the Escapist

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

In the quest for the AAA title, it seems our beloved game industry sometimes forgets what it's about: entertaining. While photorealistic graphics can enhance a gameplay experience, do they really add to entertainment? Or perhaps making a game longer, like some of the 100+ hour RPGs on the market – is that more entertaining than one that's, say, 40 hours?

I'm not saying that games can't have a deeper purpose than entertaining, but they are likely to get their point across a little better if they are. This is the same with educational books, television or movies; those that entertain are often more engaging, and therefore, fulfill their purpose a bit better.

So, if the purpose is to entertain, no matter the subject, why do games continuously get bigger and better and brighter and faster? Why are new features/graphics/hours and hours of gameplay added at questionable entertainment value? To push the limits. To utilize new technology. To challenge seasoned players. To please the hardcore.

Developers are beginning to realize that this might be faulty logic. With more games being made every year, and each of those games, on average, costing more to make, pleasing first and foremost a rather small segment of the population that most people don't **have time** to be a part of (no matter how much they might like to), is less than fiscally responsible.

But alienating them is no good either. Traditional "casual games" (I put in quotes because I've ... ahhh ... seen **other** people ... ahem ... obsess over things like Tetris and Sudoku.) often do not hold hardcore gamers' attention the way an RPG does. What is a game developer to do?

Perhaps the mark is somewhere in the middle? There's certainly a trend in that direction. As we see in Drake's article, long time casual game experts, Popcap, are moving a little more toward a fully fleshed out RPG with their new title, *Bookworm Adventures Deluxe*. In Pitts' article, renowned game designer Warren Spector talks about moving toward more digestible, less complex games. And Aihoshi talks about the barriers to entry in the current crop of massively multiplayer online games, and how these must fall for the genre to grow. It seems as though there's a movement afoot! To read these articles, and more about casual games, check out this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Why Do We Bother" from The Escapist Forum: I'm reminded of the beginning of Scott McCloud's book Understanding Comics. In it, he speaks of his earliest experiences with comics, how at first be believed them all to be worthless superhero garbage. Eventually a friend persuades him to give comics another chance and he falls in love with the craft. On the next page he concedes that most of what's out there is poorly written and crudely drawn, but comics don't have to be that way.

If you look at any medium, most of what you'll find is worthless but there is the occasional truly amazing thing out there. How many truly godawful movies does it take before we get one as good as [insert your choice for best movie ever]. How many comics are written before we read one as thoughtful and heartfelt as Maus or as complex, nuanced and intricate as Watchmen? Novels were originally treated as a worthless form of entertainment just like video games are today. I haven't done any research but I bet most art forms were not instantly accepted to be worthwhile and even then were still filled with worthless iterations.

It's amazing because the modern forms of cinema, television, video games and comics are all relatively new art forms and we get to live in a time where we can witness the growth of them. It's a time when change is sweeping us and it's going to take a while before the general public gets on board.

One of these days, scholars will look at the origins of the art forms, perhaps asking students to slog through the primitive games of the past, looking for meaning and insight into culture. Even know, video games are quite diverse. The

games I play come from all over Europe, Japan and Korea, even such obscure countries as Croatia. There's something awesome here and at some point, we'll all accept it as great but until then, it's our art form to love and cherish.

- Ayavaron

In response to "Why Do We Bother" from The Escapist Forum: I'm I worked in the game industry for 8 years right out of college. I've always loved the diversion from real life. That's all it really is, a diversion. There are artistic merits within the diversion, but none that really benefit anything outside of the diversion itself. We've seen games crossover to other diversions like movies and books, but essentially provide the same benefits in a different medium. I cannot make the case for this diversion to others. It's similar to when I try to explain to non-hockey enthusiasts why I like the sport of hockey. Just because I tell someone what I like, doesn't make it any more palatable to that person. Oftentimes what we enjoy comes from early experiences that leave positive

impressions in our mind, so we spend the rest of our lives in that comfort zone.

- bduff

In response to "Fei Long and Justin Wong " from The Escapist Forum: "You had to be there." Maybe that is true after all because I fail to understand how you reached your conclusion. While your premises are interesting, and investigation nationalism and racism is

always important, you have made out the different categories to be monolithic.

I think the burden is still on you to show that racial or national allegiance is a key factor in elite competitive gaming (XBox Live, along with WoW, is another story). It's my experience that the Daigo fan club cuts across racial and national demographics. Or is Diago's play style an exception to the rule? I think the reason why so many robotic, precise and methodical players crop up is that the game mechanics make it so effective. We only get to see the elite Japanese players, and they leave a skewed view. If we go to Japan we'll probably find just as many cocky, flashy, and impatient players bubbling beneath the elite. And they are more popular than the Justin counterparts. That's my impression anyway.

My point is that you might be over analyzing this. Sure gamers are conscious of race but we are a lot more conscious of skill. And because we play face to face, the other stereotypes that we might have had about race fade away with increased camaraderie. Or did I miss something? Was the EVO audience predominantly made up of Japanese players cheering their own?

- donquixote

In response to "Fei Long and Justin Wong " from The Escapist Forum:
Being an "Asian-American", myself; I think the assertion of two view points "American vs. Asian", seems a bit narrow in context of the event, EVO 2004. I was there to witness the action and entered a tournament or two. Although, there were a few dissenters among the audience, a good vibe was generally expressed amid the competitors and spectators. I presume a varying degree of inclinations incurred instead.

A bit more background information should be given to readers about Justin Wong, and the warring opinions of "The East Coast vs West Coast" that plagues the competition. Between the fighting game communities, therein lies its own rivalries. In a particular game, MVC2, the competition is fierce within the U.S and Americans can claim to be victors. Most followers of the scene are quite familiar with the escapades of Justin Wong and his cohorts whom reside over in the eastern side of US. Brought with them

was the challenge of besting the side with the most wins and a younger king, if you will, who has yet to be dethroned. Now compound that with legions that clamor for his defeat and you can see the passionate outbursts of their reactions.

However, the points you bring up our astounding, be it bad or good, your article gives some knowledgeable insight into the many different social issues in the melting pot that is America. And it's great to see some different commentary on the theme within the industry.

- Gnomey

One of the most fascinating presentations at this year's Game Developer Conference was given by a man I'd never heard of whose game, hasn't even been released in the United States. The presentation "Making Games for the Other 90%," chronicled the process of developing a game that would sell millions of copies, establish a franchise and get people who'd never picked up a controller to play a video game. The game was considered a joke when it debuted at E3 in 2005, but today, David Amor, Creative Director at UK-based Relentless Software, and developer of the best-selling PS2 title of 2005, is the one laughing - all the way to the bank.

BUSINESS casual

by Russ Pitts

Released for the PS2 in 2005, *Buzz!: The Music Quiz* is, in every sense of the word, a casual game. Packaged with four brightly-colored buzzer peripherals, the game allows up to four players to participate in the equivalent of a game show in their own living room, using the buzzers to, well, buzz in with their answers. David Amor says that when they set out to develop *Buzz!*, they originally wanted to make an artful game with a unique, almost visionary design, involving a "crazy alien game show host," a cactus for a hostess and a singing clam. "I don't know what we were smoking," he says. What they made instead was a game which, at the request of Sony, the game's publisher, was "more like television."

"And I think it was the right decision," says Amor. "I think we have a tendency to add more complexity where it's not necessary. … We had to be brave in a way to say … we think people will be happy with [simplicity]."

Running counter to what seems to be common sense (in this industry), Relentless held back, safeguarded the envelope and released a game with very little inspiration, almost no "verve" and

scored a near instant hit. Yet the game, unsurprisingly, received very little fanfare in the gaming press, and the company's showing at the E3 trade show in 2005 generated little buzz, if you will.

"Nobody really cared about [*Buzz*]," says Amor. "For some reason it's considered an un-sexy thing to be doing." Un-sexy perhaps, but profitable. In spite of negative, almost ireful reviews ("Buzz? Snore."), *Buzz!* had a strong retail showing upon release, and literally cleaned up over the 2005 holiday season.

"[*Buzz!* was] Sony's biggest-selling title of 2005 … and way up there in 2006," Amor says. "[We] sold over 4 million units of the *Buzz!* franchise … in its first 15 months. So by any measure it's a successful title."

"Wildly Successful"
In his presentation at GDC, David Amor outlined the characteristics of games that appeal to the mass market. Among them: **familiarity**, **simplicity** and **approachability.** Amor (as well as an increasingly large number of high-profile developers) believes that most games are too complex and too intimidating for non-gamers.

"People have a low threshold for wanting to find out how games work," says Amor. "When you create a game that has a new set of rules and spend a tutorial explaining how it works that's a very intimidating thing to have to do. I think if you make something that people know about already then you don't have to teach them so much."

This may be news to some developers, but not to web-based game developers like New York based Arkadium, one of a growing number of companies making so-called advergames, small, web-based games designed to promote and popularize a product and be fun at the same time. Their site, greatdaygames. com, which doubles as their portfolio and catalog, features over 100 small, efficient web-based games, many of which are quite capable of laying waste to an entire afternoon.

"As a whole there is this ... demographic for the 'not-hardcore' gamer," says Arkadium's Director of Game Production, Jeremy Mayes. "I think of my mom all the time. She emails me links [saying] 'Check this out. I played this for hours.' That sort of thing."

According to the IGDA's Casual Gaming Whitepaper, more people should listen to Mayes's mom. Almost 40 percent of people in America play computer games, and the majority of these gamers play casual games. 70 percent of them are women.

"If you make a game fun enough and addictive enough," says Mayes, "not only do [users] stay longer and longer, but they also tell their friends about it." Which is exactly the point. Game designers, like David Amor, call this word of mouth. But advertisers call it "going viral." When a game or advertisement reaches a critical mass of popularity, and friends of friends of friends start telling their friends about it too, you've scored a hit, whether you're selling the game or hawking the product it's attached to. Before long, you've reached the mass market.

"[Advergaming] is wildly successful," says Mayes, and he should know. Arkadium recently signed a deal with The Hearst Corporation, to create online games for potentially every single one of Hearst's publications, including *Cosmo, Redbook, Harper's Bazaar, Esquire,* and

Teen. "If you look at companies who have no experience with advergames, but they're used to more typical forms of advertising, they're used to spending millions of dollars [on traditional advertising]. But this kind of advertising only holds a user's attention for possibly fifteen seconds, if that. [Advergaming is] so much more robust and engaging, they'll hold a user's attention for fifteen minutes, 30 minutes, an hour and the whole time they're being exposed to your brand and all your products. It's a really sticky form of advertising."

Wild Tangent agrees. Founded in 1998 by Alex St. John, one of the architects of Microsoft's DirectX, Wild Tangent has since been making its name, like Arkadium, in the advergaming and casual game sphere. And making it big.

"[Traditional publishers] are in the movie business," says Dave Madden, Executive Vice President of Wild Tangent. "We're in the TV business. We're a middle man." A middle man perhaps, but with high ambitions. Wild Tangent, according to their own website, was named the 5th most popular online game property by comScore Media Metrix and if you buy a

new PC this year, chances are you'll also be buying a Wild Tangent game. Over 85 percent of all new PCs ship with the Wild Tangent game client pre-installed, giving users instant access to Wild Tangent's vast library of web-based games, and Wild Tangent access to you. Wild Tangent, according to Madden, is out for nothing less than "ownership of the desktop," and if 85 percent can be considered a majority stake, one would have to argue that they've made it.

"**What people really want is the same thing as last time, but with new [content].**"

According to IGDA's whitepaper, the advergaming market will account for over $500 million in advertising and sponsorship revenues by 2008, and casual games as a whole over $2 billion, which is more than the GDP of a significant number of westernized nations. To say casual games, therefore, are taking over the world, would not be too far from the truth. To say they're taking over the industry would be even closer.

"The Other 90 Percent"
"Web development is so fast," says Arkadium's Tom Rassweiler. "You can have an idea - a simple idea that's totally out of the box - and have a prototype to test in two days. [By contrast] we were talking to somebody one who was working for a long time on this game that they knew probably wasn't going to work, but they [had to] get it further. … And there's pressure from the top and it's already in production … talking about this 10-month development schedule for a game that they know isn't any good."

That kind of pressure is all too familiar to anyone who's worked in the trenches of traditional game development, but web-based casual games, for the most part, have eliminated a lot of that pressure. Whereas the typical blockbuster game (Like *Gears of War*) may take anywhere from 18 months to several years and millions of dollars to develop, casual games, by contrast, average only a few months, and a fraction of a million dollars. But that doesn't make them any less compelling or any less fun. Again, judging by the numbers alone, one would have to argue the exact opposite.

"You have to be super disciplined," says David Amor, "and say 'what people really want is the same thing as last time, but with new [content].'" And that's exactly what his company gives them. Since the 2005 release of *Buzz*, Relentless has developed and shipped two more entries in the franchise, each using the same big, red buzzer peripherals, and they're currently at work on a fourth title in the series. The original, *Buzz! The Music Quiz*, is still selling at full price, more than a year after its release. Most games only last a few months at full retail.

"I think if you looked at the way [*Buzz!*] sold," says Amor, "it was bought by

people who don't normally play games and played by people who don't play games. … The other 90 percent of people - people that don't play games - are ready to play games."

Amor admits he pulled this percentage out of "thin air," but he's not far off, and he's also not the only developer thinking in those terms. The legendary Warren Spector, who's long championed a refinement of what some might consider "high-brow" game design, targeting gamers who prefer deeper, more complex, story-based games, also recognizes that the future of gaming lies in the hands of people who wouldn't play *System Shock* in a million years.

"We've got to sell a lot more copies or we aren't going to be able to make games anymore," said Spector at his GDC lecture titled "The Future of Storytelling in Next-Gen Development." "If giving people what we already give them was enough, all of those non-gamers - which is most of the world - would already be gamers."

"We reach such a tiny amount of people when we make video games," agrees

Amor. "If you bring along the right game, people are going to buy it."

But what's the right game? For Amor's Relentless it was a quiz game that looked - and played - like a TV show; a game people could identify with because it was at once familiar, simple and accessible. "These kinds of games are more important than *Gears of War*," says Amor. "These are games your girlfriend buys. It'd be depressing to think we keep making the same games for the same set of people forever."

Spector agrees. "How can we be satisfied letting players jump from cover point to cover point so they can kill somebody?" he asks. His vision of the future involves iconic characters and meaningful stories. A world and design in which a talented storyteller can create something unique. Spector is currently espousing simpler, cheaper design techniques in favor of putting more resources behind story and actual game design.

"If we start making games that appeal to non-gamers," says Amor. "Then those people will eventually start playing more sophisticated games, more story-based

games. I absolutely believe that if you really think about those people … then I think that they will buy the games that we make." 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.*

"These are the games your girlfriend buys."

PLAYABLE BY Everybody: POPCAP BRANCHES OUT

by Shannon Drake

PopCap Games built an empire on a legion of casual gamers, feeding simple but addictive titles like *Zuma* and *Bejeweled* to a nation of people looking for something easy and fun to play. Their recent release of *Bookworm Adventures Deluxe* came as a surprise: A $700,000 budget and two and a half years of work is the kind of heavy lifting PopCap usually shies away from. *Bookworm Adventures Deluxe* combined an impressively-polished homage to RPGs with the clickability and fun of **Popcap's** own *Bookworm* seemed to indicate a new sort of direction for the company.

Jason Kapalka is "one of the three co-founders of PopCap (along with Brian Fiete and John Vechey), and the Creative Director of the company, which means I oversee the design of all the games to make sure they're up to PopCap standards." He says *Bookworm Adventures Deluxe* didn't start out as the epic project it wound up becoming. Putting all that effort into a single game "wasn't entirely a conscious choice," he said. "As with most of our games, *Bookworm Adventures* started as a rough prototype — originally called *Spellcraft* — which featured more traditional wizards and monsters, along with the spelling mechanic." After

completing some initial work on the game, the team decided, "maybe it would be fun to put Lex from *Bookworm* into the game, at which point, it really seemed to gel." However, turning their game into an epic RPG required something they hadn't considered: "a lot of content. Lots of monsters, lots of levels, lots of 'stuff,' and that's what ended up consuming so much time for us."

PopCap isn't used to epic-level development, he said. They usually work with small teams, "one programmer, one artist, one game designer, and *BAD* was pretty much along those lines, with a couple extra artists on contract, which is why it took so long." He called the $700,000 figure "a little approximate," saying, "We don't really keep track of game budgets in that way, usually." **PopCap** usually doesn't "have big teams working on games in the traditional game-company fashion." Usually, they go with a different model, using "a lot of smaller teams working on a bunch of games simultaneously. We spend a lot of time prototyping and testing, and throw out quite a few games if they're not fun enough, so that kind of 'R&D' does add up, in terms of costs. We hope it's worthwhile, in that we want PopCap to

have a reputation for only releasing really good titles." With that said, *Bookworm Adventures Deluxe* is "the largest game we've released to date, and I think it does represent a higher bar for polish and content than we've previously had, so the challenge now is to make sure that all our future titles live up to and surpass the bar."

The game itself was a small team effort, but it quickly became a labor of love. "I put together the original spec for the game," Jason said, "but fairly early on in development, it became a labor of love for a couple other people, who really made the game [what] it is today: Tysen Henderson, who was the producer and artist, and Jeff Weinstein, the programmer." *BAD* shows a real love for RPGs and the tropes of the genre, as might be expected from a group of people Jason describes as "pretty big fans of obscure RPGs, and even more obscure/convoluted games. … So, yes, a lot of the stuff in *BAD* is an homage to more traditional roleplaying games. We just wanted to make sure it retained an ease of use and accessibility and didn't slide off into obscurity and excess complexity, so a great deal of effort went into making sure

all the more complex RPG mechanics were introduced very gradually."

While some were surprised to see the PopCap crew trying out a different genre, the company itself doesn't "see *Bookworm Adventures* as a departure from our core mission at all, really." He says they've "always been more interested in trying out different things, [rather] than in just milking a formula to death. We've only done one sequel so far, after all [*Bejeweled 2*], where we could have probably been pumping out *Zuma 5* by now. Our earlier shoot-em-up game, *Heavy Weapon*, is certainly more of a 'serious' game than *BAD*, I think, in that it's definitely aimed more at a traditional audience for violent games."

Right around the time of the interview, I'd noticed PopCap games popping up on Steam — one of the homes for that traditional audience for violent games. He says they'd worked with "lots of portals and publishers, like Real Arcade, MSN Games, Yahoo Games, Shockwave and so on, so doing something with Steam seemed like a logical extension." He adds, "The interesting thing here is seeing the overlap between supposedly hardcore gamers — the *Half-Life 2* crowd

— and the 'casual' space, which you're also seeing on Xbox Live Arcade, where you have people who bought a $400 game system using it to play Bejeweled or *Zuma*." For all that's made of the hardcore-casual divide, he thinks "there are fewer differences between these two crowds than people think. They've both just gotten used to different channels for getting their games. If you're a hardcore console gamer, well, until recently, there simply was no way you could find even a light puzzle game for your system."

Something else PopCap is trying is an open-source toolkit, offered freely as part of the PopCap Developer Program, intended to make it easier for aspiring developers to make games. I asked him if this was a blue-sky thing, or simply another avenue to look to for submissions. "Honestly, we're not very aggressive about publishing other people's games," he says. "The Developer Program is not at all about luring people in. Brian Fiete, our CTO and the author of the PopCap framework, just wanted to make these tools available to new developers."

The framework would give them "a leg up in getting started, so they might

> **"the company itself doesn't "see Bookworm Adventures as a departure from our core mission at all, really." He says they've "always been more interested in TRYING out DIFFERENT THINGS, [rather] than in just MILKING a formula TO DEATH.""**

focus on creating cool new games, and not on refining technical stuff and chasing bugs." While he acknowledges it helps PopCap, he says that help is indirect, "by hopefully raising the quality bar for the whole casual games industry." Not all developers believe in their benign intentions, he says. "A fair number of developers are still suspicious of this and can't believe the PopCap framework doesn't have some sneaky catch built in, whereby they'll be beholden to us, or we'll have the rights to seize their game or something. But it really is pretty much free to use, with no obligations."

Aspiring developers should note, though: "We very rarely look at a submission if it's just in the idea stage. Ideas are a dime a dozen, really, and it's very hard to be able to tell if something in this vein will be fun, just by looking at a proposal. Try writing up a description of *Tetris* or Bejeweled, and show it to someone not familiar with the game. It's just incomprehensible." However, once games have reached the prototype stage, they're quite willing to look. "A number of our games are co-development efforts we've done with external people that started at this stage. *Insaniquarium* and *Chuzzle*, for instance. These were games that an external

developer had gotten to a playable stage, which we thought we could help refine and polish, and then publish and market. It has to be something pretty amazing for us to pick [it] up, though, at least in potential. We're not likely to publish something that's just a derivative of one of our own titles."

PopCap's goal, in their own games and the ones they get from others, is to make games "playable by everybody, from my mom to an oil rig welder to traditional videogamers. We can't

guarantee that everybody will like every game, but we want to minimize all the hurdles that prevent people from enjoying a title, [like] nasty interfaces, high difficulty curves, unintuitive gameplay and so on." He describes the ideal PopCap game as "timeless or evergreen, like *Monopoly* or *Tetris*. It should be just as fun and playable five years from now as it is today."

As for the company itself, they're "doing [their] best to make [their] games as universally available as possible, from

the web to PC retail, to cell phones, to Xboxes and so on. So, that's one angle for PopCap, expanding in different formats and channels." When it comes to new games, *Bookworm Adventures Deluxe* is only the beginning of their dabbling. "We're definitely experimenting with some unusual new genres that aren't usually thought of as 'casual.' At the same time, we're continuing with more traditional puzzle games." He's unwilling to give out hints, saying it's all "very hush-hush right now." But in the next couple of years, "you'll be seeing some really strange things from us." He won't predict their success or failure, he says, "but it should be interesting either way!" COMMENTS

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

> "PopCap's goal is to make games "playable by everybody, from MY MOM TO AN OIL RIG WELDER to traditional videogamers.""

The Gamer Within

by Sean Sands

My wife, a gamer so casual she's the boxers and T-shirt to my three-piece business suit of gaming, was one of the half dozen or so people on the planet who absolutely loved *Black & White*. In the six years since the game's release, she still speaks fondly of her once kind and benevolent cow, a pleasant beast I inadvertently shuffled to an untimely oblivion during a hard drive wipe. Whenever *Black & White* comes up in a discussion, my bovinicide is rarely omitted.

But during the weeks when she and her cow tripped the digital fandango, she was beguiled by the kind of hardcore gamer mania normally reserved for MMOG addicts and people who play *Bejeweled*. She would find excuses to settle in front of the computer and drag her obedient herbivore endlessly through the game space, as I was left in the unusual position of wondering when I was going to be allowed to play *Diablo II*.

Eventually she moved on and settled back into the familiar routine of ignoring games. I had briefly entertained the notion that my wife was an unrealized closet gamer, but as weeks became months, then years, I figured her addiction to *Black & White* was an aberration. Until, that is, I introduced her to Live Arcade and games like *Hexic*, *Uno* and the great time-killer *Lumines* Live!.

As she managed an endless flow of descending squares, I saw in her a glimpse of the feral gamer. *Lumines* was the full moon to her lycanthropic gamer side, and to see it revealed was both startling and glorious. In a moment of inspiration, I decided to see if I could draw the hardcore gamer from within her. Looking back, this may have been similar to what my wife thought the time she took me to swing dance classes.

Whether it was an experiment or an attempted indoctrination I'm not sure, but I resolved to introduce my wife to three popular games from the past couple years. She agreed with encouraging enthusiasm.

Game 1 – *World of Warcraft*
She took her seat at my computer, a cup of hot cocoa by her side and an eager expression on her face. After 10 minutes of character creation, her dwarf Hunter entered the world and spawned into a snowy village where her avatar manifested on top of a gnome whose user had apparently abandoned his

keyboard. My wife's brain tried to interpret the oddity of two people occupying the same space, and in her confusion wrinkled her nose, glanced at me and asked, "Is that guy trying to give me a blowjob or something." It was an inauspicious start.

While I described the controls another question erupted for which I was not prepared. "Wait," she said. "I have to type moving?"

"Well, yeah."

I directed her toward her first quest, and she lumbered around like a drunk in a skating rink. The quest was standard MMOG fare: Kill some wolves and collect their pelts for purposes both mysterious and probably grotesque. She read the text. "Why am I supposed to kill wolves?"

"Because that guy asked you to," I said. I purposely avoided the more genuine answer, which was that killing wolves would let her accumulate experience and items, so she could become stronger and go on to kill even more, and bigger wolves. The tickle of a salient point poked at the back of my mind, but I shoved it back in a box before it took hold.

"Well, what if I don't want to kill things? I mean, what else can I do?"

"You're a Hunter. It's kind of your thing."

"Oh. What if I wanted to start over and be one of the guys who heals? Can I go around healing wolves instead?"

"No, you'd just be healing the guys who are killing the wolves, or yourself, while, well, you know."

Eventually she conceded and set herself to the task. One of the wolf corpses that surrounded her dropped a pair of gloves, and I was grateful she simply accepted the fact without wondering what a wolf was doing with clothing.

"You know, it's nice that when I shoot these things they just come helpfully over, so I can kill them some more," she said, as another player wandered past and challenged her to a duel. I explained what was happening, and she clicked the decline button in disgust. The character, a gnome Rogue, began helpfully clucking like a chicken. After she declined his request, the Rogue proceeded to jump in circles around her character, putting on the kind of display one might expect from an avian mating ritual. I told her she was being griefed, and then explained what that meant and directed

her back to town to turn in her quest and train up.

The griefer eventually lost interest, and when my wife asked why he had done those things, I again didn't have an answer. Every one of her questions revealed the dark truth of MMOGs: They simply make no sense. We moved on.

Game 2 – *Half-Life 2*
Following the concerns my wife expressed about the violent nature of *World of Warcraft* - the first time I'd heard such a complaint levied against the game - I worried about my second choice. So did she.

"Running around shooting things in the head doesn't sound like fun."

"At least it's not wolves, this time."

I hoped *Half-Life 2*'s mostly non-violent beginning might surprise her. I never really held much hope that we might eventually enjoy long, passionate nights of toilet-toss in deathmatch, but if there was a game that might temper the scowl with which I am always greeted when she walks in on me playing an FPS, this was it.

> *Every one of her questions revealed the dark truth of MMOGs:* **THEY SIMPLY MAKE NO SENSE**.

She struggled with the controls again, but they seemed to make more sense to her than *WoW*'s third-person floating camera. She wandered off the train into City 17 and the bleak heart of a dystopian future. I showed her how to jump, and she skipped happily among refugees being shoved and intimidated by Combine soldiers with a gleeful "whee!"

I filled in some back story as the plot unfolded. She approached the train station's main terminal, and a guard knocked a can on the floor and demanded she pick it up. It was a scripted event I remembered annoying me. She glared at the screen, picked up the can and threw it at the guard's head with a confident "Fuck you!"

Oh, how I beamed.

The pace quickened after that, faster than her ability to control Gordon Freeman, and a number of unfortunate, if comical, deaths followed as she tried to navigate rooftops under the pressure of gunfire. Frustration set in, and the giddy gamer that had stepped off the train evaporated under the stress of combat.

The hour finished without her firing a single shot. This was, for her, the most surprising thing about *Half-Life 2*: She hadn't just been unleashing bullets into nameless faces, but instead had been coaxed into a world that she began to care about. But, in the adrenaline afterglow she said, "You know, the thing is, if I want to see something die I'll just turn on CNN. Playing a game, to me, is about forgetting all that."

Game 3 – *Civilization IV*
"I used to play *Civilization* way back," she said, and then told me the story every Civ player knows. It ends with, "And they told me it was 11:00, and I'd been playing for 10 hours! I couldn't believe it."

Don't I know it, babe.

Civilization, as it turns out, had been her first gaming love, and while she only played it a handful of times, each of those times had been for countless hours. As I sat her down in front of this last game I had the feeling it might be The One.

Not surprisingly, she settled on Gandhi as her leader and promptly set out on a

course of organized non-violence. Exploring, building temples, researching technologies like pottery and sailing - these were tasks that she could tackle in her own time and at her own speed. Following some brief explanations of the updated controls, she remained largely silent. Her eyes blinked less, her expression fixed itself into concentration and a smile played at the corner of her mouth with each tiny accomplishment.

Occasionally she would mutter something like, "*Wow*, look at the detail!" or, "Hey, those guys aren't going to attack Delhi, are they?" But the commentary was diminished compared to the other games as she played in the great sandbox of human history. She brought Buddhism to her people and rejected slavery. She built centers of learning and worship, but only enough troops to make her people feel safe from invasion. She sweated over each town's happiness and strove to fulfill their needs.

An hour passed in seconds, and when I called time I could tell she wanted more. There it was; the feral gamer lurked behind her green eyes. She crossed her arms over her chest and considered the screen for a few moments. I could see

her measuring the several accomplishments nearing completion: the growth of Delhi, the completion of the Oracle at Delphi, the last section of map that she wanted to uncover. Could she simply stop, leave those things undone, leave her infant civilization to its own devices?

"No, I should stop," she finally conceded. "I'd be here all night."

And that may be the only difference between the hardcore and the casual gamer: the ability to keep gaming from interfering with one's life. It is the difference between the guy who has some wine with friends and the bar fly on his ninth beer of the afternoon. When she rose from her chair and thanked me for the fun experiment, I realized that a casual gamer is all she would ever be. And I was fine with that.

Then, I heard the sound of *Lumines* Live! echo from the next room. COMMENTS

Sean Sands is a freelance writer, co-founder of Gamerswithjobs.com, and owns a small graphic design company near Minneapolis. He does not miss his stint in retail even a little.

"I should stop," she finally conceded. **"I'D BE HERE ALL NIGHT."**

Winds of Change

by Joe Blancato

After a friend of mine visited New Orleans, he didn't come back with much hope for the city. His stories were full of desolate spaces submerged in three feet of water, the poor being marginalized and tourists clogging the inhabitable areas like cholesterol in an artery. What's worse, much of what plagued New Orleans before Katrina stayed put. The legal system is still run by the good ol' boys. Police officers accosted young coeds in broad daylight and sat drunk in outdoor cafes in the French Quarter. And since much of the police force was concentrating on things other than fighting crime, the areas more damaged by hurricane Katrina have become third-world refugee camps.

He also said the food was amazing, and he can't wait to go back.

There's a certain breed drawn to the city, despite the graft, despite the crime, despite the fact it's under water. They're what's left of the cowboys, suffering nigh-equatorial weather and corruption for the sake of reviving a fallen city's culture.

And they build. Not just collapsed houses, but businesses and industries.

I spoke to one such builder, Ben Lewis, recent LSU graduate and marketing guy at Yatec Games. He's got big ideas, both for Louisiana and for gaming.

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The Escapist: What is Yatec? What does the company hope to accomplish?

Ben Lewis: Our main goal is to help build the entertainment industry in Louisiana. We're trying to build a film and game industry. For the company, we wanted to start off in casual games to kind of build up. We're looking into some boutique MMOGs and some bigger projects later on, in a few years.

TE: You're based in Baton Rouge, and you formed up post Katrina. Were you guys planning on making a game company before the hurricane?

BL: I think it was a combination of things. Dean Majoue - he's the President of the

company - he was looking to branch out a little bit. Then, after Katrina happened, he really wanted to get involved in bringing permanent jobs back into Louisiana. And the digital media tax incentives we have here in Louisiana will give developers 20 percent tax credits on every dollar they spend - same thing for film.

TE: Are you involved in the community at all?

BL: Yeah, a bunch of us are members of the IGDA, and we're working with other companies like Turbo Squid and GameCamp, trying to set up a kids' camp in Austin and Louisiana. Trying to partner up with some new people and get the community thing going again. There's a couple more conferences coming up in Louisiana, the Red Stick Animation Festival and another one in Lafayette, and we'll have a presence there, just trying to get the message out.

TE: How is that going so far? A lot of people must have scattered after the hurricane.

BL: It's kinda tough, since there really is no industry here, there's a lot of people enthusiastic about getting into the industry. But there was really no studio here before for people to go to, so a lot of people would just go out of state. There is enthusiasm there, [though].

The IGDA chapter shut down a couple years ago. Now that there's a couple companies here building it up, hopefully it should be going pretty well by the end of the year.

TE: What is Louisiana's appeal?

BL: The tax credits offer a lot. The word is slowly getting out. I know Austin and Georgia are also doing tax incentives. It's really tough. Development communities are really already there in Austin and Seattle, so that's been our biggest focus. Trying to bring people in with incentives. It's a good, low-cost place to live and work. Like, Lafayette for instance - a lot of people don't know what a really high-tech, driven city it is. It's a slow process, but the state does have a lot to offer, especially if you're doing any type of digital media.

TE: The company's about page says you're currently hiring and trying to ramp to team up to 30 in the next couple years. Do you plan on growing slowly?

BL: It's in line with the vision that we're staying casual for now, and as we get bigger, we're going to be adding more people. Say we're going to be doing an MMOG within the next year or so ... we're definitely going to need more than we have right now. Eventually we do intend to grow the team quite a bit. We're actually building a new office right now to fit more people.

TE: Do you plan on working on one game at a time with the larger team, or do you want to have multiple teams doing multiple things?

BL: You have to split it up. We have three projects going on right now. The great thing about casual games is small budgets, quick dev times. You can't have 12 people working on a game at once.

> "there really is **NO INDUSTRY** here"

Every time PopCap puts a game out, we say, "WOW, THEY NAILED IT."

You'll have art styles clashing against each other and everything. So we break it into smaller teams. It's usually two to four people per project now. Our last [project] took about five months.

I wish I could talk [more about what we're doing], but we do have a couple projects that are in the early stages. One of them is a boutique MMOG kinda thing. Actually, that would be blending an MMOG and an [alternate reality game], but the casual stuff would be separate. The casual stuff is a stepping stone for us.

TE: The whole office recently got addicted to PopCap's *Bookworm Adventures Deluxe*. They really did something interesting by merging more traditional gaming elements into a casual game. Is that something you look at and say, "That's what we want to do"?

BL: Every time PopCap puts a game out, we say, "Wow, they nailed it." One of our things is whenever we try to figure out, how should this sound, how should this look, it's like, "Well, what would PopCap do?"

They've never put out a blatantly bad game, but their budgets are pretty crazy, because they can afford it. They're bringing in millions a year. ... There's no way we would spend two years getting a casual game just right, because we don't have the budget for it. ... But, man, if we had the budget, we could really do something like that. It'd be great.

TE: Yatec has one game out now, *Enchanted Garden*. Could you tell us a bit about it?

BL: It was our first foray into the casual gaming space, so we were looking into themes [to see] what we could do to really resonate with the people who play these games. We were at Casuality in 2006, up in Seattle, thinking up ideas. We had gotten the game mechanic down; we were already prototyping it back at the office. And we remember seeing that the top five interests of ... the core, female audience ... were pets, shopping, arts and crafts, gardening, and travel. Alright, well, gardening, OK.

So we built in the Garden Builder. Every five levels, depending on how well you did - it's kind of like a *Diner Dash* model - if you get all five gold medals in five levels, you go to this high-res garden, and you can add new upgrades, and kinda tweak things, and get a better looking fountain, and stuff like that.

As we were making the game - it's mostly guys in our 20s - so it's really hard to figure out what women over 35 really want to get in these games. When we were making the game, it felt like a fun little diversion, but when we went to beta testers, [garden building] was pretty much their favorite part of the game.

TE: *You say that* casual games are a stepping stone for Yatec. Are they fun to work on, or are you guys grinding now to get to the fun stuff later?

BL: It's actually really fun. It's surprising. Except for Heather, our lead artist, it's all guys in their mid-20s. ... A lot of times we're just sitting there, like, "What is the player going to do?" It's kind of like the Wild West for us. It's

just, like, games that we don't really play, so it's a new area for us to get into.

TE: As the core gaming group gets older and they start getting married and having kids, do you think the casual space is going to grow, and they'll demand different types of games?

BL: Xbox Live Arcade helps that a lot. I know guys that are younger than me and they play Zuma and … they're excited about [Eetz]. There's people looking forward to the casual games on Live Arcade more than the hardcore demos that come out there. It's driving younger players to get used to casual games. Live Arcade is really helping the demographic find casual games. I'm 25, and I'd like to think of myself as a hardcore gamer, but you're right, I don't have time to play them anymore. … I think by the next generation, casual games won't be called casual games anymore. It'll just be people playing games.

TE: Thanks for your time, Ben.

BL: Thanks a lot!

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When I first heard about Yatec Games and their goal of bringing the gaming industry to southern Louisiana, my first response was one of bemusement. Why in God's name would a bunch of computer geeks ever wish to move to a place that's one more natural disaster away from *Beyond Thunderdome*? But after speaking to Lewis, I think I know why. New Orleans and the places around it are a mass of potential, waiting to be shaped into something new. It's a blank slate waiting for new inhabitants to make their mark. Who better to build a world than the people who create them for a living? [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.

> it's mostly guys in our 20s - so it's really hard to figure out **WHAT WOMEN** over 35 really **WANT** to get in these games.

THE FUTURE OF MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ISN'T YOU

by Richard Aihoshi

The future of massively multiplayer isn't you. Or me. Or anyone else who's a serious fan of the genre as we hardcore gamers know it. Don't get me wrong. We're **part of** the future, but we're not **the** future. Not if the genre is to grow enough to approach mainstream status.

Why is this, you ask? How can someone who has logged thousands of hours in dozens of online worlds possibly think like this? Well, it's pretty straightforward. There simply aren't enough people willing to spend the time playing day after day, week after week, month after month, to sustain rapid, ongoing growth in just the hardcore segment. Sure, our ranks are increasing, but not nearly quickly enough to support the kind of broader audience expansion I foresee over the coming years.

This means massively multiplayer gaming will have to attract other types of users, not just more like those of us who are already familiar with *World of Warcraft* and *EverQuest*.

Lord of the Rings Online, *Age of Conan* and other games that build upon popular brands will certainly expand the market,

but these newcomers will still only tap into a miniscule proportion of the greater potential audience, which is anyone with a PC and an internet connection. Many of them are "casual" gamers, ranging from those who buy a game or two a year to those who just play free ones. And no, the vast majority won't make the jump to MMOGs targeted directly at hardcore players.

Mike Goslin is Vice President of the Walt Disney Internet Group's Virtual Reality Studio. He was one of the principals on *Toontown Online* and is presently focused on *Pirates of the Caribbean Online*, which is approaching launch. Both of these MMOGs target non-traditional audience segments, children and teens respectively. He's clearly a believer. "I agree with the premise. The only thing that I would add is that we can [either] wait for the audience for games to diversify and have this audience begin to demand more diverse games, or we can create more diverse games and accelerate the process."

While the game industry is moving in the direction of the mass market, Disney has been there for many years. Its VR Studio

was initially set up to create interactive virtual reality attractions for the company's theme parks, which draw, well, pretty much everyone. Their operations went online as far back as 1999, when Disney first started thinking about *Toontown.* "We had the idea that we could use our theme park skills to create a similar experience for the home by developing MMOGs," Goslin says. "It seemed natural to us to continue developing for the broad theme park audience that we already knew, and we thought it would enable us to do something different from the other games in the genre."

I asked whether the current crop of online worlds has reached its potential, in terms of audience. Goslin says Disney's "point of view is that a 'mass market' is both large and diverse. I don't believe there are many MMOGs out there that appeal broadly to kids and parents, male and female, and young and old." As for how to attract such groups, he's clear in saying "we need a much wider variety of gameplay, themes, settings and stories available in the marketplace, and these games need to be much, much easier to pick up and start playing."

Daniel Huebner, who works on Linden Labs' *Second Life*, agrees. In his opinion, "the fierce competition in MMOG development has created a plethora of niche themes, but far less differentiation in the experience itself." He also sees the potential to capture a much larger user base, though it's unrealized. "The worlds offered online are rich and fascinating, and the presence of actual, living human beings with whom someone might interact give these worlds the potential to be far more compelling and immersive than traditional media - but the experience is still too constrained."

Huebner says although certain current properties qualify as "social phenomena," none are mass market. "There is something about the nature of the experience that is holding it back. *Star Wars*, as a brand, is as mass appeal as one could hope for; but *Galaxies* didn't bring a vast new audience to MMOGs. Certainly, the age range of gamers is broadening; there are parents playing *World of Warcraft*, but how many grandparents? Genders are certainly not equally represented."

These games need to be much, much easier to pick up and start playing.

Second Life, Linden Lab's virtual world, isn't a game in the conventional sense. Huebner doesn't call it one, although he does say, "The ways in which the virtual world presents itself, and mechanisms for interacting with that world, are very game-like. ... [However,] *Second Life* doesn't offer up a neatly packaged theme or plot, so we've never been able to fall back on the kinds of built-in audiences that gravitate toward sci-fi, fantasy or licensed titles. Our target audience is those who are restless, self-motivated, creative and tenacious."

While hardcore online gamers often possess these qualities, so do many others. Goslin thinks "the big difference between casual and hardcore gamers is the amount of time they are willing to invest. To attract the former, you have to get them engaged faster, because their time is limited. Once they're playing, however, the game needs to be challenging, deep and fun, if you want them to continue. If you succeed in creating a game that's challenging, deep and fun for a casual player, it will likely also be fun for a hardcore gamer."

Similarly, Huebner believes virtual worlds and other non-games can appeal to hardcore gamers, although in different ways. In the case of *Second Life*, he cites "deeper interaction, more robust relationships, fewer social and creative restraints, and the ability to contribute to the building of a world rather than simply its consumption."

In the creation-consumption vein, the future of MMOGs will also include new ways to monetize them. Most of the major Western publishers are sticking with box sales plus monthly subscriptions, but from a business point of view, this single-minded approach is self-limiting: A lot of people aren't comfortable paying $15 a month for a game. But it's only a matter of time until someone makes a lot of money - and opens the demographic floodgate - without charging players a monthly fee.

The future of the genre will be defined by the decisions developers make now. MMOGs used to be created by the hardcore, for the hardcore, but as the audience continues broadening toward the middle, the hardcore will represent a shrinking proportion of players. Like digital pioneers, the hardcore will see the fertile lands they discovered filled by the less intrepid from all walks of life, and those new souls will only push the old guard forward, past the horizon. Who knows what they'll find? `COMMENTS`

Richard Aihoshi blurred the line between work and play in another way. Several years ago, his hobby, computer games, turned into a career writing about them, primarily the massively multiplayer and roleplaying genres. An online poker player for about a year, he claims to be ahead overall but admits he makes far too little even to dream about playing for a living.

It's only a matter of time until someone makes a lot of money - and opens the demographic floodgate - without charging players a monthly fee.

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