

the Escapist

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by Russ Pitts

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Frequently, we hear conversation about how much of their lives people inject into games. Parents worry when little Johnny doesn't want to go outside, but would rather stay in by himself and play a game. Family and friends worry when they don't hear from their child/sibling/parent who was last seen wandering the plains of Azeroth. A newspaper gets wind of someone who has made themselves sick - or worse - playing too long at some game.

And while these cases **are** the extreme, they are extreme versions of similar feelings anyone into games has felt. I occasionally worry about myself when my workday is too frequently punctuated with thoughts pondering new ingredient combinations for *Dragon Quest's* Alchemy Pot. I'm sure you have your own version. What's the common theme here? That we are obsessing, thinking, pondering over the things **we can do** in the game world to progress, to enjoy, to learn. There is no other type of entertainment that allows so much

control over our experience – is it any wonder that people become so involved?

Because the human input into the entertainment experience is the novel half of games' fun equation, it often garners the most attention. The part where games reach out and touch our lives is so often ignored. Perhaps it's that the line between what we do in games and what games share with us is so vague. But those things are present ... what are they?

It is this question that has brought up today's issue of *The Escapist*: How do games affect our real lives? From bringing us into a loving relationship after years of no luck in the real world, to helping us learn to survive and use military equipment, games have become important, not just to our entertainment needs, but throughout our daily lives. Find out more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*, "Through the Looking Glass."

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Searching for Gunpei Yokoi" from *The Escapist*

Forum: Absolutely brilliant article. Such a well written homage to an oft-unheralded figure in the gaming world. Few people realize who this man was



and the impact of his contributions, overshadowed by the later failure of the Virtual Boy, against the massive success of his earlier works and inventions.

Shigeru Miyamoto always got the credit because his games sold more and he made the game that became the company mascot (and admittedly, is responsible for several gaming mega-franchises), but one has to wonder just how much he gleaned from Yokoi's experience and tutelage. If Miyamoto hadn't studied under Yokoi, would Mario or Zelda as we know them even exist?

- armitage

In response to "Searching for Gunpei Yokoi" from *The Escapist*

Forum: The problem of "condensing" information about the Japanese creators of early video games is widespread in videogame writing. It is monumentally easier to browse through the available English sources of information on people like Yokoi and compile them for an article than to actually add something new to the story of their lives.

I understand that there is an exceedingly daunting language barrier, but if you

really want to get to know people like Yokoi, then it is possible to do an interview. You don't even have to go to Japan, people there have phones and email. To say "The only hard proof we have that Gunpei Yokoi graced this mortal soil is a few faded black and white photographs" is just wrong, and a bit insensitive. What about his family? What about his co-workers? I'm sure Shigeru Miyamoto has some ripping good yarns about him, why not ask? The history of early Japanese videogames is certainly shrouded in mystery--but videogame writers often just accept this, and, even more often, present it as some sort of exaggerated conundrum for dramatic effect.

I'd also like to point out that this sort of article seems to reveal an uncomfortable trend in videogame journalism (a double standard?), whereby American and European videogame authors (even those mysterious programmers of the golden-era) get interviewed and profiled, but Japanese authors receive a nostalgic and mysterious homage. Just look at the other articles in this month's issue.

-S. Claiborn

In response to "The Indie Guru" from The Escapist Forum: I enjoyed the article and finding out about Steve Pavlina's site.

As for your endeavour to Malaysia, this Malaysian reader wishes you well and frankly speaking, it's not the desert that people make it out to be. Networking is easy here once you're here and the community as a whole is a small group altogether. And for the person who said that there may be problems in communication, there's more imported sitcoms than there are local sitcoms in the local language.

-Myremi

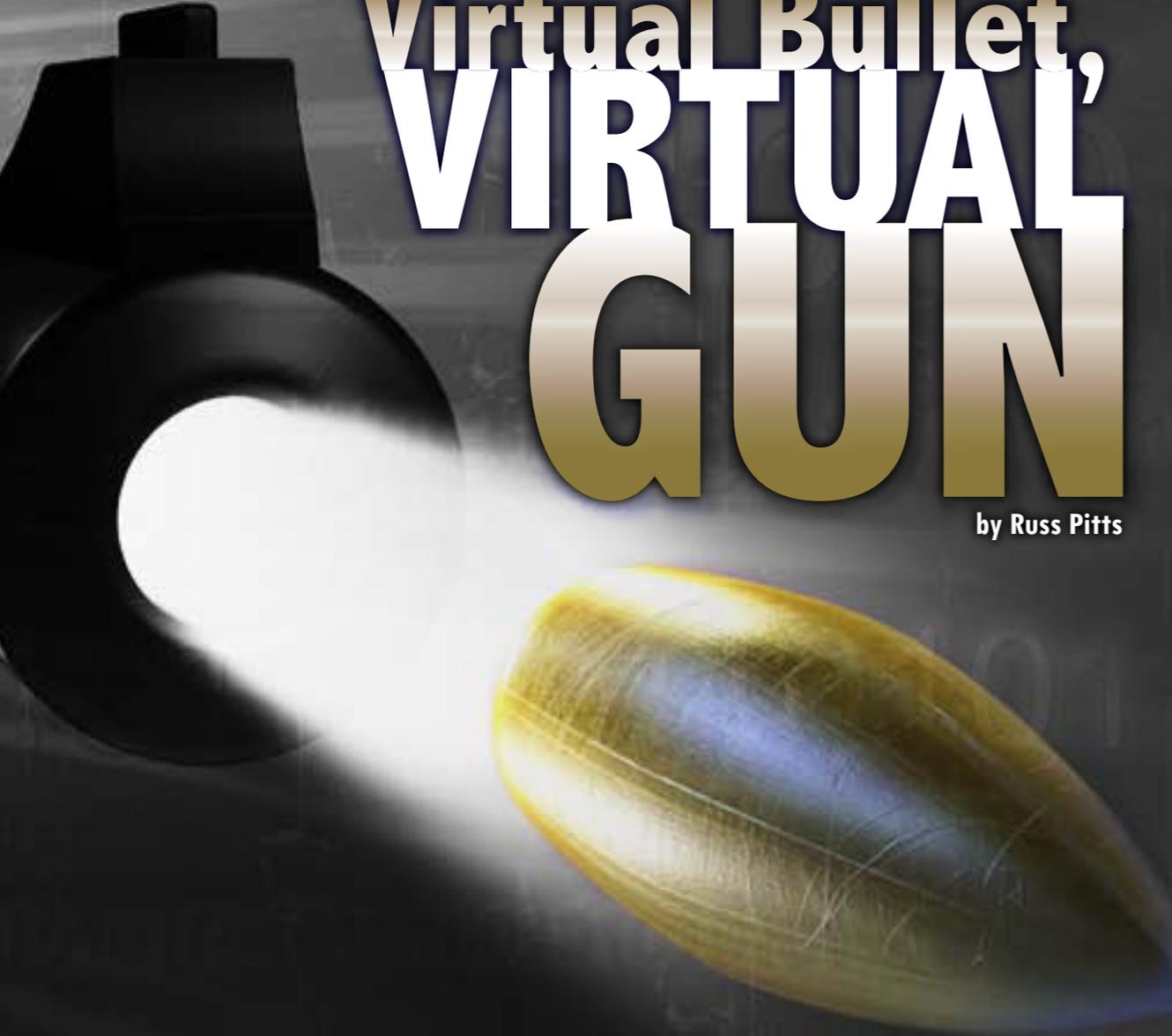
In response to 'A Natural Born Inventor' from The Escapist Forum: Who are we to argue with the father of video gaming?

- Ramification

The children of video gaming, of course.

- Meophist





Virtual Bullet, VIRTUAL GUN

by Russ Pitts

As you maneuver your tank across the field of battle, one eye on the threat indicators, one eye on the horizon, you feel an icy sliver of fear deep in your gut. You know this isn't real war, you know your enemy is virtual, but the tension feels the same. The threat, real. Although the enemy is simulated, he's not dumb, and it will take every ounce of your skill to search him out and destroy him before he does the same to you.

Your objective: Maneuver your tank from Point A to Point B and destroy him. Your reward: survival. It may sound like just another mission in just another game, but this is no game. You are a member of the California National Guard, and this is JTEP.

As your tank eases over the next hill, you see him; hull down a quarter mile away, waiting for you. The next few seconds feel like they're happening in slow motion. You see the flash a half-second before you hear the shot. You don't see the projectile, but a second later you feel it. Alarms go off, the lights dim and the sound of the explosion almost ruins your new speakers. You're dead. The game is over. And as you climb out of your tank, your nose stinging from the acrid smell of diesel

fuel, motor oil and propellant, you can't wait to do it again.

JTEP (Joint Training Experimentation Program) was created for the California National Guard by SRI International, and since 2003 has been used in a variety of live exercises using existing military vehicles retrofitted with computer simulation equipment, GPS transceivers, speakers and flashing lights. The goal, according to JTEP Program Manager John Shockley, is to "enhance the overall guard training experience and training value. [These] are real vehicles, they're doing real maneuvering, they're doing real radio communications, all that. We just simulate the bullet."

Shall We Play a Game?

The idea of learning to fight war by playing soldier is not a new one. The first wargames (that we know of) were conducted in the 19th century, to better understand tactics and strategy, and similar wargames are being played by soldiers the world over. The idea of learning war by playing a computer game is also not a very new idea, although the depth and breadth of simulations have increased exponentially

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in recent years, following the production of even faster, better computers.

The concept of all-out war waged via computer terminals entered the public consciousness in the mid-'80s via Orson Scott Card's stunning science fiction novel, *Ender's Game*, in which a group of young boys are trained in war, using a type of virtual reality simulator. Needless to say, when Card wrote his novel, the idea of training boys to fight war may not have seemed far-fetched, but the technology did. Computers at that time were barely capable of drawing pictures, and military simulators often filled entire rooms and provided little more stimulation than was to be had from a tilt-a-whirl.

Much closer to home (and in the same genre) was the popular film *The Last Starfighter*, in which a young man living in a trailer park learns to pilot a spaceship by playing a videogame. As it turns out, the game is actually a simulator, and by playing it he earns the golden ticket to ride the real thing for free and save the galaxy. "Greetings, Starfighter. You have been recruited by the Star League," the machine intones, as a spaceship lands behind him, and he is whisked away to the far reaches of

space to become a warrior. Perhaps, as the inverse of *Ender's Game*, the idea of becoming a fighter pilot in space seemed a touch far-fetched, but using a videogame as a flight simulator? Well, we were already there. Or at least the military was. Albeit in tilt-a-whirl style.

Aside from being crude, large and fairly basic, military-grade simulators in the late 20th century were also exorbitantly expensive. Which, considering the military's annual budget, may not seem like much of a problem, but when the cost of running a simulator exceeds the cost of burning a jet engine for a few hours, why not just go up? Simulators, therefore, have most often been relegated for use simulating high-risk tasks (such as space flight) or for when hands-on training is neither possible nor desirable. Like for practicing nuclear bombing runs over Moscow.

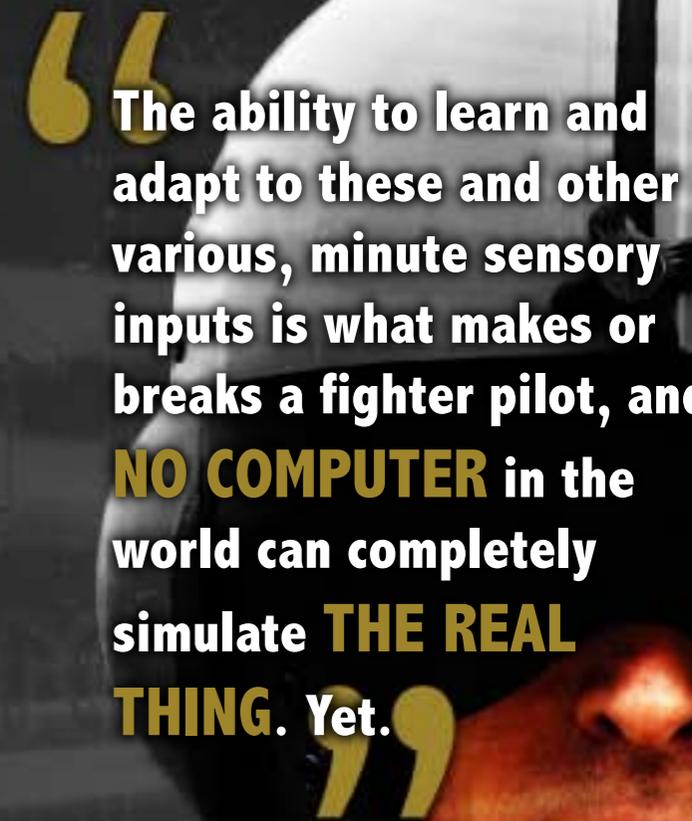
Besides, there are aspects of flight that cannot be accurately simulated, such as g-force, the way sunlight glares on the canopy or the "feel" of the stick as pockets of ionized air pass over the control planes. The ability to learn and adapt to these and other various, minute sensory inputs is what makes or breaks

a fighter pilot, and no computer in the world can completely simulate the real thing. Yet. But there is one area of military training that not only benefits from computer-enhanced simulation, it also demands it.

Remote Control

"The UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) Training Center's simulators are said to be so realistic, it would be difficult to distinguish, without previous knowledge, between them and the actual ground stations," writes Patrick Chisholm in a November 2005 article appearing in *Military Training Technology*.

UAVs are basically miniature airplanes controlled via remote control, from a computer station, and until fairly recently required, as with actual airplanes, a working UAV to train pilots. But with UAVs in increased demand in Afghanistan, Iraq (and everywhere else the Army is currently operating), the machines themselves have been too busy conducting operations to sit around idle while rookie joystick jockeys learn the controls. Enter: the UAV Training Center at Fort Huachuca, AZ.



“The ability to learn and adapt to these and other various, minute sensory inputs is what makes or breaks a fighter pilot, and NO COMPUTER in the world can completely simulate THE REAL THING. Yet.”



**POLITICIANS CONSIDER VIDEO GAMES TO BE AS DANGEROUS AS GUNS AND NARCOTICS.
AND THEY'RE SPENDING \$90 MILLION TO PROVE IT.**



“an operator does not necessarily know whether the video feed is coming from A SIMULATOR or a REAL CAMERA VIDEO feed.”



The simulators at Fort Huachuca, are a mix of proprietary systems and off-the-shelf PCs (“ruggedized Intel PCs running Microsoft Windows 2000 using game level Nvidia™-based graphics cards”), built into stackable shipping containers, deployable almost anywhere in the world. The software, however, is another story entirely. Designed by MetaVR, the simulation software, called VRSG (Virtual Reality Scene Generator) is, according to MetaVR, “a real-time computer image generator that enables users to visualize geographically expansive and detailed virtual worlds on commercial off-the-shelf PCs.” Which, if you compare spec sheets, is essentially what passes for a videogame in non-military circles.

The system works like this: Two operators per UAV sit at a control terminal that looks almost exactly like a laptop with a joystick, built into a green plastic road case (because that’s what it is), and “steer” their UAV using telemetry and video fed to them through the laptop screen. One “96 Uniform,” as the Army calls them, flies the vehicle; the other mans the surveillance and/or weapons package. Neither of them actually has to see the vehicle they’re flying. They also don’t have to be real

pilots. They just need to be good at playing what’s essentially a very expensive game.

“In the Army, UAV trainees are not required to have previous schooling in aviation,” writes Chisholm. “Army UAV trainees are often right out of high school. ... After 21 weeks and two days at the UAV Training Center, graduates are certified by the Army to fly UAVs.”

Which makes it sound so easy, anyone could do it. And that’s exactly the message the Army is trying to send. In 2004, the Army sponsored UAV demonstrations across the country at (of all places) NASCAR races. The Army supplied the tents (emblazoned with “Go Army!” banners), MetaVR supplied the MUSE (Multiple Unified Simulation Environment) systems, and thousands of race fans got to feel what it would be like to fly an actual UAV. Whether or not any of the thousands or so citizens attending heard the message “Greetings UAV Fighter ...” and was then whisked away to be fitted for a uniform, one would imagine, is classified. What isn’t classified is how accurately the MUSE system replicates the experience of flying a UAV.

From the MetaVR website: "When the system operators are not flying the actual UAV, they can fly a simulated UAV using the same hardware they use to operate the real system -- using the JTC/SIL MUSE, which replicates the air vehicle and datalink simulation software and MetaVR's PC-based technology. **Thus, an operator does not necessarily know whether the video feed is coming from a simulator or a real camera video feed.**"

Meaning, it's possible to pump simulated video into the same terminal used in real flight operations, almost exactly replicating the experience of real operational flight. This, of course, creates a near-perfect training environment, but it also raises the question of whether the pilot can tell the difference, and if the Army cares.

Forced Feedback

"We want to make sure that we use the simulations in a way that helps the soldiers," says SRI's John Shockley. "We're very concerned about making sure that they don't get any negative training value from what we're doing."

In other words, simulating bullets and battlefields saves money and, obviously, lives, but it also creates the possibility that the soldiers using the virtual training systems may not be as prepared for the real thing should it ever come. Naturally, the only real solution to this problem is to not use simulators at all, but barring that, making them as real and as engaging as possible will have to serve. This is easy for training 96 Uniforms. When the live feed and the training video are both shown on the same screen, through the same equipment, it's a lot harder to tell the difference between what's live and what's Memorex. But what about tank and infantry training? How do you fool a man on the ground that can see the target with his own eyes?

"There are two ... live instrumentation systems ... that we use to do the engagement simulation," says SRI's John Shockley. "The first one is called DFIRST, Deployable Force-On-Force Instrumented Range System, or DFIRST. ... What that system does is it provides GPS-based tracking for the vehicles, and then it also uses GPS pointing angle information to measure where a tank's turret is pointing. ... When somebody shoots a

round, a tank round, we know where he's pointing, and we simulate the engagement of him firing against another vehicle, and then do a statistical kill assessment of those results."

In other words, a virtual bullet. But the rabbit hole goes even deeper than that.

"[In May of 2003] we used a constructive simulation called JCATS, a Joint Conflict and Tactical Simulation," says Shockley, "and the issue that we had ... was how do you visually stimulate the live guys in the tank?"

The solution? Smart targets.

"Tankers are used to dealing with what they call pop-up targets," he says. "They're plywood silhouettes of an enemy vehicle [that] pop up out of the ground and provide a signature that they can fire against. So [in May of 2003] we used those, [and] we used the JCATS to mimic their locations, and then we restricted the scenario so that the [dummy] vehicles would be in the defensive position - basically coming up over a hill, firing, then going back. That way we had visual stimulation that live guys ... could engage both ways. Now, in

“Real tanks, virtual enemies and the whole exercise can be integrated into ONE TRAINING PLATFORM and monitored -



even altered on the fly - by a central computer. If you think this is starting to sound a little too much LIKE ENDER'S GAME, you're not alone.

addition to the vehicle and environment and engagements being simulated, [we're] also simulating some of the participants so that the person operating a constructive simulation could be controlling an entire tank platoon, for example."

The result?

"[We] scored the first kill of a virtual target firing back."

Real tanks, virtual enemies and the whole exercise can be integrated into one training platform and monitored - even altered on the fly - by a central computer. If you think this is starting to sound a little too much like *Ender's Game*, you're not alone.

Greetings, Warfighter

The use of games as war simulators is a definite improvement over sending young men unprepared into the crucible of war, but it does raise the question of whether the lines will begin to blur. Will the simulations themselves become so indistinguishable as to render the difference meaningless? And what happens then? When games are used to teach war, will war itself become a

game? I asked Shockley if anyone using his simulators had stopped themselves, realizing they were having more fun than they should be.

"The very first exercise we did where we had simulated bad guys shooting back," he said, "we had a company of guard soldiers out, and they were doing these exercises with our system, and they're out running around doing maneuvers. We were using them, basically to make sure that the system was tuned right and it was all working properly, and it was toward the end of the day. We said, 'Gosh, guys, we got everything we need, thank you very much.' And they said, 'Well, can't we go out again?'" He said "No."

I asked John how much an operation involving his systems would typically cost. What, in other words, is the monetary difference between videogames and war games?

"For an individual exercise it's probably in the few thousands of dollars. ... [But] I'd be really hesitant to say because it varies so much ... depending on the scale."

So, significantly more than a quarter; which, at least for now, seems to be the

only difference. Will some lucky videogamer soon find himself completing a game and then, instead of a story cut scene, or rolling credits, seeing an invitation to join the Army? According to SRI's John Shockley, such a scenario isn't too far from the realm of possibility.

"I think there's something to that [idea]," he says. "I really think there's something to that. You know, [as] the skills of simulation get better and better, a lot of the skills will be very realistic."

Meaning the next game you play could be far less than virtual. [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. His blog can be found at www.falsegravity.com.



We said, 'Gosh, guys, we got everything we need, thank you very much.' And they said, 'Well, CAN'T WE GO OUT AGAIN?'"

Annabeth Peter: A Gamer's Love Story

by Tom Rhodes

(WARNING: Names have been changed to protect the innocent – and the obsessed)

Peter

He hadn't ever been with a woman. Now, I don't mean that in a crude way (although I suppose that does apply); I mean he had never been out on a date.

It wasn't like he was an ugly guy, either. In high school, Peter was lean, perhaps even lanky, but had grown nicely into his frame. His hair was a wiry mess of sandy-colored strands that seemed to go

out in all directions, but he cleaned up well enough.

For Peter, though, girls were a strange, foreign object. Watching him try to navigate a party – or even a small get-together – was like watching someone walk through a minefield. Whenever a girl struck up a conversation, he had the same reaction: eyes to the floor, talking so softly it's hard to hear, and eventually ending their talk abruptly with the excuse of needing to use the facilities.

"Pete, you have got to get out of this slump," I said to him one day.

"What slump?" he replied.

"The one where you haven't had a date in ... ever."

He smiled. "I wouldn't call that a slump; more of a plateau."

"Uh huh," I responded. "Don't you have to rise up somewhat before you can plateau?"

He frowned at that.

I usually let the issue drop, however, as I was in a similar boat. My love life was not quite as glamorous as I would have liked, but at least I had experience under

my belt. Pete was climbing the rungs to his mid-20s and had seemingly left his party years behind before they even started. His 21st birthday went by without much fanfare ("I don't really like the taste of alcohol, anyway"), as did his 18th ("Why buy porn when there's so much of it free online?"). He didn't get his driver's license until he was on the cusp of his 19th, when his parents forced him to ("Why can't I just take the bus around campus?").

In college, he was the weird guy across the hall that sat in his dorm room and played videogames nonstop. Unlike me, he was "the gaming guy" (although I did enjoy a round of *Worms* on his PC, whenever I dropped by to visit). I feared, however, that such obsessions were going to land him in Steve Carell territory.

"There's nothing for you in that little box," I once remarked, on one of my more lucid days.

Always the smartass, Pete replied, "Little? This is the Xbox! Trucks are jealous of it."

Again, I let it drop. Who was I to judge?

Annabeth

The last time I had seen Annabeth, she was angry.

“Bastard!”

Through the air, a box of clothing fell with a loud thump onto the cement walkway. Annabeth, apparently, was kicking out her longtime boyfriend George.

“Anna, baby, please, I’m sorry!” he yelled back up to her. Down came more clothes, and more obscenities. Now, at the time, I had no idea they were having problems. Obviously that changed very quickly.

“Anna, please, not the -”

But it was too late; the computer monitor landed with a sickening thud on the pavement, circuitry cracking and flying in every direction. I winced. George howled, creating a nice scene for the sideways glances of neighbors and passersby.

“Annabeth?” I call up. Her raven-haired head poked out of the window. She looked harried, but managed a smile when she saw me.

“Tom, hey! Come up!”

“Um, sure. On my way,” I responded, avoiding George’s confused gaze. As she buzzed me up, I grabbed a brown package addressed to her, left in front of her doorstep.

When I entered her apartment, I saw the place scattered with the remains of a year-long relationship, the glass front of a picture-frame smashed to bits on the floor.

“You, um, got a package,” I remarked, although she wasn’t listening.

“You bastard!” she screeched, hurling a bundle of clothes to the pavement. Quietly viewing this spectacle, I gingerly began cleaning up the room.

An hour later, after more screaming and more of George’s things littering the street, he left and she finally relaxed enough to sit down. We established what a terrible person George was and how he shouldn’t have cheated on her with “that skank,” and so on. Eventually, her attention was drawn to the brown box that had arrived.

“What’s that?” she asked. I shrugged and said it had her name on it. She tore it open, thanks to my helpful set of keys. She dug through the packing peanuts, finally pulling out a copy of her future.

Getting a Second Life

Most people get games so they can enjoy them. You have a general idea of what it’s going to be before you shell out the cash for it.

Second Life, for Annabeth, was nothing of the sort. It was hard to navigate, the controls were somewhat foreign to her, and she wasn’t terribly interested in the nonlinear purposelessness of the world. She preferred high-action shooting games with an intellectual backbone, like the *Half-Life* series, or even something with less outright violence, like *Zelda*. Still, she gradually began to take to it like a newborn duck to water.

Little did I know, Peter had opened a *Second Life* account months before and frequented the very areas Annabeth was exploring. When I discovered this, I immediately knew I had to play matchmaker. How to do it, though?

She dug through the packing peanuts, finally pulling out a copy of her future.

I realized that they both liked to see jazz performed live – or pseudo live, in this case – so that would be my opening. After a few cautious phone calls, I managed to get them both into a quaint jazz cafe that evening, overlooking a pixelated beach. I was there, in all my glory, escorting Annabeth that evening.

When we arrived, I spotted Peter's avatar, quietly sitting and watching the band start their set. I pulled Annabeth over and did a fancy-seeing-you-here before sitting us down at his table. They started talking (which is much easier in a loud cafe or club using text chatting), and they learned they had much in common, especially their taste in games. After 20 minutes, they began talking so much, I excused myself for the bathroom and slipped out the door. I was not missed.

This cafe became their place. Every Saturday they'd meet there, chat about the world and life and jazz and everything in between, until one day, Peter developed a sense of adventure.

PETER: so i think we should meet
ANNABETH: meet? as in 'meet' meet?
PETER: yea
ANNABETH: hmm, i guess we could

This four-line conversation was actually not his, though. I was over at his place that night and jacked the computer for a minute, while he went to the bathroom. When he came back, he was steaming, but felt better after he realized he had a date.

From here, things were surprisingly typical. They went out, found the same kind of easy conversation they had in their second lives carried over, and began to fall in love. Matter of fact, they were increasingly nauseating as they got closer to the big day. That's right; they got hitched. They even had wax representations of their avatars cast and placed on top of the cake.

Casual Conversation

A month after that, I found myself at their house. Peter had gotten a much-needed promotion at his IT job and had purchased a brand new house in a little development outside of town. It was small, but it was their home.

The buzzer on the oven dinged, and Annabeth jumped up to grab it. Peter quickly followed, grabbing her waist and nibbling on her neck as they disappeared through the kitchen door (like I said, nauseating).

"OK, dinner's ready!" called Annabeth, her voice shuddering from a stifled giggle. I sighed, knowing I'd have to put up with their antics for the rest of the night. I stood and began to follow, but a

noise from the computer distracted me. Peter had left *Second Life* on, and someone had started to chat with his avatar. I sat down, examining the blonde character that had begun the conversation.

ME: Hi there. Who's this?
HER: this is Bella. is this Peter?
ME: No, this is his friend Tom. He stepped away for a sec.
HER: oh, Tom! i'm his cousin. he's talked a bit about you.
ME: Really?
HER: yep. said we'd get along too.
ME: Working so far. ;)

"Tom, you coming?" came Annabeth's voice from the other room. I said I'd be a minute.

As the dinner in the kitchen started to cool, I wondered if this accidental interaction was the first chapter in my own gamer love story, and I hoped it was. And, as another chime sounded a new message, I smiled. [COMMENTS](#)

Tom Rhodes is a writer and filmmaker currently living in Ohio. He can be reached through Tom [dot] Rhod [at] Gmail [dot] com.



They got hitched.
They even had wax representations of their avatars cast and placed on top of the cake.



In November 2005, days after France burned, a 27-year-old French industrial designer named Alex Chan created a media sensation with his machinima film “The French Democracy.”

Made in about five days for zero cost (except the price of the engine, Activision’s game *The Movies*), “Democracy” depicts three dark-skinned young men who endure daily discrimination in the Paris ghettos. When they hear about two teenagers who, while hiding from police, were electrocuted in a transformer station – the real-life flashpoint for the 2005 riots – the men join the violence in the streets. As told by the Associated Press – and *The Washington Post* – and MTV.com – and *Business Week* – the 13-minute film was Chan’s attempt to correct what he saw as biased press coverage of three weeks of civil unrest in ghettos across France. “The main intention of this movie is to bring people to think about what really happened in my country,” Chan told the *Post*, “by trying to show the starting point and some causes of these riots.”

“The French Democracy” marked the popular news media’s belated discovery of machinima. And, significantly, the film

highlighted the issue that has troubled the young medium from its start.

The media’s acceptance of “The French Democracy,” contrasted with their widespread hysteria about videogames, confirms a gaping cultural divide. Reporters treated machinima with automatic respect, because society has accepted film as a meaningful art form. But in the public mind, games are by definition frivolous; a game with a serious instructional or artistic purpose faces skepticism, even hostility. After the scandal at the Slamdance indie film festival’s 2006 Guerrilla Gamemaking Competition, Slamdance organizer Peter Baxter told *The New York Times*, “Absolutely, games should be judged by different criteria than film. I just don’t accept a direct comparison.”

The double standard has benefited “The French Democracy,” because its impact is more conceptual than artistic. Quite roughly made, the film carries the passionate sincerity of a hand-lettered broadside. Its widespread recognition proves you don’t need high-powered graphics cards and a team of hundreds

to join the world's ongoing conversation. Ideas are not only cheap; they run on low-end hardware.

It's encouraging that everyone automatically treats "Democracy" as a film. In a way, it's also surprising, because, considered strictly as film, machinima can make you squirm in your seat. See, for instance, "A Few Good G-Men," award-winning machinima by Randall Glass that uses Valve's *Half-Life 2* Source engine to render the climactic scene from the 1992 film *A Few Good Men*. Glass' work is polished, even artful, yet it points up the painfully limited range of facial expressions available in this state-of-the-art engine. We are years away from game engines that offer figure models as rubber-faced as Jim Carrey, not that anyone looks forward to that exact possibility.

Fortunately, machinima has inherent virtues that film is hard-pressed to match. Aside from its uniquely fast production time and low cost, machinima also shares the advantages of other computer animation, such as visionary design and fluid camera work impossible on a practical set.

Even its artistic limitations are hardly deal-breakers. Like machinima, several other forms of drama permit little or no facial expression, yet have nonetheless produced major masterpieces. For instance, the actors in ancient Greek plays wore masks, as did the performers in Japanese Noh drama. And from the 1920s through the '40s, America's most popular dramatic form was not film, but radio.

In terms of the skills required and the effects produced, machinima somewhat resembles puppetry. Though puppet theater in the West has a reputation hardly more elevated than games, in Asia it's a respected art-form with a long and prestigious history. In Indonesia, puppeteers called *dalang* enjoy high status as masters of *wayang* drama. And the leading work of Japanese theater, the *Chushingura* (*The 47 Ronin*) – as revered there as we revere Shakespeare and Ibsen – was written for *bunraku* puppets.

No, the main issue facing machinima is neither technical nor artistic. As any machinima maker can tell you, the main issue is copyright.

If you shoot a high-def film with a Canon camera, Canon doesn't own your movie. If you publish a book or magazine that uses fonts owned by Microsoft and images corrected in Adobe Photoshop, neither Microsoft nor Adobe owns your publication, because their licenses specifically grant you ownership. But if you make a machinima film using *The Movies*, Activision (the publisher) controls it. Activision controls everything.

Artist and media maven Tony Walsh, on his blog Clickable Culture, analyzed the End User License Agreement for *The Movies*:

"While users retain ownership of movies they create, Activision exclusively owns 'any and all content within [users'] Game Movies that was either supplied with the Program or otherwise made available to [users] by Activision or its licensors...' This means that any movie containing anything less than 100% user-created content (an impossible feat, as far as I can tell) is under Activision's control. [...] 'The French Democracy' might be a milestone in machinima history, but since Activision owns the content of the movie (the character models,

A man in a dark suit and glasses is looking down at several sheets of paper he is holding. The background is a dark, slightly blurred greenish-grey.

The main issue facing machinima is neither technical nor artistic. As any machinima maker can tell you, the main issue is copyright.



**The world-killer
machinima app
should be free or
open-source - and
in the long term,
it must be
cross-platform.**

environments and other material), the publisher could order the movie removed from internet sites.”

What’s more, if you upload your film to the official *Movies* site, Lionhead Studios can do anything they want with it.

The same restriction holds true for machinima made using other game engines – or, more accurately, there’s no case law to disprove the publisher’s claim on derivative works. If you make a commercial DVD of your *Sims 2* videos, maybe you can sell it on Amazon, maybe not. To find out for sure, pay your lawyer a million bucks and sit in a courtroom for three years.

“French Democracy” maker Alex Chan spoke on the “Machinima With Issues” panel at the second annual Machinima Festival, held in November 2006 at the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens, New York. Another, perhaps more arresting panel topic there was “Will I Get Sued?” Gamasutra’s Raina Lee covered it:

“[Fred] Von Lohmann and [the Electronic Frontier Foundation] represented the fourth speaker, Jon Grigg, a filmmaker who had dealt with an unresponsive game company, Valve. Grigg had contacted Valve numerous times to get permission for *Counter-Strike* machinima for his film ‘Deviation,’ with no response. He needed the permission in order for Atom Films to carry and distribute his work, and for him to be able to make a profit. While Grigg ultimately received permission, Von Lohmann noted that game companies do not have a stance on machinima yet, and it’s up to the machinima community to sway things their way.”

The copyright issue looms large among machinima creators. Paul Marino is Executive Director of the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences and author of *3-D Game-Based Filmmaking: The Art of Machinima* (Paraglyph Press, 2004). On his blog, *Thinking Machinima*, Marino first praised “The French Democracy,” then speculated, “Will a machinima surface that forces a game developer to issue a damage-control press release stating they have nothing to do with the

work? ... [A]s a supplier of technology, do they get to dictate the how, what and why tech is used? ... I believe it is in the interest of the developers to handle the ‘how’ specifically and not become mired in the ‘what’ or ‘why.’ The developers, and technology, are enablers.”

It’s possible to negotiate these obstacles. Rooster Teeth Productions, which makes the popular *Red vs. Blue* series using Microsoft’s *Halo* engine, signed an agreement with Microsoft that permits it to sell DVDs and merchandise. (See “Red vs. Blue Makes Green,” *The Escapist* issue No. 68.)

But in practical terms, these issues will be solved only with successful Photoshop-style dedicated machinima applications. We’re finally starting to see a few, including Reallusion’s iClone and Short Fuze’s Moviestorm. Both offer sensible EULAs that don’t grab ownership of your film.

Looking further out, Lucasfilm’s Industrial Light & Magic special-effects house is developing Zviz, an in-house machinima app for pre-visualization. In an interview with trade journal VFX

World, ILM R&D Director Steve Sullivan describes Zviz features that make a machinima buff's thumbs itchy: simultaneous multiple takes and shots in memory, lenses, real-time game-engine lighting and physics, free-floating camera or dollies and cranes, in-world sketching and asset annotation, flipbooks of facial expressions, three-point editing, audio "We have an internal system working now," says Sullivan; Lucasfilm is using it for the new *Clone Wars* animated series. "We have no plans to market it now, but it needs to be consumer friendly. ... The target audience was also 12-year-old kids. George [Lucas] wanted a system that could teach people how to make movies: something that changes how things are done."

But all these platforms are proprietary and, in some cases, vaporous. Ideally, the world-killer machinima app should be free or open-source – and in the long term, it must be cross-platform, or every generation of machinima will eventually get pushed off the pier of history into the sad sea of abandonware. In linking to a report on the January 2007 "New Media and Social Memory" meeting, futurist and science fiction writer Bruce Sterling remarked, "If you're not thinking of your

art in machine-agnostic terms, you are not an artist and shouldn't declare yourself to be one; you are a hobbyist and a slave of the hardware."

Meanwhile, Activision released one much-needed *Movies* expansion (*Stunts & Effects*) in mid-2006, and a Macintosh version in January 2007. Otherwise the game is basically dormant and likely to remain so, inasmuch as Microsoft bought Lionhead Studios in April 2006.

Alex Chan has not yet submitted another film to the *Movies* site. (Under the handle "Koulamata," he had posted three prior machinima learning projects before "French Democracy," but he later removed them all.) Other players still upload nearly 100 movies daily. A few are ambitious, such as "Dark September," about 9/11. But it's fair to say the community has not grown politically active, let alone radical.

The media perceived "Democracy" as the harbinger of a new, powerful vector for social commentary. This may yet prove true, but if so, it will take time. Today's diverse machinima communities aren't notably political; the political class remains ignorant of the form; and as

long as the publishers own everything through their grasping EULAs, dangerous legal issues overshadow everything.

Copyright problems aside, it's hard to envision a machinima movement with political clout. What is the usual fate of a political work produced outside the existing power structure? Such works aren't inherently, inevitably marginalized, but history shows that's the way to bet. "The French Democracy" is to machinima as, say, Democracy Now is to American television. They are both commentators in the wilderness, exiled by systemic pressures that have no technical fix.

In the online magazine *PopMatters*, Josh Lee wrote, "'The French Democracy' won't win any awards at Cannes, but it covers [its] political and psychic territory with an immediacy that's as moving as it is alarming. It seems a little strange, though, that while ten years is plenty of time for there to be waves of simpler, cheaper filmmaking tools, it is not long enough to have any effect on the issues that filmmakers need to bring to the public's attention." [COMMENTS](#)

Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay and Looking Glass.



It's hard to envision a machinima movement with political clout.



Fei LONG AND Justin WONG:

Race and Street Fighter II

by Pat Miller

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Watch this video.

I was there, three years ago, when that video happened. It happened at Cal Poly Pomona, as part of Evolution 2004, the biggest fighting game tournament in the United States. I was eating a Famous Star from Carl's Jr. at the time.

The match would later become legendary, immortalized on YouTube and occasionally parodied: Justin Wong, an American player known best for winning four consecutive national championships from 2001-2005 in *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*, was pitted against Daigo Umehara, arguably Japan's greatest *Street Fighter* player, in the tournament semifinals for *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*. Watching Daigo coolly parry Justin's 15-hit super combo and retaliate with his own counter to win the round with zero life remaining ... well, you just had to have **been there**.

But being in that crowd was a funny thing. Somehow, the crowd always knew who it was rooting for, and, more curiously, **why**. I knew, too, as part of the crowd, but I couldn't quite articulate it. Sometimes it made sense to root for Justin, sometimes it didn't. Of course, the crowd loves upsets, underdogs and

spectacular combos. But how did we always know **who** to cheer for? And how did **race** tell us who to cheer for?

Maybe we should rewind a bit.

Street Fighter II was widely credited with providing a much-needed shot in the arm to the arcade game scene back in the early 1990s. The graphics were awesome, and the head-to-head gameplay hadn't quite caught on full force until then. But, perhaps more significantly, *Street Fighter II* demanded a social experience. In order to get better, you had to play against someone else, and - unlike Xbox Live - you had to play with someone who was **actually standing right next to you**. It caused communities of players to form around local arcade machines, and those communities would interact with communities around other arcade machines and have tournaments, and so on.

This, by itself, isn't notably different from any other game. There are competitive communities around pretty much any game out there, from *Gears of War* to *Scrabble*. But what **is** notable about *Street Fighter II* is, unlike *Gears of War*, the only thing it takes to enter *SF2* community is the willingness to put up a

quarter, wait your turn and get your ass beat. Unlike computers or videogame consoles, which require a comparably massive outlay of cash to start playing, the barrier to entry for *Street Fighter II* is simply \$0.25. And since it's hardly a secret that people of color in the United States, generally speaking, tend to be less economically well-off than white Americans, the average *Street Fighter II* gaming environment tended to be a few shades darker than, say, the equivalent computer gaming circles of the time.

This legacy has stuck with *Street Fighter II*. Evolution attendance seemed to be roughly equal parts white, black, yellow, brown and so on. Since these communities are built around physical locations, *Street Fighter II* players become accustomed to building class and race into their common-sense knowledge. Like Evolution, tournaments that we held at the UC Berkeley arcade were attended by all kinds of people, but it was a fair bet that most of the college-age Asian and white people either came from UC Berkeley or another nearby school; black players mostly came from Oaktree Arcade, located in downtown Oakland, which is predominantly black; older Asian players mostly came from

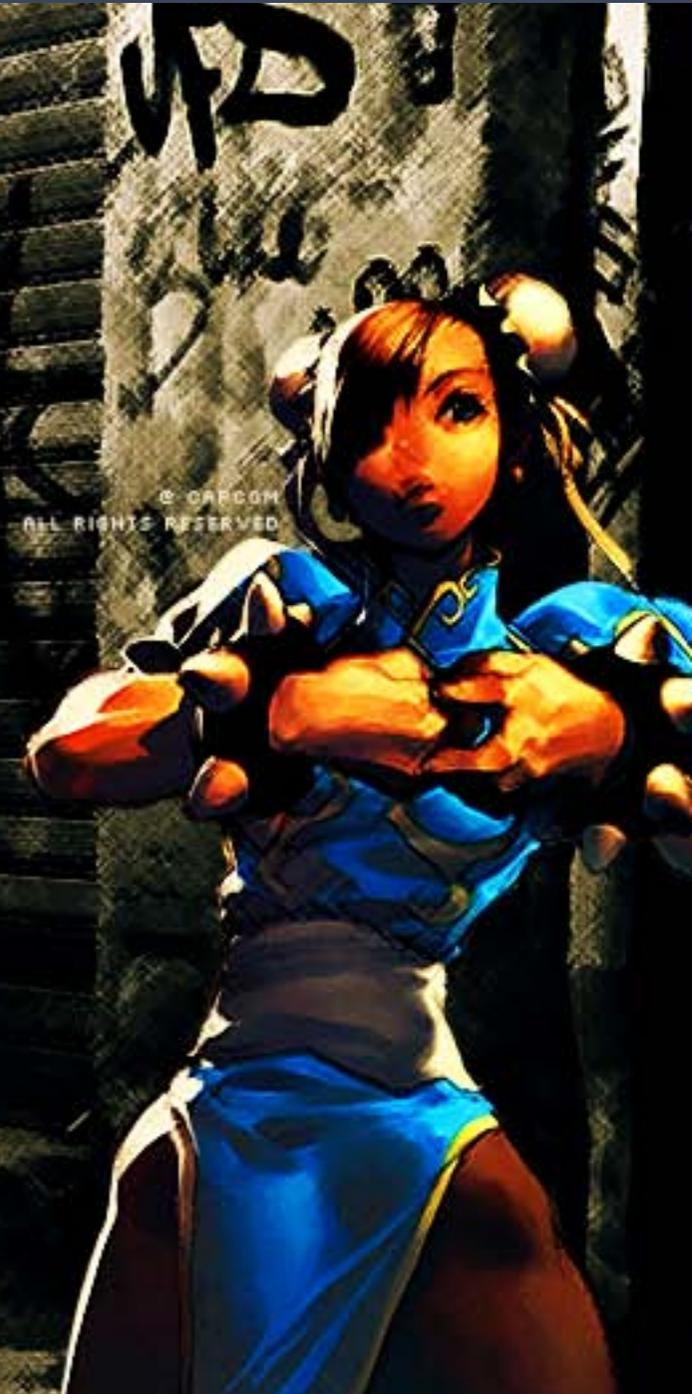
Sunnyvale Golfland, located in the South Bay Area; and so on. In this way, race held certain implications within the *Street Fighter II* community.

Many veteran arcade gamers, particularly those who were around during the early '90s, can recall a stereotype of an Asian or Asian-American kid, usually a male, who is unusually gifted at videogames. He is young; he can be loud and vivacious or soft-spoken and patient. He is known simply for his **skill**; his fingers glide over the buttons of the arcade machine with practiced agility and impeccable reflexes. Black, white and brown players dutifully line their quarters on top of the machine, each waiting for their chance to defeat him and prove themselves to the rest of the group, but they'll inevitably find themselves digging in their pockets for another quarter after two short rounds, perhaps three if they get lucky. He is found in arcades, movie theaters, family restaurants and 7-11s across the country. When he is defeated, it is usually by another Asian player, most likely a close friend or maybe even a cousin of his, who plays the game with him often enough to win.

People don't always agree on **why** "Asians are better at videogames," but it remains a particularly complicated issue in the *Street Fighter II* community, no doubt because this perception of Asian and Asian-American players is reinforced by the very real presence of international competition from Japan. Very, very good international competition.

We could simply watch the Justin vs. Daigo video as another instance of amazing gameplay. We could also watch it as Justin Wong, a Chinese-American, playing and very narrowly losing a game of *Street Fighter III: Third Strike* to Daigo Umehara, a Japanese national player, and begin to unpack the elements of race and nationality within. Justin Wong is, in some ways, the textbook example of the Asian arcade-whiz-kid outlined above: He's significantly younger than most of his opponents in the American *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* scene, where he made a name for himself. But his reputation as a dominant force is equaled by his reputation as a boring player.

He is not a crowd-pleaser. A Shoryuken.com forum thread entitled "I Think I Have A Plausible Reason Why Justin Is





People don't always agree on why "**ASIANS ARE BETTER AT VIDEOGAMES**," but it remains a particularly complicated issue

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The Greatest!" yields the following insights: "Justin Wong has god-like execution, awesome mindgames, and unrivaled blocking skills," "Justin wins because he has a fuckin robot," "Justin is the best at *MVC2* because he has a demon from the 7th layer of hell in human suit." Like the archetypical Asian whiz-kid, any discussion about Justin's ability in *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* evokes comparisons to superhuman abilities. Justin has robotic precision, mechanical reflexes and a methodical style of play that simply grinds down his opponent.

But these adjectives - "mechanical," "methodical" and "robotic" - don't merely apply to Justin. The depiction of Asian and Asian-Americans as tireless workers is not new to *Street Fighter*. This kind of description, generally known as the "Yellow Peril," has a long history ranging from American World War II-era propaganda to the American-Japanese automobile rivalry of the 1980s. So while Justin is seen as robotic and methodical, Japanese players are viewed similarly. That is to say, the *Street Fighter* community's common sense places the robotic, methodical Asian player as the dominant force, opposite the underdog. The underdog is, in opposition to the

dominant Asian player, aggressive, risk-taking, occasionally rash and, ultimately, American.

Even though Justin is presumably American by nationality, his play-style has been attached to words normally reserved for Asian players, painting him as "less American" than his non-Asian opponents. And so, when people boo and hiss while he cleans up Evolution's *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* tournaments, they don't just boo and hiss at Justin Wong, they boo and hiss at Justin Wong, an Asian player dominating non-Asian and therefore American opponents. Justin is the Yellow Peril.

The reason the Justin-Daigo video helps us understand all these intricate constructions of race in the *SF2* community is precisely because they are **not** playing *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*. *MVC2* is mostly played in the U.S., probably because the comic book heroes from the Marvel Comics universe aren't popular in any of the other countries in which *Street Fighter* games are widely played (most notably, Japan). There is no Japanese threat in *MVC2* to displace Justin's position as an Asian robot.

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Depending on what game he's playing, Justin is alternately **ASIAN OR AMERICAN**

In *Street Fighter III: Third Strike*, however, Japanese players like Daigo are the robotic and mechanical Asian players. Virtually everyone who chimed in on the "Amazing Daigo Comeback" thread from the Shoryuken.com forums call Justin "cocky," "flashy" and "impatient" - terms that seem to resonate with the underdog, "American" position Justin's opponents occupy when he's playing the American-friendly MVC2.

As long as *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* is in our Dreamcast, Justin is dominant and un-American, but once we switch the game to *Third Strike*, Justin is representing the good old U.S.A. against the **real** Yellow Peril, Daigo Umehara, who has come all the way from Japan to take our money in a *Street Fighter* tournament. Depending on what game he's playing, Justin is alternately Asian or American as they correspond to "winner" or "underdog." Perhaps more significantly, though, lines of race and nationality are crossed here, and Asian is posed against American - not white or black, but American.

Of course, when race and nationality enter the fray, there's no easy solution to any problem, especially problems like stereotyping and rank classification.

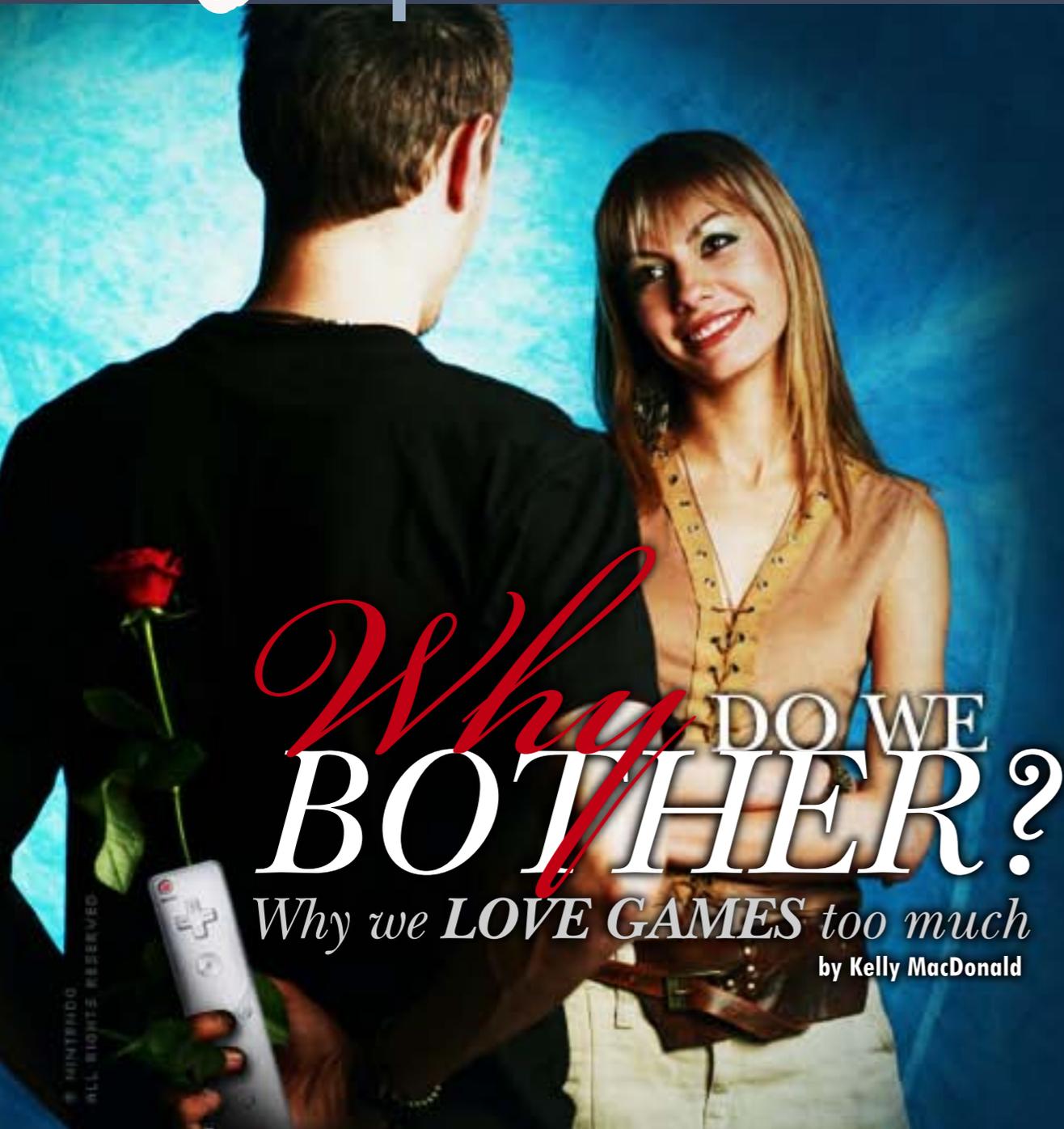
Understanding why and how people like Justin Fong bounce back and forth between American hero and Yellow Peril, in a videogame community no less, is key to finding a way to overcome racial issues. Maybe that's another edge the *Street Fighter* arcade scene has over the *Gears of War* online model: We actually have to face the people we demonize.

[COMMENTS](#)

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long. Stop by his blog, [Token Minorities](#), for more on race and videogames.

as they correspond to **"WINNER"** or **"UNDERDOG."**

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Why DO WE BOTHER?

Why we LOVE GAMES too much

by Kelly MacDonald

Imagine the aftermath of a British Christmas. Evening is drawing in, elderly relatives' snores are muffled in the fetid, post-Christmas-dinner air, and the talk turns to the rapid advance of technology. My mother wonders at the speed at which email and text-messaging appear to have overtaken all other forms of communication, my dad complains about not being able to work his new television, and slowly but inevitably, the subject of the recent Wii launch comes up. Drifting slowly back to consciousness from my over-indulged, semi-comatose state, I listen, as my aunt explains her confusion.

"I cannot grasp how releasing more and more of these games consoles makes any difference," she says. "Surely it's just the same old thing, you know -" she sticks her hands in the air, forefingers outstretched, "- blam blam, vroom vroom. Same kids wasting the same amount of time, only it's more expensive for their parents!"

Everyone laughs, throwing me the occasional glance, expecting me to leap into the defensive. I rise to the bait. Foolish, I know, but I can never resist; my family does this to me with monotonous regularity. "It's really, really

not just time-wasting," I interject, beginning a spiel which any long-suffering enthusiast will recognize. "Games are incredibly complex now, they're compelling, they're edifying. We haven't been spending our time just making more and more versions of *Tetris*. People are creating real art, these days. Games are as intelligent a leisure pursuit as anything else."

The living room resounds with familiar, tolerant laughter. My aunt shakes her head, smiling, and leans forward in her chair. "Come on, Kelly," she says, looking about as mischievous as a middle-aged and middle-class Edinburgh woman can manage, "you can't possibly say things like that and expect to be taken **seriously.**"

And yet I **do** take games seriously, and so do thousands and thousands of others. Too seriously, much of the time. Every facet of the entertainment industry has its fanatics, but seldom are they as enthusiastic, vocal and extraordinarily organized as videogame fanatics. Talented enthusiasts pour hours upon hours of their time into fansites and databases, mods and skins; fanboys scream at each other over forums about

the Escapist

whose console or series or whatever is best; we argue ourselves hoarse over upcoming releases and forgotten treasures, games' merits and failings and potential, over minutia; *Ocarina of Time vs. Majora's Mask*, *Morrowind vs. Oblivion*. We stand up for gaming as a worthwhile pursuit, band together to defend it, whether in front of our families, obstreperous newspaper columnists or Jack Thompson. We, as intelligent people, love games, and it is a love that is often complex and unfrivolous. We are not a clamoring mob, hypnotized by flashing lights and high scores into wasting our lives in front of a screen. We engage with games on a significant level, and that often has a considerable impact on our lives.

All of which begs the question: Why on Earth do we bother?

Once or twice a year, mired in the repetitive, cynical profiteering rubbish that seems to constitute so very much of videogaming as a whole, I ask myself that question. Cast a relatively neutral eye over our industry – an eye like my aunt's – and it can be difficult to see why **anyone** takes us seriously. Games are pointless, meaningless and ridiculous;

men shooting other men in virtual space in an enormous variety of ways; the eternal quest for the next meaningless shiny thing, or higher number; a sea of sheer, mindless drivel punctuated by the occasional example of something more worthwhile, so infrequent as to be irrelevant.

This is a crisis most gamers in my acquaintance seem to go through with distressing frequency. It passes, of course, usually when the next exemplary title arrives to remind us why we love games in the first place (last year's was *Okami*, for me). But I still never come out of it with any sense of clarity about exactly why games have influenced (and continue to influence) my life more than any other medium. I want to know why people who love games seem so much more enthusiastic about their hobby than their film- or book-fan equivalents.

It is quite possible to be seduced into entertaining the notion that gaming must have something over its entertainment contemporaries in order to inspire such devotion. But that analysis strikes me as self-indulgent. Every once in a while, when a new landmark of interactive entertainment comes along, it's easy to

“*it's easy to believe games
CAN TOUCH US
in ways nothing else can*”



believe games can touch us in ways nothing else can, but even assuming that to be true, it is foolish to think games are intrinsically **better** than books, film or television and therefore inspire a greater degree of fanaticism.

Indeed, our medium's negative aspects are blindingly obvious, glaring from every piece of licensed trash or gore-soaked tabloid bait lining the shelves of the world's Wal-Marts. There are particular shining examples that stick out from the rest, games of merit that do much to negate the influence of the endless dross, but these alone cannot be solely responsible for inspiring fanaticism. It is gaming as a whole that we love, not merely the occasional exemplary instance of it.

It's possible the very ubiquity of crap, rubbish or pointless games fuels some of our fanaticism. We are desperate to champion games that display the potential of the medium, waving our copies of *Planescape: Torment* and *Half-Life 2* in the faces of people who don't know games can be edifying as well as entertaining. I know my own intellectual enthusiasm for games is sparked by my consistent need to discuss, defend and

justify them in writing and conversation. Perhaps my fanaticism is awakened – even exacerbated – by the fact I am always being told it's not justified.

Actually, that seems rather likely; perhaps it's underdog syndrome. There is no denying that games and gamers are victimized in the modern media. Whoever heard of a film buff being forced into a corner and made to defend his pastime from accusations of dangerousness or, possibly worse, worthlessness? Either is insulting to anyone with any passion for games, but without such harassment, there would be nothing for us to rile against; no reason for us to convince ourselves and others so vehemently of games' intellectual worth.

However, in casting ourselves as underdogs and characterizing our inexhaustible defense of games as a natural reaction to a skeptical and dismissive general population, we are in danger of overlooking the most obvious reason for our often-unreasonable love of games: As a medium, they are entirely deserving of our attention.

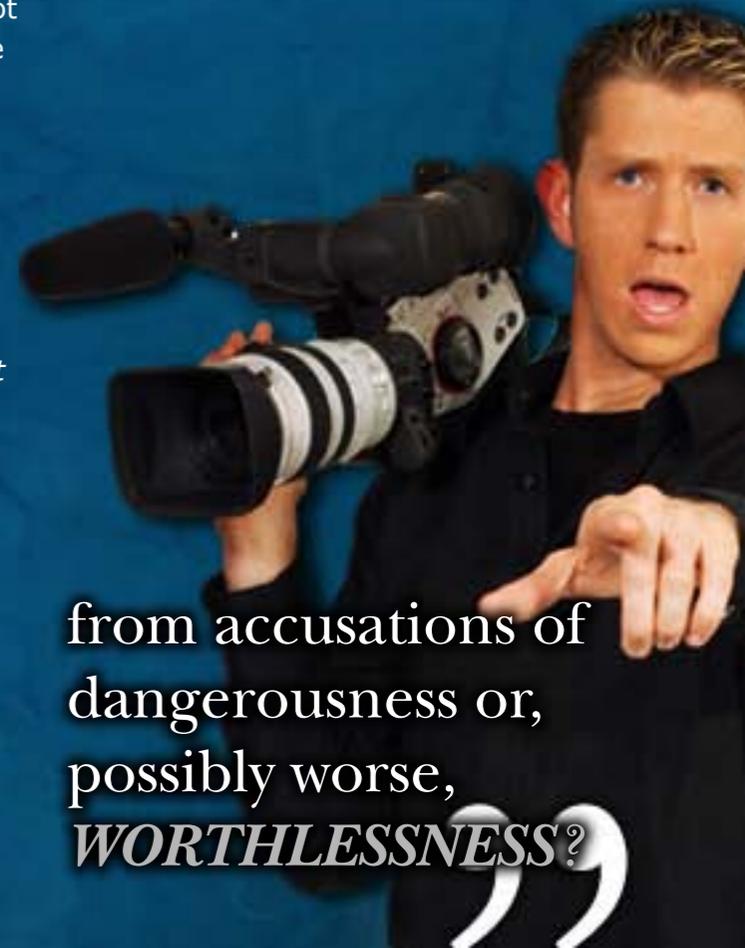
Games are a new, exciting, multi-faceted, complex and challenging passion. We feel compelled to treat them as something more than toys because they **are** more than that. Ultimately, we are so passionate because we are among the first champions of what is still, in many ways, an emergent art form, and we are often called upon to defend it. As the rest of the world comes to take games as seriously as we do, I would not be at all surprised if our fanaticism were to diminish. But with any luck, our passion won't.

COMMENTS

Kelly MacDonald is interested in everything from rock'n'roll to German literature, but videogaming was her first love. She sold her soul to game journalism when she was 16.

“Whoever heard of a film buff being forced into a corner and made to **DEFEND HIS PASTIME**

from accusations of dangerousness or, possibly worse, **WORTHLESSNESS?**”



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