the *e*scapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

It happens to the best of us. We all stumble; sometimes we fall flat on our faces. Whether because we didn't know to look, or we were being perhaps a little too overconfident in not looking around, the outcome is the same: embarrassment and, depending on the severity of the fall, perhaps a skinned knee. I know I have more than a few small scars on knees and elbows from overstepping my bounds.

Corporate entities, with personalities and, seemingly, lives of their own, are also vulnerable to the same naive, arrogant or just plain "Oops!" moments. Rising to mind is the now infamous "Wardrobe Malfunction" witnessed by millions during the 2004 Superbowl. CBS was in big trouble when tens of thousands called their offices to complain. The rest of us millions were sitting in our living rooms asking, "Was that a…?" or running off to learn the words "nipple shield" on the internet. And not the kind related to raising children.

Speaking of raising children, toy makers are certainly not exempt from the "have been known to stumble" column. An article on Radar shared their picks for the 10 Most Dangerous Toys of All Time this past December, just in time for the holiday season. And these were pulled from toys **not** intended to hurt anyone. I'm not sure who thought it would be a swell idea back in 1951 to hand out an **atomic science kit** complete with **Uranium**, but … well, perhaps there was some logic behind it at the time.

The thing is, we "all do dumb things" as GEICO pointed out in their animated cartoons years ago. And we all have accidents – I know why my grandparents always told me not to run up the sidewalk at their house, as does my scarred knee, 20-something years later. And that's really the point: Learning from those times we stumble and fall. And the only way to do that is to look at those moments and figure out what went wrong and how we could do better next time.

And looking at some of those oopsies, or stumbles, or even just plain old unfortunate events with or in games is the subject of this week's issue, "Cutscenes at 11." Russ Pitts leads us on a journey of several instances within gameworlds that contained or lead to real trauma for their players. Michael Zenke sheds some light on a year old decision to re-rate one of the top games of the last year that went almost completely unnoticed. Allen Varney explores what went wrong with SOE's *Star Wars: Galaxies*' New Game Experience. Gearoid Reidy discusses Stanley Cohen's notion of "moral panic" as it relates to videogames. And Richard Perrin relates the reality of the game behind the *Night Trap* fiasco of the early 90s. Find these articles and more in this week's *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Cart, Horse" from The Escapist Forum: I think your approach to starting this business is well thought out and well researched. With this solid foundation, your success is guaranteed! I applaud your ability to balance both home and work. You all must have very robust lives. I imagine your expertise in storytelling helps to bring richness to all aspects of yours, your families and your partners lives. Can't wait to see and read more!

- Mumsuch

In response to "A Childhood in Hyrule" from The Escapist Forum: I disagree with the assertion that games are becoming more player-submissive. How many open-ended games are there now, compared with ten or twenty years ago? More importantly, in today's linear games, how much more can the player do than in the linear games of ten or twelve years ago?

What we're finding - and Half-Life 2 and Garry's Mod together make an excellent example of this - is that, regardless of whether the player has to do the same things in the game world, there are always more things that the player can do.

Eventually, we'll reach a point where the developer creates and populates an environment, and comes up with a story he'd like to tell inside of it, and lets the player loose in the environment, and tries to steer him toward the story - which, what do you know, is just like what a tabletop RPG does. Technological limitations, not only in hardware but also in the fundamental (but diminishing) lack of creativity exhibited by non-Turing-test-passing software, are what makes the separation.

- **Bongo Bill**

In response to "The Slow Death of Game Over" from The Escapist Forum: I agree wholeheartedly that part of the tension and frustration of Dead Rising was the fact that saving wasn't the act of a moment, but a part of your planning and pathing. While I enjoyed hammering through the GTA3 series, and more recently The Godfather on the Wii, there's almost nothing to come back to. Dead Rising I also haven't come back to, but I intend to at some point try again, just to assuage my own curiosity as to whether, with a little more aggressive travel and fewer passes by the save points, I could have saved more people.

On a side note, the game-over screen is alive and well on handheld gaming devices. Then again, they rely much more on the "pick-up and play" style of gaming which is reminiscent of arcade machines like Operation Wolf or Silent Scope which let you choose your mission and hence difficulty, without having to play through the earlier easy stuff. A handheld game that you can't basically switch off with very short notice is nearly useless. (I dunno about the PSP, but the DS has the close-lid mode, which generally suspends the game, and is useful for some situations such as switching buses, but doesn't really help once you've arrived at your destination.)

- **TBBle**

In response to "The Slow Death of Game Over" from The Escapist Forum: I'd just like to say that the save anywhere idea is a great thing, but at the same time it should be accompanied with harder battles, more challenging games, and so on. If anything save anywhere is only accompanied with easier games. I have yet to beat Super Mario 1 yet I've beat a couple recent games with out ever saving once except when it's mandated.

Save anywhere is a wonderful functions as people here mentioned but the very simple fact is that games as a whole have been made easier as well as giving save anywhere, what should have been done is increasing the difficulty of the game as you give more saves, not making it easier.

- **Kinglink**

In response to "The Slow Death of Game Over" from The Escapist Forum: Some games have done away with saves completely, and become wildly successful based off of a good gameplay mechanic.

For example, the arcade game Geometry Wars on the Xbox360. This is a game that can be played in short doses, 10-30 minutes at a time, and depending on your skill level, a game can last between 5 minutes to some of the best reaching multiple hours. The game has zero story, only a few extra lives to start-more can be earned, and doesn't feature any levels at all. The only mark of you making progress is noticing how many more enemies are coming on the screen at once.

This was also one of the top games played in the early life cycle of the 360. It still has a loyal and active community.

Regarding saving as a whole, I think it comes back to not only telling a narrative, but what the mass consumers want as a whole. As the gaming population ages and expands, there are many fewer "hardcore" gamers left. We are a dying breed, being replaced by casual games and people who don't want the mostly impossible challenge of a Ninja Gaiden. They want a quick escape, and be able to return to life anytime. As much as the narrative has driven the save system, the change in the majority of consumers purchasing games has put pressure on the industry for this change as well.

- Rubix42

The Great Gaming MORAL PANIC

by Gearoid Reidy

With apologies to Gandhi: First they ignored gaming, then they laughed at gaming, then they fought gaming.

Then gaming won.

Like every new form of media before it, gaming has been demonized, criticized and made out to be something it isn't. Brutal, uncivilized, a threat to society, it has been made a figure of hate by moral guardians and bottom-line-obsessed editors the world over.

But gaming is not alone. This treatment is practically a right of passage for any new medium. Comic books, rock 'n' roll, cable television, rap music and internet pornography have all suffered the same or worse, and the only lesson from each of these experiences appears to be that to live through a moral panic is to gain widespread acceptance.

"Moral panic" was a term first coined by Stanley Cohen, a sociologist who wrote of social and media reaction to the violent clashes between Mods and Rockers in 1960s U.K. Cohen defines a moral panic as something that poses a threat to societal values, popularized and transmitted by the mass media. From rock 'n' roll as the devil's music onward, there has always been some new scourge of all that is good and decent in society, some overreaction to the unknown.

But somewhere along the line, moral panics stopped being a reaction and started being a construction. Fear sells; U.K. tabloids have for years used the greatest public fear to shift copies – the fear that something might happen to your children. Thus the Leah Betts Ecstasy scandal; mad cow disease; the fear there might be a pedophile living on your street or lurking on the internet, waiting to steal your little Johnny away. (The latter has led to tragic outcomes.)

And it has also led to videogames being identified as a threat to youth, and a real response from within gaming - from Nintendo choosing to replace the blood in *Mortal Kombat*, to the publishers of *Rule of Rose* abandoning publication plans in the U.K.

But while gamers may now be worried, following Hot Coffee, the *Manhunt* fiasco and the *Rule of Rose* episode, the cries of Jack Thompson and company are not a new front on the war against gaming, but the last throes of a futile struggle.

For the enduring characteristic of a moral panic is that people grow tired of it – and gaming has weathered the storm.

Videogame Nasties

It's not necessary to sum up the mixed moral message of our times any more than it already has been – but the world we live in, where celebrity sex tapes are the beginning of a career, not the end, but one slipped nipple can spell disaster – rarely seems sure what it stands for any more.

In a way, that's what makes the videogame moral panic all the more bizarre, because it so closely resembles others that existed in a far more traditionalist, conservative age. The devil's music, video nasties, the Tipper Sticker: the lexicon of terms is embarrassingly quaint.

As Kenneth A. Gagne's excellent thesis outlines, the similarities between the American fear of comic books in the 1950s and the modern day global concern over videogames are glaring, right down to the comparisons between Dr. Frederic Wertham – he of the declaration that Batman and Robin's co-habitation was a homosexual's dream – and Jack Thompson. Wertham was extremely influential in forcing the comic book industry to adopt the self-censoring Comics Code Authority – something, no doubt, Thompson has in mind for gaming.

The similarities don't end there. Cable television, rap music, *Dungeons & Dragons*, violent movies – all new, all strange, all accused of corrupting our youth. And in the '90s came videogames.

By December of 1993, U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman was declaring that *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* were "no mark of a civilized society," and the Senate was holding hearings into the sales of videogames.

Preempting the hearings – and wary of the effect similar hearings had on the comic book industry 50 years beforehand – the game industry formed the Entertainment Software Rating Board rating system. With the benefits of hindsight, it's hard to believe how anyone could be shocked by what is now such blatant cartoon violence in *Mortal Kombat*. While part of that stems from our continual desensitization to violence, by any objective view, the worst thing about *Mortal Kombat* was it wasn't a very good game.

Panic on the Streets of London

Once Lieberman and the media got their claws into the videogame moral panic, they were reluctant to let it go. And so with every modern tragedy committed by young people, games inevitably factor into news reports, regardless of their relevance to the incident.

And never have facts stood in the way of a good story – from the *Manhunt* hysteria, in which the Rockstar game was initially blamed as the inspiration for the murder of 14-year-old Stefan Pakeerah, to the U.K.'s Sky News, a key player in the missing girl stories that consume the British media once a year, reporting that the 9-11 terrorists "could" have used *Microsoft Flight Simulator* to help them train.

And it's not just the English-speaking world that is affected by this phenomenon. *Rule of Rose* famously

> "the world we live in, where celebrity **SEX TAPES ARE THE BEGINNING OF A CAREER**, not the end, but one slipped nipple can spell disaster – rarely seems sure what it stands for any more."
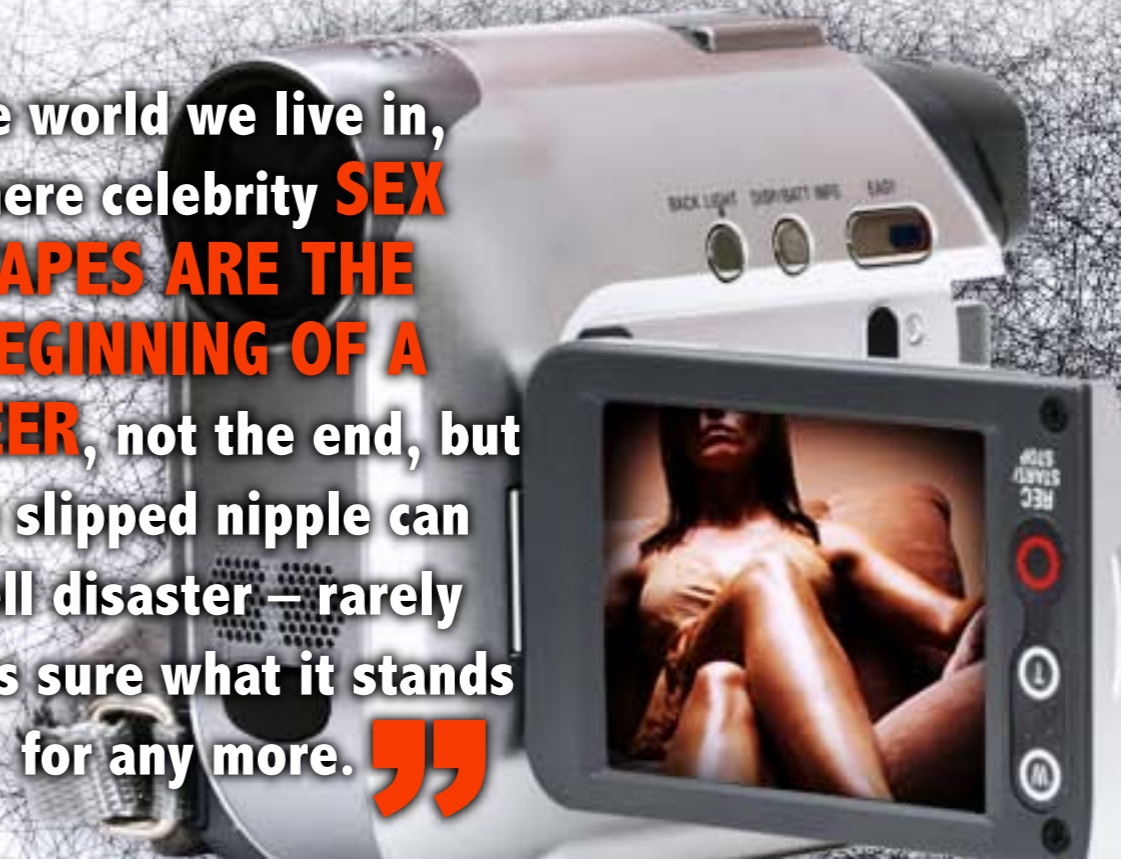
> **One can scarcely imagine an editor of the lowest gutter-press tabloid, much less of the Times, daring to write the words "HAVE BOOKS GONE TOO FAR?"**

caused ripples right across continental Europe last year, particularly in Italy, where European Justice and Security Commissioner Franco Frattini declared the game had "shocked me profoundly for its obscene cruelty and brutality," thus turning an obscure, rather dull Japanese title into one of the best-known games of the year.

The online version of the *Times* report on the story tellingly opens with the words "have computer games gone too far?" linking to an online vote. One can scarcely imagine an editor of the lowest gutter-press tabloid, much less of the *Times*, daring to write the words "have books gone too far?" but the comparison seems to be lost on some. Trapped in a campaign of misinformation, the publishers of *Rule of Rose* set a worrying precedent – choosing to leave the game unreleased in the U.K. due to the moral panic that surrounded it.

Germany, long famous for making blood green and turning humans into robots, has tightened up its regulations in recent years, refusing to rate (and thereby effectively eliminating any German versions of) games such as *Dead Rising*, *Crackdown* and *Gears of War*.

In China, the speed at which the country's male youth are taking to MMOGs in internet cafes has delighted developers and spooked the Chinese government. In April, the government instigated new regulations that required makers of online games to initiate a system to penalize players under 18 for playing longer than the state-mandated three-hour limit. More disturbing, it also required all players to register their real names and identity card numbers in order to play. There are also a growing number of reports about "treatment centers" for addicted players which, judging by reports, more closely resemble lunatic asylums.

Even Japan, usually thought of as one of the main sources of questionable material in gaming, is not immune: Kanagawa Prefecture choosing to restrict sales of *Grand Theft Auto*, even before a 15-year-old murderer was linked in the media to being a fan of the game.

Sense and Sensibility
All over the world, the media faces one major problem with moral panics: the law of ever-diminishing returns. Play the same message over and over again, and eventually people start to get bored,

which is why new folk devils need to be created to keep interest piqued.

Just as home video technology created "video nasties," and increasing graphical power made games into a problem, so too will changing technology take the focus off games. The question is how much damage will be done before the moral panic passes.

The Comics Code stifled creativity within the comic book industry for decades and perhaps denied comics their chance to ascend into a medium appreciated in the same way they are in Japan. Yet a similar outcry over music in the early 1990s merely led to the introduction of the Parental Advisory sticker, and the game industry's decision to voluntarily bring in the ESRB and thus avoid legislation has proved to be very astute.

The moral panic over videogames will probably never die out completely. There will always be something shocking to stir up the usual suspects, just as Marilyn Manson brought back the fear of rock music and Bret Easton Ellis the book burners. But the nadir of the videogames moral panic was probably Columbine, and if gaming was able to overcome the

reaction to that event, in which games could be seen to play a very substantial role, the worst has passed.

Games have already become an inseparable part of our culture. The multi-billion dollar launch events for the PlayStation 3 and the Wii in late 2006 were reported in every media outlet, and gaming has become a much bigger and more influential business than it was in 1993.

Moreover, the shift away from videogames is already happening. Enough time has passed for most sensible readers to figure out videogames are not very likely to turn your child into a serial killer. More importantly, a generation of journalists has grown up with videogames and knows this for themselves; games are simply another hobby, another form of media, no longer a strange and alien whipping boy. The focus can already been seen shifting away, to other media starting to come into its own – social networking sites, where you never know who your kids might be talking to.
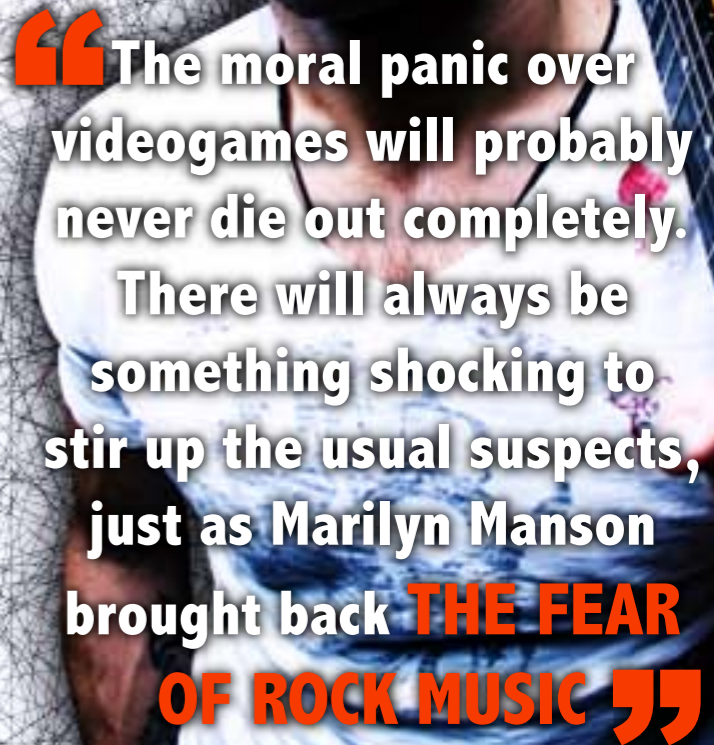
As deplorable as the willful obfuscation of facts and creation of hate figures may be, moral panics are in one sense

understandable. They are an attempt to put reason on situations that are beyond our comprehension – to put logic on the sheer insanity of human brutality. In an ideal world, a swish of a pen on some legislation would save us from ever having to wake up to another Jamie Bulger or Columbine.

But the world just doesn't work like this. And sooner than we think, the world will have come to terms with videogames and moved on to something else. As Cohen, who could not have predicted even the development of videogames when he first wrote his theory, says, "More moral panics will be generated and other, as yet nameless, folk devils will be created … because our society … will continue to generate problems for some of its members … and then condemn whatever solution these groups find."

COMMENTS

Gearoid Reidy firmly believes that losing at Winning Eleven causes real violence against his furniture. Find him at www.gearoidreidy.com.

> "The moral panic over videogames will probably never die out completely. There will always be something shocking to stir up the usual suspects, just as Marilyn Manson brought back THE FEAR OF ROCK MUSIC"

WILL *Bobba* FOR FURNI

by Russ Pitts

"Netsex, tinysex, virtual sex - however you name it, in real- life reality it's nothing more than a 900-line encounter stripped of even the vestigial physicality of the voice," writes Julian Dibbell, in a 1993 article for *The Village Voice* entitled "A Rape in Cyberspace." "And yet as any but the most inhibited of newbies can tell you, it's possibly the headiest experience the very heady world of MUDs has to offer."

In the early '90s, before the idea of an online community was anything more than a whispered dream shared amongst a brave, lonely few, a member of the text-based MUD *LambdaMOO* named

Mr. Bungle used a piece of software to commit rape. The software, called a voodoo doll, allowed Bungle to manipulate other members and "force" them to do his bidding. The doll was not rare in and of itself - voodoo dolls were occasionally used for play, occasionally for mischief - but Mr. Bungle would appear to have been one of the first to use one for sexual humiliation.

Dibbell relates the event in detail:

"The remaining facts tell us … that he commenced his assault entirely unprovoked, at or about 10 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. That he began by using his voodoo doll to force one of the room's occupants to sexually service him in a variety of more or less conventional ways. That this victim was legba … [who] heaped vicious imprecations on him all the while … that he turned his attentions now to Starsinger … forcing her into unwanted liaisons with other individuals present in the room. … That his actions grew progressively violent. That he made legba eat his/her own pubic hair. That he caused Starsinger to violate herself with a piece of kitchen cutlery. That his distant laughter echoed evilly in the living room with every successive outrage."

legba had this to say after the attack:

"Mostly voodoo dolls are amusing. … Mostly, [this type of thing] doesn't happen here. Mostly, perhaps I thought it wouldn't happen to me. Mostly, I trust people to conduct themselves with some veneer of civility. Mostly, I want his ass."

legba later admitted that while typing those words, decrying an act of "virtual" rape against her "virtual" self, she was experiencing a very real case of post-traumatic stress, crying very real tears over what she believed was a very real invasion of her personal and sexual sanctity. Even had she been able to tear herself away from her online self, even had she allowed herself to be driven away by Bungle's outrageous behavior, she would not have been able to save her character from the attack, or herself from the humiliation of knowing that others (her online family) were witnessing her virtual assault at the virtual hands of a rapist.

The Pyramid
In a 1943 treatise entitled "A Theory of Human Motivation" (PDF), A. H. Maslow proposed the idea that human behavior was informed by a series of successive

motivations grouped into five categories. His 10,000-word paper is often expressed as a simple pyramid diagram with the most basic needs (food, water, sleep and sex) at the bottom of the pyramid and the higher needs (love, self esteem, creativity, etc.) in ascending order, with Self-Actualization at the top.

"A person who is lacking food, safety, love, and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else," writes Maslow, suggesting physiological needs take precedence, and that only after a person has met those needs will he seek to meet higher order needs and so on; which brings us back to sex. Let's say you've got all that food, water and shelter folderol taken care of, but what you really lack is sex. Your first order of business is going to be finding someone with whom to satisfy that need.

Which brings us back to online communities. From full-fledged dating services to online groups only incidentally offering a social outlet, online spaces are the perfect environment for breeding wants and needs. In most online communities it takes only weeks, if not days, for the first amorphous hints of an adults-only romper room to take shape, leading to all manner of sexual experimentation and fulfillment. Some communities are even built from the ground up explicitly for sex. And sometimes, online community members act like Mr. Bungle, attempting to satisfy their basic Maslowian needs (for sex, or even control) through coercion or force.

The Rape Switch
"This game contains sex, politically incorrect behavior, blasphemy, and lots of other things which are not acceptable to many people," says the *Sociolotron* website. "This game allows you to bring out your darker side, but it also allows the same for other players!"

Just what exactly the makers of *Sociolotron* intended by the phrase "darker side" is a matter of subjective opinion (and a matter most of us won't feel the need to investigate too thoroughly). Suffice to say, *Sociolotron* is a place where anything goes; up to and including most things we simply would not tolerate in normal life - including rape.

"I'd prefer something with a violable elegance to something that appeared open to all takers," said *Sociolotron* user Dominic, speaking to a reporter for adult game site MMOrgy.com. Ultimately, I want to explore something that is resisting and I want that resistant thing to break for me."

MMOrgy describes Dominic as "one of" *Sociolotron*'s rapists. Scenes from a menagerie of horror movies come flooding in. But before we get too carried away by moral indignation, it's important to note that the ability to be raped is a character option in *Sociolotron* - users can turn it on and off at will. This is, after all, the place where anything goes. If only there were a switch for turning off sociopaths ...

Again, from the *Sociolotron* website:

"Don't yell for help to the game masters! ... There is some supervision by game masters and we will interfere if people behave in a way that disturbs other players' gaming experience beyond the normal level but other than that we leave the players to settle their own disputes."

MMOrgy describes Dominic as "one of" *Sociolotron*'s rapists.
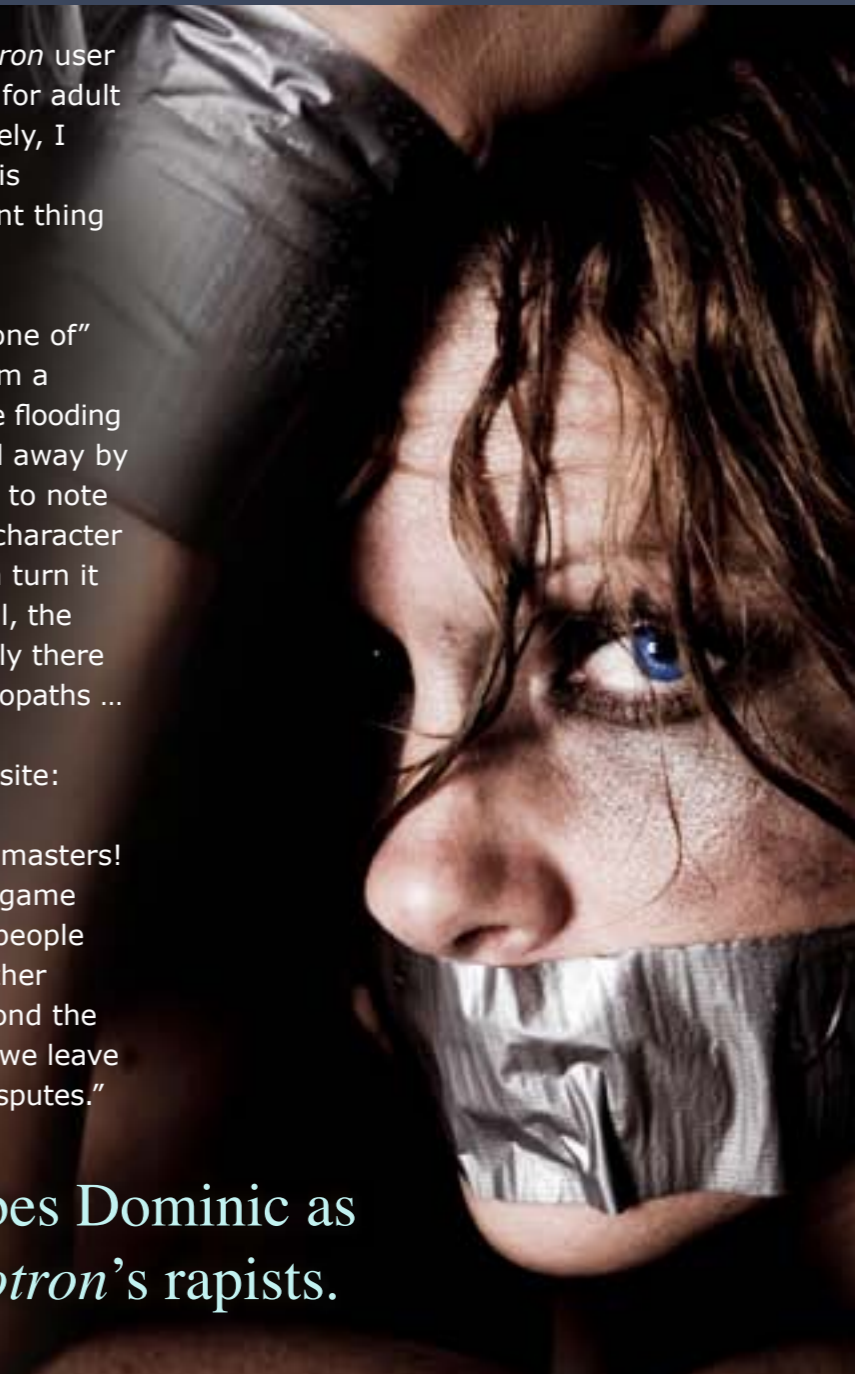
> "I need 5000 [*World of Warcraft*] gold for my epic mount," proclaimed the level 70 night elf Druid, known colloquially as "Epic Slut."

> "In return you can mount me."

The phrase "beyond the normal level" is compelling to say the least.

"And if she doesn't resist … at the initial capture? Does that lessen the pleasure for you?" the MMOrgy.com interviewer asks Dominic.
"Part of the art is to create resistance," he says.
"How do you do so in one who willingly goes with you?"
"There are always spaces of distress if your mind is subtle enough to find them."

What *Sociolotron* users may get out of willingly submitting to an individual like Dominic is anyone's guess, and perhaps intangible. At any rate, it's most definitely a higher order Maslow need, somewhere in the area of Love or Esteem. Sometimes, however, sex in the online space is more clear cut. Sometimes it's all about the Benjamins.

Epic Mount
In *World of Warcraft*, players buy items and animals with in-game gold. This gold can be earned through various in-game means or, if you have more money than time, purchased in out-of-game auction houses. But what if you have neither in-game gold, nor out-of-game cash? Well,

they don't call it the oldest profession for no reason.

"I need 5000 world of [*Warcraft*] gold for my epic mount," proclaimed the level 70 night elf Druid, known colloquially as "Epic Slut." "In return you can mount me."

Phone sex lines have been doing gangbuster business for decades, so the idea of someone talking dirty for money isn't all that new. But until recently, outside of a small circle of gamers and philosophers, the idea of breaking the fourth wall and offering one's physical self in return for in-game favors seemed a taboo too far. Epic Slut may not have changed that perception, but she, like Mr. Bungle before her, did challenge the belief that it "doesn't happen here." And she isn't alone.

"My free trial was set to end at midnight. I hadn't earned any gold whatsoever, and my character wasn't advancing quickly enough to turn a profit. I knew what I had to do, and I bravely started clicking," says *Rob Conzelman, a self-described "cyber whore" writing for Dragonfire Magazine.* Conzelman describes the character he made (female, of course) and how he dressed

her, and how he then proceeded to wait by a lamppost, looking sexy and soliciting passersby.

"And, uh, just like that," he writes, "I made five gold pieces in five minutes. I was earning zilch when I played legitimately, but cyber-whoring myself paid off in virtual dividends. Instantly I earned the equivalent of 80 cents and boosted my wage to a near real-life $4 an hour wage!"

Habbo's teens will always have the tried and true response "I learned it by watching you" to fall back on.

"Will Bobba for Furni"

Online communities, by their very nature, push boundaries, and that is exactly why so many people find their second home within one, and why so many others seek to fulfill their needs within their walls. But as the scope of internet offerings expands to include content designed for octogenarians, politicians, school teachers and children, that very tendency of online communities to break social barriers comes into stark relief. Sometimes barriers can be good things, especially when children are involved - or could be.

"Maybe 'furni' is common UK slang, but my first encounter with the word was on Habbo, where virtual furniture is the only possible currency between characters," writes the BBC's H2G2 reviewer, after a visit to *Habbo Hotel*, the kid-centric online world. "The second most important term to remember on *Habbo* is 'bobba,' a nonsense word that automatically replaces any objectionable terms. If someone says, 'Bobba you!' they're not trying to be cute or smurfy. They said something so bad that it was automatically censored. … When you hear a female habbo say, 'I WILL BOBBA FOR FURNI,' then you've met your first virtual furniture strumpet. This behavior is quite against the rules of *Habbo*, but enterprising users have found workarounds."

As vile as it may seem that children are selling their virtual selves for money (or furni), if pressed on the subject, *Habbo*'s teens will always have the tried and true response "I learned it by watching you" to fall back on.

"100 an hour paid up front for girl in Seoul 20 or younger"

Called a "failure of the ratings" system by some and "worth checking out" by others, *Audition*, a dance-based MMOG, sports tens of millions of registered users (more than *Second Life*) and according to Korean gaming site KH Games,

presents something of a hidden menace to the Korean population, if not the world.

Audition functions like most MMOGs, only with *DDR*-style dancing instead of dragon slaying. Users sign up for an account, register a name and join up with others to dance the night away. Sounds harmless enough, except *Audition*, like many Asian MMOGs, offers a deep reward system supplemented by pay-to-play extra features; features some users are willing to sell themselves in order to get. But again, nothing new here. What is different is the dance moves in *Audition* are overtly sexual, and players are encouraged to "pair up" and even get married within the game. *Audition* players frequently follow their in-game affairs out of game, leading to all sorts of trouble, as one might imagine.

But such online-turned-real-world meet ups are also not new to Korea, where, after decades of sexual repression, they appear to be undergoing something of a sexual revolution - internet style. Scheduling *bungae-ting* (lightning meetings) in chat rooms or through instant massaging and then following up with a real life hookup is commonplace, and many of Korea's free-to-play

MMOGs, like *Audition*, double as dating services. Instead of flowers and candy, Romeos buy in-game items, and their Juliets reciprocate with sex.

Audition offers very little in the way of chat or language filters, and many prospective sex seekers register with names like "Looking for a girl in Seoul 25 and under" or "100 dollars an hour paid up front for girl in Seoul 20 or younger" to save valuable chatting time. KH Games tells the story of 16-year-old Jung Na-yung, who was lured to an off-line rendezvous with the promise of a quick meet-up and perhaps some in-game items, and was then trapped and raped by an in-game friend turned real-world tormentor.

One assumes that, like *Socilotron*'s Dominic, for Jung Na-yung's rapist, the thrill of the breaking was the whole point, but in this case (unlike Mr. Bungle's rape) the assault didn't occur in-game, nor (as in the case of Dominic) was it consensual. A U.S. version of *Audition* is currently available.

Emergent Sex
"I think where parents should be the most concerned is online worlds that are not rated and where emergent sex occurs," Brenda Brathwaite, the industry's foremost expert on in-game sex, told *Wired* News last year. Was anyone listening?

Emergent sex is the next battleground, the undiscovered controversy. Incidents like Bungle's assault on *LambdaMOO*, the creation of a Dominic in *Sociolotron* and the rape of Jung Na-yung paint a grim picture, but to date, they are isolated occurrences far removed from the mainstream. Consenting adults who meet to trade sex for game gold may be an accepted fact of life on the fringe, but minors trading "bobba" for anything should sound an alarm bell or two.

According to Maslow, the sex drive is an unstoppable force, as primal as the need for food, and just as our many other modern tools have evolved to service us in this regard, so too have online worlds evolved, and so too have those who would seek to satisfy their needs (whatever they may be) through coercion or force. But the question isn't whether or not we'll allow our children, our hormonal, curious children, to participate in this evolution (they will whether we want them to or not). The question is whether or not we'll allow their curiosity to take them places we wouldn't dare allow them to go in the real world.

Sociolotron and its like are the equivalents of real-world swingers clubs or singles bars, and they have formidable barriers in place to restrict minors from entering, which is as it should be. We would not, after all, allow minors into a strip club. But in places like *Habbo* and *Audition*, we're allowing the sociopaths into the preschool. This year's political circus may be centered on the role of videogames in violent crimes, but even if every school shooter in the United States had played videogames to prepare for his rampage, chances are on that very same day more children, exponentially more, were playing doctor online. This, in and of itself, is not necessarily the problem - it's who they're playing **with** we should be concerned about. [COMMENTS]

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. His blog can be found at falsegravity.com.

Emergent sex is the next battleground, the undiscovered controversy.

BLOWING UP GALAXIES

For *Star Wars Galaxies* players, Sony Online's *SWG* NGE was DOA

by Allen Varney

In November 2005, Sony Online Entertainment drastically revised its licensed *Star Wars Galaxies* massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) with a sprawling package of changes collectively dubbed the "New Game Enhancements."

Two months beforehand, MMOG consultant Jessica Mulligan had spoken at the 2005 Austin Game Conference in Austin, Texas, on the first annual "MMOG Rant" panel. Mulligan railed against publishers who, she said, were committing exactly the same mistakes they'd been committing for 20 years: "coding before designing, changing a game after launch, ignoring the community of players, launching before the game and team [are] ready ..."

"Don't change the game after launch." After Sony Online released its NGE, *Star Wars* players dramatically confirmed Mulligan's lesson, much as the *Hindenburg* conveyed an important message about hydrogen. Yet like "Never fight a land war in Asia," this lesson cannot be taught, only learned. Each generation, and publisher, must learn it anew.

Has SOE learned this lesson? It may not matter.

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[**Disclosure:** Working through a temp agency, I spent five months in early 2003 writing mission dialogue for *Galaxies*. I was otherwise uninvolved in the project and have neither feelings nor agenda about SOE or LucasArts.]

In June 2003, *Star Wars Galaxies* launched – at least six months too soon – with an overambitious design, unfinished code and poor content tools. Even so, the game attracted around 300,000 subscribers, a respectable showing then. A year later, *World of Warcraft* debuted and redefined "respectable." At both SOE and its licensor, LucasArts, *WoW* envy grew strong.

LucasArts supervises *SWG* closely. The LucasArts *SWG* producer, a licensing and marketing executive, approves and often dictates all content. At launch, this producer was Haden Blackman; Blackman's post-launch successor was Julio Torres**.** Torres, an avid *World of Warcraft* player, strongly wanted *SWG* to feel more iconic – more *Star Wars*-y – and, by implication, more *WoW*-sy. He and other LucasArts executives, and a few SOE executives, wanted a simpler
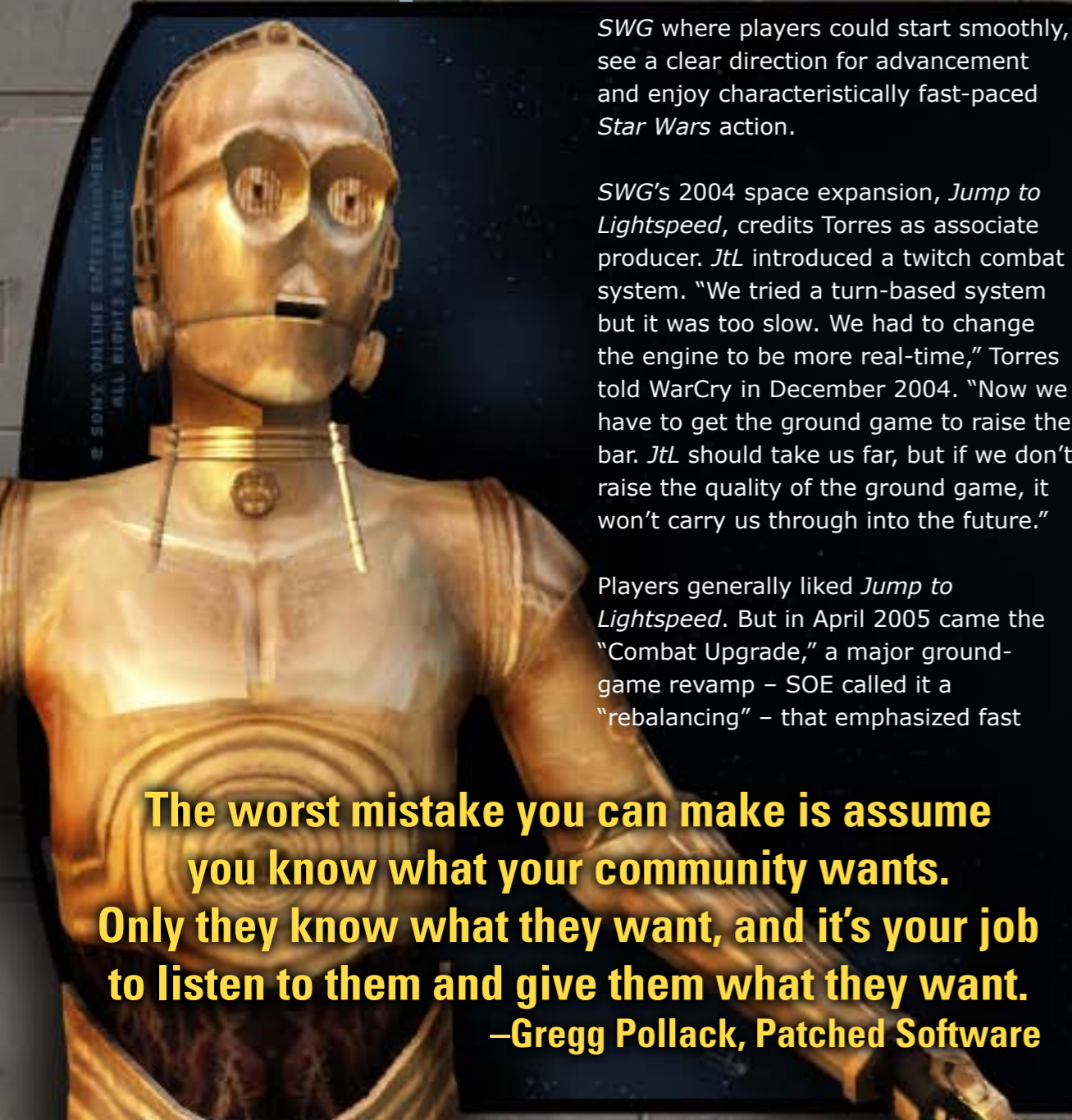
SWG where players could start smoothly, see a clear direction for advancement and enjoy characteristically fast-paced *Star Wars* action.

SWG's 2004 space expansion, *Jump to Lightspeed*, credits Torres as associate producer. *JtL* introduced a twitch combat system. "We tried a turn-based system but it was too slow. We had to change the engine to be more real-time," Torres told WarCry in December 2004. "Now we have to get the ground game to raise the bar. *JtL* should take us far, but if we don't raise the quality of the ground game, it won't carry us through into the future."

Players generally liked *Jump to Lightspeed*. But in April 2005 came the "Combat Upgrade," a major ground-game revamp – SOE called it a "rebalancing" – that emphasized fast

The worst mistake you can make is assume you know what your community wants. Only they know what they want, and it's your job to listen to them and give them what they want.
–Gregg Pollack, Patched Software

action. Players considered it poorly implemented, buggy and slow. Sony Online CEO John Smedley addressed protesters in an official forum post that, significantly, talked in game design terms: "The Combat Upgrade was [crucial] for the long-term health of the game. In order to make the experience in *SWG* more diverse and to breathe new life into this game, we felt it was important for us to entirely overhaul the current system and to make sure that it's balanced properly. Are we finished? Not by a long shot …"

This was the attitude LucasArts executives expressed: To increase subscribers, fix the game. It makes perfect sense – assuming subscribers think they're playing a game.

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On November 3, 2005, SOE stunned players by announcing surprising "New Game Enhancements" that would go live on November 15. Why delay the announcement until two weeks before launch? "There were several other announcements related to the *Star Wars* franchise going on at the time," Torres told GameSpy, "so we wanted to make

sure that something this big didn't get lost in the shuffle."

As *WoW* barreled toward 5 million subscribers, SOE launched *SWG*'s Publish 25. The NGE replaced the combat system with a shooter-style twitch game, reduced the value of crafting and entertaining, and collapsed 34 professions into nine classes. Jedi Knight powers, once obtained only after torturous grinding, were now widely available. Creature Handlers and Bio-Engineers, previously stunted by the CU, vanished.

The launch, like the original game's, went horribly: awful bugs, broken quests, lag. But these paled beside the main problem. For an unexpectedly huge number of players, the issue – the overriding issue that has burned in their heart down to, lo, this day and hour – was betrayal.

A minority of players liked, and still like, the NGE. But the Betrayed were legion, and they were loud. The official forums filled rapidly with complaints; admins pulled them and perma-banned many posters, who created independent "refugee" forums like Imperial Crackdown. Their reactions weren't the

It's like racing games, right? So what if the red car is faster? So what? Let them drive the faster car! What do you care? What bloody business is it of yours? Maybe I want to drive a slower car, maybe I want to drive a truck! Who cares? Leave me alone! Stop trying to dictate my bloody game experience.
–Paul Barnett, Mythic Software

rote whining that follows every expansion. (1. You nerfed $CLASS. 2. You obviously hate $CLASS. 3. You suck.) No, this was qualitatively different: anger, yes, but also grief.

The saddest thing I ever saw in *SWG* was the night before the NGE on the Euro servers... Creature Handlers taking out their favourite pets one last time, petting and playing with them. Perhaps they thought they'd still be able to pull them out; maybe they knew. I am not joking when I say that the conversations I overheard between them then brought a lump to my throat. And I knew then that what SOE was doing was a breach of faith. I became then as angry as the rest of us. (Terra Nova blog, "Order 66," comment by Chewster, 12/16/2005)

To dismiss these players as mawkish, to tell them to get a life, misses the NGE's lessons. These paying subscribers thought they had a life, and a community. Among a certain demographic, the distinction between meatspace and online – between "life" and "game" – grows increasingly arbitrary, like cash vs. credit cards.
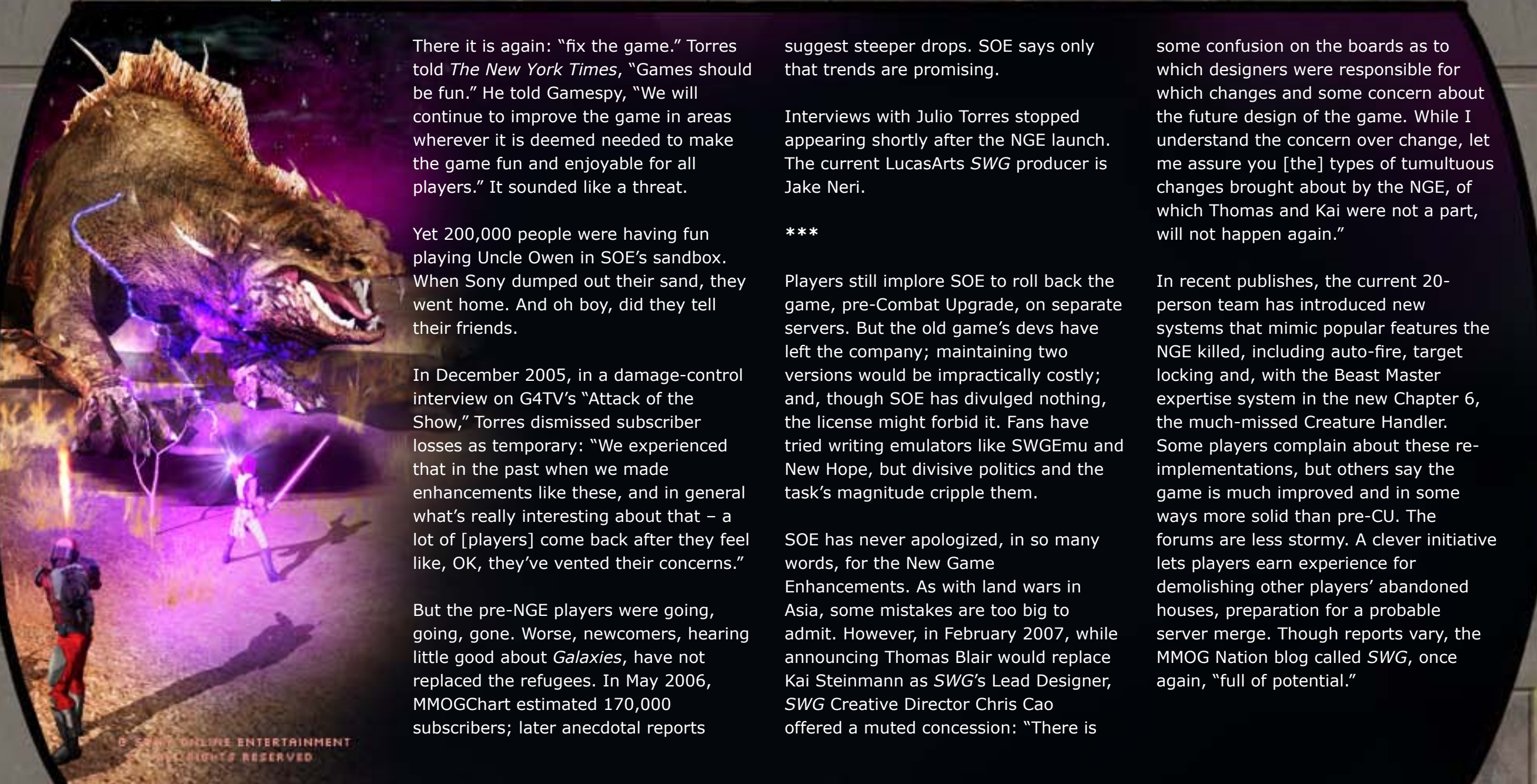
Having invested time building that part of their life, these players watched SOE, with brief warning and dubious justification, sweep it away.

For many younger players, it was their first encounter with betrayal. And as there is no love like your first love …

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At first, SOE's official line about the outcry was "Some gamers hate change"; then, later, "It's a small minority." Before long, though, the community's outrage drew unprecedented attention from *The New York Times, The Washington Post*, *Wired* and many others. The official line now sounded like, "We had to destroy the village to save it." John Blakely, SOE VP of Development, told the *Post*, "We knew we were going to sacrifice some players … [but] as a *Star Wars* license, we should do a lot better than we have been doing." Smedley told GameSpot, "Straight sandbox games don't work. … I think in the past, what we probably made was the Uncle Owen experience as opposed to the Luke experience. We needed to deliver more of the *Star Wars* heroic and epic feeling to the game."

There it is again: "fix the game." Torres told *The New York Times*, "Games should be fun." He told Gamespy, "We will continue to improve the game in areas wherever it is deemed needed to make the game fun and enjoyable for all players." It sounded like a threat.

Yet 200,000 people were having fun playing Uncle Owen in SOE's sandbox. When Sony dumped out their sand, they went home. And oh boy, did they tell their friends.

In December 2005, in a damage-control interview on G4TV's "Attack of the Show," Torres dismissed subscriber losses as temporary: "We experienced that in the past when we made enhancements like these, and in general what's really interesting about that – a lot of [players] come back after they feel like, OK, they've vented their concerns."

But the pre-NGE players were going, going, gone. Worse, newcomers, hearing little good about *Galaxies*, have not replaced the refugees. In May 2006, MMOGChart estimated 170,000 subscribers; later anecdotal reports

suggest steeper drops. SOE says only that trends are promising.

Interviews with Julio Torres stopped appearing shortly after the NGE launch. The current LucasArts *SWG* producer is Jake Neri.

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Players still implore SOE to roll back the game, pre-Combat Upgrade, on separate servers. But the old game's devs have left the company; maintaining two versions would be impractically costly; and, though SOE has divulged nothing, the license might forbid it. Fans have tried writing emulators like SWGEmu and New Hope, but divisive politics and the task's magnitude cripple them.

SOE has never apologized, in so many words, for the New Game Enhancements. As with land wars in Asia, some mistakes are too big to admit. However, in February 2007, while announcing Thomas Blair would replace Kai Steinmann as *SWG*'s Lead Designer, *SWG* Creative Director Chris Cao offered a muted concession: "There is

some confusion on the boards as to which designers were responsible for which changes and some concern about the future design of the game. While I understand the concern over change, let me assure you [the] types of tumultuous changes brought about by the NGE, of which Thomas and Kai were not a part, will not happen again."

In recent publishes, the current 20-person team has introduced new systems that mimic popular features the NGE killed, including auto-fire, target locking and, with the Beast Master expertise system in the new Chapter 6, the much-missed Creature Handler. Some players complain about these re-implementations, but others say the game is much improved and in some ways more solid than pre-CU. The forums are less stormy. A clever initiative lets players earn experience for demolishing other players' abandoned houses, preparation for a probable server merge. Though reports vary, the MMOG Nation blog called *SWG*, once again, "full of potential."

But is it too late? What, today, can fill those ghostly worlds? *Galaxies* servers intended to host 3,000 players apiece attract less than 500. Sometimes a planet of 200 square kilometers holds only a few dozen players – on weekends!

Where did the refugees go? Some went to *WoW*, of course, and a few to *EVE Online*, but many have yet to find an *SWG* substitute. Prospects aren't entirely grim. Some forthcoming MMOGs promise individual features similar to early *Galaxies*, though none adopt the sandbox approach that attracted its original player base. LucasArts has mentioned a sequel *Star Wars* MMOG, and rumors persist BioWare is working on an online version of *Knights of the Old Republic*.

I thought NGE was a very bad idea, but it was done anyway. I am not sure what else I can say, really. It certainly was a major contributing factor - even a decisive factor - in my decision to move on.
–Raph Koster, *SWG* designer

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The lessons Jessica Mulligan mentioned cannot be taught, only learned. Consensus has emerged about lessons willing students may learn from *SWG* and its New Game Enhancements:

- If your licensor wants you to launch your game before it's ready, cancel it.

- It's the community, stupid.

- Many players don't experience a persistent online world as "a game." They experience it as "my life." An online world's hardcore players view themselves as citizens. Some want to be good citizens, some bad, but the entire core wants to believe they belong to something permanent.

- Big changes after launch drive away existing players and make newcomers mistrust you.

- "Fix the bugs before release, or release now and fix later?" The NGE (among dozens of disastrous launches) confirms it beyond dispute: Fix the bugs. If you can't fix them, cancel the launch.

- Oh yeah – don't launch before you're ready.

It seems each MMOG publisher (save Blizzard, which launched *WoW* **when it was ready**) – and, more important, each licensor – must learn these lessons painfully, in public. No debacle has been more public, more humiliating, than the NGE. Will the launch of Sony's *DC Heroes* MMOG prove its new licensor has learned?

For what it's worth – and that is, as yet, unclear – SOE has learned. In May, 2007, SOE acquired the assets of Sigil Games Online, including *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* – yet another launch catastrophe. "We do not plan on making any major changes to *Vanguard*," Smedley wrote in a forum post. "We aren't mandating any big changes to the game. We've learned a thing or two with our experiences with the NGE and don't plan on repeating mistakes from the past."

COMMENTS

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

The Breasts That BROKE THE GAME

by Michael Zenke

Halfway through 2006, a huge story went unnoticed by game journalists. Barely a cursory glance or raised eyebrow marked its passage. Early in May the Entertainment Software Rating Board quietly changed *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*'s rating from "T" to "M," forcing a recall and re-labeling of the game, and costing Bethesda a fortune. The problem? Bethesda had nothing to do with it.

A modder unaffiliated with the game's developers, working on her own time, manipulated art assets in the game, rendering female characters topless, and distributed her work over the internet. It was an act beyond Bethesda's control but to the ESRB objectionable content is objectionable content, and it needed to be weighed, measured and rated.

The ESRB's decision incensed industry insiders, perplexed onlookers and gave politicians a jumping-off point for continued assaults on the industry's integrity. Looking back, there's a reason the incident didn't make bigger headlines: The news dropped in May, just a week before the last real E3 event, and there were bigger stories to cover that month. But with player-centric content vehicles like *LittleBigPlanet* and PlayStation Home on this year's docket, last year's ESRB decision may prove to be the gift that keeps on giving for an already beleaguered industry.

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When the ESRB rates a game, the only issue at hand is the impact it will have on players. Raters use a 32-item list based on the game's content to suggest a player's minimum age for most commercial videogames released in the U.S. and Canada. The foe of that process, the bane of the game industry's self-policing efforts, is the three-headed hydra of bad press, public outcry and political interest. The Hot Coffee scandal and perceived connections to youth violence has forced the Board to label questionable content "Mature," if only out of self preservation. Standing as the only bastion between government oversight and the game industry, it takes its job very seriously. When references to the "*Oblivion* Topless Mod" appeared on game news sites as a curiosity early in April of 2006, the ESRB had little choice but to check it out.

The Topless Mod debuted on the *Oblivion* Source fansite in March 2006. A woman calling herself "Maeyanie" created the mod because she hated "government/society/whatever forcing companies to 'protect our innocent population from seeing those evil dirty things 50% of them posess personally anyways.'" In terms of shock value, the resulting nudity was fairly tame. With bottom undergarments intact and a lack of self-consciousness on the NPCs' part, the modification was about as erotic as a doctor's visit.

During the course of the ESRB's examination, however, the organization saw even more it didn't like. Though the Topless Mod didn't change anything but textures on female NPCs, the ESRB found "more detailed depictions of blood and gore than were considered in the original rating." That, combined with the revelation that the skin texture was among the files shipped with the game on release gave the Board cause to approve a rating change from "T" to "M."

This is in keeping with the language on the ESRB's website, which says, "Every publisher of a game rated by the ESRB is legally bound ... to disclose all pertinent content ... including content that may not be playable but will exist in the code on the final game disc (i.e. locked out). ... In the event of incomplete disclosure during the rating process which affected or could have affected the assignment of a rating or content descriptor, an ESRB enforcement action may be initiated, which could result in revocation of the original rating and the imposition of sanctions, including monetary fines."

Bethesda objected to the Board's decision but agreed to abide by it, although they claimed they weren't at fault for the Topless Mod. "Bethesda can not control tampering with *Oblivion* by third parties," a representative said. "With regard to violence, Bethesda advised the ESRB during the ratings process that violence and blood effects were 'frequent' in the game - checking the box on the form that is the maximum warning. ... We gave accurate answers and descriptions about the type and frequency of violence that appears in the game."

Patricia Vance, speaking for the ESRB, fired back: "It is obviously unfortunate for everyone involved that no one at Bethesda deleted this file [the nude textures] before the game went Gold, contributing to our changing the rating after the game was released. ... Our raters re-reviewed the game ... and felt that the game was deserving of a Mature rating."

Both the ESRB and Bethesda declined to reopen old wounds for this article. Reading between the lines isn't difficult, though: From the ESRB's perspective, even the tame nudity spelled danger, post-Coffee. With individuals like Leland Yee decrying every misstep the industry takes, the organization felt it needed to act quickly to ensure the story didn't gain overwhelming media attention. To do otherwise would be to provide ammunition for the politicians. Bethesda, on the other hand, had almost no choice in the matter. Aside from their signed contract with the Board, they had their bottom line to consider. A stamp of approval from the ESRB is a requirement to be displayed on retailers' shelves, from giants like Wal-Mart all the way down. Rejecting the ESRB's decision would have forced them to search for a new organization to rate their games, and likely would have kept them out of

> In terms of shock value, the resulting **NUDITY WAS FAIRLY TAME**. With bottom undergarments intact and a lack of self-consciousness on the NPCs' part, the modification was about as erotic as a doctor's visit.

mainstream circulation. Retail suicide, in other words.

What neither Bethesda's defenses nor Vance's attacks shed light on are the possible future implications of this decision. The speed with which the ESRB revoked the "T" rating should have publishers of mod-able games thinking hard about their priorities. Which is more important: a thriving mod community, or a rating you can bank on?

"Game 3.0" concepts, talked about extensively at Sony's GDC event earlier this year, rely heavily on community input and outside content to make them "sticky," in a social sense. Sony's Phil Harrison spoke calmly about the ability for Home users to mute offensive speech and ignore users with pornography-filled personal spaces. In that light, the ESRB's "Game Experience May Change During Online Play" seems like a gross understatement, the possibility for abuse too tempting for those with lots of time and little perspective to ignore. *LittleBigPlanet* is even more fraught with problems, as it is more traditionally a game. Will Sony provide personnel to review every fan-made level for offensive content? Will the ESRB? If Barbie-doll

breasts can get a game re-rated, consider the dangers of introducing hardcore pornography into a *LittleBigPlanet* level.

While Hot Coffee will not soon be forgotten, the ESRB's decision on *Oblivion* should have shaken the world harder. A game had to pass through the re-ratings ghetto because of the work of one free-minded individualist. Under assault from thousands of griefers anxious to share the goatse picture with everyone that passes by, how can collaborative games hope to hold up?

COMMENTS

Michael "Zonk" Zenke is Editor of Slashdot Games, a subsite of the technology community Slashdot.org. He comments regularly on massive games at the sites MMOG Nation and gamesetwatGameSetWatch. He lives in Madison, WI (the best city in the world) with his wife Katharine. Michael is not a game journalist.

If **BARBIE-DOLL BREASTS** can get a game re-rated, consider the dangers of introducing hardcore pornography into a *LittleBigPlanet* level.

The FAKE SOUND of OUT-RAGE

by Richard Perrin

Long before Sonic, Mario or I were born, videogames had already tackled controversial material. Even in gaming technology's most primitive phase, sex and violence had found a new home. In 1976, *Death Race* gave gamers their very first chance to drive a handful of white pixels around a dark screen and brutally slay other white pixel blobs. Six years later, technology had moved on, and the advent of color graphics brought a visibly erect General Custer on a mission to rape Native American women. While each of these incidents engendered enough discontent to brew a tempest in a teacup, they rarely reached the attention of the bored masses yearning to be offended. It would take a game more sinister and terrifying than anything we had ever seen to change all that.

Let's go back in time, to the early '90s: Nirvana's *Nevermind* just launched the grunge movement, and David Koresh's Branch Davidians were under siege by the ATF. But rock music and embattled cultists were the last thing on concerned parents' minds, as a greater evil, one far more advanced, was already working its way into their very homes! In 1992, *Night Trap* was about to hit the home console audience. This was the year politicians became interested in videogames and started a war of ignorance and misunderstanding that even today shows no sign of reaching an amicable peace treaty.

Night Trap began life in 1986, as a project for Hasbro's cancelled NEMO console. While I sat too close to my TV enjoying *Bubble Bobble* and *The Legend of Zelda*, one developer had their eye on taking gaming far beyond anything I had seen in my 8-bit world. Tom Zito hoped to create a game based on the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series using live action video, but having failed to secure a license from the film studio, they created their own original horror game using live-action video rather than pixelated imagery to tell the story. Unfortunately for Zito, Hasbro killed the NEMO, and *Night Trap* sat quiet, unseen and waiting. The public was spared this abominable threat to good taste for another six years.

For me, 1992 was the year of Nintendo. *Zelda: A Link to the Past* and *Super Mario Kart* arrived, two family-friendly classics that would survive the test of time. However the videogame that caught the media's attention was *Night Trap*, on the Sega CD. It was an "interactive movie,"

an experimental genre that mixed traditional film footage with occasional gameplay choices. Game developers used to working within the tight memory constraints of cartridges had access to the vast storage space of CD-ROMs for the first time and chose to fill the vacuum with grainy film footage. And so *Night Trap* was resurrected to once again threaten the homes of mild-mannered, law abiding citizens across the country.

I was 12 when I first heard about the game the press called an interactive horror movie bent on perverting a young generation, and like any impressionable child, I was desperate to get my underage paws on it. The press had promised me the goal was "to trap and kill women," but unsurprisingly this bore little resemblance to what I ended up buying. As I discovered, *Night Trap* was a bit of fluff, a cheesy little vampire film with a few hints at interactivity. The violence we were all promised turned out to be whimsical at best, missing only a big *Batman* **KAPOW** sound, as you flung balaclava-wearing invaders into trap-doors. Did I mention it even featured a musical number halfway through? Terrifying in all the wrong ways! The whole thing seemed like some cruel and

elaborate hoax to trick young boys into buying what they thought would be a taboo piece of horror, and instead all we got was a campy B-movie.

But that didn't keep the wolves from circling.

Maybe it was the use of live-action video, maybe gaming had just finally reached critical mass or maybe the wind just happened to be blowing in the right direction one cold morning in 1992. Whatever the reason, *Night Trap* caused enough hysteria to get the government involved. In joint Senate Judiciary and Government Affairs Committee hearings on videogame violence, governmental experts were quick to claim *Night Trap* was "ultra-violent" and "offensive to women"; they also accused it of "promoting child abuse." Major newspapers across the U.S. carried this alarming message as far as it would go, and it wasn't long before stores like Toys 'R' Us and F.A.O. Schwarz stopped selling the game altogether.

Even my beloved Nintendo was quick to sell out fellow developers: Nintendo of America insisted *Night Trap* would never appear on a Nintendo console. Sega and

the creators of *Night Trap* blamed Nintendo for the hearings and accused them of using lobbyists to launch a wave of damaging controversy against their competitors. While Nintendo and the senators denied this, to me the transcripts tell quite a clear tale: In the middle of full-scale console war Nintendo got involved in the hearings to score a cheap victory.

Those hearings weren't looking for the truth. In fact, the makers were told they were "out of order" when they stood up and offered to speak in defense of their game. The bemused developers asked one of the senators afterward if he'd even played the game, but were told, "I don't need to; this is filth." `COMMENTS`

Richard Perrin lives in Sheffield, England, working as the designer and producer for independent game developer Studio Trophis. He also works as a freelance videogame journalist and maintains a blog about interactive storytelling called Locked Door Puzzle. He's partial to a quality vodka.

> **I was 12 when I first heard about the game the press called an interactive horror movie bent on perverting a young generation, and like any impressionable child, I was desperate to get my UNDERAGE PAWS ON IT.**

the Escapist

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