all to chaos theory, or serendipity - whichever you prefer.

Back in 2003, long before the magazine you so enjoy was flying off the e-shelves, I was visiting lovely Durham, NC as a Spring Break afterthought. While my peers were fleeing to Cancun or Miami, I was on a jet plane heading toward the Bible belt to visit my dad, who'd been here for work. I figured I was in for a week of minor league baseball and cheap tobacco; I didn't really count on meeting my future employer while I was on vacation.

But as luck would have it, I'd posted a travel update on an old gaming community site I ran (don't look for it - it's not there anymore), and not an hour later, I received an IM from a random member of my gaming community. "Dude!" he said to me. "You're in Durham? We gotta hang out." It was a Themis employee.

As luck/chaos/Cusack movie would have it, the place I was staying was a mile away from where the Themis guys all lived, and I ended up spending an evening with future mag Producer, Jon Hayter, and Publisher, Alex Macris. They seemed like a cool group of guys, so I added them to my contact list when I made it back to my home base in Vegas.

Fast forward six months, and the fates had drawn me again back to NC, this time to set up more permanent stakes. I stayed in touch with the Themis guys, played some *Heroclix* and *Cyberpunk* with them, and lived the life of an unemployed college student. But again, our friend chance got involved. Right around the time I was beginning to miss a steady flow of income, Team Themis was hiring Customer Service Representatives. One interview process later, I began my tenure here on Meridian Parkway, Second Floor.

Let's jump ahead again, about a year. I'm on a plane, sitting next to Alex, and he lowers his voice to tell me about this great idea he and soon-to-be Executive

Editor Julianne Greer had for a magazine that would treat gaming like a cultural phenomenon rather than just a pastime for pasty white guys. I loved it and started piecing together writing samples.

And so, here we are, nearly two years into the magazine's life, and by the hand of Julianne's writer's block and illness, I was tapped to speak directly to you, to tell you how I got here. And it was easy; all I had to do was not party in Mexico. Jesus, what were the odds of **that**?

And, after a not-so-random glimpse into my life, we've arrived at this issue's theme: "What Were the Odds?" Herein, we'll take a look at the games and companies that couldn't or shouldn't have happened without a little help from whatever it is that **does** play dice with the universe. Matt Forbeck follows *Prey* through its tumultuous development cycle. Kieron Gillen talks *Chaos*. Our own Russ Pitts and Shannon Drake tackle *Armadillo Run* and the other Ion Storm game that didn't make you John Romero's bitch, respectively. And yours truly profiles Bethesda, the company

responsible for Trip Hawkins and a little franchise called *The Elder Scrolls*.

Chances are you'll love it.

Yours,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "A Slightly Serious Primer" from The Escapist Forum: I think a lot of people will read this article and go straight to the first sub-section. Personally, it was tough to concentrate on any other part of the piece after the initial "WTF" regarding a Columbine game. I have not had time to play it, and I'm not here to support or criticize the game specifically, but I do want to comment on it in another regard.

There is so much out there about it already, and very little is dedicated to the actual game-play. A few clicks around the net will lead to message board discussions from people that love



it, hate it, hate the idea, or even completely miss the point of it.

My understanding is that the controversy over the game comes from a general perspective that a game such as this “trivializes” the incident. But, if society can comment on a game, why is it so impossible for a game to comment on society? Why do people believe that games inherently lack depth and serve only as a source of mockery of serious situations? What can be done to change this perception?

The problem is that games are ‘fun’ and nothing more. This stereotype is the biggest battle that gaming has been fighting for decades. What makes this such an uphill battle, however, is that, since the beginning of its history, the majority of games have been going strictly for the ‘fun’ factor. The most successful games have a tendency to locate within a fictional premise. Often, when a game takes place within a real time and scenario, the story is weak and takes a distant second to game-play. In some such games, the facts are not turned into a humanizing story, or the events are so deformed that the historical setting is flimsy.

Further, gaming often DOES trivialize matters. Log into Medal of Honor/Call of Duty/Counter-Strike/Operation: Desert Storm and have a good time. But, stop and think for a second while you are playing: What am I doing in this game, specifically? The answer: Killing lots and lots of enemies. When you play, do you bear in mind the lives that you ruin and end with each click of the mouse or push of a button? Probably not. (I know it’s not a new argument, but it bears merit.)

Beyond gaming, though, trivializing such subjects is not uncommon. How many war movies are there that have faceless victims, keeping you on track, cheering for the protagonist as he wipes out more and more people? There are too many to count. The same goes for books, novels, short stories, et cetera.

The difference is that those media have gained a level of respect by the overarching populous. One reason that respect has been earned is that many of those stories discuss important events and force the audience to feel. Real emotional experience is available in many films and books. Games, unfortunately, have not been able to emulate that level of response. Video

games are still childish in their story telling and their ability to trigger emotion.

The fact that there are only a few games out there that make the player feel strongly for the characters and story reveals an overall inadequacy. We are talking about an interactive medium. I put myself into a world, and yet, even with my first-hand interaction with it, I come out with little more than a sense of accomplishment by the end.

To bring things back to last week’s issue discussing film and games: If there is one thing that video games take most from Hollywood it’s the cheesy, shallow feel-good ending. I love games, but every now and then I want an experience that holds more weight than the everyday fluff of a bad movie. I want controversy; I want discomfort, and I want sadness. I want a full range of emotions.

SCMRPG proves that games are, as a whole, currently in an adolescent phase. The subject of the game immediately causes debate. This is a necessary step. Something has to push things along, be it this game or another controversial title. When people say, “it’s a game that has such-and-such a subject matter, and

that isn't right" it is clear that the medium is not getting respect. The wrongdoing is being attributed to the game first and the subject matter second.

If video games are to be viewed as an important medium they must also comment on important events; they must instill emotion in the player for partaking in these events. Developers must prove that games are capable of revealing something of value to the audience. I think the controversy, causing emotional uproar from all sorts of people that haven't even downloaded the game, is proof that games can, and will, be an important part of society and social commentary. We need more games pushing the envelope.

- **Blaxton**

In response to "Buzz Games" from The Escapist Forum: I disagree that such a market might defeat itself. Instead there will be a competing investments; one predicting some "terror event," and another predicting that this event will be stopped before it can succeed. If the market is open for all to see, this allows the possibility that a terrorist seeing a heavy investment

against an event might call off the plan entirely.

- **EastwoodDC**

In response to "You Will Never be a Princess" from The Escapist Daily: I find it interesting that the people who can best distinguish fantasy and reality are those that experience both worlds. People who have no fantasy life believe that inside a fantasy, you believe that what is happening is real. People who have no real life (and I have met a few: I even spent time AS one) believe that the fantasy is real. It is only those of us that live both in our fantasy world of choice and in the real world that can see that fantasies are fantasies and reality is reality.

Please, do not ridicule those who do not realize that Fantasy!=Reality. Simply pity them: they do not realize what they are missing. And when you can, teach them: show them that fantasy worlds are not real. And do it without making them feel inferior.

- **ZacQuickSilver**

In response to "Reward Card 2" from The Escapist Daily: I'd have to

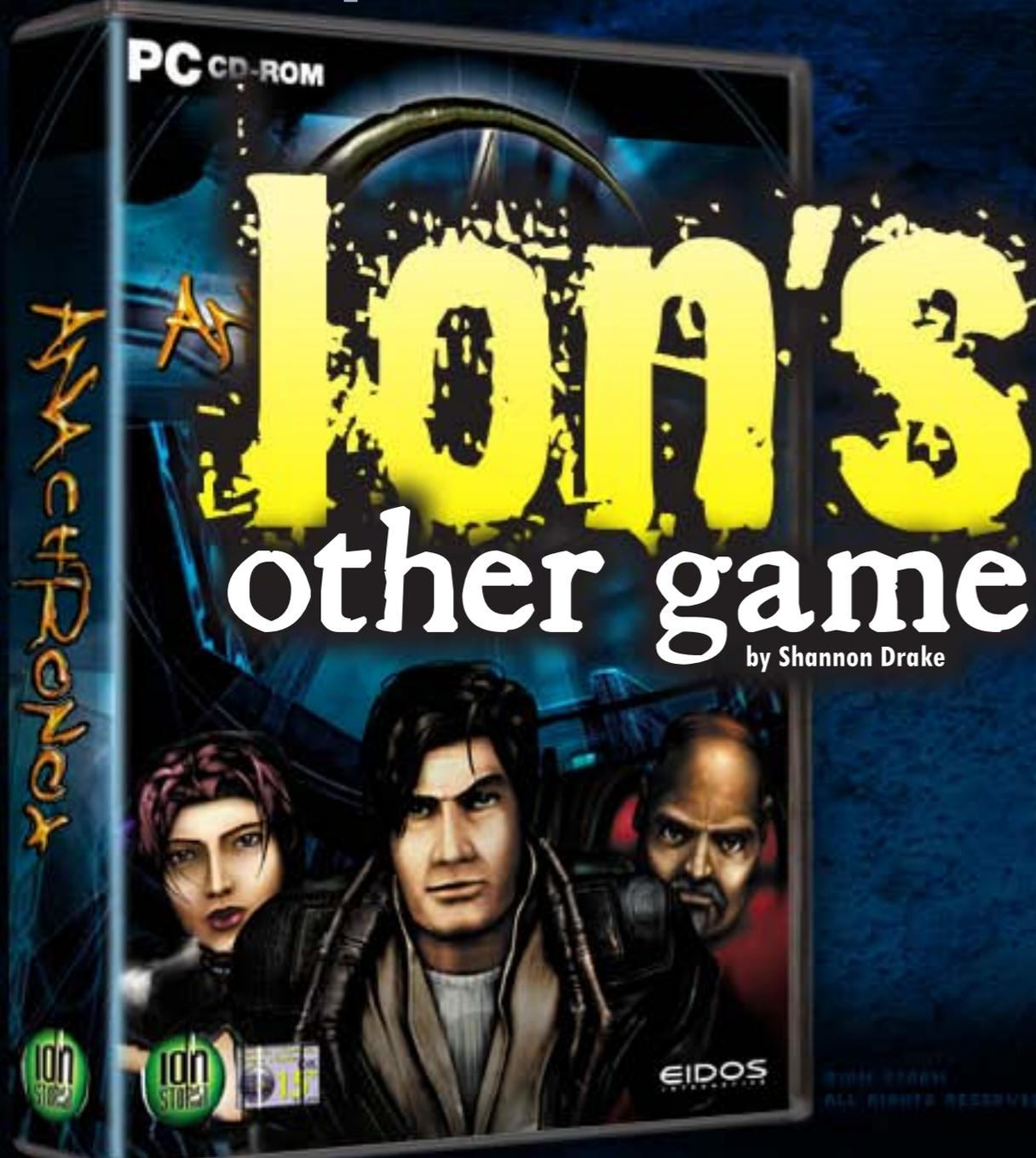
agree that I'm finding the same problems myself. I've tried to get through Zelda, but I'm stuck at around the 25 hour mark because I realize that every time I sit down to play it, its gonna take at least half an hour to remember what I was up to and where everything is in the world and then another couple of hours to make any progress. So I tend to have a quick game of Wii tennis or Guitar Hero instead. I'd like to see myself picking up Okami and God of War 2 and perhaps a 360 with Gears and Oblivion in the coming months, but I'm more likely to get Warioware and

whatever the next buzz (the quiz game) turns out to be, because I know I will play them more.

And it's not like I don't have the time to play games either. In the last few months I've managed to watch the first 7 seasons of Stargate from start to finish, its just that my spare time comes in small chunks around work and cooking and sport and a 42 minute Stargate episode fits in those chunks much easier than a couple hours of Zelda does.

- **Goofonian**





other game

by Shannon Drake

After *Dominion: Storm Over Gift 3* shuffled off the shelves and *Daikatana* collapsed under a pile of hype and dead frogs, Ion Storm Dallas managed to ship one last game before folding in on itself. Tom Hall's *Anachronox* seemed like a gritty cyberpunk adventure, but it soon turned into a hilarious send up of — and tribute to — the console RPG. *Anachronox* had everything RPG players clamor for: a compelling plot, a strange and new setting to explore, a fantastic soundtrack, a good, if older engine, and deep, interesting characters. Unfortunately, the game shipped early and buggy, and, with little marketing from Eidos and the demise of Ion Storm Dallas, it sank into cult-favorite-class obscurity, good for geeks and bad for business. The game community and former Ion Storm Dallas employees were left to piece the game's universe together via unofficial patches and even an acclaimed machinima movie.

Tom Hall himself followed John Romero to Monkeystone Games and Midway, before leaving to pursue independent projects and, eventually, winding up with hush-hush MMOG developer KingsIsle Entertainment. I caught up with him at KingsIsle, where he proved quite willing

to talk about the birth of *Anachronox* and what went wrong along the way.

On the larger level, "games start in all sorts of ways. Some start with characters, some with worlds, some with ideas for new methods of control," he says. "When I come up with a game, usually the seed of the game is understood, and that spurs on new ideas, and once there's enough density of ideas and most undefined facets fall into place, suddenly the world of concept makes 'sense,' and then I write the whole thing down at once." From there, it's simply a matter of breaking the idea down to the level of what tasks need to be done and what assets are required.

As for *Anachronox*, it "can be seen as part *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, part [Commander] Keen, part *Final Fantasy*, part parody, and part epic, hard sci-fi." He admits that it was "hubris to take 15 people and say you're going to make a console-style RPG, but, well, that's what we did." *Anachronox* actually began its life in a very humble place, he says. "The name *Anachronox* came to me, as many ideas do, in the bathroom. Then, I had to figure out what that word meant. It seemed like the city they lived

in, but I broke the word down to *anachronism* and *noxious*. One combination of these two things would be 'poison from the past' or 'poison from another time.' So, that became the basis for the history of [the] place, but also the basis for the characters. They were each healing a poison from their past." Robot sidekick PAL-18 was another bathroom idea, he says. "Luckily, I have a notepad in there. I can't fathom all the shower ideas I lost before putting a recorder in there."

Anachronox was caught in the slow-motion explosion of a drama bomb. Ion Storm Dallas was busy eating itself, a process chronicled everywhere from NPR to Gamespot to our own magazine, and Tom Hall was caught in the middle. "I had different roles at different times: Chief Creative Officer, President, etc. But, basically, I served as the Project Lead on *Anachronox*, and, where I could, as conscience of the company." He blames Ion's collapse on the company's lack of focus, or rather, their focus on things other than game development. "Once there was a re-focus on making games — boom, they got done."

Hall cites three factors in Ion Storm's demise. "A: too many newbies. We had very few hires that were senior." He said they had a strong desire to give new people a shot, "but we went too far in that regard. We wound up with an amazing team, but a lot of them had to cut their teeth on [our games]. B: politics. I can't go into this for, sadly, legal reasons, but let's just say there was a whole lot of turmoil and not enough focus on making games. C: over-marketing. We were making bold statements before we were even [in] alpha. We needed to shut up until we had something to show. If it hadn't been for those three things, *Daikatana* would have come out much earlier and been fine."

Most of the reviews at the time of *Anachronox's* release praised the game for its storyline and characters, but reviewers and players docked points for the number of bugs found within the game. Hall says "it wasn't insanely buggy compared to some titles, but it was rushed out the door. Eidos wanted to ship it. If we'd shipped Joey [Liaw]'s final build, it would have been very stable." Bugs alone may not explain *Anachronox's* commercial failure,

however. "I think most people didn't know the game was out. ... I sing the praises of Eidos for sticking with us through all the craziness — they were amazing. But they spent millions on the game, and in the tens of thousands on advertising. I think it could have found a pretty strong audience. But with all the craziness that had gone on, I feel fortunate that people got to experience it at all." He describes the potential audience as "people that love RPGs, people that love adventures, people that love story and humor. People still write to me saying they found a copy, that they played and loved the game, and that they wished they'd heard about it coming out at the time."

Of the game's incomplete storyline, he says, "We made just about two-thirds of the original storyline. We had this huge long story that was 70 hours and just couldn't finish that many assets in a reasonable amount of time. Where it was stopped, it made sense, as many characters had their story arc complete. I don't regret it, because *Anachronox* is

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the Escapist

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plenty long and ends well." Ion Storm envisioned a sequel, but financially couldn't justify a return to *Anachronox's* world. Hall is reluctant to discuss where the story might've gone, "because I'd love to have the property back and finish the story. A lot of the work was done, but all I will say is it involved two other universes." While he did say repeatedly that he'd love to do the second installment, he doesn't own the intellectual property rights. "I've asked for it, what they wanted for it, but they seem to want to keep it for some reason."

Moving back to the development of the game itself, I asked him why he wanted to put a console-style RPG on the PC. "Why explore a new continent?" he answered. "It was novel, never before done, and could introduce PC players to that type of experience." The man who has worked on some of gaming's most recognizable titles — *Duke Nukem 3D*, *Doom*, *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Commander Keen* — ranks *Anachronox* as one of his favorite worlds. "I really love *Anachronox*. It's tied with [*Commander Keen*] for my favorite universe. The cast of *Anachronox* feel like ol' buddies, and the team that finished it is all family."

Indeed, some of the game's developers worked on the game even after Ion Storm Dallas dissolved. Programmer Joey Liaw put together some unofficial patches that fixed a lot of the game's flaws, Jake Hughes put together the movie, and so on. Clearly this game meant a lot to the people that worked on it. I asked him why. "It's hard to explain," he answered. "It's like soldiers bonding. We went through such turmoil but stayed for the love of the universe, the game and each other. Former team members often mention that if I ever got the intellectual property back and was going to make *Anachronox 2*, just tell them when and where. We have, as we say, 'The Love.'"

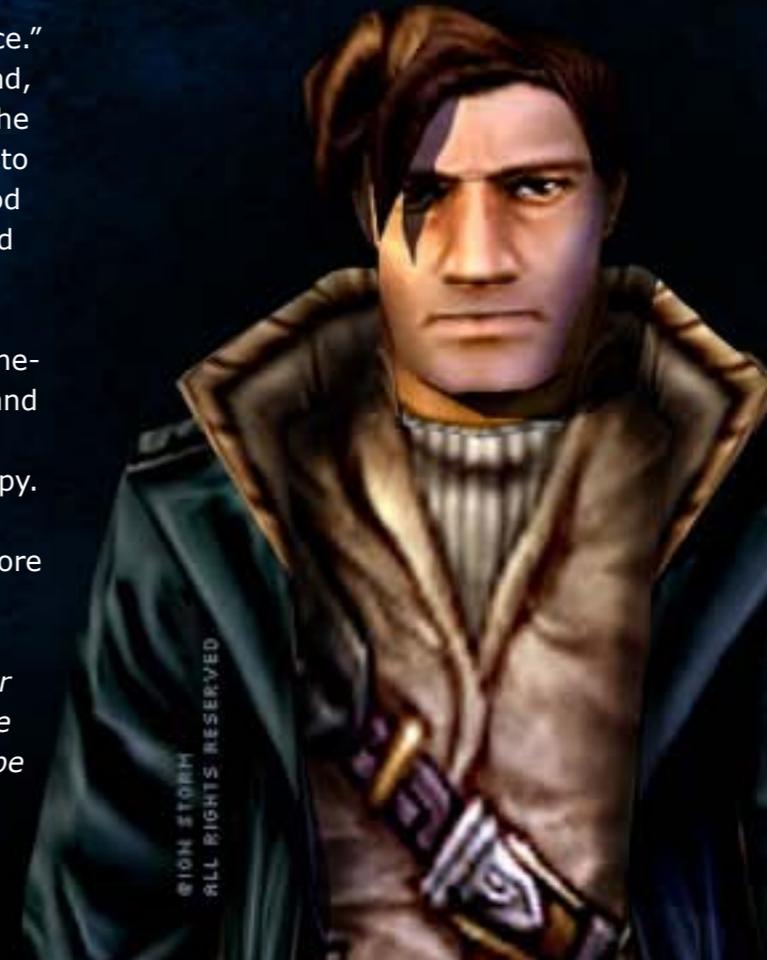
KingsIsle, where Hall is now the Creative Director, is about as far from Ion Storm's deafening hype as it's possible to get. Hall will only say, "We are a new MMOG-focused company, trying to do new, creative things that haven't been done before. Our founder is putting good money behind the idea that people will want something beyond another *World of Warcraft* clone." He offers a little bit more detail when I ask for the appeal of this particular project. "I can't tell you

what it is," he says, "but it's not fantasy. It's quite a different take on the market and what you do in an MMOG.

"There are many things appealing for me about MMOGs as a designer. The ability to sculpt a huge 'world,' the variety of experience, the social nature of the game, the ability to expand the content as you go, to maintain and grow this living, breathing entity of an experience." And the innovator in him tacks on, "And, of course, I haven't made one yet — the new is always exciting. I wasn't going to do one, but I came up with such a good base idea for one, I kind of had to. And talking with Elie Akilian, the brilliant founder of KingsIsle, I felt his passion about doing something new and not 'me-too.' So rare and precious in this day and age!" When asked about his personal creative philosophy, Hall keeps it snappy. "What's my philosophy? Make games easy and consistent to use ... and explore new continents." [COMMENTS](#)

Shannon Drake is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist and changed his name when he became a citizen. It used to be Merkwürdigeliebe.

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A PRAYER for

PREY

by Matt Forbeck

When the subject of vaporware comes up, the conversation inevitably turns to 3D Realms and games like *Duke Nukem Forever* and *Prey*. While *Prey* finally shipped last summer, it spent 11 years in development, a staggering amount of time for any computer game, even in the days of extensive MMOG production schedules. *Duke Nukem Forever* has been in the works for nearly as long. As it states on the 3D Realms website, "There's no possible joke you could make about the game's development time that we haven't already heard."

I headed up the adventure games division for Human Head Studios from 2002 through 2004. While I enjoyed working on our tabletop games, I spent a lot of time peering over the shoulders of most of the others in the office, checking out and playing with their work on the company's top-secret project, code-named *Dark Harvest*, better known as *Prey*.

3D Realms had officially given up on the game back in 1998, after a number of aborted attempts. The first of these went south after a number of key employees left to form the Ion Storm and Ritual Entertainment studios. As 3D Realms' CEO Scott Miller says, "We had to hire

new people, and when those new people came in we ended up going with a more ambitious design, too. So, things snowballed, and after another two years we reached a point where we knew the game was still too far from being complete, and so we cancelled the project." This seemed like the last nail in the coffin. "At that time, I did not expect *Prey* to ever be a finished game."

During its stint with the publisher Gathering of Developers (later purchased by Take 2 and now known as 2K Games), 3D Realms toyed with resurrecting *Prey* again. This time around, though, with *Duke Nukem Forever* still on their plate, they decided to farm out *Prey*'s development. They'd done this with another game, *Max Payne*, which had been a wild success.

Miller says, "We knew of Human Head by our mutual association with Gathering of Developers, and therefore it was an easy choice to ask them if they wanted to take a stab at the project. Luckily, they agreed."

Tim Gerritsen, who recently left Human Head, was the company's CEO at the time. As he recalls, "They approached us in late 2000 about working on a title

together. We discussed a number of options well into 2001 and eventually settled on recreating from whole cloth the *Prey* franchise, which they had ceased production on in 1998."

The strength of *Prey's* concepts sold Gerritsen and his partners on the game. "The original vision that 3D Realms had was extremely strong and ahead of its time. 3D Realms allowed us to take that vision and remake it in the image we wanted to. It was that combination of the original vision of the teams that came before us and our ability to take the best concepts from those early days and apply our own creative vision that made us really enjoy developing *Prey*, even during the hardest of times."

Miller agrees, which is why he returned to the *Prey* concept he'd long thought dead. "In the '90s, *Prey* was truly a game that was ahead of its time, and that's one of the reasons it was so hard to complete. The game featured environments that could be totally destroyed, it had portals, and it had a unique angle with the Cherokee lead character and Native American mythology. It turns out that in 2001, when we were talking about reviving

Prey, these same things were still relevant and interesting."

Of course, *Prey* didn't hit shelves until 2006. Back in 2001, no one envisioned another five years of development. The new *Prey* started out being developed with the Unreal 2 engine, but that quickly changed. Gerritsen says, "We realized that some of the things we were trying to do with gameplay were going to take us longer to accomplish than a typical game development cycle, and that by the time we released, Unreal 2 would look fairly dated. We didn't want to come out at the end of an engine's life cycle, and at that time Epic had not even begun work on what would eventually become the Unreal 3 engine."

Fortunately, Human Head had other options. "After looking into the tech base and content pipeline, we decided that *Doom 3* would be a great fit for what we wanted to accomplish with the engine, so we became the first official licensee of the *Doom 3* engine."

Despite this good news and the progress the team made on the game, they labored under a thick veil of secrecy. According to Gerritsen, "Since *Prey* had a

really storied history, all the parties involved agreed that *Prey* would be under a complete development blackout until the game was at an advanced level of completion. We knew that the game would take a fair amount of time to complete, and the last thing we wanted was for people to start calling the game vaporware. ... We even gave the game the code name of *Dark Harvest*, which was a reference to the code name George Lucas used while filming *Star Wars*, which he called *Blue Harvest*."

Even with everything all set up, the project still had its problems. You would have been forgiven if you'd thought *Prey* was cursed. It gave Gerritsen and his team some nail-biting moments. "Though I can't discuss details due to non-disclosure agreements, I can say that Human Head worked without a publishing contract for about 18 months due to our dispute with our publisher. That was pretty frightening since Human Head is an independent studio, and we were dependent on our milestone payments to pay for production.

“Despite the progress the team made on the game, they labored under a thick **VEIL OF SECRECY**”

"3D Realms, however, believed in the game and what we were doing with development, and they funded us during that period. This kept the company, and the project, alive during that period."

That sort of support from a third party is rare in the game industry, but 3D Realms thought enough of what they'd seen so far to put their money where their corporate mouth was.

Much of this, of course, goes back to 3D Realms' well-known policy of only shipping a game "when it's done" (WID). Many other companies would have forced the developer to shove *Prey* out the door when the funding ran shy, no matter what shape it might have been in. I asked Miller if he thinks this is a core reason for the company's success.

"Success, and failure. Clearly, WID has backfired with *Duke*. WID only works within reason, and we have stretched it to absurdity."

In the end, though, keeping *Prey* going worked out well. "What ended the dispute was the arrival of Christoph Hartmann and the creation of a new brand within Take 2, and that was 2K

Games," says Gerritsen. "Christoph had a specific vision for 2K and a professionalism that totally reinvigorated our relationship with Take 2. We settled our dispute, and from that moment forward, all parties came together again. *Prey* was once again on track with a committed publisher."

Prey shipped in the summer of 2006, and Gerritsen left the company just months later. To an outside eye, it might seem he was another casualty of *Prey*, but it's not so.

Gerritsen explains: "During the production of *Dead Man's Hand* [which shipped in 2004], I had seen some limitations in our approach as a company that I wanted to change. Despite being in the role of CEO, we were an equal partnership as a company, so I couldn't just dictate how I wanted things to be. I deeply respect all six of my partners, and I decided that getting all of them to leave their comfort zone to do things my way was a dauntingly uphill climb and not good for either myself or them.

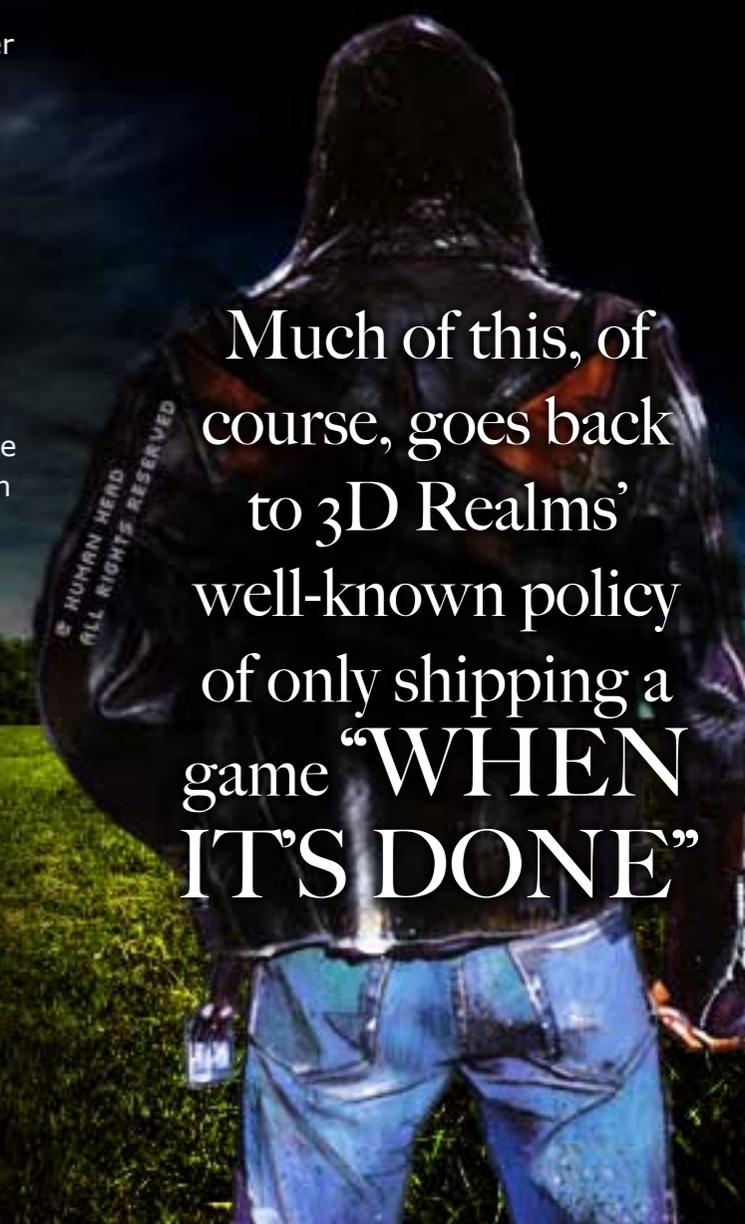
"I am also very loyal to them and decided that there was no way I could leave them in mid-project, especially on

a project as large as *Prey*. I resolved to remain on the *Prey* project until we finished it, and [to] secure our next contract before moving on. I think it's a testament to our respect for one another that we handled the transition as smoothly as I think it could have gone."

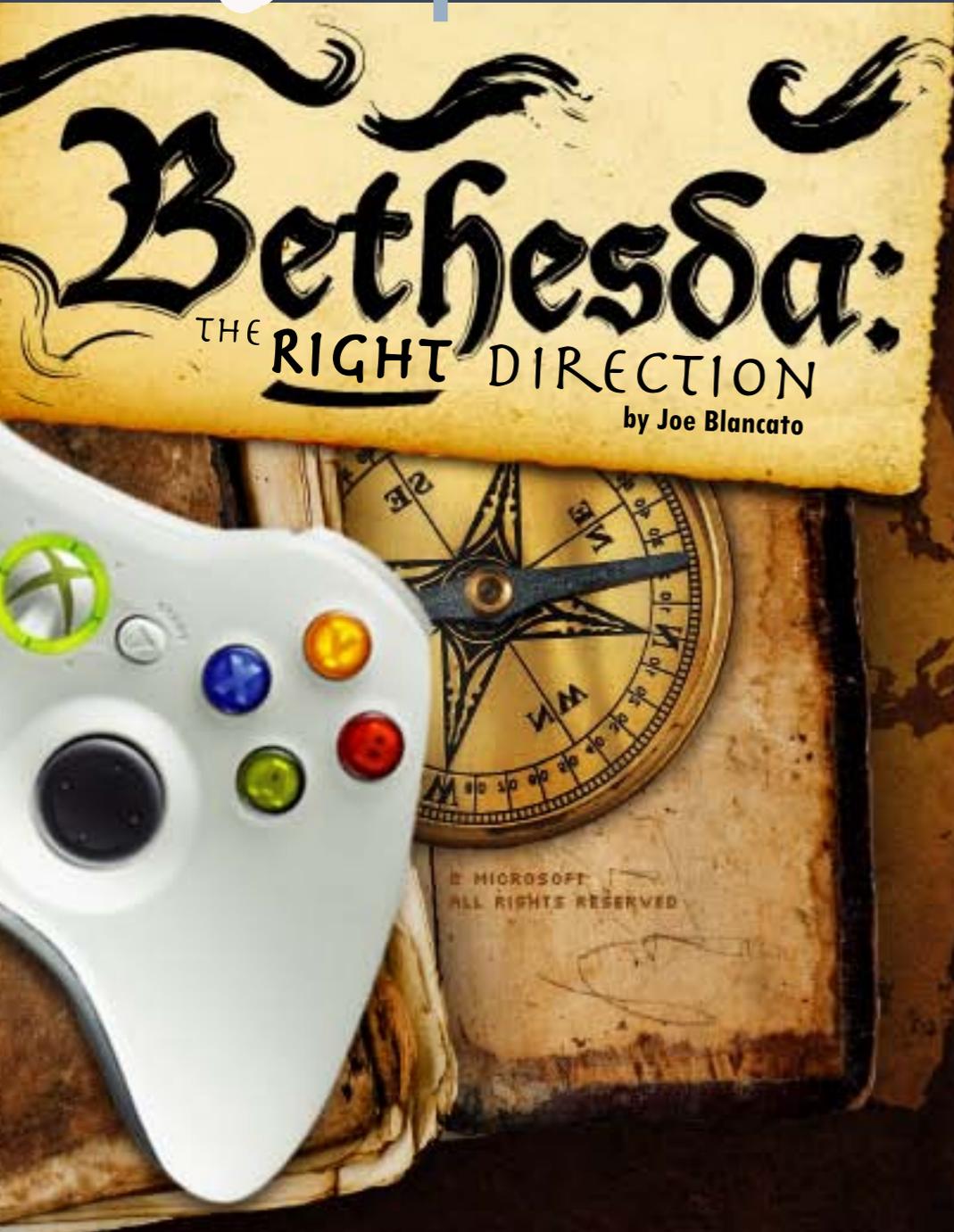
With *Prey* a smash-hit, should that give us hope we might see *Duke Nukem Forever* soon? Miller sounds cautiously optimistic. "The projects are entirely unrelated. *Duke* is another one of these super-ambitious projects, and that ambition has definitely come back to bite us. But I think we have a shock collar on that dog now, and things look like they're well under control."

Insert joke here. [COMMENTS](#)

Matt Forbeck works on tabletop games, computer games, novels, comics, toys, magazine articles for dozens of companies, including Wizards of the Coast, Games Workshop, Mattel, Playmates Toys and IDW Publishing.



Much of this, of course, goes back to 3D Realms' well-known policy of only shipping a game "WHEN IT'S DONE"



Creating the Son of Perdition

Without Chris Weaver, Trip Hawkins wouldn't be the antichrist. Think of Weaver as an antichrist enabler, the man behind the harbinger of sorrow.

It's all rooted in football. Bethesda Softworks, the company Weaver founded in 1986, released their first game, *Gridiron*, in the same year. *Gridiron* was the first "modern" sports game: Where previous games relied on statistics to determine the outcome of plays on the field, Bethesda based their game in real-world physics, meaning the ball and the players interacted with each other and affected their environment, rather than just acting out a deterministic drama on a pixelated field. And Hawkins took notice.

"Electronic Arts was so impressed with *Gridiron*," Weaver told me, "that they hired us to develop the first *John Madden Football*. I like to think a piece of *Gridiron* still lives in JMF even today." The *Madden* series has enjoyed stratospheric success and is one of the strongest legs on which EA stands. Without Bethesda's physics-based approach, *Madden* may have instead gone the way of *John Elway's Quarterback*. It's hard to fathom where Electronic Arts

would be, but Hawkins probably wouldn't be known as The Deceiver.

But, even in 1986, Weaver was used to having good ideas. Before founding Bethesda, Weaver spent his time at MIT working on "speech parsers, graphic interface and synthesized worlds - what people now call virtual reality. In 2007 this may sound familiar to what some cutting edge people are doing, but this was the 1970s, so it was bleeding edge stuff." From there, he went onto news broadcast directing at both NBC and ABC, and he eventually found his way to Washington as the chief engineer to the House Subcommittee on Communications. Then, after another stint in VR, he founded Media Technologies, Bethesda's parent company until 2002. He finally created Bethesda to see if the PC market was a viable place to develop games.

After an initial few years of rule by committee, Weaver decided "Bethesda had to follow a single person's vision. So, for 18 years, from 1981 through 1999, all the money that was invested in the company was my own. It allowed us the freedom to do what we wanted and to become a boutique house that kept

rewriting rules and inventing new things." New things, like making a physics engine that would go on to make EA, well, EA.

Since *Gridiron*, Bethesda's gone on to create over 50 games, the majority of which were published in-house. But what's made them a household name is *The Elder Scrolls* series, which got its start way back in 1994.

The Blood with the Most Power

When Weaver set out to design *Arena*, the first *The Elder Scrolls* installment, in 1992, Bethesda had been primarily working the sports game angle: In the six years since *Gridiron* debuted, six of the 10 games they developed were sports sims, and the other four were adaptations from other media. And throughout the company's life, *TES* has been their only ongoing in-house, non-sports or original franchise. If Weaver had a baby, *Arena* was it, and it showed.

The game was a wild success, despite harsh reviews, and it wasn't long before Bethesda was on the grow. Enter: Todd Howard, Executive Producer on *Oblivion* and *Fallout 3*.

"My first assignments were testing the CD-ROM version of *Arena*, and producing *NCAA Basketball: Road to the Final Four 2*, a game that was being developed externally and had been left for dead." Howard quickly made his way up the corporate ladder, and was a producer/designer on the third game he worked on, called *Terminator: Future Shock*. He also did some work on the second full installment to *The Elder Scrolls* series, *Daggerfall*.

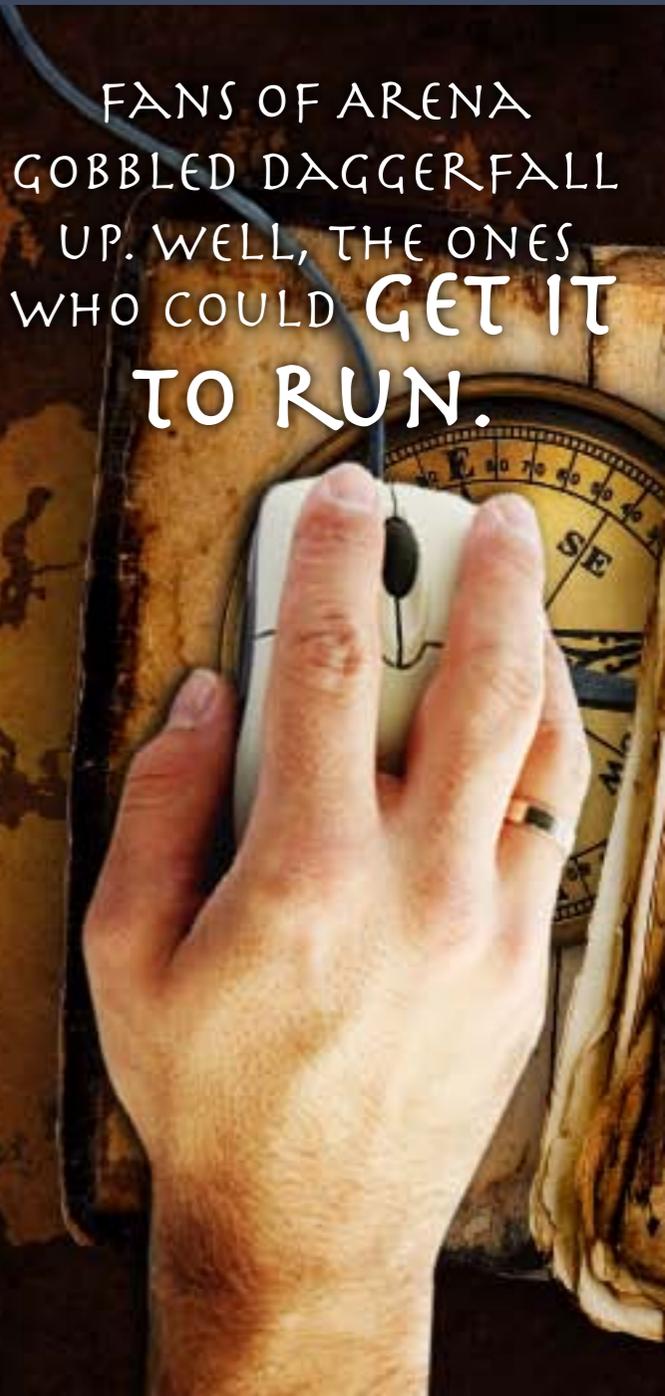
Of the four games in the series, *Daggerfall* (1996) was by far the most ambitious. They took the notion of "open-ended" to an extreme; the landmass was twice the size of Great Britain and contained over 15,000 towns with a total population of 750,000. Fans of *Arena* gobbled *Daggerfall* up. Well, the ones who could get it to run. *Daggerfall's* fatal flaws were in the details. Notoriously buggy, some people weren't able to get the game to even load on their computers, and despite commercial success, the game still bears the mark of bad code.

In '97 and '98, Bethesda released two *TES* expansions based on *Daggerfall's* code, neither of which enjoyed the success of *Daggerfall* and *Arena*. Both

games were smaller than *Daggerfall*, and once-bitten players more than likely didn't help the expansions' case. The downturn in sales wasn't limited just to *The Elder Scrolls* franchise, and the company flirted with bankruptcy as a result. I asked Howard if he was ever worried. "Oh, sure. Over my 13 years here, that's a long time, you're going to have bumps. The years immediately following *Daggerfall* were probably the worst. We made some bad decisions and some bad games."

In 1999, ZeniMax, a media/videogame holding company founded by Chris Weaver and Robert Altman, acquired Media Technology (founded by Weaver), which owned Bethesda. The new company, helmed by Weaver and Altman, was a who's who list of entertainment moguls. Robert Trump (of Trump Management) and Harry Sloan (MGM) are on the board, and the company is advised by Jon Feltheimer (Lion's Gate Entertainment), among others. If Bethesda was drowning, ZeniMax was a million-dollar lifesaver.

The buyout got Microsoft's attention, and the third chapter in *The Elder Scrolls* story, *Morrowind*, was slated as dual

A hand holding a computer mouse is positioned over a map and a compass. The map is a parchment-style map with various geographical features and a compass rose. The hand is wearing a ring on the ring finger. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a map or a book cover.

FANS OF ARENA
GOBBLED DAGGERFALL
UP. WELL, THE ONES
WHO COULD GET IT
TO RUN.

the Escapist



IN ALTMAN'S AGREEMENT, WEAVER FOUND DISCREPANCIES FROM HIS OWN; WEAVER,

release on the PC and Microsoft's new console, the Xbox. It sold 4 million copies and along with Halo made the Xbox a viable alternative to the PS2.

Morrowind, like *Daggerfall*, engendered two expansions, *Bloodmoon* and *Tribunal*, but this time they sold wildly, catapulting Bethesda to premier status and allowing them to focus more intently on their own properties. Fans, and Microsoft, were interested in another sequel immediately after *Morrowind's* release, but Howard was able to leverage the company's newfound status to decide when and how the next game would be released.

Howard and Bethesda set to work on the fourth installment, *Oblivion*, immediately.

Let Him that Hath Understanding ...

As Howard began work on *Oblivion* in 2002, Weaver found himself embattled against his business partners at ZeniMax. According to a legal opinion based on the case, Weaver filed a lawsuit against the company, alleging he was "constructively terminated" (meaning he like other industry luminaries, was being ousted by his new business partners after giving them access to his brand) and was owed \$1.2 million in severance pay when ZeniMax didn't renew his employment contract.

In 2001, the company closed the research and development branch, which Weaver, as the CTO, would have been heading up. After that, the company tried to restrict him from teaching at MIT, something he believed his employment agreement provided for. When he looked up his agreement, he also found the agreements of Robert Altman (functioning as the company's CEO) and Ernest Del (ZeniMax's President). In Altman's agreement, Weaver found discrepancies from his own; Weaver, in court, said Altman's agreement had "lots of perks," all of which were approved by Del.

After discovering this, Weaver used his access to the company's computers to go through emails of the other employees, looking for more information, which presumably led him to file suit against ZeniMax. When his actions came to light in a discovery hearing, the case was thrown out of court. As of right now, Weaver is engaged in another suit against the company and declined to comment on the specifics of either suit. Robert Altman remarked after the first case, "Bethesda Softworks was a financially bankrupt business which ZeniMax Media acquired, recapitalized and turned around. I regret that [Weaver] is unhappy."

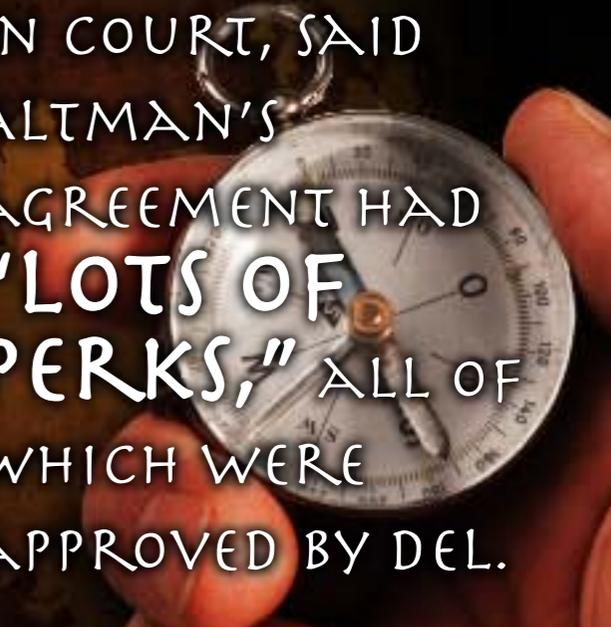
Weaver is still a 33 percent stockholder in ZeniMax, but the last Bethesda game he was credited on was *Morrowind*.

Meanwhile, Howard was conceptualizing *Oblivion* and said he wasn't affected by the legal proceedings going on in the parent company. "That's the whole corporate side that I fortunately don't have to deal with," he said. "I just focus on the games." And as *Oblivion's* Executive Producer and the one responsible for setting the franchise's course on next-gen console technology, he'd take Bethesda to even greater success.

An Excellent Day for an Exorcism

Shooting for next-gen made perfect sense for the company. First, it gave them extra development time: After *Morrowind's* numerous delays, four years of shop time all but guaranteed a punctual launch sometime around the Xbox 360's debut. (Ultimately, it didn't – *Oblivion* launched March 20, 2006; the 360 launched November 22, 2005.) Second, it let Howard focus on creating a true sequel as opposed to just releasing a \$60 engine upgrade.

"You can't repeat yourself," he said. "I think it's a common trap when working on a sequel to just add some new features



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and content, and keep doing that. I think that's a good way to drive your games into the ground. You start drifting from what made the game special in the first place. So with *The Elder Scrolls*, I'm careful to not repeat what we've done before, and to really focus on trying to recapture again what made the games exciting in the first place.

"A good exercise is to read old game reviews, because you get a much better sense of what made an old game tick, without being distracted by its aging. I could read you an old *Arena* review and you'd be hard-pressed to tell which of our games it was describing."

His approach worked. *Oblivion* was the killer app that made the 360 a must-buy in its infancy, both because the game showed off how powerful the console was and because Howard and crew were able to re-imagine a franchise that now resides in that special corner of the gamer heart reserved for names like *Zelda* and *Final Fantasy*. Financially, *Oblivion* repeated *Morrowind's* success, and as of January 2007 has already sold 3 million copies worldwide, and a full-scale expansion is due out in the second quarter of '07.

They're also cleaning up in the micropayment arena. Bethesda was one of the first large companies to embrace the notion of providing additional content for small, one-time fees. But that road started out incredibly bumpy. The first content package they made available to the public was a set of horse armor at a \$2.50 price point. The armor didn't provide any change to gameplay; it was merely an aesthetic addition intended to spice up a small part of the game. But many players vocally objected to both the content and the price, creating a firestorm on blogs and message boards. Since then, however, Bethesda has been releasing more gameplay-heavy content, which has sold incredibly well.

I asked Howard what he thought about the criticism, and why Bethesda stuck to the micropayment philosophy after getting tarred and feathered by the gaming community the first time. "That's what happens when you're the first to try something," he said. "We certainly took it on the chin for that in the press, but people are still buying that horse armor! I'm talking hundreds of thousands of people. But it was obvious to us that it was too expensive, so I'm happy we adjusted fast and got some

better content out at better prices. I think we've found a good balance now. With things like *Mehrune's Razor* and *Knights of the Nine* [both downloadable quests], we've found that people really don't mind paying the money, because it's really not a lot of money, they just want something cool, no matter the cost, and well, armoring your horse just ain't that cool."

Second Coming

In addition to extending the franchise he inherited from Weaver, Howard and Bethesda are taking on another franchise, one with more baggage than a five-time divorcee: *Fallout*.

Originally created by Tim Cain, Leonard Boyarsky and Jason Anderson of Interplay, *Fallout* is an open-ended, comedic game set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. You're sent out of your bomb shelter by your community to find clean water. Once the shelter's giant lead doors slam shut behind you, the grim world of barter towns, bandits, PIPBoy 2000 and radioactive scorpions invite you into any number of adventures.

Praised by fans for its dry-as-a-bone, dark-as-night humor and the huge scope

the Escapist

of the world, *Fallout* has been on a nigh-Biblical journey. The original game was the only one to have its creators' names on it, and each progressive version, from *Fallout 2* to *Brotherhood of Steel*, has gotten progressively worse. Cain, Boyarsky and Anderson couldn't get the rights to the franchise from Interplay, and their work on a spiritual successor was cut short when their new company, Troika, went bankrupt. But Bethesda, with their deep pockets and street cred to match, was able to capitalize on Interplay's financial trouble in 2004 and acquired the *Fallout* license.

But even though Bethesda has the chops to make an open-ended RPG dripping with carve-your-own-path potential, history has proven that it's not easy capturing *Fallout's* humor and charm. Howard, a guy who's done a good job picking up on *The Elder Scrolls'* nuances, isn't too worried.

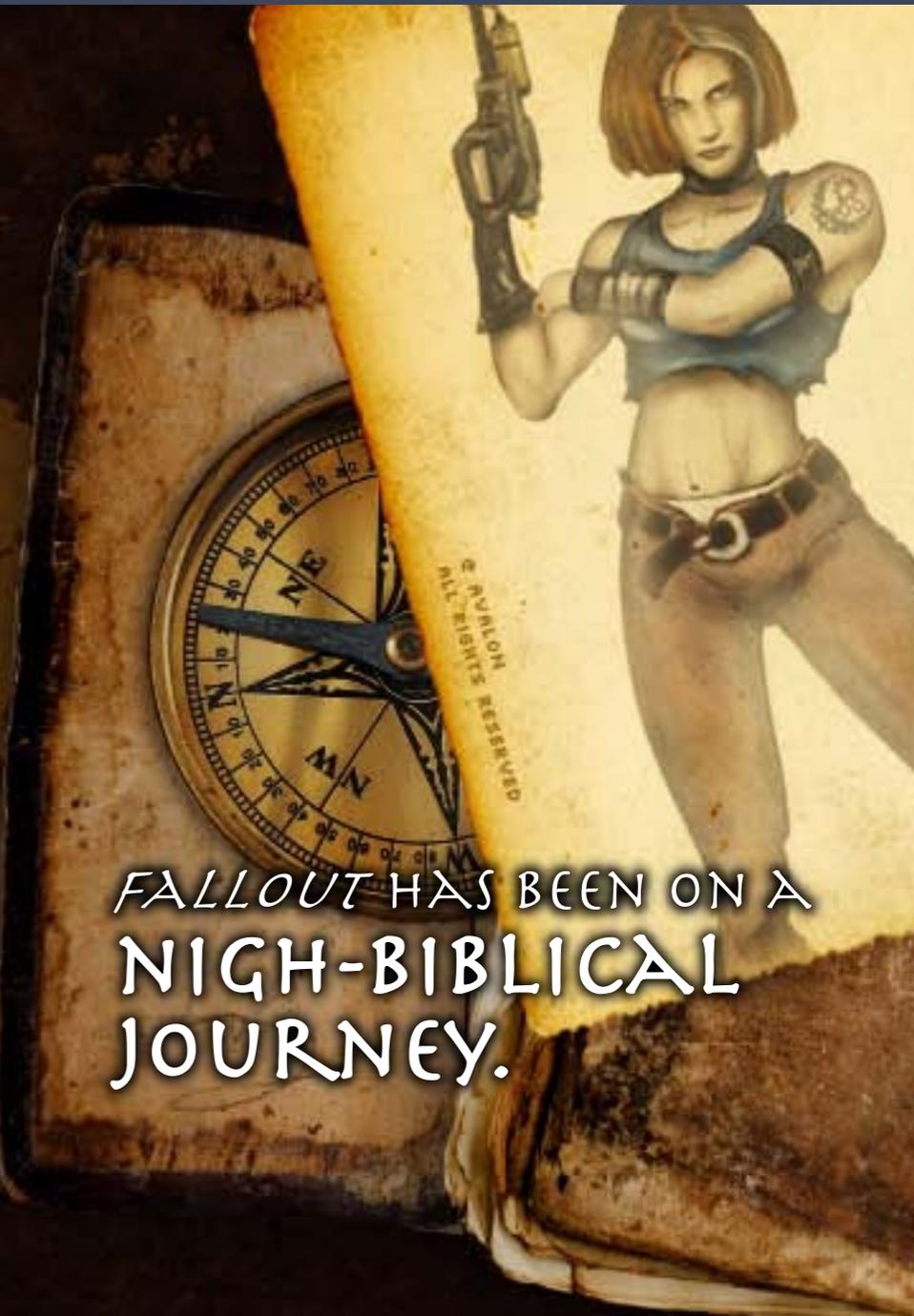
"Like I was talking about before, with sequels, you have to define the experience the first one had and stay true to it," he said. "I think the first *Fallout's* tone is brilliant, but then they start to drift in the sequel and subsequent games. When it comes to humor, I'm very anti

'jokes' in games. Most designers try too hard to tell a joke, and it just doesn't work. I think good humor for *Fallout* is dry, almost satirical. Like getting your leg blown off, blood starts spraying all over the place and you get the little [PIPBoy] interface image giving you the thumbs up – I find that funny. Horrible situations juxtaposed against cartoon mascots. But that's just me.

"We're headed in the right direction. I want us to be seen as the developers that keep that old school game experience at heart, but keeps pushing it forward, that tries new things. If you see 'Bethesda Game Studios' on the box, you know there are some crazy ideas in there. We won't always get it right, but we'll always keep trying."

Sounds like he's got it. And Bethesda, from their auspicious beginnings as the purveyors of the Son of the Morning Star to their franchise built on the backs of sports games, gets it, too. [COMMENTS](#)

Joe Blancato is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He quotes Wayne's World and Dr. Strangelove more often than what can be considered normal.

A collage of Fallout-themed items. On the left, a portion of a brown, textured map is visible. In the center, a circular compass with a blue needle and gold markings is shown. To the right, a rolled-up yellow scroll is partially unrolled, showing a character illustration of a female Vault-Tec engineer in a blue and black outfit, holding a pistol. The background is a dark, textured surface.

FALLOUT HAS BEEN ON A
NIGH-BIBLICAL
JOURNEY.



FREE FALL!

Running with
Armadillos

by Russ Pitts

"If I have seen further [than certain other men] it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants." - Sir Isaac Newton

I'm sweating profusely, concentrating intently and swearing under my breath. I've tried (and failed) nearly half a dozen times to move the orange armadillo from one end of the screen to another, and after nearly a half hour I still can't walk away. I'm hooked. I have to get that damn armadillo home, and although the physics of the thing are as confounding to me as walking on water, every slight adjustment, every tweak of my machine brings me slightly closer to success, and I can see the path. I know I'm close.

The premise of *Armadillo Run* is simple: One must construct, using a small number of raw materials, a means of conveying an armadillo-shaped ball from one point to another. The challenge, however, is in building a structure that will not only withstand the forces exerted on it, but will also meet the rather strict budget requirements. Often, the solution is slightly more complex than it would at first appear, but that's exactly what makes it so much fun - and frustrating.

I've constructed bridges, catapults, elevators and gravity slides, yet none of my contraptions are getting the job done under the budget allotted. And in spite of my curses, the damned armadillo refuses to break the laws of physics. There's no cheating; either you build a device that will stand the test of the armadillo's run, or you don't. But even failure is fun, useful. It's possible, through trial and error, to stumble on elegant solutions you would never have thought of otherwise, and since it's a game, nobody gets killed in the process. My only real problem with the game is why the hell anyone would choose an armadillo as a protagonist.

"The simple answer," says Peter Stock, the designer of *Armadillo Run*, "is that the game design required the player to transport a ball and I wanted to have an animal theme to make it a bit more interesting. The only spherical animals I know of are armadillos and woodlice. I chose an armadillo because they seem a bit easier to relate to. Some girls I went to school with also had a thing for armadillos. Apparently they are the only mammals apart from humans to suffer from leprosy."



In spite of MY CURSES,

To quote *Bull Durham*'s Joe Riggins, baseball is "a simple game; you throw the ball, you catch the ball, you hit the ball." Anybody can do it; few people are good at it. The same is true with game design, or, more specifically, designing a game as relatively simple as *Armadillo Run*. Everyone, on some level, knows the laws of physics, and everyone knows what's fun and what isn't. Few, however, can take the two ideas and make a great game out of them. Fewer still can do this alone, out of their house, and distribute the game, via shareware, over the internet. Peter Stock is among them. Seemingly the last of the "bedroom developers," Stock took an idea, made it

into a game, and sold thousands of copies. Just like that. Throwing, catching, hitting.

"My wife got a job that required her to relocate and I fancied a change," Peter told *The Escapist*, "so I decided to try out making games instead of getting another 'normal' job. I had a few ideas about what sort of thing I wanted to do and I initially set aside six months to see what happened before reverting back to salaried employment if it didn't work out." A true Cinderella story, Peter had no previous game design experience, save working on a *Tetris* port. What he did have was an idea, a dream if you will, and a little computer programming experience.

"I studied computer science at university," he says, "and I've worked as a programmer, but not in the games industry. I've worked on a variety of things, from fairly low-level search algorithms to 3-D modeling/rendering and database design/admin. Most of it taught me to have a clear, simple design, but the more immediately games-relevant parts of coding were the maths and techniques for optimization. *Armadillo Run* is my first proper game."

Principia Mathematica

The screen is almost blank. The armadillo, his cheerfully blinking eye cast downward, rests frozen at the top of the screen. At the very bottom, hundreds of relative feet down, is the target. Newton's Theory of Universal Gravitation suggests that the armadillo will rapidly descend, and without something to catch him, or break his fall, he will plummet off the bottom edge of the screen, and I will lose. Time to make a basket, then. A really big basket. I use metal rods and a big, flat sheet of rubber. Part of the structure implodes on impact, but it holds. I win. Thanks, Newton.

"The rules of Newtonian physics are pretty simple," Peter told *The Escapist*, "yet they give rise to many complexities (and since most people are already familiar with them, there's less to learn before playing the game).

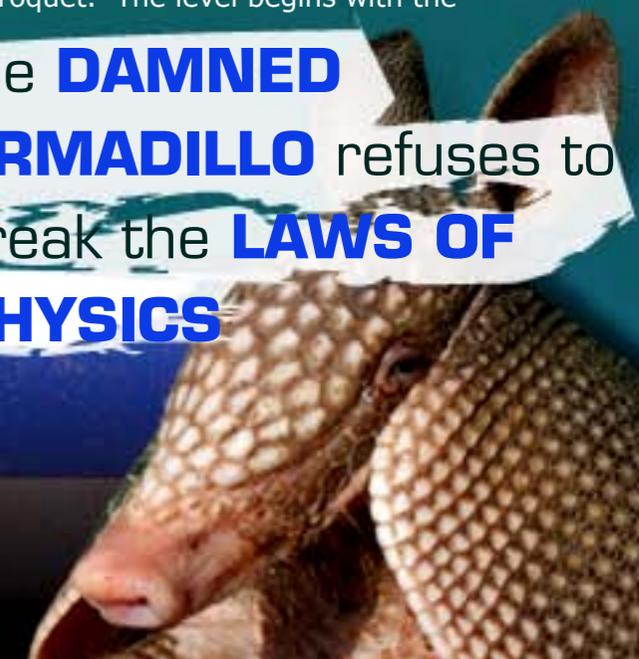
"Many good games have this trait, but I think it's tricky to design a set of simple, abstract rules that exhibit interesting complexity in gameplay. In this respect, the rules of physics are the gameplay rules, so I can't really take the credit for designing them."

What he can take credit for is using the laws to make a great game.

"I've had a few enquiries from some schools about it," says Stock, "and I've received some positive feedback from them. I didn't design it with [education] in mind, but it does seem to have some use as a teaching tool. I'm not sure if it's used to teach physics or not, but I think *Armadillo Run* (like many other games) mostly teaches people problem solving and abstract reasoning."

Scientific Method

Problem solving skills are exactly what I'll need to develop to solve Level 22, "Croquet." The level begins with the



the **DAMNED ARMADILLO** refuses to break the **LAWS OF PHYSICS**

the Escapist

armadillo at the right edge of the screen, on one side of a long ramp. The target is at the other end. The ramp is level - no momentum. In the middle of the ramp, a few feet in the air, is a large anvil held stationary by the force exerted by a gigantic rocket. The rocket is on a timer; it will explode in a few seconds, and if the armadillo isn't on the other side, it will be blocked, or worse, crushed. Time to make a mallet. And another. And another.

For a level with an obvious (self explanatory, really) solution, it's easily one of the hardest in the game. Making a mallet with enough angular momentum to push the armadillo target-ward is easy. Doing so with the limited budget allotted is nearly impossible. My solution: five sheets of steel formed into a wedge push the armadillo down the ramp, just underneath the anvil as the rocket explodes. The armadillo is trapped at first, but as the anvil falls, it falls behind him, pushing him the rest of the way into the target. It took me about three dozen tries, methodically testing and recording and adjusting, but I made it. Thanks, Galileo.

"I [tried] to make the levels fairly open-ended," says Peter Stock, "but knew it

needed a purpose - a focus that would transform it from a toy to a game. Each level needs pass/fail/score criteria, and I think restricting the budget works well, since it allows a lot of freedom in the choice of design. I had some people comment that I should restrict the usage of each material, but I felt that would reduce player choices too much. From the solutions I've seen, I'm glad I didn't do this - there are many interesting approaches I had never imagined that I would have inadvertently blocked had I done so."

The materials in question are actually quite limited, and, of course, interesting. One can choose from metal sheets, bars, rubber, elastic, rope, cloth and (my favorite) rockets, when constructing an Armadillo ambulation apparatus, and each material has defined tolerances and costs, making a combination of all of the above the best solution. Need to build a straight, flat bridge between points? Some sort of metal structure supported by struts or suspended by ropes is the answer. Need to move the armadillo vertically up or down? Well, then, that's when things get interesting.

"The rockets were included to spice things up a bit by introducing a source of energy," says Peter. "Rockets are pretty fun to play around with, but I designed the levels so that rockets were only to be used on a few of them, otherwise there would be less incentive for players to use different approaches. I tried to make the pricing reflect their usefulness, so that different solutions were possible using a similar budget.

"Apart from the rockets, the materials represent each of the possible combinations of three properties (edge/center placement, flexibility and elasticity), so as with the armadillo, it was a case of finding suitable real-world materials to match those required by the game design."

On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres

The starting screen is familiar: My little armadillo (I've named him Bob) is poised at the top edge of the screen, ready to plummet toward the target below. The only problem is that he and the target are not opposite each other; the target is about 20 feet to his right. When he falls, he will miss it - unless he's nudged. Or slung. I construct a sling out of rope and



cloth. The armadillo falls, he hits the sling, which rotates, spinning him out at just the right angle, just the right speed and into the waiting basket. Gentle as a kiss on the cheek. I've just constructed an homage to Copernicus.

Part of what makes *Armadillo Run* so much fun to play is the realistic way in which the materials act: metal sheets provide a rigid surface, add strength and weight; rubber bounces, of course, but also adds a subtle flexibility to structures; and cloth, as I've just observed, conforms to whatever it covers or contains, making it perfect for slings, pulley systems or to catch a falling object. I ask Peter Stock if he spent much time playing around with actual materials to get the feel of his in-game objects just-so.

"Well, I didn't do any experiments with real armadillos!" he replies. "It was mostly a case of implementing some low-level physics laws and assigning realistic values to the various constants. As with the design of many games, I didn't rigidly stick to reality in some places - sometimes for efficiency of implementation and sometimes to improve the gameplay.

"Although the behavior looks realistic, the gravity is too low - or more accurately, the scale of the objects is far too large (the armadillo is something like the equivalent of 1 m in diameter). I've read that this is a common technique used in games, to make them 'more

Like building a scale model of the solar system to spin at one's leisure, just to see how the planets all move, by playing *Armadillo Run* we get a glimpse into the fun its creator had testing the boundaries of physics, game design and possibility. You can't solve many of the

generations of bright minds from the world over. Stand on the shoulders of giants, as it were. Just like Peter Stock did in making his game.

Elements

Sir Isaac Newton, who theorized that an invisible force (gravity) is what causes apples to fall down (and not up), was aware that those who came before him laid the foundation upon which his Theory of Universal Gravitation could stand. Among them was Johannes Kepler, who was the first to derive the laws of planetary motion (planets orbit the sun in a predictable pattern), yet did so by using observations made by the brilliant astronomer Tycho Brahe, who, in turn, like all astronomers and scientists since, built upon the observations and methods of Galileo Galilee who, for his own part, was building upon theories espoused by Copernicus. One inspired another, who inspired another, who inspired another. And so on, as the commercial says, and so on and so on.

Euclid came before them all. In the third century B.C., Euclid postulated that a single line could be drawn between any two points. Put a penny on your table. Then another one. Now draw a line



by playing *Armadillo Run* we get a glimpse into the fun its creator had testing the **BOUNDARIES OF PHYSICS**, game design and **POSSIBILITY**

realistic'(!). This was done for both gameplay and implementation reasons - I think Hollywood makes us expect slow-motion action, and the physics calculations are easier to handle when objects are going slower."

levels in *Armadillo Run* by putting your armadillo on a sled and attaching as many rockets as will fit on the screen, but you can try that, if you want. You can try anything. But to advance, you have to tap the scientific principles and laws of physics handed down to us by

between them. Simple. You've just proven Euclid's first postulate, but you didn't have to. He already did. Something so simple we now take it for granted was a radical line of thought in Ptolemaic Egypt, just as the fact that the earth was not flat was a radical departure 2,000 years later, and the idea that men could walk on the moon or that cancer could be cured have been departures in our own time. Theories which, we hope, will some day become so well known and accepted as to be taken for granted by future generations, who will quite possibly be traipsing between dimensions on their way to school. On Mars.

Euclid's first postulate can (and has) been re-written as "the shortest distance between two points is a straight line," making it the central tenant of not only geometry, but almost all modern thought. All game design, too. No one knows this better than Peter Stock, a man who stood on the shoulders of Euclid, Newton and everyone who followed in their footsteps to make one of the smartest, most addictive physics-based games ever created. The natural question then is, "What's next for Peter Stock?"

"I had some ideas about making a totally different type of game, but since I have little experience in playing or making the types of games I was imagining, I've postponed those ideas for the moment, and I'm working on another physics-based game. The gameplay will be quite different from *Armadillo Run* - this time I'm going to incorporate some element of user control, and it will be more action-based, although there will still be the construction part of the game which encourages experimentation and refinement of design.

"I'm hoping that some improvements to the physics will enable objects to be simulated in greater detail, allowing players to create robots, which will be used to compete in certain challenges. If this is possible, then I'm imagining a 'virtual Olympics' type game with many different events."

Robots ... yes, we are enthusiastic about this idea. Very, very enthusiastic. From Euclid to Asimov, in two easy steps. From point A to point B. [COMMENTS](#)

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He has written and produced for television, theatre and film, has been

writing on the web since it was invented and claims to have played every console ever made.

ROBOTS ...
yes, we are enthusiastic
about this idea





Strictly speaking, the game didn't come from nowhere, just the closest local equivalent: Penkridge Market. A village sitting halfway between the nowhere Midlands towns of Stafford and Cannock, its sole notable feature was the sprawling Saturday market that grew from its side, like a prolapse of capitalism. Wandering around, trailing parents, it was a joy. Men shouting about meat, glorious meat. Knock off heavy-metal T-shirts (Eddie the Head Ts for a quid, man!). Bargains from the backstreets and backs of Lorries. All manner of media, at knock-down prices and questionable legality.

In its own way, chaos. Which was terribly appropriate.

When the parentals were off looking at something tediously grown-up, brother and I worked out whether we could afford to buy a game. One day, we bought *Chaos*, by Spectrum. Just *Chaos*, as its "The Battle of the Wizards" subtitle was excised on the budget release. This meant we got it for a couple of quid (about \$3 at the time). The price was what clinched the deal, but of the array of budget games, I've no idea what attracted us specifically to *Chaos*. Its

cover art was a couple of shady figures and some manner of hellish wolf – a Dire Wolf, specifically – staring out at us. And, yes, we were suckers for anything which stunk of Orc, but the sloped racks of Penkridge Market was full of that manner of common fantasy. And while *Chaos* remains a great name for a videogame, it wasn't a name trafficked much through the nation's playgrounds. In fact, it wasn't whispered at all. No one had heard of it. Ultimately, we bought it for no reason other than it was Saturday and we wanted a game to play.

It was two quid well spent. We had no idea at the time, but we'd be playing *Chaos*, on and off, for the next 20 years.

We weren't alone. While it didn't have a reputation at the time, one slowly accumulated. By the time seminal videogame magazine *Your Sinclair* closed its doors in 1993, its readers voted it the fifth greatest PC game ever. In 2006, when British multi-format magazine *GamesTM* did a Best Games Ever list, it was the second highest Spectrum game present.

The game managed a posterity which, at the time, few would have guessed at the time was possible by a couple of factors.

First, as the Spectrum press started to fall, they took to cover mounting tapes with videogames. *Chaos* was a relatively early example of it – tellingly, it was the only game on the tape, when later over half a dozen fine Spectrum games would be squeezed on. Its sales success didn't matter. An entire generation of hardcore gamers were given a copy and fell in love.

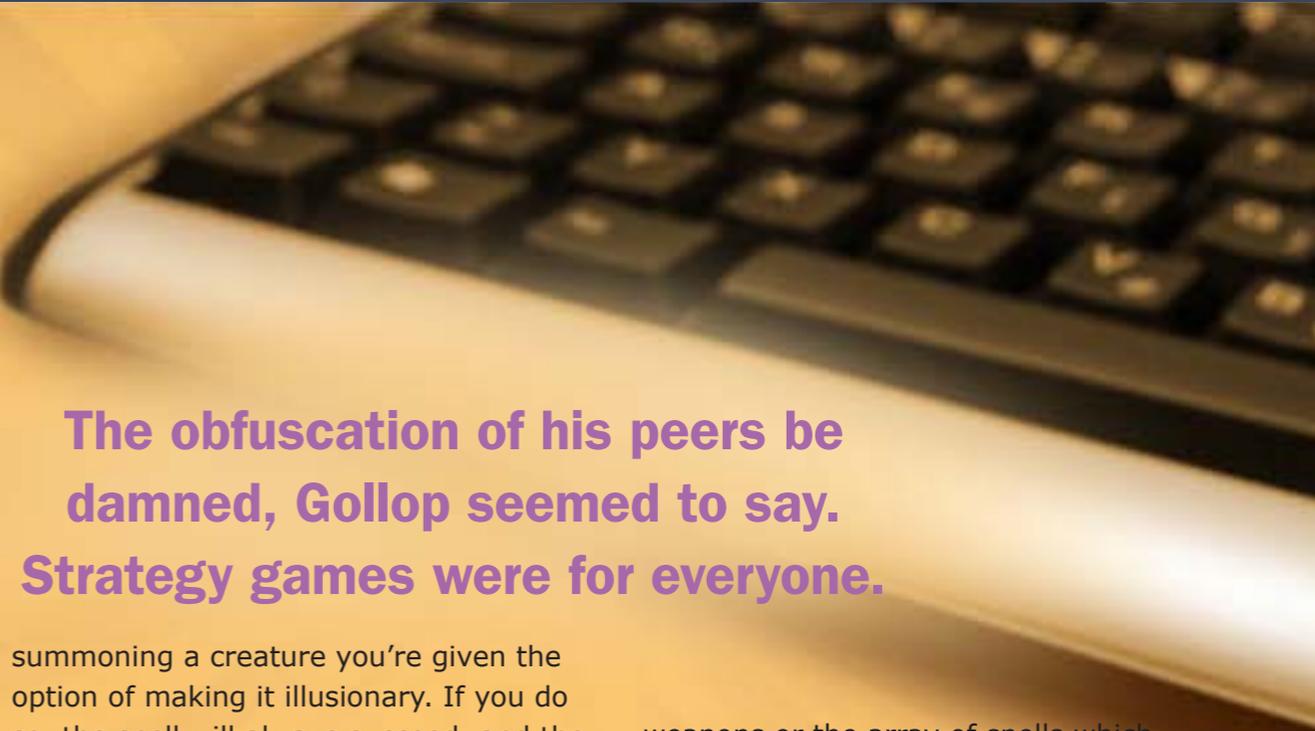
Secondly, *Chaos* gained historic importance in retrospect due to its creator's later work. Julian Gollop's among the British designer/programmers who could be justifiably described as "auteurs." The ideas which went to achieve commercial success in *X-COM* (making turn-based strategy games operate with the intensity and accessibility of an arcade game, without sacrificing intelligence) were first devised for *Chaos* and his other great success of the period, *Rebelstar Raiders*. The obfuscation of his peers be damned, Gollop seemed to say. Strategy games were for everyone.

This democratization of tactics led to *Chaos: The Battle of the Wizards* being about wizards, well, battling.

Two to eight wizards found themselves in a single screen arena, which starts off completely empty. Each wizard is allowed to choose one of their randomly selected spells to cast. Casting it will make it disappear from your arsenal. The majority of these will summon a creature for you, which can then go fight in your name. Then, everyone takes a turn to move all their characters. Then, they go back to choosing spells. Repeat until one wizard stands victorious and the rest have their pixels spread across the screen in a *Defender*-esque blur. That's it.

Wizards battling.

Well, that's not quite it. A few sophistications have to be considered. First, every spell has a chance of success. The harder the spell, the less likely it'll cast correctly. While summoning a Bat can be guaranteed to work, a Golden Dragon only works 10 percent of the time. You can mitigate this in one of two ways. First, every spell is categorized either Lawful or (wait for it) Chaotic. If mostly chaotic spells are cast, the universe becomes more chaotic, increasing the chance of Chaotic spells to work. The same for Lawful. It's terribly metaphysical. Second, when



The obfuscation of his peers be damned, Gollop seemed to say. Strategy games were for everyone.

summoning a creature you're given the option of making it illusionary. If you do so, the spell will always succeed, and the resultant monster will operate exactly like a fleshier sort, except for having the Achilles heels of disappearing embarrassingly when hit with the Disbelieve spell (The one incantation in the game that's perpetually reusable). Anyway, **that's** it.

Wizards battling!

Yeah, there's more to it, but this is stuff around the edges, like undead creatures can only be hurt by their fellow afterlife-shunners, or people with magical

weapons or the array of spells which do things other than summon creatures. The usual thaumatological array of lighting bolts, with a few special spells which, in their low-production value, 8-bit ways, actually manage to be a little bit on the iconic side. The Goopy Blob, which starts as a single pulsating mucousoid **thing** before expanding; anyone in a square it spreads to is engulfed and immobilized, only being freed if friends attack the blob. Easy to do when small, but cheerily suicidal if you've let it expand to fill 80 percent of the playing space, which happens all too often.



That's *Chaos*, then. What makes it special is how those mechanics, when placed together, create something which is my default answer when anyone asks me, What's your favorite game ever? The important thing to realize is that *Chaos* was so far ahead of its time intellectually that no one even noticed, including the people who played it. They were just too busy being entertained.

In terms of technical futurism, *Chaos* had room for eight players in 1985; the same year *Gauntlet* was blowing everyone's minds into tiny pieces by allowing four players to *Need Food*, *Badly*, together. In England, you have trouble cramming more than eight people in any given room, making it the

***Chaos* was turn-based deathmatch, taking the looks of *Robotron* and marrying it to the depth of chess gleefully polluted with the earthy semi-random humanity of poker.**

maximum you'd ever need for a social gathering. Don't have eight friends? Even with four players, nothing as competitively intense arrived in our homes until *Bomberman/Dynablast* (if you're console) or *Doom* (if you're PC). Fundamentally, *Chaos* was turn-based deathmatch, taking the looks of *Robotron* and marrying it to the depth of chess gleefully polluted with the earthy semi-random humanity of poker.

Despite being a turn-based game, that the most natural comparisons are to arcade games is more than posture. Turns are made with, on average, less than 10 keyboard presses, unless you're being particularly perfectionist and examining everyone's statistics, in which case you can expect the room to harry you more than the hurry-up beast in *Bubble Bobble*. All of this means *Chaos* was fast to play. There's room for skill, sure, but it's a minimum effort strategy game. Sit there, planning when best to drop your illusionary Golden Dragon if you wish, trying to second-guess whether anyone will have worked out you're about to do so and selected a *Disbelieve* spell in advance ... or just summon a Pegasus because it's a magicky horsey. It is **welcoming**.

This was the key part of its futurism, foretelling the era of the mid-'90s when the strategy game – suddenly – was the mainstream. The whole of real-time strategy – lest we forget in these days of the genre's middle-age spread, once an entirely radical innovation – rest entirely on the intellectual soil first investigated by Gollop. If you want to see its influence in the modern age, the truest disciple (and Gollop's other '80s games, like *Rebelstar* and the divine *Laser Squad*), is *Advance Wars*. I digress.

Between its vision and the quick, caution-to-the-wind play it accommodated, *Chaos* gained its gaming immortality. It actively invited you to gather as many friends as possible around to have a crack at each other in digital forms, while making a game simple enough so anyone you'd invite could play. And this means that wherever I've found myself in my life, there's been a place for *Chaos*.

When I was a Spectrum devotee, my brother and I played it intensely, with friends or not, with the computer filling in the gaps. When I left the Spectrum behind ... well, I didn't leave the Spectrum behind. It sat beneath the

the Escapist

desk, with *Chaos* perpetually in its drive, ready to be dragged out when Stafford's finest Amiga-gamers fancied a break from *Speedball II* or *Sensible Soccer*. When I left Stafford behind ... well, you never leave Stafford behind, but upon crashing in from a club, *Chaos* found itself loaded up, the keyboard passed from hand, chasing the smokeables. And now, when I don't have a Spectrum, I'll find myself sporadically making a pilgrimage to its online java shrine and going for one last duel.

Nostalgia's the most dangerous of emotions. People doing the retrogaming thing normally leave disillusioned. But *Chaos* is untouched, because its flaws were always visible. It never looks dated, as it looked dated the second it came out. It also has a little arcade-crispness in rejecting modern staples like hit points on its units. Things are either alive or dead, with the survivability decided by their defense, which can't be reduced piecemeal. There's always room for a turnaround. If in a disastrous position, there's always a tiny chance you could be lucky and pull through to, if not a win, at least a draw when the match ticks out. You almost certainly won't, but forlorn hope keeps you

interested as much as the knowledge you could come back with only a fraction of your health (like in *Street Fighter 2*), rather than most strategy games where necessary attrition will necessarily destroy you.

Its youthfulness is also assured by its **real** choice of genre. Action games, especially on the home systems, can age terribly unless the controls manage to be perfectly precise. Going back to a day when low frame rates were acceptable can be jarring. Conversely, a turn-based game suffers no such issues. Literally, *Chaos* is as good to play today as it's ever been. You can come around my house now; I'll boot up an emulator, and we'll sit down and play and you'll be entertained.

Of course, you'll lose. Don't mistake its simplicity for a lack of sophistication.

Since you'd be a newcomer, I may even try some of the more nefarious tactics by exploiting some of the holes in the game's programming. For example, deliberately getting an illusionary creature trapped in a gooey blob, then freeing it for it to become miraculously real. I probably won't, just relying on the

long-practiced ability of knowing when **exactly** to make a creature illusionary or not. Either way, the result will be the same: entertainment, and, in the final stages, an arena that's gone from basic black to a mass of gooey blobs, corpses, clawing shadow-woods and the assorted detritus gaming archeologists will recognize as sign that a game of *Chaos* was once here.

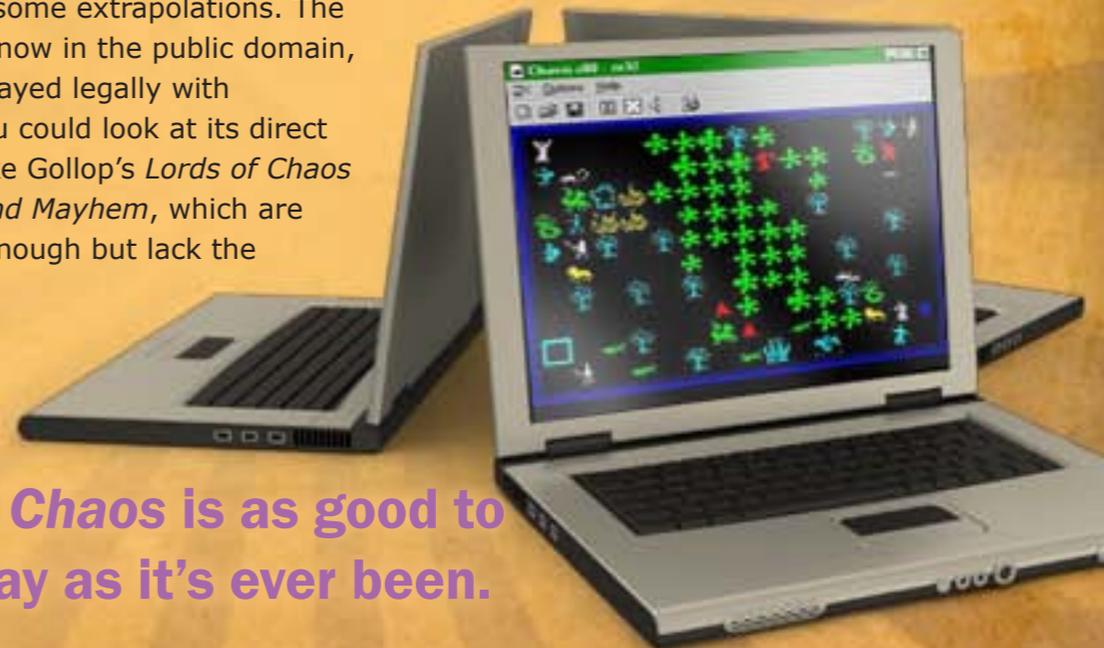
And it will be glorious.

Chaos' trail is easy to follow online, for interested souls. Like most cult games, a small cottage industry exists of people making new versions of *Chaos*, some pixel perfect, some extrapolations. The game itself is now in the public domain, so it can be played legally with emulators. You could look at its direct successors, like Gollop's *Lords of Chaos* and *Magic & Mayhem*, which are entertaining enough but lack the

originator's clarity of purpose. You could even look at the games that are openly inspired by it, like Shiny's *Sacrifice*, which updated the warring-wizard mandate with a big helping of Hieronymus Bosch. You can do anything you want.

Just don't disbelieve *Chaos*. [COMMENTS](#)

Kieron Gillen has been writing about videogames for far too long now. His rock and roll dream is to form an Electro-band with Miss Kittin and SHODAN pairing up on vocals.



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