the escapist

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Editor's choice

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

We've reached a major milestone: Today is Issue 100. Thanks to all those of you who have been around since the beginning, and a warm welcome to those who are new to the fold.

Over these last 100 weeks, we've heard from a lot of people on a weekly basis wishing to write for the magazine. Some just like the magazine's style and want to be involved. Sometimes, they've already looked at our editorial calendar and have an issue in particular for which they'd like to write. And some come forward with fully fleshed out pitches or articles, great ideas, but not at all related to our calendar.

It is these orphan articles which cause us the most difficulty. You see, we're suckers for a great article, but we have designed, and love, our editorial calendar. It is the foundation upon which the whole of *The Escapist* is built. However, we have learned in our 100 issues of publishing *The Escapist* that sometimes it is best to have a little flexibility built into the mix.

It is this need for flexibility that has brought forth the recurring Editor's Choice issues you'll find scattered throughout the calendar. These issues are literally a mix of some of our favorite Homeless Articles over the last few months – and this one is no exception.

This week, O'Hale returns pondering the inspiration for games over the years and how those changing inspirations are changing our play experiences. Howard Wen interviews Curt Vendel, keeper of the Atari legacy. Kyle Orland discusses the disappearance of the game over screen and that entails. And Corvus Elrod shares how his company may have backed into a Right Way to build a game design studio. Find these articles and more in this issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Response to "West Virginia's Health Revolution" from The Escapist Forum: Let's hope the conclusions of this study reflect Ryan's answers, because I think Murphy has it badly wrong. DDR is *more fun* for these kids. It's that simple.

Traditional team sports are often extremely badly "designed" (insofar as they're designed at all) for promoting exercise. As a kid I saw most sports as violent and offering little worthwhile gameplay. And most team sports were structured in such a way that the weakest member of the team had little impact when they were playing well but a large impact when they screwed up. Not ideal, psychologically.

I have a kind of rather unlikely dream that progress in video game design may one day feed back into real-world team sports and people will start to design and play games that actually don't suck. That would be nice.

- Dom Camus

In Response to "Whyville: Saving the Children" from The Escapist Forum: Unfortunately, there is no one way to improve education. The fact of the matter is that kids are different: some of them will jump headfirst into mathematics and science, and others will

question why they have to be there at all. You can't apply the same solution to both of them, because either the kids who get it will feel stifled, or the kids who don't get it will feel lost, and eventually some of them are going to end up resentful of education as a whole. This is the price that we've paid for assuming that the worst thing that can happen in a kid's education is not, in fact, not being educated, but rather being made to feel segregated or inferior.

Things like this are excellent - it reminds me that there are still people out there who believe that kids naturally want to learn, and aren't afraid to look for answers to the question of why, if they like learning so much, they don't like doing it in school. Most of the "edutainment" I've seen has been poor as an example of entertainment, or as an example of a game, or both, but these people seem to be doing it right.

- Bongo Bill

In Response to "Plaintiff's Attorney in Player-IGE Lawsuit Speaks to The Escapist" from The Escapist Daily: I can't see Hernandez winning this lawsuit simply by the fact that the process of farming the gold falls well within the rules of the game. The act of camping spawn points or any other method of obtaining gold is what the game's about. **If IGE isn't farming the gold, it's a million other players.** Nothing will change with IGE out of the picture.

Richard, Hernandez's lawyer, uses the analogy of kicking the back of a moviegoer's seat. Um, yeah. Sure. Can I get a court injunction against all griefers and players in my way then? ;-)

IGE does the same thing that any other individual player does in the game at one point of another... so it must be because they are a large organized body that makes it worse, right? Guilds, anyone? Oh, right, it's about the money. So it's okay to camp a spawn point and ruin someone else's game as long as your not earning real money for it. That doesn't sound convincing enough to me. Am I missing something here?

Yes, IGE is breaking the licensing agreement with Blizzard, but that's with Blizzard, not Hernandez. I think Blizzard is not suing IGE for reasons that Hernandez's lawyer doesn't understand... or won't admit.

I have never played WoW, but I'm familiar enough with a variety of MMOs to understand that it's impossible to achieve an online utopia. Hernandez needs to have an intervention... there's more to life than *WoW*.

- Echolocating
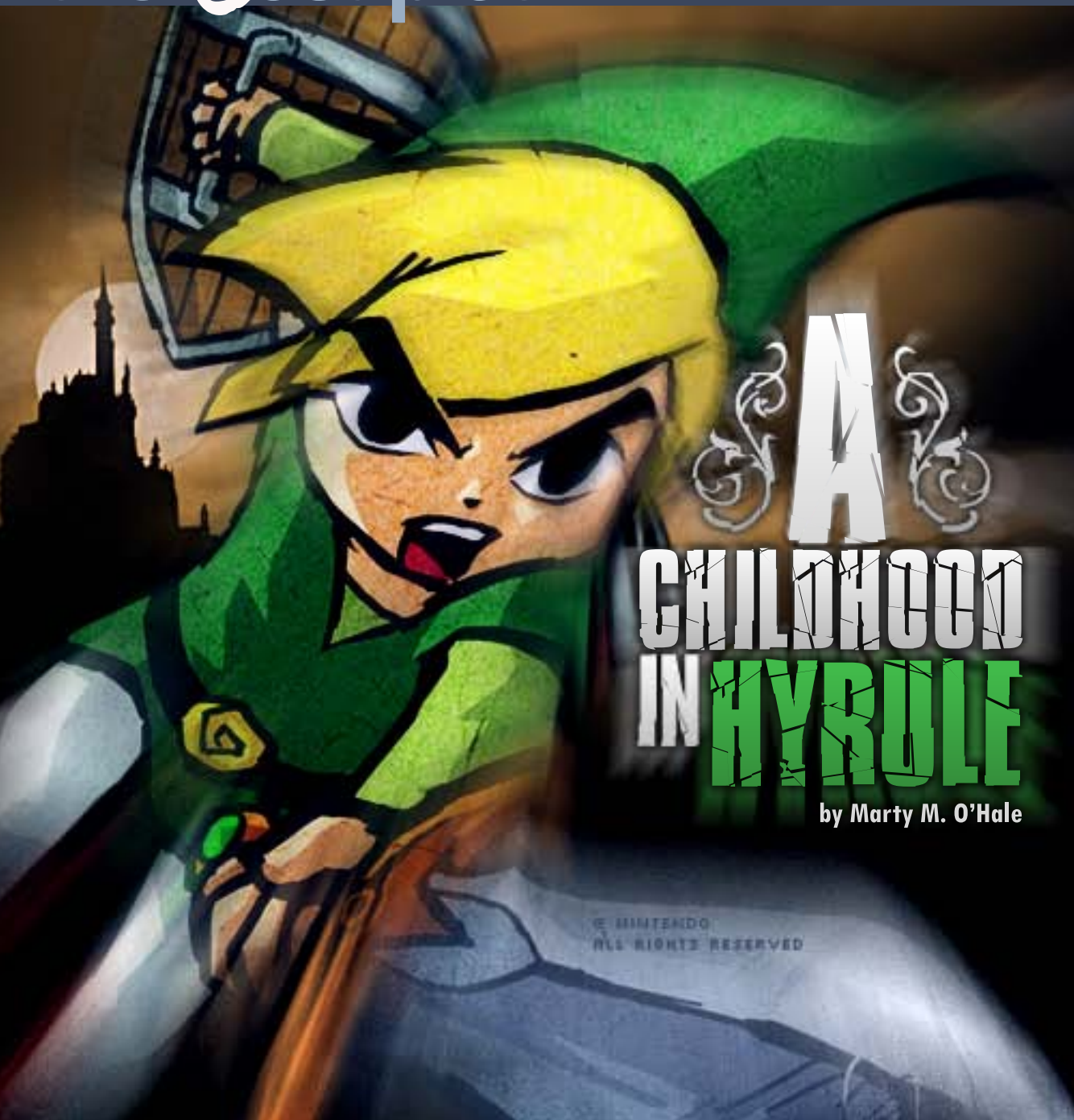
A CHILDHOOD IN HYRULE

by Marty M. O'Hale

Shigeru Miyamoto, the creator of Nintendo's most successful franchises, famously recounted how the inspiration for *The Legend of Zelda* came from his childhood adventures in the countryside near Kyoto: "I went hiking and found a lake. It was quite a surprise for me to stumble upon it. When I traveled around the country without a map, trying to find my way, stumbling on amazing things as I went, I realized how it felt to go on an adventure like this." In the same way, the firstborn of the entire adventure game family, *Colossal Cave*, was the product of creator Will Crowther's spelunking in Kentucky. In essence, players who grew up enjoying those games were experiencing the creators' real-life adventures, embellished by imagination and translated through the limitations of the game systems of the time. Miyamoto's childhood lives on, now in its 13th installment, and has become an integral part of the childhoods of millions.

The striking difference between growing up adventuring in the hills around Kyoto and growing up guiding Link through Hyrule is the former is an inherently creative, idiosyncratic act, while the latter is passive and uniform. We all got the same sword from the same old man,

fought the same Octoroks and found the same silver arrow (tucked away in the same corner) to kill the same pig-demon, ending the adventure. It is not particularly significant that the **plot** was the same for everyone, because at bottom, childhood adventures are seldom defined by meaningful stories. What matters is the **experience** and the **action** were not controlled by the players - the way Miyamoto or Crowther created their own explorations and adventures - but instead were formed by some other author. Moreover, for all its thrill, Hyrule was profoundly cramped and constrained compared to unmapped hills or colossal caves.

Endogenous and Exogenous Influences

We can divide categories of creative endeavor at high levels (literature, games, movies, sculpture and so forth) or at relatively narrow levels (say, first-person cRPGs vs. isometric cRPGs). No matter how we define the categories, it is possible to talk about "endogenous" and "exogenous" influences. Endogenous influences come from within the group - the influence that *Wizardry* had on *Might and Magic*, for example. Exogenous influences, by contrast, come from outside, like how *On*

> **For those of us who grew up in the current era, capturing the THRILL OF CHILDHOOD adventures**

Stranger Tides inspired Ron Gilbert's ideas for *Monkey Island*.

As should be obvious, non-gaming experiences like childhood make-believe or exploration are inherently exogenous to game design. As computer and videogames increase in prominence, they inevitably supplant other art-forms.

For that reason, those who design games today will do so against a backdrop of having played them for much, if not all of their lives. The designers of the next generation of football videogames probably will have spent more time playing *Madden* than playing two-hand touch or watching the NFL..

Moreover, games have influenced other media, assuring the exogenous influences game designers experience will, in some sense, merely be an echo of games. Sometimes, this leads to strange loops like the game version of *Street Fighter: The Movie*, the comic books based on *Freedom Force* or rule sets based on cRPGs like *Fallout*.

For those of us who grew up in the current era, capturing the thrill of childhood adventures may mean rekindling the excitement of one's first videogame, not transforming something exogenous into game form.

Heterogeneous and Homogenous Experiences

Widespread game-playing increases the homogeneity of designers' experiences in two respects.

First, like the film industry, the game industry is dominated by a handful of prominent titles occupying most of the market. The most obvious example of this is *World of Warcraft*. Because of the budgets required to make, market and distribute videogames, they inevitably won't be as numerous or as risky as books, board games or even tabletop RPGs. For that reason, game design tends toward homogeneity. Everyone will tend to have played more or less the same games, and those games will be relatively similar to one another.

Second, within a given videogame, a player's experience will be much more predictable than it would be within more freeform experiences where the rules are negotiable. The lack of fixed media and the wheeling and dealing involved in make-believe adventures and tabletop roleplaying leads them to create heterogeneous, even idiosyncratic play experiences. The contrast is driven home by an absurd memory of mine from grade school: two friends playing a game that was nothing more than one relating the preordained plot and fixed puzzles of *King's Quest V* as the other tried to guess the single solution Sierra had provided in the computer game. It didn't

matter that there were dozens of other obvious conceivable solutions based on his descriptions; the "game master" had been enraptured by what he'd played on his computer.

Autonomous and Subordinate Play

In one of the all-time great moments of fanboy incitement, Nintendo boasted that *Zelda* was superior to *Final Fantasy* because the latter was merely a movie to be watched, while the former was an

> **may mean REKINDLING the excitement of one's first videogame**

> **If one were to write an account of a play-through of Zelda, no one would call the player the DIRECTOR OF THE ACTION.** "

adventure to be played. But while Nintendo surely was correct that *Zelda* offered more freedom than could be had in linear console RPGs, at bottom, the player in *Zelda* is still subordinate to the designer. He visits the dungeons in a predictable order, solves problems according to rigid rules of engagement and navigates the world along fairly narrow paths. If one were to write an account of a play-through of *Zelda*, no one would call the player the director of the action. At best, he's an actor performing minor bits of improv.

This stands in stark contrast to board games like *Axis & Allies* or Risk. In those games, players have the ability to define the rules to some extent (which is to say, they are autonomous). Complex treaties or trades can be hashed out in board games, which can immeasurably

alter the course of play. In a well-managed tabletop session, players will invent unexpected solutions to puzzles presented by the game master, who will respond not by rejecting the solution but by expanding his concept of the scenario. Tabletop games have a way of ending up somewhere quite different from where the GM planned; *Zelda* always ends with Link killing Gannon.

When a player is autonomous, his engagement with the game is active and creative. The subordinate player is passive and receptive. That is not to say that the experience of subordination is necessarily less fun or meaningful than the experience of autonomy; reading *Hamlet* or watching *The Princess Bride* is subordinate, while playing with stuffed animals is autonomous, yet a convincing case could be made that the former are deeper and more fun than the latter. Games, out of necessity, strike a balance between these poles, because they must permit some freedom but also provide rules. Yet there is a trend to hew toward player subordination, in part because such games are cheaper and easier to make, but also because players may no longer know any better.

Closing Minds, Closing Thoughts

So where does this leave us? It seems that one likely effect of this shift in entertainment is that designers who grew up in the videogame generation will see less of a need for open-ended, flexible games than those who grew up playing in other ways. (The audience, too, will have those altered expectations.) The evidence is somewhat equivocal here. In at least three major genres (adventure, roleplaying and FPS) the direction has been steadily toward less freedom and a more directed experience. But in many ways that change seems to have come more from the pressure to be "movie-like," not from pressures internal to game design. And there have been exceptional, often blockbuster, titles that have offered considerable autonomy. *The Sims*, *Black & White*, *Grand Theft Auto* and *Oblivion* come to mind.

But these games are the exception and not the rule. And it seems fair to assume, for example, that designers and players whose formative experience with roleplaying games is *Baldur's Gate* (or worse, *Final Fantasy*), not a tabletop adventure, will see the genre in a totally different light than did the designers who

made those games in the first place. The designers of early computer roleplaying games drew from memories of collaborative storytelling with friends. They failed to mirror that experience in computer games, and as a result players and designers relying on those games for inspiration have come to think of RPGs as fantasy cartoons wrapped around random numbers.

You can find a similar progression in adventure games, in which exploring and creatively solving puzzles transformed into walking in circles and looking for hotspots. Focused on the mechanisms rather than the inspiration, designers lost sight of the whole point of the genre. As a result, the evolution of adventure games as adventures or as games simply came to an end.

But the self-inspiring nature of games is not entirely a negative. To be sure, creativity may be suppressed as outside influences diminish and genres become rigid. But cinema did not come into its own until people stopped thinking of it in terms of other media (as recorded plays or moving pictures), and the same may well be true of games. Developing a

distinctive idiom and honing core techniques can lead to mature design.

So many factors affect the development of game design that it may be difficult to pin down the significance of this cultural shift. Nevertheless, it seems imperative that designers continue to look outward to bring new ideas and greater breadth to the games they make, as there is still more to be found in the hills than there is an 8-bit cartridge. `COMMENTS`

Marty O'Hale has written stories for a number of computer and videogames, primarily roleplaying and strategy games. He has also published a number of works of fiction. Currently, Marty's career is in the law.

> **"Focused on the mechanisms rather than the inspiration, designers LOST SIGHT OF THE WHOLE POINT"**

Curt Vendel:
THE ESCAPIST INTERVIEW

by Howard Wen

One of the past year's best-selling videogame consoles has been the latest version of a three-decades-old system: the Atari 2600. Though marketed as a plug-n-play TV game unit last fall, the Atari Flashback 2 is actually a full-blown, official clone of the 2600, right down to its microprocessors. The only difference is it lacks a cartridge slot. Fortunately, the Flashback 2 was designed so it could be hacked to add one.

The Flashback 2 was indirectly born from the active community of homebrew Atari 2600 game programmers and fans who pine for the classic era of Atari gaming. (A few of the games on the Flashback 2 are originals created by homebrew programmers.) Among them, Curt Vendel is one name to remember: He designed both the Flashback and Flashback 2. For all intents and purposes, Vendel is the current caretaker of the classic Atari gaming hardware. He runs the Atari History Museum, which is dedicated to archiving the legacy of Atari's classic gaming era.

Vendel and the engineering development firm he runs, Legacy Engineering Group, scored the gig for both Flashback projects after he previously worked with

Atari to assist the company on licensing issues for several plug-n-play TV game units that featured classic Atari games. These products, which were fitted into recreations of the Atari 2600 joystick and paddle controllers, were developed by other companies - not Legacy - and neither accurately re-created the original Atari gameplay experience.

Even Vendel's first take on the Flashback was roundly criticized - particularly for using a microprocessor meant for emulating the NES. But the Flashback sold well enough that Atari commissioned Vendel's company in 2004 to design a second version. With more development time, and fielding input from the classic Atari gaming community, Vendel and his team achieved critical and sales success with the Flashback 2.

The Escapist: What's your history in the classic Atari gaming community?

Curt Vendel: I go back to the early '80s, participating in [my] local New York Atari users groups and running the Staten Island Atari Users Group for several years. I also ran my own Atari

BBS, frequented the Atari [forum] on CompuServe and haven't stopped since.

TE: While designing the Flashback 2, did you have access to the design blueprints of the original Atari 2600? Or, did this job require a bit of reverse engineering?

CV: I was actually disappointed to see just how little Atari itself owns insofar as past assets. The fact of the matter is the Atari Museum owns far [more] materials than Atari. So it was fortunate that the Atari Museum's efforts to recover and preserve Atari's past materials have helped to save such things. Of particular importance were the original chip schematics to Stella, the heart [microprocessor] of the Atari 2600.

TE: Prior to the Flashback 2, there were a number of other TV game units that played classic Atari games, and pretty much all of them sucked. You were involved in some of these, though just consulting for them. What do you think was the common problem with all of them?

CV: Originally, the consultations had to do with the form factor, supplying materials for the packaging, manuals and game content. On some of the first systems, we never received test units to give feedback on the games, which turned out to be poorly written ports.

TE: Describe an interesting technical challenge you encountered while designing the Flashback 2.

CV: A lot of timing issues. Anyone who's done any kind of chip development is familiar with the inherent challenges of trying to move older hardware designs into a new modern core. Another challenge was having games written for the console. We didn't get the go-ahead for software coding until April [2006] and had only until June to deliver games for production. Several games could have afforded more time to improve them further.

TE: Why replicate the internals of the Atari VCS for the Flashback 2, and not just emulate the hardware?

CV: The purpose was to give people the exact game experience, not to tamper with the existing designs on that particular project.

TE: How has the Flashback 2 done in sales since its original release? What's the latest possibility of a follow-up, a "Flashback 3"?

CV: Flashback 2 did exceptionally well. 860,000 sold in U.S./domestic. Unfortunately, Atari didn't order units in a PAL format for the U.K./European markets. Otherwise, we'd have easily broken the million mark.

A new product was developed, and if the timing can be worked out, there is a good chance of it making it to retailers shelves for the holidays.

TE: What is this "new product"? There have been rumors that the "Flashback 3" could be based on the Atari 5200, the 7800, the 2600 again - with new games, or with some form of cartridge slot - or a magical combination of any of these

> **"On some of the first systems, we NEVER RECEIVED TEST UNITS to give feedback on the games"**

three. Can you hint what the next Flashback to come will feature?

CV: It will be based on the 2600 architecture, but this time we are enhancing the game experience with newer display and interfacing technologies and putting the system together into a form factor that Atari had never before delivered to gamers.

TE: The so-called plug-n-play TV game business isn't covered much in the mainstream gaming press. Is this still a profitable market, or has the appeal for these systems waned?

CV: It's still quite profitable and has evolved. When we designed the Flashback 2 and Atari sold it to retailers, it set the bar very high for the plug-n-play market. The Flashback 2 was not some "toy," but in fact a game console. Atari can now be considered the king of the "entry level console market" in a round-about way, I suppose.

TE: What's the coolest Flashback 2 mod you've seen?

CV: Someone had completely redone their case, and actually put the cartridge slot right back where it originally was on the original Atari 2600's and added some great switches to it; it looked fantastic. Another person did a whole *Tron* theme case. It's great to see all of the creativity that people have shown when modding their Flashback 2's. A lot more people did the cartridge mod than I thought would have, so it's good to see people having a lot of fun with the consoles.

TE: Nostalgia aside, what do you think has been the lasting appeal of the classic Atari games and consoles?

CV: Everyone knows and remembers Atari. Parents today were the arcade dwellers of the '80s. Now they can not only show their kids these great games, but they can probably beat them at them, too. It also comes down to something that even the industry itself is finally recognizing: It's not about massive amounts of CPU horsepower, full cinematic storylines or [Dolby] 5.1 or better stereo sound. It's about making games that are fun - fun but simple, too. Many would-be gamers don't want to invest 30 to 60 minutes just to understand how to play a game, its storyline, etc. Many want that "quick fix" - to step up to a game, pick up the controller and just play, have fun and enjoy themselves.
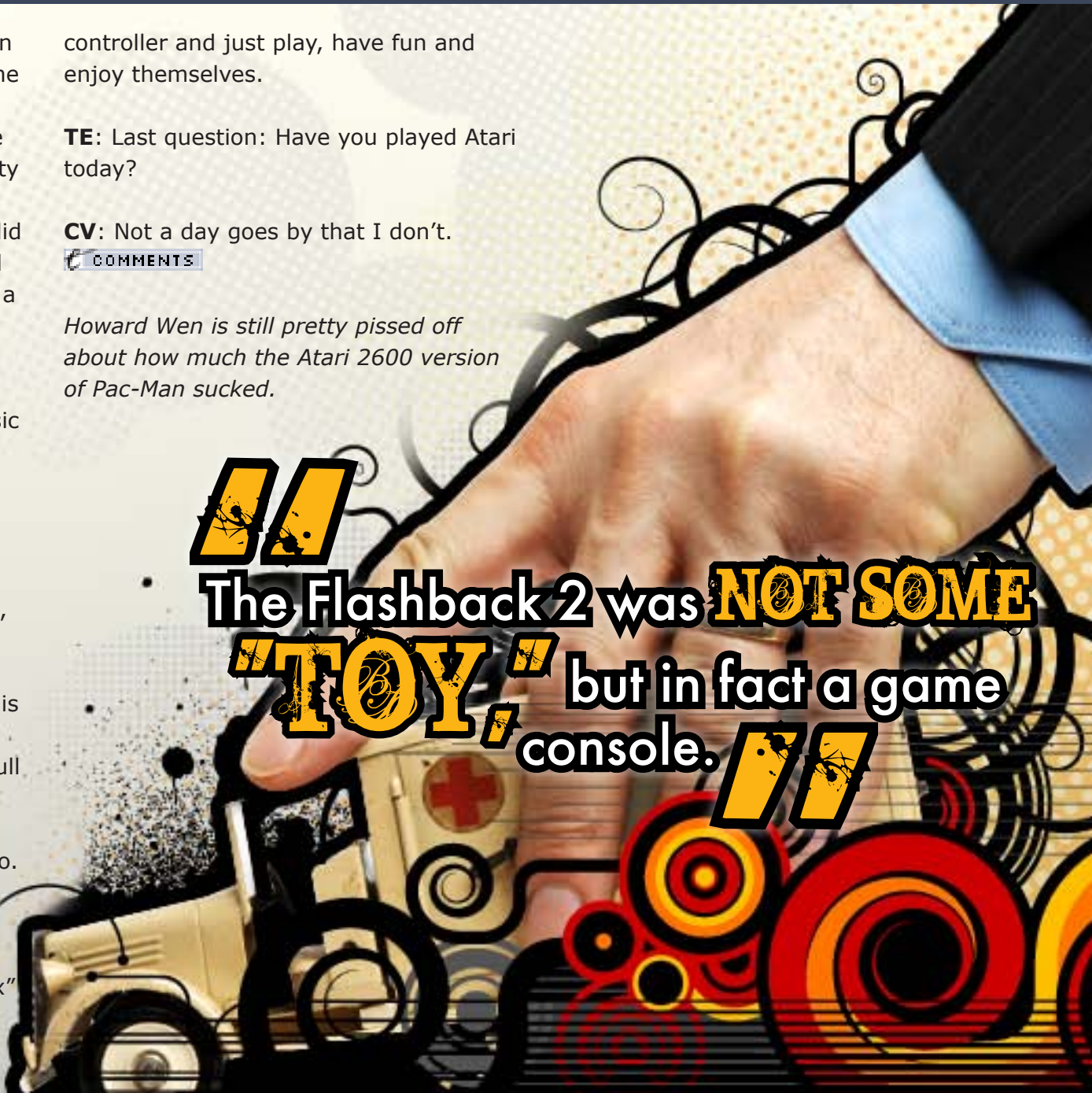
TE: Last question: Have you played Atari today?

CV: Not a day goes by that I don't.

COMMENTS

Howard Wen is still pretty pissed off about how much the Atari 2600 version of Pac-Man sucked.

"The Flashback 2 was **NOT SOME** "**TOY**," but in fact a game console."

The Slow Death of the Game Over

by Kyle Orland

When was the last time you were really distraught about seeing a game over screen?

Think about it. If you've been playing games for any length of time, you've probably seen hundreds, maybe thousands of game over screens. At one point, these straightforward messages could be taken at face value; as distinct separators between one game and the next. Yet over the last few decades, the game over screen has slowly morphed from a full stop to a perfunctory pause in most games; from a period to a comma in the constantly unfolding gameplay story.

Sure, modern games still penalize failure, but often in the most trivial ways. Getting caught by the police in *Grand Theft Auto III* will roll back your bank account, but won't do the same to your progress in the game. You'll never see a game over screen in *Jak and Daxter* – the worst punishment there is being sent back to a few hundred feet to the edge of the current environment. Going into a *Metal Gear Solid* boss battle? Just use the codec to save your progress and you can die as many times as you want without having to retrace your steps.

It wasn't always this way. Back in the day, game over screens were a business necessity for arcade owners. More game overs meant more turnover, which meant more quarters and more profit per machine. There was a financial incentive for designers to make games where each play session was nasty, brutish and short.

Early console games kept this convention going, even though the financial incentive for failure was gone. Getting eaten by a duck-shaped dragon in *Adventure* meant a trip back to the beginning of the maze. Losing all your lives in *Super Mario Bros.* meant playing through the simple, familiar World 1-1 yet again. It was a little tedious, but it gave players a great incentive to get better quickly if they wanted to see that final game over screen. You know, the good one. The one where your character doesn't die.

As games started to get bigger, though, it was clear that primitive negative reinforcement wasn't going to work anymore. After all, what good is packing dozens of levels into a game if most players won't be alive long enough to see them. Save systems, passwords and continues became the order of the day, letting players work their way through an

epic game piece by piece over many play sessions. The game over screen was slowly changing from a death sentence to a brief setback.

It was still a setback, though – most designers still made sure death had serious consequences. Losing that last heart in *The Legend of Zelda* meant heading all the way back to the beginning of the dungeon. The password system in *Mega Man 2* would only take you to the beginning of Dr. Wily's brutally hard five-stage fortress. Many games offered a limited number of continues – those that offered infinite continues often had no save system to retain your inevitable progress once the system shut down. Games that were too long to be endurance sprints were turning instead into stair-step climbs through a series of breath-catching plateaus.

The beginning of the end for this era came in 1993 when *Doom* burst onto the scene. The seminal first-person shooter popularized many concepts that still impact the gaming world today, but the most insidiously revolutionary was its pervasive save system. Sure, PC simulations and roleplaying games up to that point had routinely let players save

their progress at any time, but *Doom*, and, to a lesser extent, its predecessor *Wolfenstein 3D*, popularized the idea of the save-anywhere action game. Suddenly, the first time you killed an enemy could also be the last time, provided you remembered to bring up the save window after every significant kill.

It was impossible at the time to appreciate how revolutionary this change would be. On the one hand, the save-anywhere system meant an end to the often tedious process of replaying familiar, already-conquered areas - surely a step forward. On the other hand, the system ruined the tension of not knowing when an errant bullet would ruin all – or at least some – of your careful progress. With the save-anywhere system, you could always rush in, shooting first and asking questions later, knowing that if you failed you were just a few keystrokes from rushing in again from the exact same point. Overnight, the stair-step approach to longer games became more like an escalator, albeit one that occasionally stuttered to a stop for a brief game over screen.

In the wake of *Doom*, games slowly but surely became more forgiving and less

likely to knock you back a few paces just for failing a challenge. *Super Mario 64* allows players to save after every collected power star, rendering the franchise's signature 1-UP mushrooms practically meaningless. Action games like *The Getaway* and *Gears of War* allow injured characters to heal some or all of their health back just by kneeling behind some cover. Player-coddling found its standard-bearer in the quicksave, the one-button immortality machine that became a reflexive part of many post-*Doom* first-person shooters. Kill an enemy, tap "F3." Repeat until you win. Yawn.

But shockwaves of the quicksave revolution aren't all bad. It's easy to wax nostalgic about the game-over-bred familiarity of *Super Mario Bros.*' signature World 1-1, but let's face it, restarting from the beginning every time you died was annoying. Where's the fun in spending hours working through the first four levels of *Super Ghouls 'n Ghosts*, only to be thrown back to the beginning by a tricky passage in the fifth? Gaming in the days before pervasive saving was often a masochist's errand, and one of limited appeal to anyone who wasn't willing to put in hours of mind-numbing practice.

> **Back in the day, game over screens were a BUSINESS NECESSITY for arcade owners.**
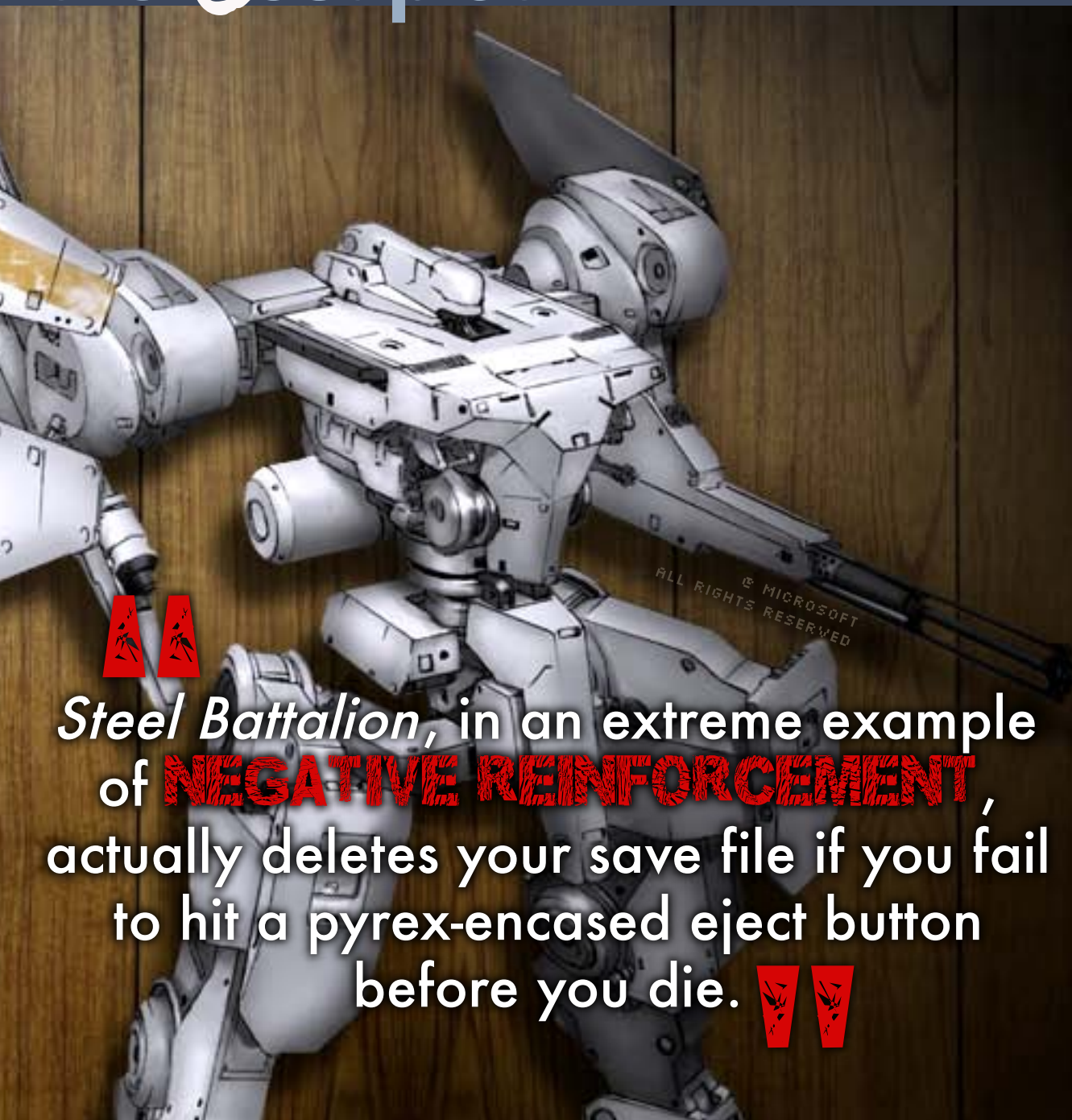
> *Steel Battalion*, in an extreme example of NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT, actually deletes your save file if you fail to hit a pyrex-encased eject button before you die.

Still, it's easy to feel that today's gamers are being a bit coddled by the overly forgiving nature of many action games. For evidence, look no further than the tepid critical reaction to a *Dead Rising* save system that actually forced players to (gasp!) find infrequently placed save points. "An awkward save system bogs down your progress more than the repetitious play," moaned a 1UP review. "Potentially forcing players to replay sections because of an overly punishing save system is the polar opposite of fun" whined a Gamespot review. Still, some writers recognized the importance of limiting a player's outs. "It forces you to put some skin in the game," said *Wired's Clive* Thompson in a commentary on the game. "That's why people seek out life-threatening sports like sheer-face mountain climbing and skydiving. In situations of genuine danger, your senses snap open and you experience things more fully -- or, as any extreme athlete would boast, you live more fully."

And even in the age of the quicksave, some games are still willing to capture that extreme snap, God bless 'em. Much of *Resident Evil's* tension comes from the limited number of saves offered through typewriter ribbons scattered about the game world. *Maximo: Ghosts to Glory* cumulatively raises the cost of each continue, meaning it's possible to run out of options after hours of play and dozens of play sessions. *Steel Battalion*, in an extreme example of negative reinforcement, actually deletes your save file if you fail to hit a pyrex-encased eject button before you die.

Are these systems annoying? Sure. Do they sap the fun out of a game? Occasionally. But in an age where everyone seems to run from responsibility, it's nice to see some games are willing to let you know that screwing up has consequences. So here's a toast to the punishing, brutal, unforgiving, masochistic games of the world - the kinds of games brave enough to have game over screens that actually mean the game is over. For those about to die, we salute you! **COMMENTS**

Kyle Orland is a videogame freelancer and co-author of The Videogame Style Guide and Reference Manual. He's written for a variety of print and online outlets, as chronicled on his workblog.

cart, horse

by Corvus Elrod

I sometimes wonder if it's odd that my company, PJ's Attic, has spent the first several years of its existence focusing more on the business of developing games rather than actually developing games. I wonder, are we putting the cart before the horse?

Until recently, PJ's Attic had only two employees. I'm the Chief Creative Officer, which means I'm ... creative. Our Chief Operating Officer is the other; he focuses primarily on the business side of things. Running a business is not, however, so cut-and-dried. **Holistic** would be a good term to describe our business partnership. We each have an occasional finger in the other's pie, so to speak, and are fine-tuning our strategies as we go. At the beginning of this year we added a third employee, filling a marketing and business development position from a talented pool of applicants. It was with no small amount of trepidation, therefore, that I prepared to attend GDC this year and, when asked, tell people our studio of nearly three years was only just entering into the development of our first title. I was in for a bit of a surprise.

When I met my peers at GDC and listened to the issues their independent studios were having —communication problems, ego and conflict issues, marketing confusion, budgetary concerns, and their need for trustworthy business people to help them navigate the treacherous waters of intellectual property law and contract negotiation - what surprised me was while we certainly don't have all the answers to these issues, we do have answers for a number of them. Most exciting to us is we've taken the time to address these concerns while we don't have the added stress of simultaneously managing the development of a game. Suddenly, the time we've spent growing our company seems like time well spent.

We're a virtual company. Our three employees live in two different cities, and we've had a number of communication issues over the years. While many of these issues have been related to technology, the truly daunting challenges have been psychological ones. I have spoken with developers who feel isolated within their teams, team leaders that feel isolated within their

company and company directors who feel isolated within the industry. Physical distance only heightens these emotional states. Text-based meetings lack sufficient nuance, and it's easy to interpret comments incorrectly, finding offense where none was intended. Audio meetings are considerably better, but as a visual person, I find I miss watching other attendees' body language. Long silences on the phone are harder to interpret, as I can't see if someone's arms are folded or if they appear contemplative or confounded. Video over the web has its own challenges, but when all the technology between our offices aligns, which is rarely, we find it's the best way to go.

We've learned to compensate for the psychological factors of the virtual office with a few simple rules. The first is simply: Ask. We ask many questions of each other. If we don't understand, we ask questions. Once we **think** we understand, we ask more questions. The second rule is: Repeat. Once we're sure we understand the others, we repeat what it is we think we heard. Not only does this allow us to take advantage of the next rule, it has the added benefit of instructing us on our communication

styles and how we come across in conversation. The third rule is: Clarify. We constantly reframe our decisions, using new metaphors, new data and new ideas. Rather than become impatient with constant questioning, we use it as an opportunity to improve our communication and fully express ourselves. To aid us in implementing our rules, we've established what you might call aggressive communication habits. Using shared calendars, SMS, Google Docs, instant messaging, e-mail and phone calls, and any new technologies that present themselves, we follow the overarching rule that more is better.

One irony of being a small company with few employees is we're often overburdened with energy and manpower. Some people call this Superman syndrome. We all work full time jobs in addition to PJ's Attic; being realistic about the amount of work we can do and setting appropriate deadlines continues to be a struggle. We are all very passionate about the studio and very confident in our abilities, so we frequently find ourselves taking on more than we can realistically handle. We plan on remaining an independent studio because we firmly believe maintaining an

appropriate life/work balance is key to our success, both as individuals and as a company. Funnily enough, the biggest threat we face in this area comes from our desire to achieve it. When it comes time to add more people, we hope our established culture of interdependent self reliance will attract likeminded, creatively driven employees. We're busy examining successful hiring practices across a variety of industries in hopes of recreating their successes and avoiding their failures.

Hiring more people is going to be contingent upon gaining the capital to pay them. As we're intent on avoiding publishers and investors who will want pieces of our intellectual property, expanding the team has been the subject of a lot of discussion. Our plan is to find clients who would benefit from our design approach and help them express their company's story via our games. This bootstrapping method has many inherent risks, but the potential benefits far outweigh them. This requires

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us to be extremely flexible in our short term plans, but we're still able to remain firm in our long term goals.

Of course, more clients will mean more contracts to deal with, which will mean more legal issues and more elaborate accounting requirements. We're working to find attorneys and CPAs that share our values. We're examining the types of clients they take and the work they've done. In this way, we hope to build lasting relationships built on trust. We're also doing our own research into intellectual property issues. We have decided to

open all of our code as free open source software, so the wilderness of patent law has been replaced by the equally bewildering labyrinth of FOSS licensing.

The most important thing we're doing to prepare for these upcoming challenges, however, is listening. There's a vast wealth of experience in the halls and conference rooms of GDC, on the web and in your local community. Much of this information is available; you just have to ask for it. Many people are willing to share their horror stories - even their successes. We talk to contractors who work with other industries as well; graphic and web designers, writers and programmers, all have tales that shed light on the most stubborn of issues.

To help encourage this atmosphere of shared experience, we have a policy of transparency at PJ's Attic. We're publishing whitepapers about our design philosophies and business experiences. We do everything we can to respond quickly and comprehensively to questions about our studio. We regularly

blog about our journey and experiences. We typically get rapid feedback from our peers, we learn to better tell our stories and we establish ourselves as active, even when we don't quite have that first game out the door yet.

We've learned it's all, well, a learning process. No two studios are exactly alike, but each stands to learn a lot from the other. Our focus on communication, company culture and our business model has hopefully prepared us to quickly resolve issues when they arise. No doubt that means the next road bumps, the ones we didn't foresee, will be that much closer. So perhaps we're not putting the cart before the horse. Rather, we've taken the time to hook up the cart before the horse is running at full gallop.

COMMENTS

Corvus Elrod is a storyteller and game designer who is working on bringing his 16 years experience into the digital realm. He has a habit of taking serious things lightly and frivolous things seriously, a personal quirk which can be witnessed on his blog, Man Bytes Blog.

> ## The most important thing we're doing to prepare for these upcoming challenges is listening.

the escapist

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