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editorial

Editor's Desk - September 15th, 2005

Another three months have quickly passed. In this iteration I wasn't able to lead the TGQ Staff as effectively as usual as I live just southeast of New Orleans, Louisiana. Less than three weeks ago, hurricane Katrina passed within 10 miles of my house.

Thankfully, I took heed of the warning sirens and evacuated in time. Even after leaving, I wasn't really expecting the hurricane to hit. I gave Wes Ehrlichman, a good friend who also happens to be an indispensable help, a call that ended with this cryptic note: "Just in case this hurricane hits, I may not be able to get online or work with the magazine anytime soon. I mean, heh, the city would be underwater."

I was half jesting; there was no way it was going to happen. Now I haven't been home since the 27th; bouncing around the country from hotel to helpful household the whole time, selfishly wondering about my stuff.

As horrible this event has been to so many people, it still feels surreal to me. I keep thinking that I will just go home one day and everything will look the same. It has to be this way, I just know it. When I go home, I will sit down on my couch, unwrap my PS2 controller, plug it in, and finish the Sega Ages Collection game of *Outrun* I had just started before the loudspeakers drove past my house blaring evacuation warnings.

That's how it feels anyway. Looking over satellite photos, I know that I still have a roof and it's currently dry, but I have heard reports of minor flood and wind damage in my neighborhood. Even if my house is ok, my stuff might not be - my copy of *Rondo of Blood*, my recently acquired Sega Saturn, my MVS arcade machine - it might all be gone.

With my thoughts focused on the magazine I have been able to put that out of my head for now. I've been able to get online enough to download drafts of articles and look over art to keep myself in the loop. The majority of the final work was done by Wes with enormous assistance from the rest of TGQ's staff. The magazine would not have made its self-imposed deadline without their teamwork and dedication.

Thankfully, my wife and I are fine. Others, people I once called neighbors, are not. I know that some of you reading this have already donated to the flood victims. If not, I know there are many who still need help and will continue to need help for months to come. Seeing the support and relief that's been offered to flood victims thus far warms my heart.

I thank all of you from the bottom of my heart.

-Regards

Matthew Williamson, Editor In Chief
shapermc@gamersquarter.com

staff

Disgaea, Phantom Brave, Makai Kingdom - PS2
Christopher Bruso

Last night, as I fluttered down into sleep, I heard what sounded like a familiar noise:

ker-cha.

It must have been a passing car rounding the corner, or a ravenous night-beast searching trashcans for a meal. Whatever the noise actually was, it sounded like the "Confine" noise in *Phantom Brave*, and the sound brought me back to Nippon Ichi's games. I lay there, staring up at the ceiling, wondering what those games meant to me and how they've changed my life.

ker-cha.

The whole thing started with *Disgaea*. It felt like ages ago, but it was released in just 2003. Back then, when I first saw the preview materials at *RPGamer*, I was immediately impressed. I had always been a fan of strategy RPGs — I spent years looking for a copy of the SNES *Ogre Battle*, and read so many FAQs on *Final Fantasy Tactics* that I dreamt about how the battle system would work years before I actually found it as a Greatest Hits release, ugly green stripe and all. I wasn't too fond of the character art — they looked too young and insubstantial to be warriors — but as more information was

released, I became hooked. I got it three days after release, finding it in a mad search of seven different stores, played it, and was immediately impressed.

After I got over the shock of how silly the game was (I was used to my RPGs being about questions of morality, not about pirate penguins), I realized how smooth Nippon Ichi had made it. They understood that they were making a videogame, not a tactics simulator, and kept only the necessary elements for fun in. You could easily discern that Nippon Ichi had played many strategy RPGs and knew the strong and weak points of each. For instance, they refined *Final Fantasy Tactics*' system so that each char-

acter turn took less time, without missing any essential elements to strategy. *Disgaea*'s execution showed an inner understanding of the multitude of systems at work, and how to maximize the discreet value known as "fun" from each.

For quite a while, nothing else went into my PS2. The game was so goddamn *entertaining*. Whenever I would start to get bored, Nippon Ichi managed to throw a curve ball my way. And if I got stuck, instead of just repeating beaten stages over and over, there were random dungeons that earned you character levels and improved your weapons as a bonus, making them feel personal. Nippon Ichi had the design of the strategy RPG down to an art. They knew exactly how to keep the game simple yet strategic, long but interesting. They understood the essence of the SRPG.

Disgaea will always remain a classic to me, though it has been surpassed by its successors. It opened my eyes to how a game should be constructed. It's not an idea so much as it is a gut feeling, something that can only be experienced, not told. Some people got that idea when they first flew in *Super Mario Bros.* 3; it was *perfect*, and all was right with the (game) world. *Disgaea* felt like it was designed for the player - as a game - instead of a mere diversion. When I played it, I was more than hooked; it was like an alternate reality for me, the gameplay felt so substantial. My television became a window into a world that I had always known existed.

Then came the announcement of *Phantom Brave* - the game that was to top *Disgaea*. Did Nippon Ichi understand what they had created in *Disgaea*? Was their piece of work art by design, or was it a fluke? Would *Phantom Brave* instill that same powerful emotion - the one called fun - that *Disgaea* had?

I thought to myself, probably not.
I was dead wrong.

ker-cha.

Phantom Brave changed my life, and not in an insubstantial way. Most people play video games for fun, as a diversion from mundane life. Some people play them with more of a passion than others, but it usually remains a diversion from an imperfect life. Nobody's life is as exciting as a video game; we can't run forever, battle giant insects, or fall down 20 stories without getting hurt. But *Phantom Brave* came to me at a crucial moment in my life, a time where I needed an ounce more strength than I had. *Phantom Brave* was part of my healing process.

I won't bore you to death with the circumstances. I'm here to talk SRPG, not depression. I was diagnosed with a severe anxiety and panic disorder, and my life fell apart as I became apathetic towards everything. I went out and got *Phantom Brave* out of habit, not really expecting to enjoy it. It was one of the rare times that I had money, and besides, I didn't have anything much better to do, I felt. So, on a day when I was supposed to be in school but didn't care, I jumped straight into the waters of *Phantom Brave* and was again amazed. I was a born-again Nippon Ichite.

Don't misunderstand me on the next

part. I had a lot of help in getting through my problems from family, friends, and even people in local government who believed I could make it through. It was because of them that I'm still alive, in the sense of an upright human being as opposed to a downtrodden one. They gave me hope for the future and the will to carry on. But *Phantom Brave* was the turning point, the kick I needed to help the depression pass.

Really, what I needed was to have a little bit of fun. *Phantom Brave* was exactly that: pure, concentrated fun - enough to stick my head above the depths of depression and begin to tackle the problem. How could a game have this powerful an effect?

It's apparently simple as pie if you're Nippon Ichi. Take one part knowledge of the basics of gaming, flesh that out with a tablespoon of tough, rigid strategy fiber, add a touch of creativeness, throw in a pinch of lightheartedness, and mix well. The result is my favorite game of all time. It does everything *Disgaea* does right and adds an inventive flair to the mix with its "Confine" system (*ker-cha*), adds more characters and more ways to play, and does it with the same exact understanding of the basics that made *Disgaea* so great.

When you play *Phantom Brave*, you feel like you're in a whole world that was designed just for you. There is even evidence that Nippon Ichi wanted you to feel that way; Phantom Isle can be designed with whatever characters and items you have, making for a unique "home base." I myself established little cliques of characters who got along well, but disagreed with all the others; the secret characters were secluded on their own part of the island, not deigning to interact with the homegrown ones. And once in battle, it felt like Nippon Ichi had thought of everything they could to make the battles difficult but smooth: confining your characters to objects onscreen produced effects that were obvious, each character had a specific role on the team, and many maps had their own little strategy to them that would lead to victory. It really was a self-contained world, albeit one much more fun

and perfect than the real one. Moreover, the story was heartwarming, to answer the "what story?" question about *Disgaea*.

Phantom Brave, from beginning to end, is a piece of art. Art as something that is executed with precision and flair in order to make someone feel or think a certain way. The greatest works of art in human history are the ones that change us, even for a moment, as we gaze upon them. *Phantom Brave* does this with ease. We get a feeling of pleasure from playing it. It's more than a necessary distraction from modern life; it comes alive just as *Disgaea* does; a tiny world where we can play until it becomes necessary to head back into today's society. Is providing this kind of refuge so skillfully not an art? I say it is. When I play it, it provides me with strong emotions, and nothing anyone says about the nature of video games as a medium can belittle the feeling I get when playing.

As I was about to fall asleep, my last few thoughts ran along one remaining line. Nippon Ichi is more than a developer of games; they are *artisans* of them. They aim not to simply create video games as diversions, but to produce ones that give us such fundamental feelings as joy and hope. They understand that
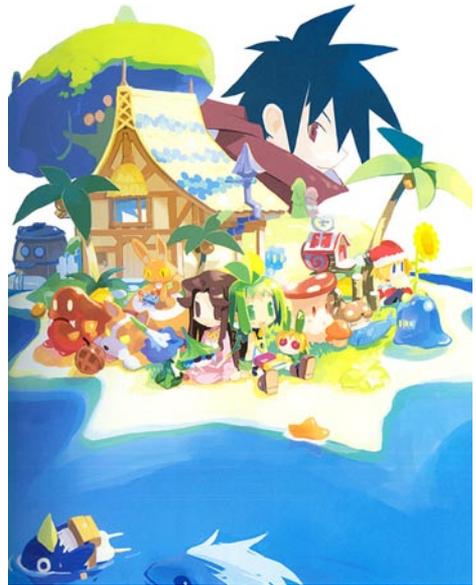
what goes into a video game is not merely work, but that a game has to be molded into a certain shape to provoke feeling. They understand the basics of game mechanics and use this knowledge to create games as uncomplicated as possible while still stretching the imagination and strategic thinking of the gamer. And, most of all, they know about the ethereal factor known as "fun," and the art of producing it in games.

ker-cha.

And thus I fell asleep, dreaming of *Makai Kingdom*, Nippon Ichi's latest game. I slept horribly — I woke up at three in the morning to play it and didn't put it down until 10. *Makai Kingdom* contains the very best elements of *Disgaea* and *Phantom Brave* in a fusion of immense proportions. Nippon Ichi adhered to the adage "keep it simple, stupid" and removed individual character turns, à la *Disgaea*, while keeping the freeform gridless gameplay of *Phantom Brave*. The usual multitude of options and ways to play are further extended in *Makai Kingdom*, with a greater variety of different character classes and weapons to fool around with. More importantly, the addition of facilities, each with their own bonuses, to the mix further refines the formula, as opposed to simply re-hashing the gameplay of previous installments. Finally, the random map generator gives us a practically infinite number of stages to play in; many with a "theme" or special condition that allows the game to continue to be fresh and interesting.

Yet even with all these new improvements, Nippon Ichi stays true to their own artistry. The game remains fine-tuned to the point that feels like it was thoroughly inspected with a microscope to detect any flaws in the inner mechanics. Each new feature feels like it was added only after many days' thought; every new character class has fills a key niche instead of being inutile. Every new feature has a role in the whole of the experience, so that the game demands to be viewed as a cohesive identity instead of a composition of isolated elements in order to gain true cognizance of it. *Makai Kingdom* continues Nippon Ichi's tradition of understanding the answer to the question "what makes a game?"

With these three games — *Disgaea*, *Phantom Brave* and *Makai Kingdom* — as evidence, we know that Nippon Ichi's mastery of the art form of "the video game" is near perfect. Each of these games by their own would deserve to be called classics, yet each somehow improves the formula even further when no improvement was thought possible without disrupting the whole of the experience. With a light touch, they prod and poke around for better ways to extract fun from each game. Truly, Nippon Ichi are perfectionists, and a master of their artistry. We can only hope that they continue in their own tradition, and somehow scale the bar they themselves have set once again with their next game.

So, what are you waiting for? Art begs for attention.

ker-cha.

An Interview with NIS America
Matthew Williamson

In 2004, after having two of their **Tactical Strategy games, Disgaea and La Pucelle Tactics, published by Atlus and Mastiff respectively to greater-than-expected sales, Japanese publisher Nippon Ichi Software opened up their US branch, NIS America, to localize and publish their own games abroad. After self-publishing their third Tactical Strategy game, Phantom Brave, they surprised everyone by announcing that they would also be bringing the Gust-developed traditional RPG, Atelier Iris ~Eternal Mana~, to the US along with their fourth Tactical Strategy game, Makai Kingdom. The Gamer's Quarter asked Jack Niida, NIS America's marketing coordinator about what went into some of NIS America's decisions, and what they're planning to do to survive as a niche title publisher in a big-budget gaming market.**

TGQ: What factors went into the decision to create a US branch instead of licensing your games as you did with Disgaea and La Pucelle?

NIS: We have noticed in recent years the tremendous growth in the anime industry and in the niche strategy RPG market. Therefore, we felt it was the right time for us to open our own branch to fulfill the growing demand here in the United States.

TGQ: Why did NIS decide to use ATLUS for their first 2 US RPG releases (Rhapsody in 2000 and Disgaea in 2003) and then switch to Mastiff for the release of LaPucelle Tactics?

NIS: We did not necessarily switch to Mastiff for La Pucelle. La Pucelle was a title that Mastiff preferred more than Atlus did. It was simple as that.

TGQ: There was a minor controversy regarding censorship in Mastiff's localization of La Pucelle Tactics. How does NIS currently feel about censorship and past censorship?

NIS: Censorship is a necessary evil that we have to deal with. On one side, we do not wish to alter the game in any way, so the North American gamers can enjoy our games to the fullest. However, it is in no way our intent to disturb or upset anybody by leaving in potentially offensive material. We believe we made the right choice for censorship in La Pucelle, but we will work hard not to limit the gaming experience.

TGQ: In anticipation of the then-soon release of Phantom Brave ATLUS re-released Disgaea: Hour of Darkness in the US. ATLUS also announced that after the re-release they will not be doing anymore re-releases. Does NIS of

America have any plans to procure the US rights to this game and re-release it ever? Or LaPucelle either?

NIS: Nobody can foretell the future. At the current moment, we have no plans in re-releasing previous titles, but hey, you never know. :)

TGQ: NIS Japan announced Hayari Gami, a Horror Adventure Sound Novel (a story told with text, graphics, sound and limited gameplay) that seems very Japanese in nature. Do you feel that this title might make it to the US? Assuming it doesn't, does the creation of a US Branch mean that the type of games that NIS Japan creates will be more focused on a worldwide market in the future?

NIS: Wow, I am surprised that everybody knows about Hayari Gami. Hayari Gami is in fact a novel type adventure game. The game itself is very interesting, but we are not certain if the western market is ready for games of this sort. That being said we could expect future NIS games developed for the world market as well

as Japan.

TGQ: With the rising costs of next generation development, what will make it possible for a small company like NIS USA to thrive?

NIS: That is a good question and we are asking that ourselves. We obviously cannot compete against major developers in regards to graphics and movies. Therefore, we have to be more creative and make games that are unique. If not, we will go down the drain quickly.

TGQ: Does NIS USA share the same thoughts on company survival as the EU Vice President of KOEI (who releases Nippon Ichi games in Europe) in saying that "profit is not always the priority – creativity is" with the rising costs of next generation development?

NIS: In a way, we do agree; however, we believe that creativity is what brings profits. Of course, just being creative will not make us profit. Being able to develop and market, and sell creatively will help us thrive.

TGQ: It was hinted at that Makai Wars will be getting a large delay in the USA. Is this true, and is it in any way related to Sony's PSP game development policies?

NIS: Seems like bad news always gets out be-

fore any good news… Yes, Makai Wars has been delayed and it is due to major developmental delays. It was not necessarily Sony's fault for the delay. The developmental lag on our side and the fact that we had to focus our energy towards Makai Kingdom delayed the game.

TGQ: Was there anything behind the decision to change Phantom Kingdom (the Japanese release title) to Makai Kingdom?

NIS: Well, the decision was simple and quick. We did not want gamers to confuse Phantom Brave with Phantom Kingdom. In Japan, many of our fans thought Phantom Kingdom was a sequel to Phantom Brave and that created some confusion. Therefore, it was natural for us to change the title to distinct itself from our other titles.

TGQ: Atelier Iris is a Gust-developed RPG that is the sixth game in a series spanning back to the PS1. This leads to many questions for NIS US about Atelier Iris ~Eternal Mana~. Does this mean that NIS USA plans to become a localization house for Japanese games that share a similar vein as NIS developed games?

NIS: Yes, you can expect more games from different developers to appear here in the states.

TGQ: Atelier Iris is a branch off from the traditional Atelier games in Japan with many new elements to the series. Was Iris' advancement in the series involved in the decision for NIS US to begin localization at this point in the series?

NIS: Unlike Atelier Iris, the previous Atelier series was a pure simulation type game. These games were great in [their] own ways, but we felt that the North American gamers would enjoy a more classic RPG-type title than a pure simulation game. Plus we haven't seen RPG titles like Iris in years, so we had to bring it over.

TGQ: What effect will Atelier Iris have on NIS

US' decisions on localization of both other Japanese RPGs and the rest of the Atelier series (Atelier Iris 2 was released in Japan May this year)?

NIS: Atelier Iris definitely opened up the road for niche market import games. The demand is certainly there, but everybody (publishers) was afraid to take the first step. It's certainly understandable. I mean, who would want to risk tens and hundreds of thousands of dollars on games that have no previous record here in the states? Now that Iris has paved the way, we will see more and more niche market games imported.

TGQ: NIS seems to like smaller companies. In an interview, Haru Akenaga said "NIS will remain relatively small compared to Square Enix by establishing our brand name in the niche market." Does this have any effect on choosing to use Double Jump Books as your strategy guide creators, as well as contracting them to create an online strategy guide for you, which will be free, over larger companies such as BradyGames?

NIS: Double Jump has always created quality strategy guides, so it was natural for us

to approach them. We have a great working relationship with them and that might be, in part, because we are both still relatively small companies. Hopefully, we can both grow into major corporations in the gaming industry.

TGQ: Does NIS's American branch have any plans to develop in-house games?

NIS: That would be nice… However, we just don't have the resources and strengths to develop games for ourselves yet. Hopefully, in the near future we will be able to create games on our own.

TGQ: Just for fun, what games are some of the staff playing currently?

NIS: Well, some of the games we are currently playing are Gran Turismo 4 (you could never go wrong with this series), Tekken 5 (Gotta love that dysfunctional family), and Miina no Golf PSP. Hmmm… Just noticed we don't have a single RPG in our playing list. Let me throw in my personal favorite, the Super Robot Wars series, for our sake.

TGQ: I would like to thank the staff for taking the time to answer these questions.

NIS: Thank you very much for this wonderful opportunity. Please look forward to Atelier Iris and Makai Kingdom! If you have any more questions or concerns, please visit www.nisamerica.com!

SOLDIER OF LOST FORTUNE

Missing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.
Paul Lilly

Videogames. They're a funny old thing, aren't they? Perhaps even more funny are those of us who play them, and the many ranks and positions we invent to go alongside. Like a mini-snapshot of society and human thinking, videogames come with their own assumed factions and depressing set of rivalries.

Casual, Middlecore and Hardcore all wage wars on international forum boards; Email accounts fill to bursting with vitriol-fuelled exchanges. Voracious collectors lick their fingers with each successive acquisition while fanboys and code-monkeys ride the tube to their respective jobs. Games journalists (sorry, "writers," if you prefer that terminology) live via all of the above by selling their souls to write copy to deadlines.

Like I said, it's a funny old thing isn't it?

Of course, the main point that I'm leading up to is that there is a little bit of a collector in each of us. We all love a good bargain, whether it's at a car boot sale or "Dodgy Frank's Import Emporium." Above all else we love acquiring expensive, rare and obscure items at prices well below their expected value, sometimes for our own personal collection, and sometimes simply to resell on the "bay of fleas" for a high profit. As a result, all of us have also at some point passed by that deal of a lifetime that would have filled the coffers had we not been so hasty.

As such, my tale began little over a year ago when I was still living in good old Blighty; it should act as both a warning and a comfort to the collector living inside everyone. The names of people, places and some details have been changed (or in some cases entirely fictionalized) in order to protect the innocent.

The Rail Tracks to Perdition

I finally set foot on motionless ground, close to sunrise, after a grueling four -hour train journey up from London during the winter. It wouldn't have been so bad had I not been sandwiched next to a cluster of cider-drinking, chav-like teenagers and their grossly overweight mother, who insisted on regaling the entire carriage with the exploits of her unpleasant offspring at a local arcade. Still, such things could be put up with in light of the fact that I was about to collect my greatly overdue pay.

The walk to my editor's office/living accommodation was a long winding one, and I questioned how a Spectrum-based magazine could still be published out of a tiny village like Wrothendelshire in this day and age. Squeeze through the alley between an off-license and Oxfam store, then up some stairs to the first floor of a local Chippy and you reach the entrance.

Once through the door the sight of Mr. Fontleroy Bumblebry's expansive games collection greeted me, the walls of his dingy office were adorned with some of the most bizarre and

desperately sought after collectables known to gamerkind. Having never actually played any of his vast assortments, I was certain they were only displayed to torment the many underpaid freelancers that saunter through there. I paused briefly at his three factory sealed copies of "Shinrei Jusaishi Taroumaru," propped up and resting on the box of a Metal Slug AES cart no less. Collectors who never play their games; how do they even know if these games actually work or if the dealer didn't simply replaced the innards of that AES cartridge with old teabags? How he funded such decadent collecting baffled me.

Mr. Bumblebry himself, resembled a younger Elliot Gould with massive moustache and a loose flowing Burberry shirt that would make Austin Powers blush, unbuttoned of course, to reveal a tacky Space Invaders T-Shirt. However, the final touch was his massive horn-rimmed glasses that had mirror shades clipped onto them. Unlike your stereotypical obsessive games collector, his personality was perhaps more closely akin to that of the Irish TV personality Bernard Black, except with a cockney accent. He would drift across subjects, with a worryingly

spontaneous air that seemed almost propelled by the ridiculously rare bottles of Metal Gear Solid wine he had.

I slammed the latest dozen page feature down on the desk, "Where's my money for this, mate?"

He drifted back to reality, and finally noticed my presence as thick smoke from his Gitane cigarette wafted upwards, "Hmm? Easy geezer, freelance payment comes out 6 weeks later. Besides, you know how it is, limits with the budget, innit?"

I looked around his wretched office, which I could barely tolerate at the best of times. The paint had been stained yellow with nicotine and the smell of fried grease hung in the air like a cheap bordello. There were bad memories in those walls and not just because he rented it off some bloke who'd used it as a knackers yard previously.

My retort was swift, "Listen, I spent 24 hours on the cold streets of London without sleep so I could attend and report on that bloody 8-bit convention, you said payment would be given when I handed it in."

It was true, the convention required long queuing and I was feeling sweaty and disheveled after the previous two days.

"But mate, surely it was fun being there?"

"Yeah," I responded jadedly. "A real barrel of laughs when the SpecChums started a ruckus with some Commodore owners, it felt like a 1986 playground all over again. I can't believe people still buy and read reports on this stuff."

"It's all about the nostalgia mate, wash it down with a little Newky Brown and you feel like a kid again."

Ahh yes, I thought to myself, the old nostalgia ploy. People love reading about old classics perhaps even more than they love collecting them. I lied, "Look, if you don't pay me now, it's going to your big rivals Geeq."

"Funny you should mention them mate," he said placing a large cardboard box on the desk. "I know you consider yourself a bit of a collector like, so I procured for your perusal this rather

nifty set of… well, it speaks for itself really."

I peered into the box. "Did you try and solder two Dreamcast motherboards together again?"

"Nah, it's proper pukka stuff mate. Genuine wotsits, from Japan they say. Found it in the old stock cupboard, dunno how it got there. Must have been part of some old shipment perhaps."

I grew tired of him incessantly sprouting fiddle-faddle. It was bad enough my contract dictated that I no longer actually owned the rights to anything written, but now he attempted to fob me off with a jumbled box of what looked like PC spare parts and loose cables, clearly bought for pennies at the local car boot sale. "Listen you dodgy spendthrift, I wouldn't be surprised if you got this blooming junk off some gin-soaked puff-jack. What else have you got to offer, if you're not paying in cash?"

"A'right, a'right, don't get your knickers in a twist mate. If you don't fancy a bit of that, how about some of these review copies of games I have?"

My brow furrowed. What would this publication be doing with the games he held before me? They certainly were not review copies, though such payment wasn't uncommon. Still, I decided not to ask questions; better to take the games and scarper. They may actually be worth a few bob. "Fair enough, I'll take all 30 of these so called review copies. Put them in a box fast like, it's nearly nine o' clock and I haven't been

anywhere near a pint yet."

"That's blinding mate, absolutely blinding," he said with a cheeky grin. "Pleasure working with you as always."

From there the meeting ended. Another commissioned article was under my belt, and there were plenty of extra games to play and then sell. But best of all I finally had the chance to leave that dreadful village and retire back to my apartment. Each acquired title was worth roughly a tenner, I guessed, which should easily cover the many bills that week. As was the routine, another form would pop through the door a week later, commissioning me to produce another piece. Life would go on, or so I thought.

A nasty surprise 9 months later

Many moons later, and with the previous events having been lifted clean from my mind thanks to several hedonistic evenings, I was rudely awoken from my morning slumber. With as much control and focus as can be afforded by someone who hasn't had their morning coffee, my hand reached for the ringing phone.

"Morning mate!" came the booming voice over the receiver.

"Morning Fontleroy…."

"Lots of great news me ol' mucker, have you seen the latest issue?"

I held the publication up, browsing the pages. "I see you ended up printing my lengthy interview with that CEO. I'm assuming I'll get paid for that."

"Sorry mate, budget constraints an' all

that. Innit?"

I sighed before inhaling deeply on my tobacco pipe. "But that interview effectively doubles the page length. This means I'm only getting half-pay per page. I had to trek down to that dockland warehouse to meet the guy because he's such a recluse, it was cold and bloody awful! This job isn't exactly rock and roll mate. Damn it Bumblebry, you didn't even credit it to me!"

"Look, these things happen sometimes. Stop glory hunting, this shows loyalty and should put you in good stead with the corporation."

There had barely been time to wipe the sleep from my eyes and already I was infuriated with him. Emotional chains such as loyalty were not something to have when dealing in business; it only meant I was screwed out of what I was owed. But it couldn't compare to the bomb he was about to drop on me next.

"I have more good news. You know that box of goodies I offered you before? You should have taken it when you had the chance. I took it to that London collectors club you informed me of, Bazaar Pour Jeux. They said it was worth quite a bit, mate. Triple figures they said."

My mouth went dry. Like a sick joke where the punch line had been nine months in the making, everything started to shatter with this revelation. BPJ was the penultimate international high-profile videogame collectors club, and it was hidden in England's premier city no less. BPJers (as the clientele were affectionately referred to) dealt strictly in the most expensive, rare and downright bizarre gaming items the world could offer. The sheer amount of money thrown down on those tables elevated proceedings to the levels of wine or antique dealers. Everything from cartridge based GameCube systems through to early beta copies of unreleased triple-A titles were on sale, for the right price of course. Which is to say nothing of their expansive library of egghead archivers and data keepers. It was like an underground hive. The dark and thrilling underbelly of gaming, and it

was invitation only.

I made my excuses and hung up; there was a train to London I had to catch.

The journey was long, uneventful and not very easy thanks to the ball of tension in my stomach. I rushed madly through the streets, running at full pelt, until the entrance to BPJ was in sight. Not that it was easy to recognize. The only clues as to what lay beyond the doors were the burly guards at the front. They blocked the entrance with their hulking figures and demanded to see my entry ticket. A quick flash of the Kanji tattoo on my left shoulder verified to them that I was an official member, thereby granting me entry.

Once inside the hawkers began their routine, kindly "informing" you of the latest high-profile sales. One such individual, a tall skinny lad whose figure seemed eclipsed by the cigar he was smoking, held up a GameCube NR disc for my perusal. On closer inspection it turned out to be a preview disc of *Zelda: The Twilight Princess*. I asked what build it was.
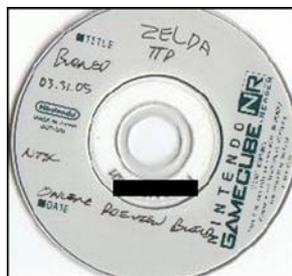
"Sixty percent sir, not complete but a very difficult item to acquire. It took us some time."

"No thanks" I informed him. The price tag would be enough to blind small orphans, and items that hot were not something that interested me. Instead I wandered across the great hall over to a contact of mine; a Mr. Derrick. He was a bald Liverpudlian bloke with a heavy lisp, of African origin, dressed head to toe in mauve-coloured velvet. If anyone knew the answers to my question, it would be him.

"Where are Bumblebry's items on sale?!"

He turned slowly to look at me, and raised

an eyebrow. "Oh yes, quite a remarkable selection of hardware he brought in. Most surprising that it surfaced the way it did, the proprietors had assumed there were no more than two in existence. There are even bidders coming in from Hong Kong and Stalingrad. He certainly will be the talk of the town. Quite a find don't you think Mr. El?"

"Of course it's a bloody amazing find you fool! It was supposed to be MINE! I should never have allowed him to attend the high-council initiation ceremony!" I bitterly cursed my foolishness for informing Fontleroy of the place.

The other clientele milling around were equally impressed with Fontleroy's sale, fawning over him as if he were some kind of demigod; totally unaware of his true nature. It was then that I had an epiphany, the nature of which surprised me. Why was I so concerned about my relative status amongst collectors? Why did I continually strive for that next big hit that would induce awe and envy in others? Why were there so many abysmally dire games on my shelf at home? The answer was simple; to complete a full collection. As any collector knows, no collection is a true collection if it is merely an incomplete collection of collectables.

I was doing it again, rehearsing the same rhetoric that all collectors live by. I had also used the word "collect" at least 4 times in a single sentence. I shuddered, suddenly feeling cold in that large hall. Collectors, I pondered, what drives this obsession of ours? I'm a money man at heart, and more important than the collector's status of such items was their value on the open market.

I checked the boards. Triple figures, just like he had said. I stood and watched as the prices climbed, eventually leveling out at a figure that was roughly the equivalent of 6 months of my wages. To use a cliché, I was well and truly gutted.

Self-loathing welled up inside, and I cursed my bitter luck. A large sum of money had passed right through my fingers, and making the situation worse was the fact that it was my

own fault. When fate gives you a bad hand at the poker table, you can sip some gin and then grin and bear it. Work hard, but leave luck to fate they say. After all, it's only in her nature to pass around varying degrees of bad luck. What makes such a situation unbearable though is when fate played no part in events; when the misfortune that befell you was entirely your own doing. How was I supposed to know that collection of junk would be valuable?

Later that day I again spoke with Bumblebry on the phone. No amount of arguing would change things. He made it quite clear that while said items were at one point mine for the picking, it was now too late. I had blown my chance and there would be no reprieve this time. It was genuinely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and I had let it go. The single-handed most valuable gaming items I had ever come across and I rejected them.

In this moment of money related despair there was only one option; getting a little help from some old friends.

The first port of call would have to be old Jack - sadly though he was out of town that day. Next on the list was Jim, but the phone simply rang and rang. Things were getting desperate, so I went looking for my good buddy Johnny. Alas, he was not to be found at any of his regular hangouts. I had nearly run out of options before remembering perhaps the most faithful of old friends, Mr. Fiddich from the Glen. Sure, the Glen was a long way to travel, but you could always be guaranteed a cheery welcome and blissful time of things whilst there. While in the

company of the Fiddich family I let my sorrows pour forth regarding recent events and soon all seemed well.

The next morning I awoke back at my apartment, feeling as if an El Gigantes had been let loose inside my brain. You can't turn back time. Deeds were done and I had to live with them. The headache would subside, but the memory of losing those collector's items would not. Collector's items that could have easily funded a lengthy - and much needed - vacation. Unfortunately, it was back to work as usual; back to the grindstone.

Act 3

And so here begins the third and final act in this tale - attempting to get over this disaster by writing a long-winded and cathartic article, sharing the loss with as many gamers, regardless of rank or faction, as possible. Hopefully you too have experienced such games related mishaps. Since as Mephistopheles told Faustus regarding the Devil and hell, "*Solamen miseris, socios habuisse doloris,*" or, comfort in misery is to have companions in woe.

Forums across the land are filled with similar tales of forlorn loss, of people taking comfort in each other's woe. Tales such as passing up valuable collector's PCBs at a mere third of the price. Moreover, who hasn't bitten their tongue after realizing that they passed up so many bargains at the end of the Saturn's lifetime; *Radiant Silvergun*, *Panzer Dragoon Saga* and *Dracula X* haunt our thoughts still to this day. Or perhaps you forgot about that eBay auction ending at 3 in the morning? That listing with FM Towns Marty and Zak McKraken mint for only 50 bucks that no one seemed to notice.

Of course for me it wasn't the ultimate loss. I'm still alive, I still have all my limbs and I'm still healthy. I certainly never ended up in hell like Faustus did. Not to mention I'm still on good terms with a nearby busty barmaid. In short, life does go on regardless of whatever small mishap may happen. All you can do is accept it, hopefully learn some lessons, and move on.

Enjoy game collecting but don't let it control your life, even if you did pass up the equivalent of six months wages. There is a big world out there filled with amazing things, and it's begging you to explore it.

WITHIN THE SHELL
OF A LICENSE

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex - PS2
Wes Ehrlichman

Masamune Shirow, artist and writer of Ghost in the Shell, draws pictures of anime girls with big boobs and big weapons.

It's just what he does. Open any of his four Interon Depot art books to a random page and you'll find an image that mixes traditional and digital artwork into something of a professional quality Doujin[1] lite. Always with a sword or a gun. Look closer than these books and you'll find the "lite" part taken away. A friend of mine owns a Japanese porn novel with some early Shirow artwork depicting graphic tentacle rape. These images didn't make it into the Interon Depot books, but they're a good indication of why Shirow's projects are so popular with the "18-34, tech-savvy male demographic."[2] Guys love babes and destruction. Remember, this is the stuff that inspired the Matrix.

It's because of this that I never quite understood the design reasoning behind the *Ghost in the Shell* game that came out on Playstation One. The game was released in Japan in July of 1997. I remember this distinctly because I was actually in Japan at

the time. Right after college I did a two-week home-stay in Tokyo. During this time, I went to as many game stores as I could, and many were heavily advertising for it. I was interested in checking it out, but because the game's cover prominently featured a big breasted Major Kusanagi hunched into a fetal position with several wires leading from her body to who-knows-where, I couldn't let on my interest in front of my host mother. In one of these stores there was a TV running a video. Among the games featured was a fast-paced title starring a red spider tank that slid across the ground, blowing up all sorts of enemies. As the video ended some Kanji I couldn't read faded into the screen followed by the words "Ghost in the Shell." I figured the text must have been wrong - aside from sci-fi destruction, this didn't at all match what I had seen in the movie.

When I returned from Japan I headed

[1] Doujin is shorthand for doujinshi, which refers to unofficial fan-made works which oftentimes involve putting popular characters into pornographic situations.
[2] From a press release about *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence*

into the Electronics Boutique where I worked. One of my coworkers, Tim Smith, was big on Japanese imports, and during my trip I had bought him a copy of *Tobal 2* and an original PS1 single shock analog controller. I handed these over to him and as he put them into his bag he flashed me another game - *Ghost in the Shell*. He told me that the game was made by Exact, the people who made *Jumping Flash*, and that you played as a Fuchikoma - so that was what that red spider was! I had seen the movie, and all I knew was that it was about a hot anime babe named Kusanagi that got naked whenever she had to use her invisibility suit. The store died down a bit and he popped the game in. He showed me a few seconds of the anime intro before skipping past and beginning the first stage. Watching him play, I could tell that the game offered much more than the video had indicated. The Fuchikoma could grip to walls and slide along them while mowing down monsters with its machine guns. This was incredibly cool. A far cry from *Jumping Flash*, but an even further cry from what *Ghost in the Shell* meant to me.

As he slid up the side of a giant pillar that rose into the sky I asked him what it had to do with *Ghost in the Shell*. He said that it was closer to the manga than the anime, and that the Fuchikoma were actually a big part of the manga. I've read the manga since then and aside from a few instances of comic relief, the Fuchikoma were minor characters at best. Before I could get a chance to play some customers came in and we had to get

back to work. We worked for the rest of the night and I didn't get my hands on the controls until the game was finally released in America in late 1997. The game's controls took some getting used to, but after letting them sink in they became tight and smooth, really making you feel like you were sliding the Fuchikoma all over the huge buildings that make up the backgrounds despite being an analog game stuck on a digital controller. Using the strafe to weave back and forth through enemy fire was so much fun that it was easy to forgive the fact that most of the games battles could be won just by strafing. Zooming myself to the top of the tallest buildings echoed the feeling of looking down on the world from high above that only Jumping Flash had previously provided. I ended up finishing the game in a day or two and set it on my shelf, never to pick it up again until a few days ago while researching for this article.

Now that I had played the game, I had full confirmation that it really had very little to do with the anime. Yes, the action was broken up by over 30 minutes of animation by the original Ghost in the Shell staff, but despite its beauty, the story that those cutscenes told seemed so disjointed from the actual gameplay that I often found myself skipping them to keep myself immersed in the action. As I slid around the playfields dodging fire and gunning enemies into oblivion, I came to the realization that I loved the game for what it did as a game, not what it did with the license. I liked *Ghost in the Shell*, and bought the game because of this, but it really didn't matter that this was a *Ghost in the Shell* game. To me, this game may as well have been an alternate character in a third *Jumping Flash* game. I had played too many disappointing licensed games to think that a game could be faithful to its source material and still be good: Spiderman and Venom in *Maximum Carnage*, *Batman Forever*, *Wayne's World*, *Toys*, *Home Alone*, *Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk: The Pantheon Saga* - they were all terrible. But this. This was how a licensed game should be made. It made me decide that

licensed games should use their license to sell you a game that may not necessarily have to do with that license. It's more important to be a good game than a faithful license.

Currently, Intellectual Property has become **the** buzzword in all entertainment industries, and as Mamoru Ooshi and Masamune Shirow put together their artsy sequel to the first *Ghost in the Shell*, Production I.G. takes advantage of this by milking the *Ghost in the Shell* IP as much as they could. A new animated television series - *Stand Alone Complex* - had been made to help hype the movie and Production I.G. began working with both Cavia and Sony's internal studios to create the accompanying Playstation 2 game. Exact, the creators of the original *Ghost in the Shell* game, have since changed their name to MuuMuu, and haven't had a game released in America since the original *Ghost in the Shell*. They've had a few games in Japan though, including a cash-in Pocketstation game called *Virtual MuuMuu*, a lackluster *Jumping Flash 3*, a singing bear PS2 game called *Kuma Uta*, and have an upcoming PSP *Animal Crossing* rip-off called *Fuku Fuku no Shima*.

I watched a few episodes of the *Stand Alone Complex* show, but quickly gave up on it as I'd been cutting back on anime in favor of playing games. When I came across *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* for the Playstation 2 on store shelves during the 2004 Christmas game flood I left it sitting there. In contrast with the drawing power of Masamune Shirow's busty Major Kusanagi, this game's cover was almost a repellant. It consists of an unattractive and badly proportioned image of Kusanagi kneeling down with her machine gun while transparent, green, matrixesque rings encircle her. There's a noncommittal quote on the back of the box from Play Magazine that calls the game "a stunning new Playstation 2 game," as if you didn't know that from the label on the side. I left it to rot on EBgames' shelves.

A few months ago, I was checking out budget PS2 games at the local Target and ran across their last copy of *Ghost in the Shell:*
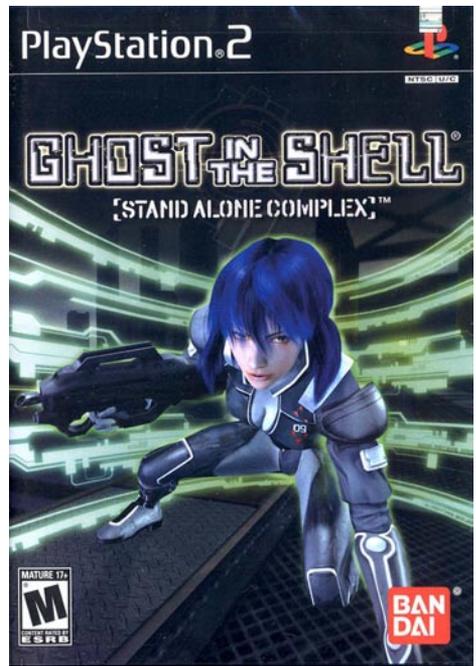
Stand Alone Complex. I thought about it for a few minutes and decided,

"what the hell, I buy far more games than I play these days anyways," and threw it in the cart. When I returned home, I put it on the shelf where it sat untouched for weeks.

One Saturday morning I inexplicably woke up at the time I usually wake up on work days and couldn't get back to sleep. With nothing to do, I wandered out into the living room and looked over my games, searching for something to play. With a wealth of slow-paced RPGs, humdrum character platformers, and overproduced EA games staring back at me, I decided to pull the wrapping off of my copy of *Stand Alone Complex* and try it out. I figured if all I've got are generic games, I might as well play a new generic game instead of one I've played before.

The game begins with an FMV cutscene, but unlike the PS1 game, this cutscene is pure CG instead of the mix of hand-drawn and computer animation that *Ghost in the Shell* usually insists on. As a result, the art looks

much more consistent, possibly even better than in the anime. I was sort of expecting the game art to look as rushed as the cover. The game's initial cutscene ends by panning the camera into position behind Major Kusanagi into and giving you control. This direct transition suggests that the game is actually part of the story instead of two separate entities being forced to work together as in the original.

Now that I had control, the feeling of generic 3rd person shooter really sunk in. I would have turned it off right then, but I hadn't gotten used to the controls and I wanted to give the game a fair shake. Eventually I reached an area where you have to climb a stack of cargo as you make your way to the top of a tall piece of heavy machinery slowly grinding back and forth. When I reached the top of the cargo stack I panned the camera around and viewed the meticulously designed backdrop. The shipyard full of cargo is a staple video game setting, but the sense of height and scale that this game presented it with was really incredible. I hadn't felt that sense since the PS1 original, and I wondered if the first game had been more of an inspiration than the gameplay of this new one seemed to imply. As I continued through the game, I would come to a genuinely unique and interestingly designed section every few minutes that made all of the generic parts in between seem worth it. I would have quit playing without regret if these moments of inspiration hadn't kept coming. I felt compelled to continue playing in nearly every moment of my free time for a week.

In one of my favorite sections, Kusanagi had to use her wall-jump to scale the side of a building and reach the only unlocked door. The game provides little markers telling you where the next destination is, but leaves finding the way to that destination up to the player - eliminating my biggest pet-peeve of 3D games. I often get stuck not knowing where to go next and have to rely on finding the next set of enemies to know I'm going in the right direction. This type of indicator wouldn't work in all game

worlds, but within the context of the *Ghost in the Shell* universe it feels right at home as the character you're playing is part machine.

Another one of my favorites involved outracing an army helicopter's machine guns while racing through the open hallways of a tall building. At the end of this stage you have to make a leap of faith off of the building and into the moving helicopter. This stage will go down in my memory as one of my favorites right next to; the first level of the original *Panzer Dragoon*, the mode-7 level of *Castlevania IV* and the battleship level of *Sin and Punishment*.

Thinking about it, really well-designed action sequences split up by average filler is a lot like the Ghost in the Shell anime itself. If it weren't for the really neat action sequences, nobody would sit through the droning techno babble and introspective ponderings that the artsy people laud the movie for.

I haven't mentioned this yet, but most importantly of all, through almost all of the game you're staring at Major Kusangai's beautiful, round ass. The *Tomb Raider* team said in interviews during that game's creation that

if you're going to have to stare at someone's bum the whole game it might as well be a hot girl. Rather than compare *Ghost in the Shell* to *Tomb Raider* though, I think a more accurate comparison would be to Capcom's *P.N.03*. Both games feature a limber, hot female lead that fights within a sci-fi setting. Many people were disappointed with P.N.03 when it was released because it didn't quite meet their expectations. Coming from Shinji Mikami, people expected a game that would make them feel like a sexy female bad-ass, but they ended up with a game that was more about watching enemy patterns and learning how to dodge them correctly. People who recognized this fact really enjoyed the game, but people who couldn't let their expectations ruin it for them.

    Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone complex is a lot like the game people expected *P.N.03* to be. It's all about empowering the player through a sexy female lead who unapologetically kicks ass. If the original PS1 *Ghost in the Shell* game taught me that licensed games should ignore the license and focus purely on being a

game, this game taught me that it was possible for a good game to elevate itself to greatness by taking whatever it is that people like most about that license and creating a game that makes the player an active participant within that context. I'm a *Ghost in the Shell* fan because of the hot girls, big action, and cool technology; and with *Stand Alone Complex*, Cavia has created something which *Ghost in the Shell* creator Masamune Shirow, with his artistic focus on boobs and guns, can be proud.

We Shall Meet In The Place Where There is no Darkness

Half-Life 2 - PC
M. O'Connor

The gray drab of Half-Life 2 lifts for a bit when you drive along the shore by the highway and stop to tour those mostly empty pockets of civil society from before the Combine. Even infested with soldiers those modest houses feel far more human than the concrete and glass of City 17; even before the walls begin eating the city it embodies the cold gray predetermined days of control and decay. Along the train route from Schipol Airport to Centraal Station in The Netherlands you can see the elements cribbed from the architecture along the way.

But most of all you see that eternal gray in a couple found in the first set of apartments; a woman sobs uncontrollably in the arms of a man with hopeless pity written on his face. He knows he's lying as he tries to comfort her. The same scene – identical dialogue – plays out during the uprising at the end of the game, just more hopeless wailing and gnashing of teeth as the world crashes down around them.

The police state is a drag, man.

If you want a solid dystopian template, you can't go wrong with 1984. Brave New World lacks the malice required for nonstop action and not enough people value anti-social individual sovereignty enough to look past the rape and murder habits of the victims of A Clockwork Orange. But 1984 has malice in spades. There are nods to other horrific futures written into

being – Burroughs is evoked in the prison death camp of Nova Prospekt right down to the name, and headcrabs look like something that crawled right out of an Interzone sewer – but Valve managed to capture a tiny bit of the hopelessness and helplessness of power being exercised over the powerless.

I discovered recently that 1984 matches the weighty municipal grind of waiting in a jury pool. Brooklyn Supreme Court is decorated only with browns, beige and shades of off-white, having the usual granite façade of Very Important Places. One of the functions of governance, judging by the similarities between the houses of civil government, is reminding the citizenry that Very Important Places are filled with Very Important People.

In New York State, potential jurors are shown a video featuring Ed Bradley and another on-air personality from 60 Minutes – a woman with platinum blonde hair and the same measured diction of Very Importantness that marks Mr. Bradley's brief history of trials in the western world. That history, for those who may never have the pleasure, begins with a sequence involving a guy thrown into a river in a sack for his "trial by water," after which Mr. Bradley makes the point that trial by jury is far better than being tossed into water while wrapped in burlap.

I was reading 1984 because I knew from experience that jury pool waits are long and dull, and because that book is both Important

and written in a crisp, cool English. Being stuck in a place that resembles, to my mind, a holding pen ripped straight from a chamber of commerce from your worst nightmares, reading something so fantastically vile cannot help but brighten the mood.

I do not compare a jury system with one of the greatest totalitarian states ever written into being, aside from pointing out that they share a similar mood of attempted order and presumed chaos. I have sympathy for those who have to create order, especially those who do the dirty work of oiling and greasing and otherwise ensuring the operations of a great machine made up of thousands of people who punish thousands more. I understand why we use certain words the way we do, and I even understand why the Empire State would insult my intelligence by having a television personality explain to me that a trial by laws and the citizenry is better than being drowned in a sack. Words are magic and magic is tricky business indeed.

Orwell wrote 1984 the way he did because he loved literature and he loved the English language. His greatest villain destroys both with a callous disregard for the sublime human ability to meld words and ideas that Orwell admired and defended. Of course, he was also making a giant, hand-drawn fuck-you poster to the Communists and Stalinists whose company he had parted, but his loathing for those who treat language as a means to political end drips off every page of 1984. It is the chronicle of a pervasive human need to force people to follow the silly games of others while calling it anything but a game.

One of the beauties of an alien invasion – or of a figure like O'Brien, who seems more like a cartoon abusive parent than a functioning adult – is that it dispenses with the cognitive dissonance. Aliens who look like bugs, or shape shift, or fly about in ships with hundreds of guns sticking out of them are understood to be bad news, and their motives are not particularly mysterious.

Valve has a similarly simple rationale for

their villains. Shooters need enemies, and lots of them. Wickedness and cruelty are byproducts pushed on your foes by your interaction with them, as their primary function is to shoot at you and get shot in return. Even Dr. Breem, whose delightfully authentic speech in Nova Prospekt is pleasing to my ears, is an understandable prop; he's a clerk who was too clever at the right time and the wrong place. He now runs a rather lifeless processing plant for what's left of the human animal, and given the circumstances, most of us would be there right beside him.

There doesn't seem to be any way – or desire - to recreate the feel of manmade horrors in games. Atrocities are plentiful throughout the industry – they are the bread and butter of many franchises - but in most cases they don't actually impress the consequence or weight of what unfolds onto the player. Bouts of shooting at the future's version of Homeland Security workers in HL2 doesn't give a sense of much, aside from being chased into well-executed script points; the dots they connect, however, do.

The introduction comes on strong with these connections. There's a guy who gets pushed into an interrogation room right before you're yanked off the processing line at City 17; he sounds like he's trying to get his license renewed by a hostile and armed civil servant. The mechanistic quality of artificial order is what makes total physical control by one group over another so deeply disgusting, and the brief taste of it at the beginning warmed my heart, to use a

I'd like to take a moment to address you directly, Dr. Freeman.

very inappropriate phrase. It's nice not to be treated like an idiot sometimes.

So how about a game bent around total control? Specifically, interrogation seems the easiest way to do this. It's a well-documented phenomenon that prisoners and guards are both necessary to a functioning state (police or otherwise) but still invoke revulsion in all of the population (They differ only on what counts as torture and what counts as too human to torment). There are hundreds of scenarios from which to choose. One could make a historical simulator with no shortage of scenarios, a testament to human creativity and the power of pain to destroy resolve and fix problems. Will you break prisoners in Solovki or Gitmo? Play the Catholic inquisitor cleansing Spain or put Buddhists to the sword in 11th century India? The box art practically writes itself.

This is something that is depraved in a way that stomping on digital hookers is not. It is both true and real, illustrating human nature and history in a medium that doesn't dig into much of either. I played through HL2, and through the exquisitely painful carpal and ulnar choruses resounding through my dominant arm, because it was showing me a little bit of both.

The farcical violence of teenagers doesn't require thousands of pages of ledgers in which to track prisoners, divide by gender, separate the sick from the dying and dead, make tallies of boots and clothing and fillings and whatever else can be seized. A game like Grand Theft Auto can't simulate the hundreds of otherwise ordinary people doing what we consider

extraordinary violence to ensure the machine runs smoothly. It's far beyond game violence because such things are normally faceless, and done in the name of some sort of understand-able fantasy, like survival against all odds or a very nice car.

It's a decent violence because it tries to say something about itself.

From a political perspective, it would be interesting to track what sort of people play such a game, and what scenarios they pick. Will the comfortable middle-class kids with the Che Underoos walk in the digital footprints of their idol and torture homosexuals, journalists and other counter-revolutionaries for the sake of international socialism? Will hawks pick a modern American scenario and only find validation in tormenting jihadis, farmers and whomever else is unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time? Breaking the politically brittle is fairly simple; but what about savagery from another time and place? Can moral revulsion – or an appreciation for the practicality of brutality in certain places and for certain goals – be induced by a game on purpose?

Imagine if you will, something we might call the reverse Jack Thompson effect; the spectacle of games assailing politicians for their amorality. Ideally, this mythical simulator of human nature would be apolitical, and designed only to make a point about human nature and the reality of brutality separate from one's political opinions. However, that's more or less impossible, and perhaps unnecessary. All it would take is one success from one political viewpoint for their ideological rivals to respond in kind.

Thus begins the equivocation. The Nazis were worse than the communists. The commu-nists weren't as bad as the bankers. The Ottomans were not nearly as savage as the Aztecs, and both were eclipsed by singular exploits of Andrew Jackson.

At least someone somewhere will be proving a point about something. My hope would

be that the players would come away from such a title not with "torture is bad" stamped across their foreheads, but rather, "the lengths to which people go to cooperate in the denial of the humanity of others is something far worse."

When I was knee deep in HL2, some nights I looked out my window towards Red Hook and saw the streets filled with striders and soldiers. Snipers nestled along the nooks and crannies of the elevated line that rises from the tunnels leading from Carrol St. to points south. Would I be helping Breem save scraps of human DNA to be churned in a bigger and better blender, or would I be holed up in my bathroom with a rifle and scope, watching whatever was left of the F train make its way across the night sky?

I though about that a long time ago, and forgot it as part of the long smear that make up my evenings and weekends. I didn't reconsider this particular question – though its underlying theme is a constant obsession - until a few days ago when a particularly young cop asked to search my bag at the 77th St. and Lexington train station.

I told him I just couldn't participate in a bag search and that I'd leave the station. He nodded, and we told each other to have a nice day. My gesture was as meaningless as his particular duty at that moment. I sweated along the way to the 68th St. station and stepped onto a downtown 6 train, thinking more about paying my bill for the upcoming semester at Baruch than the absurdity of what had passed between that cop and I.

I hunger for a game like this because I do not think our particular future is very avoidable in one sense, though I do not dabble in conspiricism or predestination. It would be nice to help others to practice for the question we will be asked to answer; at the very least, we can come up with better excuses as we're

pawing through the ashes this time around.

A gulag camp guard simulator would be interesting, and provoke some minor controversy at best. People are not thoroughly beaten over the head about the horrors of collectivism in the United States. Being a camp guard at Treblinka or Auschwitz would create the most obvious howls, and for all the wrong reasons. People would concentrate on the iconographic evil of the Nazis and forget the far longer reach of thousands of years of everyday violence from one party against another, stamping out the particulars of a human face because someone else said so or just because one can.

This is completely understandable, because a game that intends to induce a feeling of revulsion at the methodically mundane depravity of our own race is a hard sell.
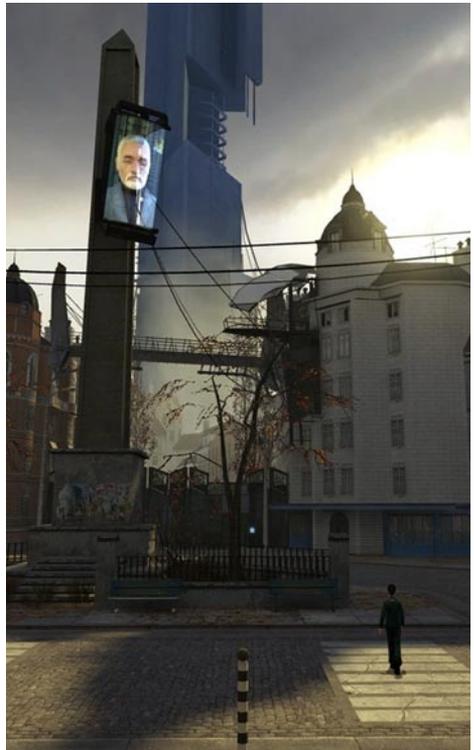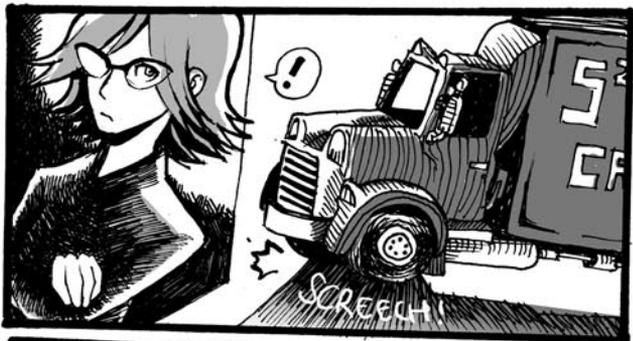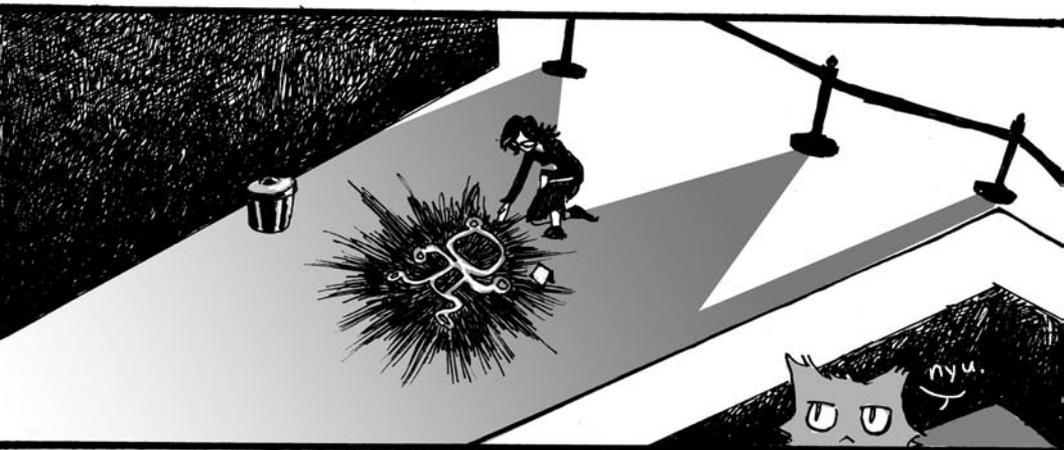
Carrefour City ★

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CHAPTER 02:
THE COPARCENER
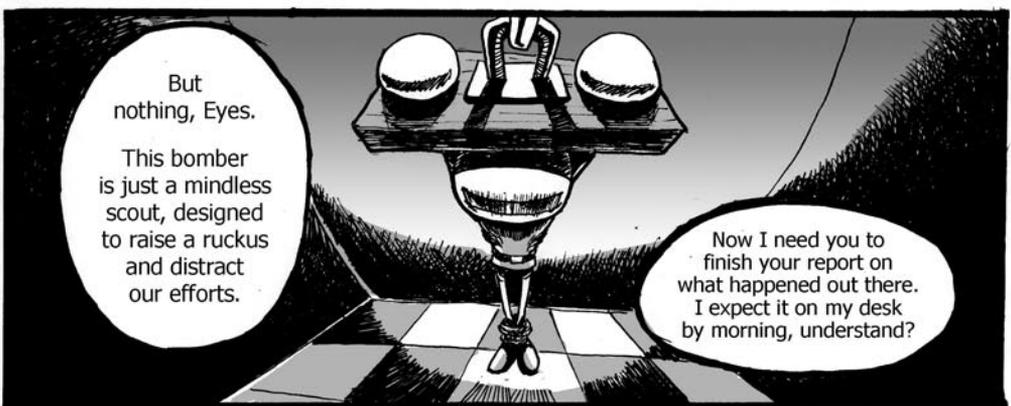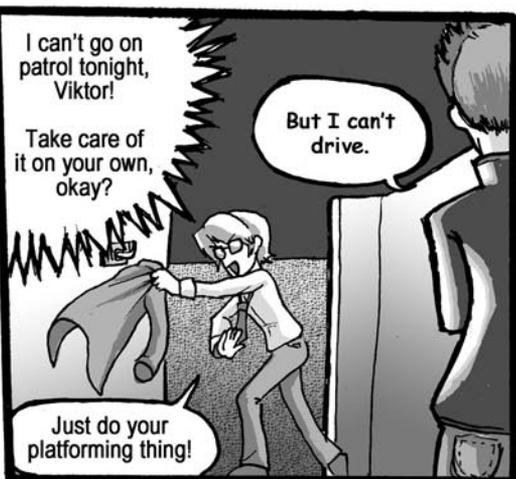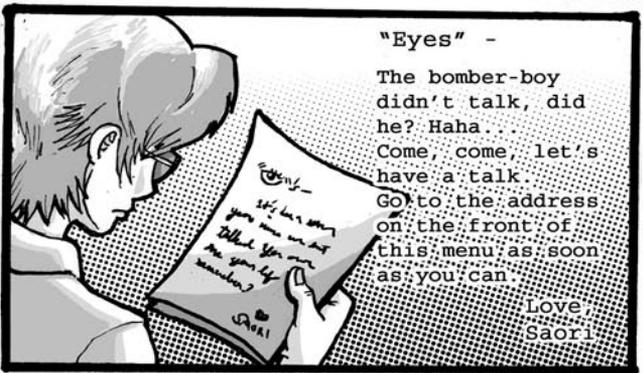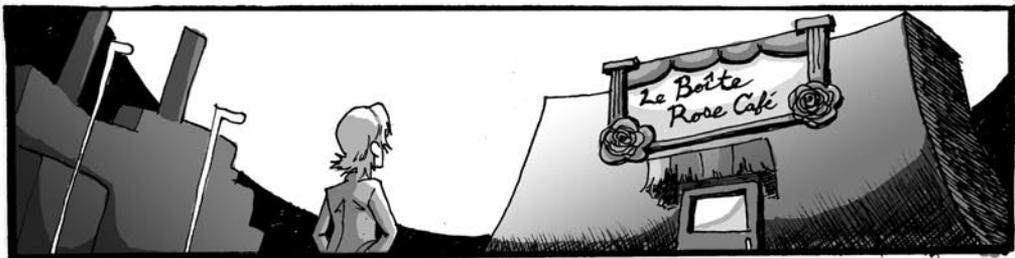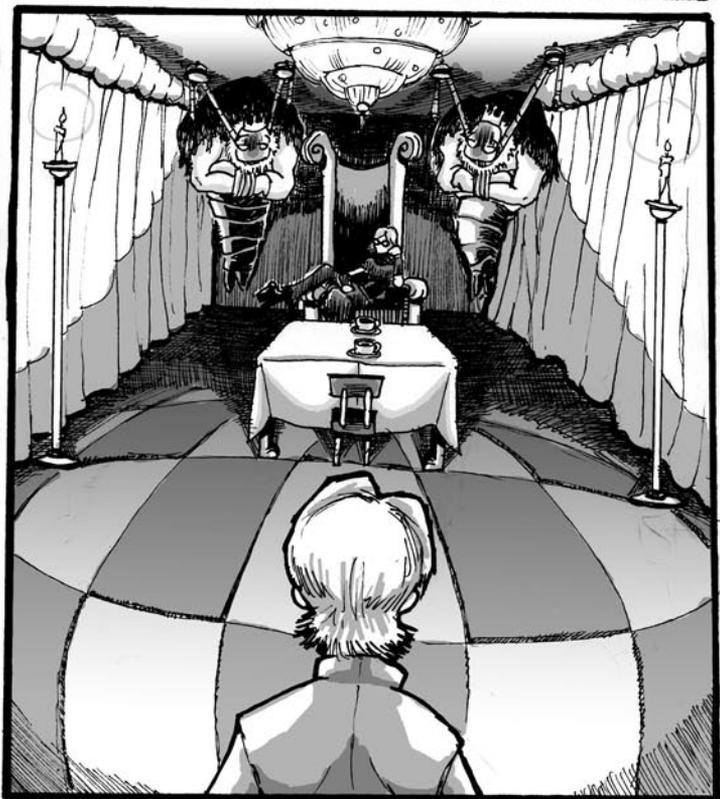
A CALCULATED ASSAULT ON STARCRAFT AND ALL IT STANDS FOR: WHY I AM NOT A GAMER

Starcraft - PC
Amandeep Jutla

There is a huge split between PC games and console games. It developed gradually, after the fall of Atari and subsequent rise of Nintendo. Video game consoles became long-lived, static platforms influenced by the impossibly unavoidable design philosophy of Shigeru Miyamoto and his accomplices. The rules of Miyamoto said to keep console games simple; to make them revolve around straightforward, self-contained mechanics.

On the PC end of things, the games became more complex and concrete; their design philosophies were uniquely western: intentionally large and confused. PC games became graphically-advanced enough that it was technically impossible for many of them to run on consoles, and even if somehow they could be scaled-down and finagled into it, there wouldn't be enough buttons on a Nintendo controller to play them. *Ultima VI* and *Super Mario World* came out within a year of each other, and all that they have in common is that both are games. Convergent evolution had split the world of electronic games into two distinct design schools, which would continue in their respective directions.

How well this has worked out for each school has depended on circumstance. In the early nineties, for instance, the PC shareware scene was taking off; small teams wrote interesting, conceptual games and distributed the

first few levels of them free over the Internet. This was an extreme expression of the experimental, explosive, willy-nilly growth of computer games. Such innovation almost put the console world to shame. Nintendo, for instance, only published dull NES retreads such as *Zelda: A Link to the Past,* or polished turds like *Donkey Kong Country*, for years. Sega did marginally better for a time, but then they, too, succumbed to the Boring Sickness and put out *Sonic 3,* which, rightly and for years, lost them the respect of most sane gamers.

However, I feel like this has all come to an end. Computer games are becoming - have been becoming, in fact, for an extremely long time - boring as hell. The era in which they were fun and interesting has ended. Things have gotten fucked-up.

I think it's all *Starcraft*'s fault.

* * *

The console world made me who I am. I never played many PC games as a kid. I dabbled in shareware titles and *Myst* for a time, but once Mario was brought into my household, I jumped ship and didn't look back for years.

Given this context, the *Starcraft* phenomenon is difficult for me to understand. *Starcraft* is a major PC game, so major that I don't think it has a console equivalent in influence and popularity. Sure, there are popular console games and series. But a single game - a simplistic real-

time-strategy title set in outer space - receiving so much outright worship, that's weird.

What's weirder is that *Starcraft* is not anything like the best-selling computer game of all time. *The Sims,* say, has sold many, many millions more. Still, it would not be unfair to suggest that *The Sims* is primarily played by people that are out of touch with the pulse of gaming. (Damn, maybe we should just call them "non-gamers," sneer derisively, and move on.)

It's the people who say they Play Games that like *Starcraft.* Many of them like it a lot. Most of them have bought the game, bought it with such force and passion,and so repeatedly, that *Starcraft* still ran for forty dollars new four years after its release.

This in itself is almost unheard of in the world of PC games. Ever-changing computer hardware means that a game that runs on an average system at a certain date is not at all guaranteed to run on an average system six months in the future without patches and tweaks and kludges. This limits the shelf life of a PC game severely; game pricing begins at about $49.99, and then within three to six months reaches $29.99. Then it goes down to $19.99. Then a budget company like Majesco picks it up and sells it for $9.99, "jewel-case only" at Wal-Mart. This is only for the successful games, of course. The unsuccessful ones begin at $49.99 and disappear altogether before the marketplace registers their existence.

Hell, let's go back to *The Sims*: it really only sold as well as it did because of expansion packs. More and more of them came out, released at regular six-month intervals, and every once in a while Electronic Arts pumped out a new deluxe pack, bundling the core game with specific expansions. *The Sims Deluxe Edition* included the first one. *The Sims Double Deluxe Edition* included the first two. *The Sims Mega Deluxe Edition* included the first three.

I mean, I like *Thriller* - I actually like it a *lot*, no kidding - but the reason every person in America owns at least two copies of that record has less to do with Michael Jackson's raw talent as a pop musician than it does with Epic Records's releasing seven of the album's nine tracks as singles.

The point is, *Starcraft* did well because it was doing something, all on its own, which compelled people to buy it and compelled developers to emulate it. It was special.

* * *

My introduction to *Starcraft* came in 1998, when I was in fifth grade and talking to a friend of mine over the lunch table. His name was Daniel, and he was a heavy-set guy who listened to Metallica. I had once lent him my copy of *Riven*, and he'd returned it the very next day, telling me it had put him to sleep. He told me I needed to get into "some better games," so he lent me *Mechwarrior 2: Mercenaries*. I can't tell you what that was like because the disc was so heavily scratched that the installation process always hung at ninety-three percent completion. All of this kind of led me to question Daniel's taste, and actually Daniel in general, a little bit

On this day, he was messily drinking chocolate milk and telling me about this new game he had gotten.

"It's called *Starcraft*," he told me. "And there are these units in there, called 'Vultures.' And when you click on them a lot, they say, 'I don't have time to fuck around.'" At this point, a bunch of kids gasped and turned around.

"Is that not sweet?" he asked me. "They say the word 'fuck!'"

"Oh. Yeah," I said.

But some days later, when Daniel had calmed down about the f-word, he started telling me about the game itself, and why he liked it so much.

"It's just," he said, grasping for words, "really well-made."

* * *

Yeah, *Starcraft* is really well-made. I think it's the most flat-out disgustingly well-made game of all time. From a pure-design perspective, it is impressive. It is the culmination of everything Blizzard Entertainment had been trying to do for years. *The Lost Vikings*, one of their first games, taught them about balance, and about how three playable characters, each with different abilities, can make the player think critically. The original *Warcraft,* their first real-time-strategy title, showed them the importance of sound mechanics. That game did not allow you to right-click on a spot to make a selected unit move. Its sequel, *Warcraft II*, did. It was cleaner and more playable. It showed what they had learned.

Work on *Starcraft,* meant to be a spiritual evolution of some of the ideas in *Warcraft II,* began as early as 1996. There are early screenshots of the game floating around the Internet, if you know where to look. They are very purple and rough, and look almost nothing like the *Starcraft* that was eventually published.

What had happened in the meantime to change the nature of *Starcraft* was the publication of *Diablo. Diablo* is the only Blizzard product

that I really like, and this, I think, is because it wasn't by Blizzard at all; it was developed by a company called Condor, which Blizzard bought and absorbed six months before the game's release.

Funny thing about *Diablo* is that even though it was not made by anyone close to Blizzard, it represents the polished epitome of everything Blizzard had done until that point in a way that *Starcraft* never was able to. It has a *Lost Vikings*-esque three-way-balance amongst playable characters. It has a *Warcraft*ian polished interface. It finally coats this with a layer of pure style; semi-3D models abound. It is pretty.

I imagine then that, seeing *Diablo*, the *Starcraft* team thought, "Shit, this is what we need to do." So that's what they did.

This explains a lot of *Starcraft*. Three-way-balance; check. Polish; check. Style; check.

Why, then, do I think that *Starcraft* is a boring piece of shit but *Diablo* is truly great? Why does the average gamer believe the opposite? I mean, even though it did well at release, no one likes the original *Diablo* anymore; people play its diluted and Blizzardified sequel, instead. On the other hand, everyone still plays *Starcraft.* It has more online players at any given moment than the four-years-younger *Warcraft III,* for fuck's sake.

What *Starcraft* does is take each of its distinguishing characteristics, freshly and gracefully ripped-off of *Diablo*, and stretch them to uncomfortable and ridiculous extremes. *Starcraft* is a weird, sick cartoon, which has, in a morbidly hilarious way, proliferated across the computer-gaming landscape. *Starcraft* has, in some way, influenced nearly every western game that followed it.

* * *

To begin at the beginning: *Starcraft* is a real-time-strategy game, which means it involves using your mouse to order a bunch of tiny characters around with the ultimate goal

of destroying a bunch of other tiny characters that are differently-colored than your own. The game actively promotes not just ethnic cleansing in general but outright hate crime. When beginning to play, you're asked to choose which "race" you belong to, either the "Terrans," futuristic humans with southern accents, the "Zerg," feral *Alien*-like that breed like rabbits, or the "Protoss," wise and advanced aliens reminiscent of Tolkien's elves. These races - they hate each other. Sort of. There's a plot, see, and it's very convoluted and stretches across thirty missions. Over the course of this plot you are introduced to several main characters, who betray each other on a regular basis. There is a climactic resolution. All of this happens within the framework of a game which is extremely polished and streamlined from beginning to end.

Starcraft comes on a single, deep-blue compact disc containing exactly 641 megabytes of well-organized data. Pop it into a CD-ROM drive and a tremendously slick setup window appears; bright, sans-serif menu options superimposed on artful illustrations. If you want to start the installer, the game dumps itself onto your hard drive quickly and painlessly, because rather than using a half-assed, off-the-shelf version of InstallShield, *Starcraft* implements the proprietary Blizzard Installer, first seen in, yes, *Diablo.* This is all neat and clean, but something is subtly wrong: the art, the entire look and feel of *Starcraft*'s installer, while technically as well-done as *Diablo*'s, is cold and clinical. *Diablo*'s art is somehow warmer and more human. Everyone who has played *Diablo* remembers the image on the installer splash screen - a huge, stylized portrait of Diablo himself. He stared at you, and a wav file of him laughing madly played in the background. In the five seconds that you see and hear this, *Diablo*, the game, comes together beautifully. You just know that the guy whose ugly mug you're staring at *is* Diablo. You just know the game will involve killing him. That's why it's called "*Diablo.*"

Starcraft, though--frankly, what the hell kind of name is that? What does it signify?

What did the name *Warcraft* signify to Blizzard, in 1994? Well; they'd thought it was cute - almost-but-not-quite clever. They had made a game about waging war, you see, and to win a match, a player had to craft bases. *Warcraft* itself, then, was a shitty, generalized name to give a computer game. It sounds like the type of name you'd give a tech demo. Well, fair enough. *Warcraft was* a tech demo, a proof of concept, as it were. Blizzard had seen *Dune II* and knew that real-time-strategy games were the next big thing. They'd wanted to try one of their own—they would call it *Warcraft* while they were working on it, and then –well, I guess no one remembered to give it a snappier title.

That means I can (mostly) excuse *Warcraft. Starcraft* has no damned excuse whatsoever. Its title is both vague and misleading. The game has nothing to do with stars, except that it happens to be vaguely set in "outer space." You're not crafting stars. You're not crafting anything, since "craft" itself was a word that only sort-of made sense given *Warcraft*'s pseudo-medieval setting.

The *Starcraft* installer splash screen, pretty as it is, is completely forgettable. I didn't remember anything about it until I looked at it again just now, in the name of research. It depicts a generic

spaceship moving towards some kind of space station. The crash of music that plays is a typical whooshing-zoomy-outer-space noise. This noise has nothing to do with *Starcraft*. That particular spaceship does not appear anywhere in the game, either, nor are there space stations involved in the main campaign's story arc at any point.

That image, and that sound, is what you get when a producer tells a few artists, "Yeah, okay, this next game we're doing? It's about space. Give us some material. Thanks."

Diablo is about making a slow, disturbing journey into hell, with the eventual goal of finding and killing one Diablo, a murderous bastard who is also the Lord of All Evil. Okay. That's a neat premise.

No one ever seemed to know what the hell *Starcraft*'s premise was. From the beginning, it had no focus.

Starcraft was designed by the well-meaning employees of an up-and-coming California computer game developer who *wanted to create a computer game.* Arbitrariness permeates the entire game. It has no purpose, and no motive, and therefore brings up an important question: are computer games interesting enough by themselves to exist for their own sake? Hell, is *anything* that interesting?

* * *

"I like playing as the Zerg," someone is telling me over a lunch table.

(This is five or six years after Daniel, and I'm in high school. The lunch table is different, but many things are the same. One of them is *Starcraft.*

I'd finally played the game by now, and I'd thought it was okay. It was a way to kill time, especially if you played multiplayer with people you knew. I still couldn't see how *Starcraft* was so perfect, though; I didn't get all the adulation.)

"Do you?" I said dryly.

"Yeah. Zerg is a pretty good rush race, see. They're pretty good in the early game, but

not so much late. The thing you have to take advantage of, of course, is that two Zerglings hatch per every Larva you have at the Hatchery, so of course if you have three Larvae, then you end up with six Zerglings, and those can usually take down weak Terran defenses early on, if you scout around for the enemy. The first thing you need to do, of course, before the Zerglings, or, better, *concurrently with* them, is build four Drones to start off with - well, I say four, I really mean *at least* four, because actually you need as many Drones as possible because then you can hit the mines up faster; while you do this you scout, right, with your Overlord, and then when you have, say, five Drones, have one build a Spawning - "

"Hey," I said, slowly and loudly, because I had said this before. "I really don't care. Shut up. Please."

I'd better explain. The person talking was a guy named Billy. I'd met him on the sixth or seventh day of school that year. I had been taking an Algebra II class, one with a *fucking crazy* teacher who'd thought it would inspire better academic performance if she read out loud the names of students who had received higher

than one-hundred percent on tests the day after they were taken. When she did this after the first test, mine was one of the names she'd called out. As at least twenty-five people in the room looked at me with an expression of burning hatred, I shrugged. I had *not* tried, truly, hadn't even studied, it wasn't my fucking fault; I wasn't an A-student because I had ever wanted to be one, stop looking at me that way.

That day after class, Billy found me. He was a kid who breathed through his mouth and found climbing a single flight of stairs exhausting. He was also a year younger than me - he'd been taking that Algebra II class anyway because he was a Mathematical Child Prodigy.

"You're *smart*. Let's be *friends*," He said.

"No," I said.

He laughed.

"You're *funny*, too!"

* * *

Billy found out that I played videogames. This was exciting to him because, hey, he played games, too. He had a PC and all three consoles of the current generation.

He liked *Starcraft*, and told me all about the strategies he used to play it. He frequently

did this at some length.

"I like *Starcraft* because it is such a well-made game," he'd tell me, and I'd feel a weird echo. "It's so…so balanced. You've got the Terrans, and…and the Protoss, and….," he was breathing heavily here, again, like he was too excited to finish his sentence, "and the Zerg. You know what? I like playing as the Zerg…"

Every time I tried to talk to Billy about electronic games of any sort, there would be a bizarre barrier of understanding. I'd managed to get him to understand one day, for just a moment, that I did not like *Starcraft.* He asked me why, and I told him. The game, I said, feels cold to me. It has no personality. No feeling. It boils down to nothing more than numbers and balance. It is soulless and empty. I play it and I feel tired and drained.

Billy would listen to this, and then tell me that the game feels less empty if you play as Zerg, because then you can have more units.

I'd give up.

For at least a little while, *Starcraft* turns everyone who plays it into Billy. The effect may or may not wear off, given time, but it is harrowing and freakish.

The first time I played the game, I was thrown into a state of abject confusion. A friend of mine, functionally identical to Daniel and Billy but not either, as this was a while after the former and before the latter - - was yelling at me.

"No, no, do it *faster!* Faster! Faster, you… you're going to get *killed!* Don't you fucking know what this game is like? Wait, wait, hit F10."

I did. The game paused.

"Let me teach you about the hotkeys now," he said.

* * *

If the mere existence of *Starcraft* is characterized by a certain amount of arbitration, so is every individual aspect of its design. The interface gets in your way ninety-nine percent of the time. It is supposed to do that.

ITEM: You can only select twelve units at once - this is why you are encouraged to set up multiple groups of them, each assigned to a hotkey.

ITEM: The tech tree is so limited that you can only build structures in a certain, specific, predetermined order, with almost no leeway allowed.

ITEM: It is impossible to queue up technologies to be researched; instead, you're expected to keep mental track of what's being researched where, and use (yes, another) hotkey to jump to a building once it finishes researching something so you can give it a new task.

ITEM: There is a definite unit cap of two hundred. Get too close to it and you're fucked. There is no easy way to destroy a unit you don't want, so you have to manually initiate friendly fire. This is unreasonably hard to do.

ITEM: The pathfinding AI is *intentionally* crippled so that you have to keep a close eye on what units are doing at any given time, because they frequently do the stupidest thing it is possible to do in any given situation.

It's important to understand that although this is a list of specific complaints, I'm not interested in them by themselves. I'm not Billy. I'm more interested in the type of game they create - and that's an utterly hostile one. It is one thing for a game to restrict the player. *Starcraft* takes this a step further by restricting the player in entirely meaningless ways.

Play *Starcraft*, and you have to keep a number of factors in your mind at all times. You have to monitor your current supply of minerals; how much Vespene gas you have stocked up. You have to know where your units are and where they need to go and the mouse-clicks you need to make them get there. You have to know what new units you need and which enemy units they're effective against, and these two in par-

ticular can change an awful lot, based on what race you're playing against, and the playing style of your AI or human opponent.

It is a mental balancing act - which is fine, on the surface. I, after all, always say that I'm "looking for videogames that make me think." I want something that forces me to *interact* with it. Then again, *Starcraft* doesn't make me think about anything important. It doesn't let me interact in an interesting way. I keep asking myself, is there anything of substance, behind the maneuvering of units and the juggling of variables? I only have one answer: that playing *Starcraft* is, at best, a sort-of-pleasant abstract exercise, and at worst a boring time-vacuum of a game.

The time vacuum is the thing. *Starcraft* wants you to surrender yourself to it, to pull yourself into its world, and it tries to trick you into believing its world is a real one with depth. Once you're inside, it's taken over your brain and slowly emptied it, and when it's all over you get up and you feel like you've slept with six half-crazed wolves with bilious genital vasculitis.

* * *

So, where are we now?

Starcraft's slickness and shininess have kept it high on the sales charts for years after its release. If you want to play it today, well, it's still on shelves, and it will run on any hardware you throw at it – its code has been as meticulously engineered as the "balance" in the game itself. *Starcraft* has survived: a major overhaul of the Windows operating system, hell-if-I-know-how-many generations of new video cards, and processors that are fifteen or twenty times faster than what was top-of-the-line at its release.

But even if you don't want to play *Starcraft,* you're probably still playing *Starcraft.* Computer games are about computer games, now. Multiplayer, formerly a sort of interesting afterthought, took off with *Starcraft* as players spread across battle.net, Blizzard's proprietary, very well-made online game matchmaking service (first used for *Diablo*.) Similar services have cropped up like weeds. Billy is taking over the world.

* * *

Before *Starcraft*, I had shareware.

My father had found a disc filled with it at an office store. It contained "99 GAMES ON ONE CD-ROM." You used to see these discs everywhere, back then, because even though all the games there were freely-available online, this was 1998, and the Internet, while exploding, hadn't blown completely open yet. There were still unwired people around. I was one of them.

I still have this CD-ROM. It is special to me, absurd as it seems, because there was a lot of inventive stuff there. I had *Raptor, Commander Keen, Cosmo's Cosmic Adventure, Jazz Jackrabbit, One Must Fall 2097, Mystic Towers, Flying Tigers, Zone 66,* even *Pong Kombat* – all in all, a complete education in early-nineties computer games.

I get emotional when I think about some of these games. *Flying Tigers*, for example, was a simple vertical shooter, but it had soul. There

was feeling within its 500k or so total of data. The music was low-quality MIDI written by a guy who probably knew nothing about music composition. Because of that, maybe, every note sounded clear and perfect, like a distinct and beautiful thing all on its own. *Flying Tigers'* README file listed the actual home address of its author. He said that if I liked the game, I should send him a postcard. He liked postcards. It was because of things like this that I once spent entire afternoons going through README files.

Something about the aura surrounding those shareware games touched me. They were all experimental to some extent, because their authors were nearly all hobbyists noodling around in their spare time. Their games were their noodles, in digitized form, pressed onto compact discs, delivered to me and converted in my mind into pure inspiration.

It was because of those shareware games that I taught myself QBASIC; I'd wanted to create something and share it with people and maybe get a postcard in the process. I may have spent the majority of my free time for *two years of my life* trying to write games this way. I was never very good at it. Then, when my family plugged into the Internet, I poked around and found that the shareware community had vanished years before; that my disc was really a freshly-packaged fossil; that there were no games like this around anymore at all.

They'd been usurped by *Starcraft,* the first big summer blockbuster computer game. *Starcraft,* the game you get when a dedicated-but-dry group of people analyze older games and try to incorporate the best of them into a massive edifice of Game That Is A Game. *Starcraft*, what happens when you take a set of ideas and polish them and polish them and polish them until there's nothing left *but* polish. *Starcraft*, a very well made piece of trash that has redefined the PC gaming landscape.

There are efforts to outdo *Starcraft* everywhere, now; to force players into the bondage-and-discipline thing, to oversimplify in silly

ways; to turn computer games from interesting experiments into hideous caricatures of their console counterparts; to make them simplistic and directionless.

A spaceship. A random whooshing noise. An installer splash screen that alienates and discomforts. Billy, talking my ear off about Zerg strategies. Because of the *Starcraft* effect, computer games are treated like time sinks, and they aren't about ideas anymore. They're about computer games.

I used to think that I played computer games because they were conceptually interesting to me, or because they did neat things. I played them because they weren't so inward-looking, so focused on nothing, so *motherfucking well-designed.*

* * *

Right now, I'm in my second week of college, and a kid who lives in the room adjoining mine thinks he's my *friend* or something. It's because he plays games. He likes *Wing Commander,* for instance; he tells me has finished the entire series so many times that he has memorized every statistic about every enemy type.

He "likes thinking," you see. The guy has seven Rubik's cubes in his room. They were all solved in less than twenty minutes. It's a skill he has, you see. His other big skill is playing *Starcraft*. He likes the Protoss, and has some great strategies that involve Photon Cannon placement. He's asked me, am I a Zerg guy, or what?

I explained to him that, no, I'm not. I don't want to play *Starcraft* with him, ever, because I hate the game with a furious and all-consuming passion, as it has entirely destroyed everything that once excited me about computer gaming. I got into games in the first place because I want to connect with them on a personal level, in a high-concept way. It's hard to do that in a *Starcraft* deathmatch.

This guy just doesn't listen, though – I think he's either deaf or stupid. Earlier today he

was hovering over me as I used my computer, blathering on about custom maps he's made with the **official *Starcraft* campaign editor.** Finally, he sort of paused, and then looked at me intently.

"See," he said, slowly, "I'm a gamer, you know? And I really want other gamers, people *like me,* to hang out with, and do stuff with, you know? And, and, *you're* a gamer, aren't you?"

I gave this serious consideration for a few seconds. I thought about this guy and the people I've met who resemble him, and the way any conversations we have about games are always at cross-purposes. This guy will play a videogame simply because it is a videogame, and he wants to play one. He needs no other explanation. If a game appears fun, and if it looks like it'll let him waste a lot of time, then… shit. I can't identify. The day I start to identify with that is the day I stop thinking.

"No," I told him. "I'm really not a gamer."

He didn't believe it. He'd seen my Gamecube, and the videogames lying around my dorm room. I must have been kidding. He laughed at my joke, and told me that whenever I wanted to play *Starcraft* later tonight, I should give him a holler. Then he left.

And yet it's true. I don't care about games. I can care about what they suggest, sure. Or what they imply. Or what they have to say. But the games – they can go fuck themselves.

MOVIE OPTIONS ✕

PLAY

RECORD

STOP

SELECT :

● 0 ● 1 ● 2 ● 3

● 4 ● 5 ● 6 ● 7

● 8 ● 9

Speed Runs And You

I Like to Watch
Ancil Anthropy

When I was very little, too young yet to play games, I watched my parents play on their Nintendo Entertainment System; *Super Mario Bros.*, usually. To my young eyes, eyes that had never seen a squid or large mushroom, those vague pixels took on shapes that were inexplicable and wondrous. I thought bloopers were large, gloved hands that reached down to gracefully snatch at Mario as he passed; I thought a goomba was a fat face with two eyes and a nose, crawling along on a caterpillar-like moustache. My images of Mario's world would be mine and mine alone until logic and understanding replaced them with likelier images that I cannot un-see.

The other game I remember my parents playing a lot is *Castlevania*. I was absolutely terrified of this game - I think it was mostly the burbling metal music and that grinning bat - but it was thrilling to watch. My vantage point afforded me safety - I could experience the game without it having to be dealing with the staring fish-faces and Simon's stiff legs. It was like watching a scary movie - and, indeed, when I saw the game's joke credits for the first time years later, I realized how present in the minds of the developers the parallels between games and cinema had been.

I never really worked up the courage to play *Castlevania* - to this day I rarely play that frightening first episode - but with practice I was able to leap that first goomba in *Super Mario* and I was off and running from there, playing many of the wonderful games that console had to offer. The games back then were fresh from the arcade, and many of them accommodated two players at once - working in tandem - sometimes better than they accomodated a single player! My mother and I, when we weren't playing Mario and Luigi in *Super Mario Bros.*, got very good at *Bubble Bobble*. Stage ninety-nine, I'm convinced, can only be completed by two, and she and I completed it. One of us grabbed the crystal ball while the other maneuvered into position to leap for the magic door which led to the game's true ending. We played the game many times, but never defeated the final boss.

Eventually we put the game aside; there were too many games to play on the growing console, and many of them had never even seen arcade release. *The Legend of Zelda*, which I watched my mother finish first - both quests - and then attempted myself, is a sprawling game that can only be played by one person at a time. The world is persistent - the player's actions change it - and the player accumulates backpacks full of stuff. This is, then, a very personal game. It is not a game two players are likely to trade off to each other every fifteen minutes. It is a solitary game.

A number of consoles, and a number of console games, came and went. *Super Mario 64* didn't even have a two-player option, though

the console sported four controller ports. Our NES had flickered to a blinking blue screen, and its games were dusty and untouched, when they hadn't been traded. I had my first computer, and my computer had something I had never even conceived of - its first emulator. It was one of those rare moments when something that seems to be too good to be true is true; the complete library of NES and Famicom games was available to me. The emulator, its name a pun on a piece of male anatomy, also played and recorded game demo movies.

To play back a movie, one needed three things: the original movie file, the rom on which it had been recorded, and the same version of emulator the movie's producer had used - new emulator releases brought timing changes, and characters who moved smoothly in earlier versions now walked into walls or leapt into enemies until they died. The movies were pixel-perfect and lossless - uncompressed; the movie files were lists of keypresses the game played for you as you watched. But there was not yet any way to pause or skip forward and back - you watched the game from beginning to end, with no breaks. And I did. There were many of these inconvenient movies on the internet. This is how I saw the ending of *Castlevania* - my parents had never gotten past the grim reaper - for the first time.

Now I own stacks of DVDs with speed runs, skill plays, demo plays and documentaries on them. My desktop is cluttered with a mess of movies in transit from download to DVD. I hide them behind my instant messenger windows. I own the first series of Speed Demos Archive's Metroid speed run DVDs, each in a slickly designed case with the logos of Speed Demos Archive at one side and Metroid 2002 at the other, but the rest have all come from my own burner. My collection is large; it has been dubbed "porn for gamers."

Distributing game movies has become much easier, mostly due to the increased availability of video capture cards and devices. Now anyone can record a movie on a VHS tape,

mail it to Nate from Metroid 2002 or Scott at vortiginous.com and have them capture it, encode it with Divx, and place it on the internet for someone to download and burn to DVD. There are hundreds of these movies on the internet. There are at least a hundred on my computer. Many of them are shooters.

Why is this? Shooters are one of the mainstays of the arcade; they are fast, finite, and score-based. Indeed, looking at ikaruga. co.uk, one will find charts of high scores achieved by those who played the game not in the arcade but in their homes on Gamecubes and Dreamcasts. Konami held a high-score competition following the release of *Gradius* V - the first game in the series that didn't see an arcade release. Competition and bragging rights are valid, but there's perhaps another reason why ikaruga.co.uk has such a large collection of replay movies.

Jeff Minter, who founded Llamasoft in 1982 and spent decades producing manic shooting games on home platforms, who ultimately programmed remakes of Dave Theurer's *Tempest* and Eugene Jarvis's *Defender*, recalled the experience of playing *Space Invaders* at a bar with a bunch of other college students: "I remember watching in awe some kid who was nonchalantly maneuvering in the open space under the rack of Invaders, casually dodging bullets, instead of cowering under the nearest house and squeaking out every now and again to take terrified pot-shots (as I did). We learned through practice and osmosis, watching each other's games intently when not at the controls

ourselves."

When games left the arcades and went home, is it possible that something was lost? What was once a public experience had now become private. The high score tables in your shooting games contain your own initials, over and over, along with maybe those of a handful of people you've leant your copy to. A game is played alone, not surrounded by people watching intently, whom you will watch in turn. Alone, there is no one to show your skills to; there is no one more skilled to demonstrate how to complete the parts you find difficult. There's no thrill of showing a novice something they have never seen before.

In this way, super play movies might fill a necessary role that has been abdicated, creating a community where there no longer might be one. That doesn't explain, however, the proliferation of so many movies that are not super plays. Role playing games. On the Speed Demo Archive message boards, posters ask if anyone's interested in seeing a speed run of *Shenmue*. The Internet Archive hosts a video of someone sailing around a lighthouse in *Second Life*, and a number of videos of events in *World of Warcraft* set to music. Why?

I think it has something to do with what Will Wright called "owning your experience" in his GDC *Spore* demonstration. During his talk, he mentioned *Grand Theft Auto*. What had become important to him while playing the

game was not the missions and cut-scenes that the game's developers had designed for the player to plod through, but the individual stories that emerged from the unique experiences Wright encountered as he explored the game's world, mechanics and limitations.

Videogames, as media, are different from novels and films in that each player will have a very different experience when playing a game. Narratives emerge which are unique to one player's experience; events may unfold in a completely different order for another player. I record demo play movies of games I like, games which I think are obscure enough that not many players have encountered, and enjoyable enough that more players should. In those movies I play in such a way as to make the rules of game obvious and understandable to a person who is seeing them for the first time. The movie contains a narrative that the player watches and, hopefully, in watching, learns from. That narrative exists in that movie only; it can never be recreated exactly. Is it the recording that's important?

I would argue that it's the communication. Gaming is an experience that, like any other, needs to be shared (and frequently, at least for me, needs to be shared to be validated). What's being shared is something very intimate: the player, even more than the game. It's a transcription of the player's nuances, choices, decisions, what is important and what is interesting. It is not the kind of thing that can be shared in a block of prose on a message board. This is, I think, why video recording is and will continue to be necessary.

At least until we're all gathered around the arcade machine again.

A STORY OF FABLE

Fable - Xbox
Keith Engel
Editorial Supervision - Andrew Toups

Lo and be warned reader, for the story you are about to read is not a heart-warming fairytale filled with characters cute and cuddly. No, it is a fable filled with frightful, horrid creatures that lie and cheat at the first moment they are given the chance. It is a tale of ambition and ego, a tale of anger and disappointment, a tale of humility and failure. Come and listen to the telling of the Greatest RPG of All Time.

Part One: The Boasting

The tale begins with a proclamation made by Peter of the Boasting Mouth, who stood proudly on the boasting platform in the neon halls of the Festival of the Three E's, and thusly declared: "I will create the greatest RPG of all time."

Many who witnessed this event were in a wonder as to what he meant, and asked him many questions about his great ambition. Standing on the platform, he answered them. He told the public about of his dream to have a wide, open world to explore, free of fences and set paths for an adventurer to discover as he pleased. In his vision, there were forests, mountains, plains, towns and cities for any adventurer to explore. In the forests, beasts would attack by the dozen; plentiful trees could be cut

down, the seeds of which would grow into new trees. Interaction with the inhabitants of towns figured centrally in his plan, and there would be so many secrets in the RPG as to outnumber all those found in many existing adventures.

And the crowd talked among themselves in a frenzy of awe.

Peter the Boasting raised a hand. Could there be more to tell?

Indeed, there was more to tell, said Peter of the Boasting Mouth, for he saved the biggest announcement for last. He made the bold statement that for every choice the adventurer makes there would be a consequence. The choices the adventurer made would determine his path and appearance. Should he choose to defend the peasants from their attackers, the adventurer will gain points towards a nobler disposition. Instead, if he chooses to aid the attackers and kill the peasants, he will shift towards the side of evil. The choice would be up to the adventurer as to which path to follow, and the consequences of his actions would be many. Then, Peter of the Boasting Mouth revealed the name of this grand undertaking: *Project Ego*.

Part Two: The Frothening

Many moons and suns passed before any more was to be heard about this Project Ego. Soon, however, images of that which Peter of the Boasting Mouth had spoken were revealed to the public, and they shook with excitement

in response. There were many images of the adventurer standing in vast wheat fields; or beneath the shadows of a dead tree, the setting sun serving as a backdrop; or of a lonely mountain road, the ruins of a long-forgotten age in the foreground.

And lo, just as the public began to take a strong interest in this Project Ego, Microsoft the Mighty accosted Peter the Boasting, wielding the Purse of Many Dollars, and insisted that the RPG come to the Green and Black Box that they had created for the purpose of hosting such adventures.

Peter the Boasting was thusly joined in union with the Mighty Microsoft. Once destined for a great multiplicity of PC's, The Greatest RPG of All Time now was destined for the Green and Black Box. With the move to the Mighty Microsoft, *Project Ego* was dubbed a more simple and fitting title: *Fable*. Even more etchings and engravings began to pour through the heavenly gates of The Inter Net, and many of its denizens commenced the composition of various pamphlets and epistles, comparing it to other highly anticipated adventures soon to come forth.

Yet, as time passed, the public grew anxious, frustrated, even worried about the RPG, as its release was not yet known, and the public was informed that the game was going through delays. Was there something wrong with the Greatest RPG of All Time known as *Fable*? Two years of setting suns and rising moons had passed after Peter had taken the Boasting platform, when one day an proclamation was made at the Festival of Three E's: the adventure was to ship in four months time! There was much rejoicing. An even great number of excited mis-

sives were written and exchanged in the course leading up to the day of launch. The moment was arriving, and the public's anticipation was palpably ripe.

Part 3: The Great Launch

The four moon cycles had gone by and the RPG was released onto the public, swollen with anticipation as they were. As they first partook of the adventure, they all had a laugh with the innocent inhabitants of the towns and the interactions they made possible. Yet, this joy was to be short-lived - for the quests they undertook were more important than fooling around with the innocents of the towns. People began taking the quests that the guild had provided for the adventurer, and it became apparent to the public that the quests were a bit one-sided: it was easy to see that many of them were set up for the adventurer to lean towards a pure, moral alignment. The adventurer had no real choice when it came to his questing. There were but few quests that afforded the adventurer this choice of sides. This promised dimension of choice and consequence seemed to be falling short of its potential. To become wholly good, all an adventurer had to do was kill bandits and other villainous creatures of the land. However, to become wholly evil, the character simply had to begin killing the traveling merchants and the innocents found in the towns. In becoming evil, the so-called "bad elements" in the game, bandits and the like, would continue to attack the adventurer instead of siding with him. It all felt shallow and hollow.

Yet were there still the wide-open areas to be explored in the game? Not so! It became quite apparent that the wide-open areas had been replaced with simple, inflexible paths. The RPG's motto was: "Every choice has a consequence." This too proved to be an optimistic estimation of the game, at best; generally the case was that if an adventurer failed in an undertaking, he hadn't really failed at all; as if by magic, the events that passed seemed to erase

themselves, and he was given an opportunity to repeat the mission if he so desired. One particular tale that dealt with the preservation of a little boy's well-being stood out in the minds of many. If, in the course of the quest, the boy died, then the adventurer had failed; and yet should the adventurer tempt the fates and attempt the quest a second time, then lo, the boy would appear again, in perfect health, cheeks ruddy with the innocence of youth.

As if to add insult to injury, many found the tale of the adventurer to be shorter and less substantial than had been promised. Peter of the Boasting Mouth had claimed the adventure would span the greater part of 40 hours -- well over a fortnight's worth of revelry, to be sure! However, many found themselves at the voyage's end so much sooner than they had expected – often far less than a quarter of what the Boasting Mouth's word had pledged.

When the adventure had been prematurely completed, the public remembered Peter of the Boasting Mouth's words; in one passing, the full meaning of the adventure would not reveal itself, for there were many secrets to be found in its cavernous halls and winding pathways.

Thus the quest for secrets had begun.

Part 4: The Folly of the Better Bard

Peter of the Boasting Mouth and his underlings still insisted to the public that there was much left to do, even after the game's story had come to a close. One periodical's report of the game made mention of a secret adventure and quest that many in the land were unable to find. The people were filled with a glimpse of hope: despite its many flaws, they had become attached to the adventure, and wanted to see it continue. Thus, people began to congregate in many communities found on the Inter Net to embark on a quest of their own: A Quest for Secrets. They pooled together resources, each individual exploring different areas of the game, searching for that elusive hidden adventure. Then the individuals would return, only to re-

port, with a heavy heart, that there was nothing to be found.

During the pinnacle of this great quest of adventuring for secrets - into the hallowed halls of the Mighty Microsoft Forums wandered the Better Bard. Now, in the past there had been a few bards in the adventure that would weave a quick rhyme about the hero and would mention a Better Bard to be found, leading many to reach the conclusion that a Better Bard was to be sought out. Thus, lo and behold, The Better Bard appeared one day in the forums, and began weaving rhymes and hints about possible areas for secrets in the game. Many adventurers found themselves salivating as the hints were provided in little pairs of couplets. The adventure they all knew so well had been given new life as the Better Bard sang his delightful verse and poesy. While some speculated about the integrity of the Bard, many more speculated that this was some new type of game established by the Mighty Microsoft - a game that would spread through the halls of the Inter Net and into the people's reality with viral efficiency. Yet, as time passed, the Bard would continue no more with his rhyming ways and mischievousness and revealed that he was not the Better Bard that the game's bards had mentioned; but just an ordinary peasant, making jests at the expense of the many. Some were angry with this roguish imposter, but many gave him a round of applause for pulling off a fun and adventurous hoax.

Yet, the question remained on many adventurers' tongues: were there secrets that remained to be found?

Part 5: The True Quest for Secrets

Now our tale turns to an individual named BA of The Special Cake. This wizard began searching through the script of the RPG, using a special Green and Block box that had been modified for such a purpose. He spent many hours deciphering the glyphs and language of the creators and finally found out the secret of Fable. Having encountered this forbidden knowledge, he was hesitant at first to reveal this secret to the public. But alas, he felt that the public had to know, so one bright day, BA of The Special Cake was to address the people, who eagerly awaited his words with baited breath. After much hesitation, he finally spoke: all of the secrets that Peter of the Boasting Mouth reported had been removed! "How can this be?!" was their unanimous refrain. BA informed them that certain important glyphs were missing from the language to complete the code, thus keeping the secrets inaccessible and, most importantly, removed completely from the adventure.

Suddenly, it was as if a summer storm had been brewing. Many in the public began calling for the head of Peter the Boasting; he was even bequeathed with sundry vulgar appellations. Some spoke of litigation against Peter of the Boasting Mouth for making false claims. The public made a great outcry, asking why the secrets had been removed. These answers were not provided, as Peter of the Boasting Mouth's servants brushed them off, insisting still that secrets were in the game. The public requested an apology from Peter the Boasting for his dishonesty and villainy, and Peter of the Boasting Mouth (who from that day forth was to be known as "Peter the Word-Eater"), issued a statement of apology, which failed to appease the people.

Yet, in time tempers and anger were soothed. The Mighty Microsoft announced the triumphant return of the Great Green Knight of Two Halos, and much was forgotten.

Part 6: Beyond

Yet, the Tale of Fable does not end here. Peter Word-Eater wanted to make amends to the public and began work on an updated version of Fable. Aptly, he dubbed it The Lost Chapters. At first many shook their fists at the Word-Eater; the chapters he spoke of, after all, were only lost due to his own inability to find them! Some consolation was found, though, when Mighty Microsoft, in their great wisdom, realized that the public would not be asked to waste their wealth on a fully priced version of the Lost Chapters; the upgrade was to cost them but a Green Jackson.

The RPG, no longer worthy of its former appellation, the Greatest of All Time, will be expanded in size by the fold of a third; the rules of combat have been greatly revised, and new weapons and garments are said to be included. Though many of the public seem pleased and remain hopeful, let this tale be a warning to those who will blindly trust the words of a braggart. For a man can boast many great things, but only by his fruits will you know if he be good or evil.

"Ohhhhh yeah!"

presented by
PERSONA

Welcome to the GUILTY GEAR!

DESTROYED

Johnny has turned into a real pedophile lately, hasn't he?

Yeah, he's not even trying to hide it anymore.

I AM NOT!!!

I'm just a fan of the female body in all its forms and shapes, baby!

He's dressing more like one, too!

YEE HEE—!!

Um... He just jumped through your wall...

Excerpted from the Aoi Koi Summer 2005 doujinshi "Guilty Pleasures XXX" Visit to learn more: http://aoikoi.color.nu/

Riiiide theee haaaair!!

Colosseums pop up like that.

How does he breathe?

The mystery deepens...

Ladies and gentlemen! Welcome to the *Guilty Pleasure* fighting tournament!

Let's go sign up!

REGISTRATION

I don't really want to fight, though.

This is a winner-takes-all tournament with a grand prize of 30 billion world dollars!

30 billion??

SAMMY COLA

And now a word from our sponsor, *Mr. Trojan!*

Huh. Looks like Sol's joining.

MEN

UWAHH!

Outta the way, chump!

PSYC HO!!

WOMEN

Hey, look! Ky's here too!

Hey Ky ~ ♥

Ah, Miss Kuradoberi!

Whoa... So mysterious! Who could it possibly be?

MONKEY!!

You're kidding, right?!

Are you interested in the cash prize too?

Actually, I'm here to investigate the mysterious sponsor. Who could it be?

Oh God! What the hell is wrong with you people?!

An Exercise in Creativity by The Gamer's Quarter Staff and Their Friends

You've heard this one before. Whatever happened to innovation in videogames? Why does it seem that every major release these days is a sequel, license, or retread of an existing genre formula? Or all three at once?

It's a complaint that is growing with frequency and urgency, and coming from all parts of the world of gaming: from industry insiders, to developers, writers, bloggers, and gamers themselves. As the industry prepares to embrace the next generation of consoles, with their high definition visuals and multi-million dollar budgets, the question isn't losing any of its relevance. Where did the creativity go?

It's difficult to argue that the amount of creativity found on game store shelves isn't dwindling. Once upon a time, games weren't so easy to separate into categories, but nowadays it seems like this is almost all there is. Worse yet, most aren't disappointed when a game fulfills all of the expectations that its genre suggests. The argument that genre sympathizers often give is that all of the good ideas have been taken and we're at a point where all that's left to do is refine what exists. If a look at the shelves is evidence that this is a fair argument, a look at nearly any given gaming messageboard or magazine would be the counter argument. In this time of the two-week video game shelf life, doesn't it seem odd that people still talk about

Katamari Damacy over a year after its release? Isn't it strange that 50% of any given *Shadow of Colossus* coverage consists of Ico praise and memoirs? How many people do you know that are trying to track down a copy of *Rez*? People are sick of playing the same game over and over again, and the games that stand out as unique experiences become ingrained in our hearts and minds.

We can't claim to speak for the industry (and, as some of our critics have pointed out, we can hardly claim to speak for ourselves sometimes). But, in order to show that creativity, if nothing else, is still possible in these dark days, here are four completely off-the-wall game ideas from our staff writers and contributers.

The following ten pages contain four unique ideas that hope to display something new and interesting in this world of *Grand Theft Auto* low-rider editions and polished *Doom* clones. Yes, some of the ideas here may not be entirely practical, but our goal isn't really to get these games created (that said, feel free to take what you can from this and run with it, homebrewers), but rather to get you thinking about how different games could be if publishers and gamers alike would be willing to take a chance with something new. Open your mind as you read these, and put an imaginary controller in your hand.

Creativity isn't dead - it's resting.

SUICIDE INSTANT KILL
57,050
ITEM   MONDAY

SUICIDE COMBO!
4HIT
658,460
ITEM   WEDNESDAY

SUICIDE SALARYMAN
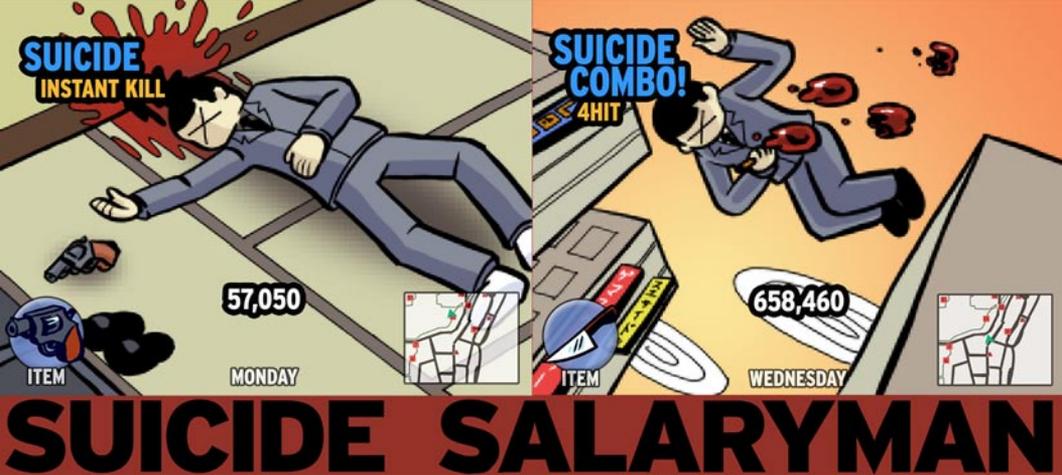
Game Design #1
Wes Ehrlichman
Art by Lestrade

Anyone remember the game *Bubsy*? Most people who do probably want to forget it. I actually have fond memories of *Bubsy*. Not for what the game was, but for my memories of what I thought the game was going to be. *Bubsy* was first in the long line of shameless *Sonic the Hedgehog* rip-offs that attempted to capitalize on the spiny blue rodent's success. While Sonic lived by his attitude (OMG, Sonic taps his foot when you set down the controller!), *Bubsy* was meant to live by his death. You see, Bubsy's claim to fame was the dozens of different types of death that he could succumb to.

I remember an EGM of that era which featured a huge spread showing many of Bubsy's different death animations. Before *Bubsy* finally hit my local Software Etc. I would stare at that page in daily anticipation of killing off that bastard. When the game finally came out, I found out that these deaths would come cheaply due to poor control and awkward screen scrolling. I quickly gave up on *Bubsy*, but the prospects introduced by his game were enough to get me thinking, "Wouldn't it be cool if there was a game that centered around trying to die in the most gruesome way possible?" And from that the idea for *Suicide Salaryman* was born.

Suicide Salaryman begins with your character – a typical Japanese Salaryman, chosen specifically for the high suicide rate among men who work in Japanese offices – waking up in his bed. Our character, named by the player upon beginning a new game, was fired from his job of 25 years the day before, yet continues to wear his suit in an effort to keep his mind focused on the years of his life which meant the most to him - those when he was supporting his family with his career.

After waking up for the first time the tutorial begins with a step-by-step walkthrough which explains how to move into the next room (the kitchen), how to jump (onto the counter), how to pick up items (a knife), and how to use a held item (the Salaryman stabs himself). At that point, an instant replay would trigger, showing the stabbing in a dramatic camera angle while tallying up the accumulated suicide points. A notepad with several different suicide possibilities would slide up from the bottom of the screen and the "stab self" checkbox would be checked off by a skeletal grim reaper hand. The Salaryman would instantly reappear in his bed and be given another chance to end it all. At this point, the game would allow you the freedom to take your character anywhere in Tokyo that you want, allowing you to kill off the Salaryman in thousands of different ways.

Each time the Salaryman is killed off, he will wake up back in his bed for you to try something else – a bit like the suicide section of the movie *Groundhog Day*. The ultimate goal of the game is to try to complete all of different

possible suicides. Pressing Start would allow you to look at many uncompleted "standard" suicide types, but most of the suicides would appear to be scratched off and would require you to spend your suicide points to see what they are. For example: jumping off of a skyscraper would be shown, but taking the toaster into the bathtub would be hidden until you either unlocked it or came up with it on your own.

Accumulating suicide points is an important part of the game, as these could be used to see which suicides you haven't attempted yet, unlock new areas of the city where your Salaryman can find brand new ways to end his life, or buy new clothes that allow you to customize your Salaryman's look. After all, you gotta end it all in style!

The goal of each individual day would be to maximize your suicide points by doing the most outrageous suicides. Take the knife from the kitchen table and carry it all the way to the top of the tallest building in the city, then fling your Salaryman off the building and press the "use" button on the way down to have him stab himself in mid-air and perform a suicide combo, resulting in an intense replay and a wealth of points. Try doing the same, but landing in the path of a moving car for more points; a moving train for mega points.

Start up the car inside of the garage and just sit there to die from carbon monoxide poisoning. Take some raw meat from the refrigerator and jump into the shark tank at the zoo to get mauled to death. Pick up some cigarettes at a gas station then go out, pump some gas, and strike up a match to cause an explosion that sends you straight to purgatory. The possibilities are endless.

After completing a certain number of objectives with the Salary Man, you would then have the option of beginning the game as a working-class woman who begins her day in a different part of town. After accomplishing her objectives, you could play the game as an older woman who wakes up next to a sleeping man in yet-another part of town, and subsequently a teenage boy in

an orphanage. Starting in different parts of the city would give access to new, more interesting areas to die, and make it easier to access some of the more accident-prone areas.

Of course, there's a certain amount of irresponsibility in asking for gamers to contemplate different ways to kill themselves. To counterbalance this, there would be a thematic link between the Salary Man and the rest of the characters that slowly builds up over time. The game wouldn't overtly tell you, but little clues could be found throughout the city, hinting that all of the characters are linked together in some way. When the game has been completed, and the primary goals have been met with each of the characters, the credits would roll. When the final name scrolls off of the screen, a family photograph would be fade into the screen showing the Salaryman, the woman who woke up next to the strange man, their working-class daughter, and their orphaned teenage boy. The theme of the game would then be brought to the forefront; with the player realizing that suicide affects not only the life of the person killing themself, but also those of everyone surrounding the victim. The player has been killing off each of these characters because it's what the game told him to do, but in the end he or she would be forced to realize that he has just killed off an entire family.

Before you start looking up phone numbers of places where I can get counseling, let me reassure you that I'm perfectly happy with how life is going. I'm just not convinced that the concept of dying in a video game has been explored thoroughly enough in current games. Most of us play games to let us explore new places. Why not a game that explores the depths of depression?

Skylarking

Game Design #2
Philip Tonner

Validation!

Recently there has been much discussion about the validity of games as a medium. It seems to be disintegrating into fun vs. worthiness.

Now let me establish one thing: games are FUN. They are perceived as fun, fun is their purpose. Games are never going to be viewed as anything other than fun because they do not attempt to be anything else. The games we have that are not viewed as fun are seen this way because they are failures. If we want games to be perceived as *the* new artistic medium, then we need to have a game that stands apart from what we currently have.

So.

I propose an unfun game. Fun is not part of its remit. It is not on the agenda. The game will, however, be mainstream, for one reason. When the Playstation 3 launches, this will be the only launch title. In fact it will be the only title confirmed. The only title rumoured to be in development. The only title, period.

Ladies and Gentlemen. I give you:

Skylarking. (Now before I get accused of cleverness or originality, I will point this out. This is a musical reference. *XTC* to be precise. But there is a reason for the name.)

In keeping with industry standards, I will summarize *Skylarking* in easy to understand terms, using existing titles. *Skylarking* is *Outrun 2* meets *GTA 3*. A Beautiful Journey within a sandbox. It's almost paradoxical. There will be one element that separates it from its inspiration. One limitation. You can only walk.

The aim of the game is to walk home. You have a start point. You have an end point. The sandbox elements can be seen in how you reach home. You can simply wander off in the hope of getting there. Or you can set off down the road. It's not so much a beautiful journey as a beautiful wander. Now, the setting is both crucial and utterly unimportant. My setting is my home and my surroundings. Your setting is your home and your surroundings. The start point will be a friend's house, say a few miles from your own. All you have to do is get home, but you don't have to, if you catch my drift.

Now here's the important part: photorealism is stupid and pointless. If I want to arse around with the marvels of physics I'll do it outside. Cel-shading is also stupid. So what *Skylarking* will provide the player with is an interpretation. One version of their surroundings. Not as it is in actuality, but rather, as it is in the eyes of one person. Think of a painting. Think of Picasso. He painted what he saw. This will work in much the same way (it needn't be cubism though).

Back to the title. "Skylarking," the song, revolves around seasons. The track listing was very carefully considered (ignore "Dear God"). Our *Skylarking* will also feature seasons. Four of

them to be precise, and for each, there will be an album of music (licensed music, much like the Grand Theft Auto series).

For winter we will have David Bowie's *Low*: glacial, harsh, sparse, synthetic. The key will be the closing track "Subterraneans." Think of that sax. Hear that sax.

For spring we will have Talk Talk's *Spirit of Eden*: similarly harsh, glacial and sparse. But organic. Ever so organic. I've spent two months listening to *Spirit of Eden* as the sun rises. This **is** spring.

For summer we will have Tim Buckley's *Happy/Sad*: similarly organic, similarly jazzy/folky. But warm. Ever so warm.

And for autumn we have The Durutti Column's *The Return Of The Durutti Column*: similar to *Happy/Sad* but not similarly jazzy. Sad. So sad. The passing of time, of seasons, of everything. Note the first track: "Sketch FOR Summer." And then later "Sketch FOR Winter." Autumn is obviously a time of change. You can feel this music change: from bird song and a thousand guitars intertwined to a solitary guitar fading away repeating itself like a last breath.

I'm presuming that most of you won't have heard any of these songs. But I assure you that they fit. They even flow together, sort of, in my head. The music is the core of the game. Or, at

least it is when you combine it with the walking. *Skylarking* is a slow game, there are no set pieces. There is just the player.

In an environment, but not his environment.

Skylarking's cover would be austere, oversized and pretentious (much like the game itself). It would not be a game you'd want to play, at least not more than once. It's a game to sit on a coffee table and be pretentious. Just being there would be enough. It would not be a game for me or you. It would be a game for all those worthy folks who don't play games. They would, however, have this. An unfun game. An important game. A valid game.

Note: There would be two other songs that play over the credits. For our bad ending, "Sleep Will Come" by The Durutti Column. And for our good ending, "Orchid Girl" by Aztec Camera. The ending would be chosen randomly.

PROJECT FTL

Game Design #3
Christian C.

This game has the tentative title of *Project FTL* (for "Follow The Leader"), and it would be a PC-based FPS. Well, FPS isn't exactly accurate - it would be played completely from a first-person point of view, and the character would move as you expect someone in Doom or Quake might, but there's no shooting, or even attacking - on the part of the player, anyway.

The game would start with the main character awakening in a pile of disfigured and mutilated bodies in what appears to be some sort of factory basement. The player can only see in black and white (and shades of gray, of course). Upon looking in a cracked mirror, he would discover that his mouth has been sewn shut and his body has been abused and has possibly even begun to decay. The final revelation would be that each of his fingers are sewn together, leaving him unable to use them except to push things and wave.

As the player explores the apparently abandoned and underground building, they stumble upon what appear to be the walking dead - shambling, mindless humans who have been mutilated, although they haven't been attacked by the sadistic tailors that sewed the main character's hands together. They seem to pose no threat, and they merely regard him with blank and dispassionate eyes before returning to milling around listlessly. However, one startling feature ensures that the player realizes their importance. They are the first things you see which actually are colored. Granted, it's more of a purplish-blue essence that radiates from each creature, but it's the start of discovering the main thrust of the game.

The player can press the "fire" key (the left mouse button by default) to stand in place and hold their hands out, then by pointing at one of the Mindless Creatures (as they are dubbed) the player can "select" them. The colors emanating from the creature could then be dragged over to objects of interest: other creatures, doors, items, etc. This will cause the selected Mindless Creature to try and interact with the item they've been matched up to. Doing this will cause the creature to momentarily toy and experiment with whatever they've been directed to. Then, with different keyboard presses, the character performs various hand movements which modify the MC's behavior.

For example, if you merely direct an MC to a rock on the ground, they may kick it along or get down on all fours to smell it briefly, but if you press the key to cup your hands while the rock is indicated, they'll pick it up and carry it around. You can then make the motion of waving your hand while directing them to a window, and they'll throw the rock at the window.

The early part of the game would consist of experimenting with the Mindless Creatures and seeing what you can get them to do, using them to bypass obstacles and whatnot. It would

be kind of like a puzzle game where you don't directly control things, but only influence them. Eventually, by looking at documents on tables - which you could easily read but you might need a MC to hold them up for you - and exploring the area, you will begin to figure out that you're being held in the "dungeon" of some kind of secret paramilitary experimental compound, and everything you've seen so far (including yourself) is part of the inhuman and unethical work being done there.

Early on, the main incentive to keep going is to figure out who you are and get the hell out of there. The only real dangers are the occasional automated security systems and general instability of the abandoned areas. However, about 30-35% of the way through the game, the threat level increases. This happens when you start running into human enemies who appear as very bright red and green essences. You must try and avoid these enemies, defeat them through cunning (since you're not much of a fighter), or order your Mindless Creature minions to attack them. But the largest change to how the player would approach the gameplay comes when you discover a very alive, very terrified young woman and her little brother.

Suddenly, you're not only responsible for your own survival, but also that of two innocent civilians you've found. First, you must gain their trust and indicate to them that you're not a threat. Then you'll have to establish a system of communications with the older sister (the younger brother is either oblivious or ill - this is currently undecided), using the hand motions previously mentioned to set up a crude sign language (with meaning reinforced by shaking or nodding your head to her questions). It would obviously take some time for the player to get a handle on the setup, but when they become accustomed to it, using these motions allows the rest of the game to be more interesting and dynamic.

Unlike the Mindless Creatures, the young woman, and to some extent the boy, are aware of what's around them and pay constant attention to their situation. These characters are hurt by dangerous things and become frightened, panicky, or even angry (the MCs can be destroyed, but up until they're shot in the head they can pretty much take any abuse). The older sister can more clearly follow commands to do things like bar doors and set up traps. There are other actions only she can do, such as operate computers and wield weapons. But, as I said, she's fragile. So you have to be careful and play intelligently.

The rest of the game flows on from that - trying to figure out what's going on, while at the same time escaping from the complex without getting your new human friends killed. Where it will end up is currently undecided, but more than likely a cinematic chase of some kind along a desolate highway or through the woods might be in order. The game would more than likely have a positive ending, but that too is currently undecided.

Another part of the game that is undecided is how to further elaborate the manipulation of the other characters' colors. It might be interesting if the only way you could restore health would be to somehow draw these colors from the Mindless Creatures (or enemies) into yourself, but that seems a bit too bizarre.

I envision this as one of those games that's more meant to be experienced than to be played. While the player obviously wouldn't understand everything at first, their questions would be clearly answered later on, instead of asking the player for a second playthrough where they are asked to make logical connections. That's not to say it would be dumbed down, just that it wouldn't be a game with any real chance of loose ends.

Concessions would be made in the spirit of replayability by including certain factors of randomness such as area layout, puzzles, enemies, and so on. When you complete the game a shorter version of the game would be unlocked in which you take the part of the young girl and follow the orders of a simulated game player. Henceforth, follow the leader.

Game Design #4
John Szczepaniak

Imagine an action RPG in the mould of the *Zelda* titles through the generations. Now imagine its most fundamental element removed. That's right; imagine not having the ability to save. Traditionally, all RPGs require a save feature due to a game length far longer than games of any other genre - normally over 40 hours of content.

Console based cartridge saving began with *Zelda*. It was a revelation, since at the time other games required starting over from the beginning every time. It's ironic then that the *Zelda* games would, with some tweaking, be perfectly suited to playing without saves.

What I propose is a large and sprawling action RPG so perfect in execution and design that saving is not needed. The key to this would be a replacement of the staples of most RPGs - EXP, levels, gold, equipment, special items et al - with knowledge and information that is retained by the player outside of the game world.

Jimmy in the real world purchases his new RPG - let's call it "Szczepaniak's Grand Quest" - and takes it home. The game has no instruction manual, with the narrative printed as the blurb on the back, and the only clue to his goals is printed on the actual CD (a sly nod to MGS).

The clue says, "head East three fields, then North by one".

Jimmy switches on his machine, which jumps straight into the game without displaying a title screen. He controls his avatar, and following the instructions that were printed on the CD he reaches a shrine. Inside, an old man gives him a sword. Intuitively he understands that the giant green button on the control pad must control the sword. The walls of the shrine are covered with instructions (that can be read by panning the 3D camera), which lead to a cave by the sea. Below them it is explained that five crabs on the beach must be killed, and that the character will need to be injured inside of the cave before it will reveal its treasure. Armed with such knowledge, Jimmy sets out on his mission. Along the way, he sees an ornate castle in the distance (think *Ico*, with a grandiose structure that glimmers in the light). He takes a detour to explore this, for every area that can be seen in this game can be reached given the right clues. Sadly, there is a huge moat surrounding the castle and the drawbridge is closed. Only slightly disheartened, Jimmy sets off again for the cave by the sea.

Upon defeating five crabs and taking a bit of damage as instructed, a mermaid appears and grants him a crossbow in compensation for spilling blood within her little grotto on his way to the completion of her crustacean killing task. After this, an entrance is revealed which leads to a dungeon deep within the cave. Picture it as having been constructed from glowing Italian marble, and emanating a beautiful, almost *Soul Calibur*esqe atmosphere. It takes Jimmy 15

minutes to complete this dungeon, where the guardian, having been defeated, reveals with his last dying breath the way to enter the castle seen previously. Using the crossbow, Jimmy needs to shoot a certain four bricks on the wall of the castle, thereby lowering the drawbridge. The defeated guardian also explains some of the narrative. I like to think of the player as being in a cursed land, where everyone is forced, Groundhog Day style, to relive the same things over and over.

At this point, Jimmy retires downstairs for his daily gin and crumpets. But *oh no* you cry! What about saving the game? Worry not, faithful Action RPG veteran - for you see, Jimmy now knows how to enter the castle. It would take little more than 200 seconds to get his sword and the crossbow and return to the castle if he were playing right from the beginning. Since he knows the trick to entering the castle he can bypass the cave dungeon entirely. Completion of the castle by scaling the ruined citadel at its centre (roughly 30 minutes for capable players), will reveal further clues and information.

The next task is to head west from the shrine, using the sword to cut down three bushes in a nearby clearing. The order is important, since cutting the 3rd, 6th and then first bush will reveal the entrance to an underground river of blood, replete with ferryman of the damned ninja cats. The player may of course be tempted to again retrieve the crossbow, but it is unnecessary - the player can only hold a single item at a time and the ferryman will hand him a shield that cancels out any other item.

Here is where the clever design must come into play. Since the player can only ever carry their sword and one additional item at any time, they must not feel chained by their equipment, and as such, are limited in what they can carry. The aim of this limitation is to achieve the purity of titles such as Sony's *Ico*, or Delphi's *Another World* (1). Of course, of the presumed 15 or so key items found throughout the game, only

(1) – Released in the US as *Out of this World*.

one is ever needed for any goal. With each goal completed, clear information for completing the next is given. The entire game needs to be structured in such a way, so that the player never has to backtrack a great deal or feel annoyed with the item they are carrying.

In this way, knowledge - and to a lesser degree skill - becomes the key assets in completing the game. Of course, the player is free to explore at their will, but without knowing precisely how to achieve certain affects, their progress will in theory be fairly linear. How are they to know that they must drown themselves in the uppermost mountain to acquire the wings of Narog unless they had previously been told by the Harpies of Narog? Alternatively, they may have been told to do so by real-world friends, and a key element to enjoying the game is discussing strategies with friends who are playing at the same time. If a certain section proves too difficult for one person, a friend can simply reveal the information won by completing that task. Imagine the possibilities of school chums, or even work colleagues, discussing the previous night's questing and their theories on how to progress next. They've all discovered the sleeping Dragon of Jade, but will they manage to sequence-break the game and work out its secret a little early? Most goals would need to either be cryptic (tree cutting), or counter intuitive (drowning oneself at a key area).

The entire game features your standard towns and villages, lost civilisations, and other strange characters to meet and talk with. Most RPGs have NPCs repeating the same dialogue,

so what's the point of saving after having a discussion anyway?

Of course, such a unique system is open to abuse. The final section of the game - which leads to the final guardian and the ending - will take no longer than 45 minutes to complete assuming you start from that original shrine visited earlier, and assuming, of course, that you have all the knowledge needed to locate and defeat said enemy. The chances of stumbling across this accidentally are virtually zero, but there will always be the temptation for some to skip out on the 40+ hours of questing, visit GameFAQs for spoilers, and then rush ahead and complete the game in under an hour.

There are ways to avoid such things, but the great hope is that the reason for purchasing the game is not what you find at the end, but rather the journey you take to get there. Plus, of course, the final area can have a quiz designed to test if you'd actually played that far yourself. For example, there may be a section mid-way that features some antics on a wrecked pirate ship; a doppelganger of the ship may be present at the end, and if the player doesn't use his foreknowledge of said area, then it's instantly Game Over. The trick to would be subtlety; perhaps it's an entirely different ship, but hopefully the player will heed the warnings of a navigator's ghost met previously, who clearly states the rules for navigating all future ships. The point is that they remember and work out what needs doing. Knowledge is key in this game and this key is worth more than all the Gil in Midgar.

Another element that slows sequence-breaking is the presence of red herrings designed to lead people astray when experimenting. If only key elements pertaining to the quest exist, it may eventually become fairly easy to stumble across solutions. If you find a giant statue hidden in the desert, it must obviously have some importance later on - unless of course the game is riddled with things to side-track the player. Just for fun, why not include a wholly superfluous city floating in the sky? When players see it, they will be gripped by curiosity,

desperate to see how it fits into the main quest. Of course, exploring it will yield little more than narrative explanations, but such things should keep players guessing at to what happens next, and encourage them to "stick to the path" that they are given.

On the flipside, such things could encourage longevity. Since once the main quest is beaten, dedicated players will be curious to find the truth behind so many things hinted at past the main path. In the same way that people were fascinated by the airships and distant lands they couldn't reach in *Shadow of the Beast* and the ghost city in *GTA*, so will they be interested in the city in the sky. Some may baulk at such ideas, arguing that there would be no replay value to such a game, but I argue the replay value would be greater than in any similar game. In other RPGs, great set pieces – such as the coastline battle in *FF7* - may require a dozen hours of play time to reach. But in Szczepaniak's Grand Quest, all your favourite set-piece events are no more than 15-30 minutes away from the start, meaning you can easily relive "the great battle of unholy vengeance" that occurs mid-game atop a floating battle fortress without having to play through everything else again.

The final game would be delicate, dripping with atmosphere, and be pure and ergonomic with regards to controls, real-time combat and inventory management. An ethereal atmosphere such as that in *Otogi*, *Zelda*, or *Shadow of Colossus* would be key, since without clear achievements such as leveling and item acquisition, the player would need to be motivated by a sense of exploration and the innate joy received from piecing together clues. It would almost be like a Sherlock Holmes mystery for the modern day, with each clue leading onto another, eventually forming a whole picture. Of course, once you have a certain clue, you can skip past all those that came before when you next switch on your 'Cube.

Sadly, such a game will never be made. Can you imagine pitching it to a publisher?

"Well, it's like an RPG, but not. And it's

huge, but there's no save game option or instruction manual. But it's really cool, since you can start the game and complete it in 30 minutes. Even though there are 40 hours of gameplay. And none of that crap with gold, or leveling up, or a million different items. It's pure, you see? Pure energy, pure time, pure space, man."

If they don't accuse you of insanity and revoke your game designer license after that, I'd be very surprised. Today's publishers want sure fire hits - things people can relate to without having to experience them first. This is why every second design brief submitted today begins with "It's like GTA, but different."

There remain, of course, problems with people abusing the system then feeling cheated and claiming the game doesn't provide enough value for your money. Not to mention, you would need one hell of a designer for the kind of 18 month development hell that this would require. Remember, for such a concept to work, the actual design and layout would need to be absolutely perfect.

Despite the world of problems with this concept, it continues to prove a fascination for me. Like a piece of glass glinting in the sun that you can't quite seem to take your eyes off of. Perhaps as gaming evolves, such unusual ideas may have the chance to get made.

Real Dog vs. Nintendog (Real Dog Wins)

Nintendogs – Nintendo DS
Wes Ehrlichman

This is Popper the dog:

She's a full bred beagle that my girlfriend and I adopted from Stray Rescue on July 8th 2005. The first time we saw her, she was in a litter of seven. There had been four girls named Snap, Crackle, Pop, and Petey, and three boys named Caesar, Homer, and Elliot. We played with all of the puppies, but chose Pop because every time anyone got near her she would run in and attack by literally rolling over them in the grass. When I got close, she did the same thing to my ankles so I picked her up and she immediately licked my face with such intensity that her head moved violently up and down with each slurp. I handed the dog over to my girlfriend Christina and it began licking her with even more intensity. We knew from that moment that it was love. When we picked her up,

we renamed her Popper because we didn't like the idea of someone else naming our dog.

This is Pooper the Nintendog:

I made the call while I was home from work for lunch taking Popper out for a walk. "Did you guys get in *Nintendogs* yet?" I asked the Target employee.

"No, not yet, but we're expecting it either tonight or tomorrow," he replied.

"Oh... ok. I'll call back in a bit," I said, and I took Popper back inside, ate lunch and went back to work.

While at work I went to the Nintendogs website to decide which version I wanted to get. There are three different versions, each containing six different breeds. I decided to compare the Nintendogs experience with the real life experience of owning a dog, so I chose the Dachshund and Friends version. Apparently, at least according to the title, Beagles are

friends with Dachshunds. I was using the web site to meticulously plan my Nintendog rearing when my girlfriend called to remind me that she was working late and that I would have to take Popper to the vet after work to get the stitches from her Spay taken out. In all of my *Nintendogs* excitement I had forgotten. I begrudgingly thanked her for reminding me and went back to playing around on the web site.

After I got off of work I went home and tossed Popper into her travel crate. I think she can sense when we're going to the vet because she immediately began whining and shaking uncontrollably. I put my hand up to the grill of her crate and muttered some baby talk to reassure her. When we got there, the removal of her stitches took no more than 5 minutes, and when I put her back into her create to go home her whining and shaking was completely gone. I took advantage of her tranquility by calling Target again. "Is it in now?" I eagerly asked the electronics department boy.

"Yep, we just got it in."

"Great! Can you hold me a copy of the Dachshund and Friends version?"

"Huh?"

"The one with the brown dog on the front."

"Oh, ok. Sure"

And we hung up.

"We're taking a little detour," I told the dog as I drove past our house continuing straight to Target.

When we got there, I assured the dog that I would be right back and made a b-line for the electronics department. There it was – behind the theft-proof glass – *Nintendogs: Dachshund*

and Friends. Unfortunately, the department was completely devoid of people with the exception of a thin blonde teenager who needed help deciding on a stereo. I strode down several aisles, scanning left and right for anyone wearing the token red Target shirt, but with no luck. Finally, hiding in the center of the hamper and ironing board aisle, I found a black haired teenage girl Target Employee with cat glasses. "Yeah, can you help me in the electronics department?" She shook her head no, and not so subtly avoided any direct eye contact. I resolutely made my way back to the electronics department in the hopes that someone might have finally shown up. By now, I was starting to get worried about the lonely dog I left in the car, but I reassured myself that once I got the game I wouldn't waste any time before getting out of there.

I returned to the electronics department and the girl who needed stereo help was getting advice from a teenage boy whose shaggy red hair matched his token red Target Employee shirt. The girl's eyes met mine momentarily as the boy enthusiastically walked her through her various options. Her triumphant stare gloating the fact that she was the one that got help first. I sighed heavily and followed them through the section until she finally admitted that she wouldn't be back until the weekend to make her decision. The girl sashayed off and the red shirted boy turned his attention to me. "What can I help you with?"

"Just here to pick up the *Nintendogs* I had on hold."

"So you're the guy. We've had a lot of people asking about this," he said.

"Yeah, Nintendo's really been pushing it," I said, wondering how anyone could be asking about anything if he has been ignoring his post all night.

He swiped my credit card and put my copy of *Nintendogs: Dachsund and Friends* in a bag. I rushed back to my car to find my dog sitting in her travel crate, weight shifting back and forth on her paws with her ears pulled back in excitement. I reached back and put my hand up to the

grill of her crate to let her lick it a few times and we drove home.

When we reached the apartment, Popper went to the bathroom and then we made our way upstairs and inside. My apartment is a two-bedroom loftish residence with high ceilings and hardwood floors. A green table is set upright in between the living room and the rest of the apartment that prevents Popper from chewing on anything we don't want her to. I slid the table over and Popper scooted past. I closed off her area, grabbed my DS, kicked my shoes off and laid back on the couch.

I popped my cartridge in the system and turned it on. My first task was to go to the Kennel and decide on a dog. There were three Beagles to choose from: two girls, and one boy. Since Popper is a girl, I decided to go for a direct comparison and select a girl. Out of the two girl dogs, one of the portraits had an almost fully brown face while the other had a white stripe that crept up her nose and in between her eyes. I looked at Popper, who was now lying down in her puppy bed with her face toward me. She also had a white stripe between her eyes, so I chose that one. I was then transported via the top screen into a digital house where a digital door opened and a digital dog bounded out of it towards the screen. When the dog got close enough, the screens swapped and the beagle I adopted was standing on the lower screen, staring at me and barking. I touched the stylus to the screen and the on-screen pup hopped up, put her paws to either side of it, and started sniffing it. I tapped it around the screen

and watched as the pup's nose darted around in pursuit of the action. There was an undeniable charm in its movements. I continued tapping around the screen for a few minutes until a prompt came up telling me to speak the dog's name.

I decided to call her Pooper, keeping her name as similar to my dog's name as possible while also giving her an identity. I clicked ok and said her name loudly. The onscreen dog looked up and came toward me. I was then prompted to say her name two more times. When this had been accomplished, Pooper barked a couple of times and I was given a message telling me that the dog had learned its name. I heard another bark, but this time it wasn't coming from the DS. My dog had come up to me when I was saying "pooper" repeatedly and was now begging for attention. I kept my eyes on the DS screens as I picked Popper up to put her in my lap. She nipped at the Strap that was hanging down from the DS, so I folded it under the system and pet her with my left hand as I tapped away with the right.

My next step was to teach my Nintendog how to sit. I tapped her once on the nose then put my hand on her head and pulled down with the stylus. The Nintendog's nose followed the stylus downward and she sat down. I tapped the light bulb in the corner to indicate that I wanted to teach her this command and then said, "sit" loudly and clearly. Popper stood up and poked her wet nose into the DS's screen to see who I was talking to. "No Popper," I said. I put down the DS and picked up Popper, gently setting her

back down on the ground. I picked back up the DS and once again went through the motions of having my dog sit. When I reached the end I said, "sit" and found that both the onscreen dog and my real dog were sitting down. "Good girl," I told the pair of dogs. And I patted Popper on the head with my left hand while petting Pooper on the head with my stylus. I still hadn't received confirmation that my virtual dog had learned how to sit, so I led her through the motions again and said, "sit" when the time came. Popper started barking and jumping up trying to grab the DS. I had to find something for her to do while I played. I realized that I hadn't fed her yet, so I set the DS down on the end table and put some food and water into her dog dishes. When I came back to my system, a confirmation was on the screen telling me that she had finally learned how to sit. I looked up at Popper and she was busy eating, so I quietly told Pooper to "sit." She sat down right away, so I rubbed her on the head until some sparks appeared indicating that she was happy with me. Luckily, Popper was eating her food and didn't budge.

I decided that I would have to wait until later to try the rest of the voice commands, so I tried out the rest of what the game had to offer by buying and feeding food and water to my virtual dog and throwing and retrieving a Tennis Ball. One advantage to the virtual dog is that when you throw a virtual tennis ball the dog actually allows you to take it from her mouth after she retrieves it. When I play ball with Popper, she always forces me to play tug of war every time she brings the ball back to me. The two games mesh together into something like a fetch of war.

By now, Popper had finished eating and was sitting in her doggy bed with her head hanging lazily from the side. I decided to see what taking the Nintendog for a walk was like, so clicked on that icon and drew the path of a walk to and from the budget pet store, going through two question mark icons along the way. As she followed the path that I drew, she stopped to go to the bathroom at least two

times, stopped to eat trash once, and stopped once to give me a present containing a picture of a dog that, according to the caption, "dogs aren't very fond of." When we arrived at our destination, I bought more food and water, then left the store and continued on home. On the way home, my dog stopped to go to the restroom at least three more times, and I ran into someone else walking their chihuahua, who reprimanded me for not taking care of my dog's accidents. When we got back to the virtual room, I fed her some water then tried to take her out again. A prompt came up telling me to try again later. I played Frisbee with the dog for a bit and then ran out of things that I could do without speaking, so I saved my game and popped in the *Jump Superstars* cartridge to play a few rounds. Popper grabbed her stuffed snail toy and kept herself entertained by trying to tear it apart.

A little while later, while I was still playing *Jump Superstars*, my girlfriend finally arrived back at home. I've been telling her about Nintendogs for a while, but she hasn't shown any interest, saying that she would prefer to play with a real dog. Now that I had the game home, I popped it in the DS and asked her to check out my new puppy. She scoffed and threw the dog its toy, almost to prove a point. I figured that with Popper distracted I would be able to play with Pooper again. I pushed the power button on the DS only to find that she was hungry and thirsty. I fed her and gave her water, then called her over and said, "sit." Popper immediately quit playing with Christina and came to sit next to

me. Christina said, "What are you doing to her?" then came over and started petting Popper to let her know that she appreciated her obedience. "I bet you've been doing this all night!"

"No I haven't," I replied. "I've been waiting for you to come home."

She rolled her eyes at me and tossed one of Popper's toys across the room to which she responded by chasing after it. "Quit tormenting the dog," she said.

I rubbed the stylus on my virtual dog's belly for a bit then got up and went to the bathroom, taking it with me.

The joy of portable systems is that they can go anywhere with you – the DS is no exception. I took down my pants and sat down on my throne only to whip out my stylus (not *that* stylus) and begin petting the DS screen again. "Sit," I told Pooper. My voice echoed off of the bathroom walls making it sound even more crisp, and the dog sat. I rubbed the stylus from her head toward the ground again and she laid down. I hit the lightbulb in the corner and said, "down." The game let out a chime to let me know that it understood and Pooper wagged her tail. I got her to lie down a few more times and the game confirmed that she had learned the voice command. I practiced sit and lie down with her for a while, then set the DS onto the ground and finished up with the bathroom. I came back into the living room, took Pooper for another virtual walk, then turned the system off.

That night, I played the game again in bed, then again the next morning, then in the bathroom at work, then when I got home and again

the next night. This went on for a few days and in no time at all, my dog was an expert at both catching Frisbees and hopping hurdles at dog shows. Unfortunately, with my admittedly limited bathroom time, she still hadn't learned many voice commands.

Every week we take Popper to her puppy classes at PetSmart, so one day after work I had to forego my usual virtual walk in favor of spending time with my actual dog. I didn't want to totally abandon her though, so because we were going to be in a place with a lot of pet lovers, I decided to try out *Nintendogs*' "bark mode." "Bark mode" uses the wi-fi functions of the DS to search for anyone else in the area that also happens to have "bark mode" enabled. If you find someone with "bark mode," your DS will literally bark at you, the two systems will exchange business card information, and a new breed will potentially be unlocked. Anyway, I turned on "bark mode," closed my system, and went out the door with real and virtual puppies in tow.

The first stop was Qdoba to meet Christina for dinner before class. I laid my virtual dog beside me in the car, grabbed my real dog and went to the outside eating area in front. I told my girlfriend what I wanted and she went inside and ordered while I sat with the puppy on my lap and kept her company.

Just as Nintendo was betting when they made *Nintendogs*, nobody can resist a puppy, and people would come up and pet my dog while I waited for dinner. My dog encourages this sort of behavior, and if anyone walks past without
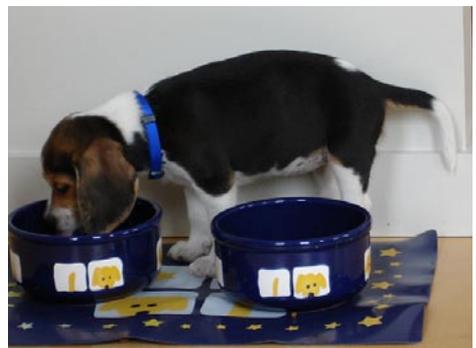
petting her, she gives a little growl to announce that she needs some attention.

While waiting, a mother and her two children, a five-year-old girl and an eight-year-old boy, walked by. My dog did her growl and they turned around and did the "aww" thing. The mother was loud and suburban. As she approached she asked, "Is that a Beagle?!"

"Yeah, her name is Popper," I replied.

"How old is he?" she asked.

"SHE is around four months old. We're taking her to puppy class tonight."

"That's great! My son got this game yesterday. Tell him about the game."

So the son looks at me and I swear to god he's got rabies or something. He's got little white pearls built up on either side of his lips and they disappear and reappear as his mouth opens and closes while speaking. "Its called *Nintendogs*, and you can raise and teach tricks to 5 puppies."

A smile forms across my face. This could be my chance to actually use that "bark mode" thingy. "Hey, do you have it with you? I've got it in my car right now, we can do 'bark mode'."

The kid goes, "Really? Do you really have it in your car?"

"The man is teasing you, honey. Of course he doesn't have it in his car," ending her statement with a nervous laughter.

"I'm totally serious," I assure them.

"Wow," the kid says, as the foam that frames his lips disappears completely for a moment, only to reappear as the final 'wuh' sound parts his lips.

The mom pets my dog a few more times and says, "Well, we'd better get going."

The daughter pets Popper on the head a few more times, as the mother prods her son on into the restaurant. As she pats my dog to say goodbye she notices my t-shirt. "Hey look! Baby Mario and Big Mario!"

The son corrects her, "No, it's little Mario plus mushroom equals Super Mario."

The family disappeared into the restaurant. At this point it finally hits me that the mother is convinced that I was a child molester trying to coax her son into the back seat of my car with the promise of video games and I'm thinking of what I should have said. Maybe I should have told her that I write for a video game magazine. Then I think about how terrible it is that I should have to justify my hobby. Then my dog barked at another passing couple and I had to calm her down again.

We ate dinner and went to class then continued home, played with the dog for a bit, and hopped into bed. Popper settled in at my side and cuddled her back into me, sprawling her legs out as I petted her. Then it hit me. I forgot about my Nintendog! I threw on my pants and went down the apartment stairs to my car to get my DS. On the way back up I opened the system to check on my virtual puppy. Nope, nobody had tried to contact me using "bark mode," and the batteries were running low from all of the wi-fi use. I turned off the system and came back inside. Popper wagged her tail as I came back into bed and resumed her position next to me staring up into my eyes. I put my DS on the bedstand and rubbed her belly until the two of us fell asleep.

Real Dog vs. Nintendog (Real Dog Wins) 69

"at how many komas do jou get gogeta?"

Jump Superstars - NDS
Matthew Williamson

Jump Superstars is a dirty little pile of shame. To be interested in this game you not only have to follow import video game releases, but you also need to have an interest in manga. If not manga, than anime; the kind that is on FoxBox, which features characters with names like Monkey D. Luffy.

Some of us try to cover this up by claiming that we want it for the more mature themed series, such as *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* (1) or *Rurouni Kenshin*. *Kenshin* aired on Cartoon Network during *Adult Swim*; it has to be mature.

Either way, if you're someone who is interested, you have probably been caught behind the Young Adult section of your local bookstore; hunched over, thumbing through something that the average passer-by would consider a comic book. You need not defend the fact that you want a game with a main character who uses their nose hair as their main weapon of attack.

Being a unilingual person, I am left to fend for myself by searching through massive forums that read like, well, what they are - the Game-FAQs forums. While the FAQs are often informative, the forums are usually cluttered with spam. Wading through them, I found many slightly legible that seemed to go by unacknowledged.

(1) Recently the *JoJo's Bizarre Adventures* manga was released in English by VIZ Media.

"a english to japanese translater for the game or just so jou can say like hello and it wil translate in japanese letters"

Good things do come to those who are fed up though; they pull out their old kana charts and Japanese to English dictionaries. Some time ago, I felt like learning Japanese in my all-too-much free time would be a blast. This would allow me to import more games and watch Japan-only shows.

Ahh, the dreams of many.

I got a bit further in my practice the last time I tried; I almost had the Hiragana chart memorized. Like many, poor memory and no teacher led to frustration and the eventual halting of my studies. I kept the books just in case. Of course, I use this as an excuse; I don't really need to translate anything to play the game. Someone on GameFAQs has already done most

of that for me. Regardless, I still use my Kana chart to identify the characters in the game that I'm unfamiliar with.

Using the manga panels called Komas that are unlocked as you play the game a deck of your favorite characters can be arranged. With the minor card game elements and the large amount of fan service that the game provides, I relate it to the Neo Geo Pocket's *Card Fighters Clash*. The decks are fun to build, but I don't like the trial and error required to find certain characters, hence the kana charts and translation dictionary.

"ive herd differant things bout sngle cart"

Getting to the meat of the purchase, I wanted a portable *Smash Bros.*-esque game. When I heard about multiplayer from one cart, it sealed the deal for me. Unfortunately, the single cart multi player is little more than a demo. With only a small number of characters and choice of teams, you are thrown into a short 30-second battle. This repeats ad nauseum until someone decides to shut his or her DS off.

Building all these custom decks just to wail on the CPU? I think not. Damn you, you fun little game you. There is a second copy of the game in the mail so I never have to hear my friends complain about import costs and shipping times.

"Accordint the physics of anime power..."

Due to a fair amount of invested cash in a certain series, I loathe a certain anime that took about 20 episodes to finish a single 8 minute fight scene. What a waste of cash. After finding out that I would have the opportunity to use JoJo to lay out a certain Super Saiyan, a tingle went down my spine.

Yes, we all know that based on some kind of power level to X-teenth degree, Goku would destroy us all in .0035 seconds. If you don't know that, you are more than likely a better person for it. Seeing a wandering swordsman from the Meiji Era put down one of the most irri-

tating characters in an anime ever holds a great joy to me.

So much that I can ignore the physics of anime power and just grin.

"Game ends?"

Having only the most basic inkling on how large this game was, I thought it was going by awfully fast in the beginning. Suddenly I found myself at the last world of the game and nearing the end. But after the credits rolled, the game kept going. The best part is that some time down the road, when I've finally found the last Koma, I will still be able to make custom decks to battle against friends in multiplayer.

The game flow leads me to believe that it used *Soul Calibur*'s Mission Mode as a guide for building a single player mode out of a fighting game. As the game progresses, goals are given that range from arbitrary to useful, the whole time asking the player to chase a carrot hanging from a stick - the carrot being that every goal met unlocks more characters to fight with. When you play the game and you're not interested in the carrot, you will see just what it is: busy work. But if you want the carrot, then as stick bobs in close enough for a nibble; you will taste how sweet it is.
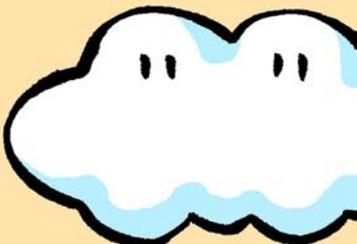
LIFE, NON WARP: DX

Super Mario Bros. 3
Tim Rogers
Art by Lestrade

    I got *Super Mario Bros. 3* for my eleventh birthday. It was a present from myself to myself. It was the best present anyone ever gave me.

    I had first played the game several months before. This was in the magic era before videogame release dates. The only indication we had that the game was even being released at all was the Fred Savage vehicle "The Wizard." That movie was about an autistic boy who wants to go to "California" for no distinct reason. His brother, noticing the autistic boy's amazing talent at *Ninja Gaiden*, decides to take him to Reno, Nevada, The Biggest Little City in the World, to win a videogame tournament that's going to amazingly include *SMB3*, which no one at the time had even known was in development. Without being told how to, without even the slightest indication that such a thing is possible, the autistic boy - "The Wizard" - obtains a raccoon tail and flies up over the wall of the

Mini Fortress in World One. He obtains a Warp Whistle. The fast-talking announcer is all over this event: "He's going to the WARP ZOOONE!!" It sounds like something out of the 1980s. This actually took place in that gray area between the 1980s and the 1990s, where everything sounded like it was the 1980s though really it was more of a sign of "things to come" in the 1990s.

    The Wizard wins the tournament, thanks to the Warp Whistle, which he had no right to know about in the first place.

    We were dumb back then, my two brothers and I. My little brother was only two; my big brother was twelve. I was ten. We only went to see "The Wizard" because the commercials (and *Nintendo Power*) promised to give us a "hot first look" at *SMB3*. We begged our parents to take us, and they took us. We got a free mini issue of *Nintendo Power* called "*Pocket Power*." I somehow managed to swipe five or six copies. When I sold all my videogame magazines to Frank Cifaldi of The Lost Levels, I included all of them. Hopefully he's done something about the

staples. That magazine contained an "exclusive first look" at the first *Dragon Warrior* game for the Nintendo Entertainment System, which I somehow already knew plenty about.

So we saw "The Wizard," and it got us all worked up about everything. The experience endowed me with a spirit that would see me writing and lying about videogames in the future. My *Killer 7* review on insertcredit.com, for example, lies about the game so fiercely as something of a throwback to "The Wizard," which features a scene in which the hip, cool older kid manages to actually *play* a videogame using Mattel's Power Glove. The game is Square's *Rad Racer*, a mercilessly flat racing game with very little competition. I suppose that's as good a game as any to test the Power Glove out on. It wasn't until E3 2005, to tell you the truth, that I was able to try a Power Glove on my own. The game was *Bubble Bobble* -my lord, it was a disaster. Recalling the kid in "The Wizard," who waved his hand around in front of the television and made hip facial expressions, I felt like a big silly oaf. All you're doing when you use the Power Glove is twitching your fingers and triggering buttons. Waving your arm only breaks your concentration and makes your hand sweaty.

So in the spirit of that kid, you can quote me on this - **I love the Power *Glove***.

When "The Wizard" got down to the point where the little boy won the Warp Whistle and went to the Warp Zone, no future man in the audience who played videogames could doubt that what he was seeing was true. This lent a kind of authority to the rest of the movie, in hindsight. When Fred Savage makes a big deal out of his little brother's score of 50,000 points in the first stage of *NG*, we wonder why we'd never noticed our own scores. In the same way, I imagine some kids with really rich parents were able to drag them over from the mall multiplex to Toys R Us and demand they spend $89.99 on a Power Glove.

The rest of us were merely scarred for life. Robbed of our childish hopes and dreams

to one day grow up to be a baseball player or a movie director, or even a lawyer, all we could think about for the next three months was *SMB3*. It had been the first videogame to be placed on the pedestal of a form of mass media that wasn't, you know, otherwise devoted to videogames. It occupied one hundred percent of the time I, personally, had previously used to daydream about things like food or sports or Chinese historical fiction. A game I'd never played, and I was that hypnotized by the mere thought of it. All I could do to satisfy my yearning was ask the dude at the local video store when the game was coming out. The place was a converted house called "Pop'n'Go Video," of the era before Blockbuster, with creaking plywood floorboards. He looked like the Comic Book Guy on *The Simpsons*, only with a black goatee. My mom knew him by first name. I didn't. My mom was the kind of person to make small talk with video store clerks she otherwise considered lowly, unwashed human beings. The big guy recommended movies sometimes, and sometimes my mom rented them, though she'd always moan and groan while she and my dad watched the movies, wondering what "that tubbo" had seen in such and such a movie. The tubbo might have called me a tubbo behind my back once or twice, and I can forgive him from here, because I was probably really annoying about it. Prior to my Shy Phase, I had an Annoying, Question-Asking Phase. This fat man must have really been irritated by me once or twice. I can understand why; I almost never said anything to him unless I had a question about when *SMB3* was coming out.

When the game finally came out, one Friday when snow-rain was doomed to fall on Rock Road in Wichita, Kansas, the fat man and his brothers (and bandmates; my brother seems to recall that they were in a garage metal band) were hunched over the television in the back room, jaws dropped, drooling, eyes bulging - all those things reviewers do on IGN.com when they get a hold of a preview copy of a new *Grand Theft Auto* or what have you. My mother

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asked if she could rent the game, and the guys said they were busy. She gave them a lecture. It was scary. We ended up with the game.

My brother and I had been playing it for ten minutes, gliding through the first couple of stages with the skills we'd honed since *Super Mario Bros.*, when my brother entered the first Mini Fortress and promptly imitated what he'd seen in "The Wizard." He got the raccoon power-up, he flew up and over the wall as Raccoon Luigi, and got the warp whistle. Next thing I knew, we were whisked away to World Four, the Giant World, the world the credits would reveal was properly named "Big Island." The first level had huge pipes and huge enemies. Little Mario was a good one-fourth the size of Huge Goomba. I felt heartbroken for a minute. I'd only been able to play World 1-1, 1-3, and die in 1-4 before suddenly being forced into 4-1. I felt like I didn't deserve the right to be there. I felt like I hadn't earned it. My older brother - who'd eventually give up videogames, take them up again when *Resident Evil* was released for PlayStation, and then give them up again before PlayStation2, only to pick them up again with *Halo* on Xbox - was possessed merely with the thought of getting to the most advanced world. He wanted to see his position in the game represented by the highest numbers possible. It merely made me feel cheated. I wanted to learn the game a stage at a time.

It was hard to rent the game. They had two copies, and they were both most certainly out, or promised to someone who'd signed their name on a list that spanned a dozen or so pages of a legal pad. If we'd had the cash to buy the game, we wouldn't have been able to find a copy. Life sucked for a few months. And then, suddenly, Nintendo, knowing they had a hit on their hands, unleashed a large shipment to the public. Around this time, miracles conspired and I received a check for $50 from my grandmother, on my birthday. Normally, she only sent $25, though I guess a part of her realized that she'd been spending a bit too much of her dead husband's fortune on the casinos in Atlantic City

and cruises around the Caribbean, so she threw me and my brothers a little extra. We all have birthdays in the month of June. I'm the 7th, my little brother Clint is the 8th, my big brother Roy is the 26th. I was born at 11:58 PM on June 7th, 1979. I remember my dad telling me the day after Clint was born, "You know, if you'd been born just two minutes later, you would have been born on Clint's birthday." Eight years old, I was, on that day, and I screwed up my face and replied, "No - if I'd been born two minutes later, *he*'d have been born on *my* birthday." I was that kind of kid. I guess that's why they never bought me presents. My grandmother, the type to offer me a dollar whenever the family car found its way to Newark, Delaware, perhaps because she never saw me and never knew me, found it easier to give. Little did she ever have the chance to learn -- her chain-smoking, condescending, throaty, utterly serious "Go buy yourself a Snickers, tubby" did more to make me than years of never receiving presents. My family had been kind of poor until around the time I turned eleven; having a baby brother with a birthday the day after yours has a way of acquainting your parents with statistical irony. They get all misty-eyed, and they declare that the child will have a better childhood than the other two children. I guess you could say I'm a little jealous. I guess you'd be right.

I thought to buy my copy of *Super Mario Bros 3* at a Children's Palace toy store by Town East Square Mall in Wichita, Kansas. A girl with braces told me they didn't have it. She looked at me like I was a kid. It occurs to me, now, that that's what I was. We finally found a copy of the game at a K-Mart. It was on layaway, and my mother screamed at some hapless redneck clerk until he gave us the game. We took some poor bastard's layaway.

My brother and I played the game every night until midnight, all summer. Having the Nintendo in the basement of a three-floor townhouse was a wonderful way to keep my parents ignorant. Sometimes my mom would find out we were up so late, and she'd get mad. She'd tell

us we had to wake up early the next morning for baseball practice. During the afternoons, my mother would leave Clint downstairs to watch us play. He always wanted to watch us play.

My mom's friend, one of our neighbors, had a son named Heath. Heath was studying computers at Wichita State University. He had a Casio keyboard, long fingers, long curly hair, long glasses. He worked the night shift as drive-thru guy at Spangles, a central US burger joint. I'm not sure if they're still around. My dad got promoted to major and we moved to Maryland in 1990. I haven't been back to Kansas since.

Heath used to come over and knock on our basement sliding glass door, and we'd let him in to play some *SMB3*. Deep in his studies, Heath had no doubt missed out on "The Wizard," and found *SMB3* as much a surprise as I'd found *Super Mario Bros*., back when our Indian neighbor Rohit had shown it to me for the first time. Rohit's dad later got a job as head of KGE's Wichita nuclear power plant, and they moved to a swanky development called "Tallgrass." Our videogame-related free rides ended.

Now we had people like Heath mooching off *our* NES collection. Sometimes he'd bring over *NG*, and we'd revel in watching him beat it in one life. We loved those long cut scenes between levels, though hell if we even read the words. We were just amazed - touched, more like it, as only children can be touched - that someone had gone through the effort to put dynamic scenes like that in a side-scrolling game. That's why we'd never noticed our scores; we were just racing through to get the cut-scenes. Heath, enamored of *SMB3*, bought his own copy, making it one of only three games he owned for his own NES, the others being *NG* and *Super Mario Bros / Duck Hunt*.

I remember a lesson Heath had once taught me with *Ultima* on his PC. He showed me how the game offered the player limited freedom. This was a rainy day, like many rainy days in Wichita, before *SMB3*. One of the options offered to *Ultima* characters was the option to attack any old townsperson. He attacked a little girl. His warrior had twelve hit points; the little girl had three. He slaughtered her, and was rewarded one gold. When the game screen returned to the town, the little girl had been replaced with a big, blocky, brawny, brown castle guard. He killed a young boy, then an old man. Soon, the entire town was full of castle guards. He attempted to engage one of them in pleasant conversation, only to result in a battle - his twelve-hit-point fighter against a three-hundred-hit-point castle guard. He was snuffed out quickly. I asked him why the game lets you kill innocent people, if you don't get anything out of it. He told me it does this as a means of teaching you a lesson. What lesson is it teaching you? I asked him. He laughed and said, if you have to ask that, you probably wouldn't get it.

On that rainy day, the courtyard between the townhouses at 202 N. Rock Road would turn a sickly shade of muddy brown, rise up to engulf all cement patios, and creep into all basements. The water level would rise up to Heath's high waist. I remember him unplugging the power strip when he sensed danger, and piling all the cords atop the television. I ran next door to move our Nintendo and our television, and when I got back to Heath's, he had his tower case on his shoulder.

I guess I kind of learned a sense of justice that day; from then on I didn't take baseball so seriously, and I allowed myself to sink more deeply into videogames than I'd ever really intended to. Maybe it was a bad thing, or maybe it was a good thing; it's not for me to say, because I'm still here right now, as a human being who is pleased by some things and upset by others.

One day, Heath treated us to free burgers at Spangles, further cementing his position as the coolest guy in the world. I always liked Spangles' burgers. The cheese was never fully melted. Now I'm a vegetarian, and I've been one for ten years. It feels creepy to talk about liking burgers. I'll admit I never liked the taste of meat. That partially-melted cheese was the icing on the cake for me, to mix food metaphors. (Actually, I hate cake icing, too.) Natural

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lighting, greenhouse-like seating. Me and Heath and Roy, fresh from seeing "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade" for the sixth time. This was the end of June. Ice in my Dr. Pepper. Heath and Roy and I had been training ourselves at *SMB3* for a couple of die-hard weeks. I spoke with weight:

"I want to beat the game, someday, without warping. You know, non-warp."

"Non-warp?" my brother asked skeptically. We'd seen Rohit perform non-warp feats of dexterity on *Super Mario Bros.*, though to imagine such a thing on *SMB3*, which we hadn't even beaten *with* warps yet - it was unthinkable.

Heath was nominated as the one to eventually beat it, first, non-warp. He had gotten better than my brother and I, most likely because he was the best and oldest gamer among the three of us. He could beat *NG* in one life, after all. He beat the game with the use of one warp, just to show us the ending. He collected lives and items in Worlds 1 through 3, and then warped from the beginning of World 4 to World 8. He used a Frog Suit to swim under the battleship. He used the P-Wing to ace the hardest airship level and the Jugem's Clouds to skip the only two stages, 8-1 and 8-2. He then toughed it through he last three challenges. We were amazed to see that beating Bowser required you to dodge him as he jumped and broke blocks. It was so non-confrontational, and brilliant.

One cloudy day in late July, Heath came over to attempt "the ultimate challenge." We'd been talking about it for weeks. He was to beat the game "non-warp." He was to beat every level. He was to do this without any 99-life tricks (picking up the odd extra life mushroom was not, in any way, forbidden). He was to do this on one continue.

He did it.

He used two controllers - alternating between Mario and Luigi. It took four hours. By the time he got to World 7, it was raining horribly outside. Just two days earlier, it had been 116 degrees. The patio door felt cold.

It was the most I'd ever been moved by

the end of a videogame. It scared the life out of me a few times. This game I'd known so well had so many nuances I'd never noticed, and so many things I'd been blatantly skipping, or else too inexperienced to see. Half of World 7, for example, I'd never seen until that day.

Heath had gone to the bathroom right before the World 7 airship. I was staring outside as my brother flipped through the *Nintendo Power Official* SMB3 *Strategy Guide*. He'd been serving as navigator for the mission. The rain stopped, and a B-1 Bomber streaked across the sky on a touch-and-go from McConnel Air Force Base. The B-1 had been the other big debut of the summer, and it shook the windows and shorted radios every once in a while.

I felt like crying, then. *SMB3* had made me cry for some stupid reasons. I cried when they didn't have it at Pop'n'Go one day after school, and my mother called me an idiot for crying. She said, "Grow up! So what if they don't have it? You can go play another *Mario* game."

That day when the rain stopped and a B-1 shook the basement glass door, I wanted to cry for a different reason. It was a reason of finality. Finality always brings about emotions. I think, when emotional movies end emotionally, we aren't moved so much by the particulars of the story as by the fact that the movie is ending. Or at least that's how I've always felt. That's almost how I felt on that day. Before Heath came back to finish what he'd started, I understood something quite simple, and childish. Is it not the case, however, that the childish things are often the most important? What happens to us in childhood shapes us as adults, to be sure. To look at it most obliquely, we can say, if we don't die in childhood, then we will no doubt be alive in adulthood. That's as direct and, at the same time, indirect as it can get. There couldn't have been anything more direct than what I realized that day:

Without fail, I will play this game for the rest of my life.

It meant I would never grow up.

I'm pretty good at *SMB3*.

I can beat it without warping. I've done this maybe twenty times in my life. Once I beat it without dying. I'd like to say I can beat it without being hit. That's not the case, though. Though I'm pretty sure I *can* beat it without being hit, I've never actually done it. Maybe I'll do it someday.

For the moment, as an "adult," I take a certain comfort in knowing that there are things I do not know about the game, little quirks I have not mastered or even awakened into a fully aware sense of being.

My mom asked me, when I was playing *Final Fantasy VI* on Super Nintendo, when I was seventeen, "Do you think you'll still play these videogames when you get older?" I wonder how much older she wanted me to get. I told her, "I don't think I'll ever stop." It was a quick, self-damning statement. I like making those, sometimes.

I haven't stopped, yet. Maybe I won't.

For all I know, some other game might have flicked the switch, some other game might have been the gateway, had *SMB3* never existed, had a certain Japanese woman bitten a certain Japanese man on the shoulder at a different instant, had another sperm won the race to the egg and Shigeru Miyamoto had been born a woman who'd grow up to teach home economics at a middle school.

Yet, I think about it a little more deeply, and it fills me with dread. I trust creative people to be creative, just as well as I trust that as long as men play baseball, deep into the future, we will always, *always* see significant records being broken every year. Yet, like international immigration authorities, who deny a man a visa unless he has twenty years' experience in his field or if he's been married for five minutes, I cannot doubt the nature of love. To doubt it makes me - at this point in my life - a useless human being. To imagine that what I had felt for *SMB3* had been less than love is to declare my entire childhood a failure.

I can *feel* the game on my fingertips. I can recall holding a Nintendo Entertainment System controller the proper way for *SMB3* - upside-down, turned vertically, covering the left-right rocker on the D-pad with the inner edge of my left thumb, the B-button with the tip of my right thumb (you *never* let go of that B-button, you hear?), and rocking the meat of my right thumb onto the A-button whenever jumps came up. With just a blink of my mind, no matter where I am, whether it's waiting in line at the post-office with a broken iPod and thus no music to entertain me, or sitting in an airport in Pusan, Korea on a day when snow piles ever higher than human knees, my hand gripped around a sweaty two-liter of Lemon-Lime Gatorade, I can turn the game on in my head and play it. I even, sometimes, make mistakes in my imaginary games. I was at an airport in Rome once, in a big plastic dome with a frozen cappuccino, headed back to London, when I first questioned: are the mistakes I make in the game in my head intentional? Is my brain throwing the mistakes into my fingertips so as to keep the fantasy real? The only way to test this is to play the game on a television. Television is where videogames take flesh and love becomes factual. With another flick of my mind, I can change the game to the Super Famicom *Super Mario Collection* version, which I actually like better. I like the tweaked inertia effects, and the controller layout - the run button is located above and to the left of the jump button, which is how I was used to holding the controller anyway.

Riding a bike on a highway, boarding a train into the Japanese mountains, again and again, I can imagine Mario running to the edge of a pit, grinding his heels to a stop, turning around, running back, turning again, running faster, and eventually taking flight. I can imagine hitting a P-switch, and turning a room full of blocks into coins, and then plunging into them, jump-

WORLD 1

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ing as Mario runs back and forth, squealing on his heels with each turnaround. I can feel the jumps multiplying - it was the era before the double-jump, and the sliding movement and the flutter of the feet lent an undeniable sincerity to everything. I can defeat the boss of World 1 in three seconds, noting his irregular patterns. When he tucks himself into his shell and flies up and off the screen, he drops his magic wand. I crouch, and jump toward it in a crouch. Mario catches the wand, and suddenly snaps up into standing posture, wand raised above his head. Every time I play a *real* videogame, and I develop some little tick not five minutes in to the first level, I mentally compare it to catching a magic wand while crouching in *SMB3*. It never adds up. Whenever I play a videogame - maybe a demo of the new *Naruto* platform-puncher for Nintendo DS, set up at a kiosk in Akihabara, alongside a girl, though the girl ribs me for being a "gamer" or a "big kid," I take no mind of her chiding, and only set about comparing the game to the *SMB3* I can play in my head. *SMB3* always wins.

For more than half my life, I've been playing *SMB3*. As I get older, that half will become two-thirds, and maybe three-quarters. The older I get, the greater portion of my life I'll have spent playing *SMB3*.

I've died more times than I can count. I've won more times than I can count. I've gotten three Starman panels and scored five extra lives as a stage-end bonus more times than I can count. I've jumped more times than I can count. I've flown more times than I can count. I've caught falling magic wands while crouched more times than I can count.

More times than I can count, I've played other games. More times than I can count, I've wished I were playing *SMB3*.

More times than I can count, I've wished I were somewhere that I wasn't. More times than I can count, I've wished I were doing something other than what I was doing.

My thoughts always tend to fall back on *SMB3*.

SMB3 is no mere gateway game. It is the road itself.

I developed a ritual. From my twelfth birthday on, I promised I would play *SMB3* non-warp, alone, on my birthday. I kept true to this promise. I wrote a story about this practice of mine, the high points of which I've recounted above, for fledgling website www.insertcredit.com. I got a lot of email and made a lot of friends because of that story. One of the friends, Doug Jones, who miraculously lived very close to where I was staying when that article was published, I came to regard a best friend. On my twenty-fourth birthday, I thought to invite Doug Jones over to my house to play the game with me. He was working until the late afternoon. I was at that phase in my life where I was questioning the childishness of the little rituals I'd set up for myself. I'd stopped eating meat because I hated pork and beef, yet I didn't mind chicken. On my twenty-fourth birthday, I wondered, why not eat chicken again? I never ate with a metal fork, either, back then, because I didn't like the taste of metal. On my twenty-fourth birthday, eating orange sherbet with a plastic spoon, I thought a lot of things were childish. I booted up my old Japanese Super Famicom and *Super Mario Collection*, and started a non-warp quest. Doug Jones came in at the end of World 7.

My twenty-third birthday *Mario 3* session had been distinctly imperfect. I died twice. The twenty-fourth birthday *Mario 3* was quite a disaster. I kept tripping up on Worlds 6 and 7. Luckily, I had plenty of extra lives - even without exploiting the infinite-Goomba-pipe in level 1-2, if you play to the end of World 6 without dying, using two controllers, you're going to have a good eighty lives between Mario and Luigi.

Age twenty-five... where was I? I'd boarded an airplane for Tokyo in Los Angeles on June 6th, swigged some NyQuil, and woke with a start in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. I looked down, in a dazed, hallucinating state, to see a red line drawn across the ocean between the June 6th and June 7th, a line between the past and the future. In the sky, there is no present.

I arrived at Ueno Station, penniless. My friend Marco was waiting for me with some money I'd wired to his bank account. We walked down to Akihabara, the wind being kind and the weather being mild, and we passed a kiosk at which an autistic man in a blue hooded sweatshirt was playing *SMB3* on a Famiclone, with its big meaty controller. The Famiclone was only 2,000 yen. It had a real, live, *Super Mario 3* cartridge sticking out of its top, clear packing tape holding it in place. His performance was angelic. He was fighting Bowser with a reserve of five lives, as Raccoon Mario. The guy must have gotten the whistles in 1-3 and the Mini Fortress, and then warped straight to World 8 with the Raccoon powers he'd earned in the Mini Fortress. He hadn't suffered a hit. He was slobbering all over himself, eyes narrowed behind gold-framed Coke-bottle glasses. He sidestepped Bowser like a kung-fu master. When he beat the game, he flicked the reset switch and started over.

I'd later come across the same autistic man, in the same blue hoodie, nearly a year later. I had a dreadful conversation with him. It scared me. I almost cried in front of the guy. I don't even remember the particulars of what either of us said. He told me he played the game at home every day, and that he could beat it in his head, and he thought about it at night, and if he ever saw it at a kiosk in the street, he'd play it.

I asked him what he thought about the Gameboy Advance version. I remember what he said: "It sucks. Mario's voice is noisy noisy noisy. And the buttons - suck!!" He meant the angle of the buttons - the Gameboy Advance's A button is situated right of the B Button, at a forty-five degree angle, which is a bastardization for any *SMB3* player: to hold B to dash while using A to jump requires you to somehow hold your right elbow at a forty-five degree angle up and to the right of your breastplate. You can dislocate your shoulder playing that thing on a crowded train.

I agreed with the guy. I thought, I'm going to mention him in something I write. I asked him, "Hey, which do you prefer, the Famicom version or the *Super Mario Collection* version?" He said, "The Famicom version." I asked him why, and he just bit his lip and shook his head furiously. That's when I felt like I'd asked a horrible question.

On my twenty-fifty birthday, I didn't imagine I'd ever talk to that guy, or even see him again. I was merely pleased to be back in Tokyo on a late spring day. It felt like the cherry blossoms should be blooming. That's how pleasant the weather was. I walked with Marco up to our favorite Skylark Gusto Family Restaurant, and ate potatoes and drank Coca-Cola - being asleep, I'd been consistently passed over for drink service on the flight - while talking about videogames and recent news. I told him about my trip to America. I gave him a present - a hideous "NINTENDO DS" T-shirt I'd received at E3 - and felt very tired. Later that night, I'd meet a woman in Ueno, the woman who I came to live with a year later, and have another potato-and-drink-bar experience. Then I'd trek down to Shinjuku to catch some of my punk-rock friends practicing in an expensive little basement. I'd then eat an apple pie at McDonalds. Then I'd meet a woman in front of the Don Quixote at the gates to Shinjuku Kabukicho. She'd offered to take me out for my birthday, though I'd just had three birthday meals, and didn't feel like another, despite the fact that none of them had filled me up in the slightest. What was most important was somehow starting a *SMB3* quest before midnight.

Well, this woman's idea of taking me out to dinner involved going to a refrigerated Circle K and buying me a 300-yen plastic tray of *zaru*

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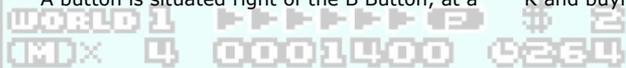
soba noodles and then taking me to a hotel. I wasn't complaining. I'd been doing this sort of thing with this girl for about six months at that point. When she showed up, fresh off work, at the Don Quixote at nine-thirty, I tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade her to invite me to her parents' house in Chiba, where I knew her brother had a Super Famicom with an extensive library that included *SMB3*. I didn't want to tell her, outright, that I looked pale and had an edgy attitude because I wanted to play *SMB3*. It would have felt stupid and cruel. This girl knew I loved videogames, and she didn't mind them, either. We'd played a lot of *Grand Theft Auto 3* together.

I guess you could say she was my girlfriend for a while. I never used that word to describe her, though I guess that's what she was. She had money and she bought things for me. She was a little older, and she was really serious about everything except me. I suppose I started going out with her because she was the first woman I met after breaking up with my girlfriend. I call her a woman because that's what she was. She used to reprimand me for not using polite speech with strangers at restaurants. She was otherwise very nice to me in quiet places. We went to a hotel with a big bottle of Coca-Cola, a bag of Doritos, and two trays of *soba*. She bought a can of beer at Family Mart, and we entered the first hotel with an overnight fee less than 8,000.

The place was perfect. All the other hotels we'd stayed in had been boring little places that smelled like cigarettes. None of what you hear about Japanese so-called "love hotels" is true, I'd always been tempted to write. Yet I never did write about it, because the subject is kind of boring, because the hotels themselves are boring. They are rectangular hollows with beds and purposes.

Well, this place was nice. There was a wall of mirrors on the right side of the bed, and a switcher on the headboard for turning on black lights, which revealed thousands of stars painted on the walls. The place came to life like

a planetarium. We enjoyed the atmosphere in silence for a few hours. When she was damp in a bathrobe after a shower (the shower room was separated from the bed by a two-way mirror that favored the bed-bound), she kissed me on the top of the head and said, "Happy birthday."

We sat in the Japanese-style living room, her looking over travel brochures to food tours of Taiwan, me cracking my chopsticks unluckily - I left a few splinters - grumbling, and sipping some Coke. She turned on the television, and they were talking about a little boy whose stepfather had buried him up to the neck in a garbage heap as punishment for not doing his homework. I studied the television with a dropped jaw for a moment.

It was a Sharp/Nintendo Hotel Model. Forged in 1994 by geniuses crafty enough to somehow fit true stereo sound into a television with one speaker on the left side of its casing. In the back, next to RF and A/V inputs, were two Super Famicom controller ports. In the top of the television, situated at a forty-five degree angle, was a ridge in the casing and a triumphantly askew Nintendo Super Famicom cartridge slot.

I had lusted after this television for, what, eight years? Whenever I look one up on Yahoo! Auctions, it's on one of those days when I feel like looking up things on the internet that I'm not going to be able to buy. The only time I ever found one for sale was the month after that birthday, during which I was still homeless, sipping frozen Fanta Orange at an electric-blue internet cafe in Shibuya with Marco. It was 70,000 yen. That's a little steep.

On the night I beheld the television in the hotel room, right before me, I was giddy for just a moment. I checked myself. How many times had I been in a hotel with this woman, only to discover on the way out that there had been a PlayStation2 sitting next to the television? One time I checked the PlayStation2; there were no controllers or games. The machine was there, obviously, for the benefit of people carrying games, or DVDs, and the PlayStation2 controllers to operate the machine. Or maybe you

had to ask the people at the front desk if they had the controllers, or what. I once asked the proprietor of a hotel - a funny old guy who was easy to talk to - why there were PS2s in every room, according to the sign. He shrugged. "All the other hotels in the area have them." I asked, "Why do *they* have them, though?"

"Maybe because they're better than Xbox?" He cackled.

That's a true story.

I opened the drawer beneath the television, and let out a gasp.

"What are you doing?"

I pulled out two controllers - the Hotel Model's controllers have four-meter cords, and are exceptionally rare. I plugged one of them in, and rumbled through the selection of raw cartridges. I found what I was looking for - *Super Mario Collection*, with the name of the hotel written across the back label in black permanent marker. The name of the hotel was in English, and misspelled.

"Oh my god . . . " I whispered.

I jammed the game into the top of the television, and flipped the switch. The Hotel Model is ingenious enough to automatically switch the television to the input channel when you turn on the Super Famicom power.

In a minute, I was starting up a new, two-player quest, and sitting next to the woman with my legs under the low table. I put one controller atop her magazine. She snorted at it. "You can play by yourself," she said. I think it was the only time I ever made any kind of affectionate gesture at her that could be recounted in a rated-R-or-less movie.

Two hours later, playing deliberately slowly, it was past one in the morning. I was on World 6. I was transfixed. The sound was up terribly high. I had to go to the bathroom very badly. Between stages I sipped the Coke and bided my time. I play Mario and Luigi. The brothers marched toward the final world. Mario took on the tank at the beginning of World 8, dressed in a Hammer Suit. When had I put him in a Hammer Suit? I wondered. Oh, that's right - the

one time in World 6, where they give you a free Hammer Suit during a stage.

That meant I hadn't been hit.

Luigi hadn't been hit either. He still wore a Tanooki suit from World 4. Though I wanted Mario to kill Bowser with his hammers, I didn't want to spoil the perfect game by intention-ally killing Luigi. What's more, some part of me still harbored the childish dream that the game would explicitly stand up and reward me for beating it pristinely. I was doing a "she loves me, she loves me not" in my head as I counted off the final stages, wondering whether Luigi or Mario would be the one to step into Bowser's castle.

It was Luigi. He did admirably.

The woman had not moved from my side. The page of her brochure had not been flipped.

"That was wonderful," she said, smiling. She had one crooked tooth. To say which one it was would be to say too much. She put her head on my shoulder.

The next morning, when I woke up, we had sex again. She told me, "Welcome back to Japan." We went outside, and got lost. We didn't remember how we'd gotten to the hotel. We ended up at the crossroads housing the famed "Gates of Kabukicho." Six in the morning; that place hit the eyes like a box of fresh crayons. I was homeless, the morning after accomplishing something I'd only dreamed about accomplish-ing as a child.

I remembered something my dad had told me long ago, about baseball. He spoke this as a US Army soldier who had never been sent to war, the son of a man who had fought the Japanese in World War II, and the grandson of a man who had fought the Germans in World War I:

"In this world, there is no glory, only the glory we make in the context of games."

I recalled the question, from a while before: were the mistakes I made in the game, in my head, merely details I'd invented to make the experience seem more real? I had my answer, as the woman hurried to get on the subway and head to work, not looking back at me, though I waved. Of course they were. In my head, the game has every right and every rhyme and every reason to be utterly perfect. That it wasn't perfect was merely my own means of compensating for my own flaws as a human being, knowing that to have no flaws would be to be told a lie.

I saw that woman a few more times as we gradually drifted apart. I ended up somewhere else, with another woman, and now I have another girlfriend still. I'm neither good nor bad with women. I create conflicts because to not do so would make things too boring. To me, everything has to be a game, and every game has to be *SMB3*. I catch my magic wands while jumping while crouched, and if anyone thinks that's childish, it's like they're disputing the fact that water is wet and the sky is sometimes blue.

I'll admit, I have some problems deal-ing with people. Sometimes, when I don't like the look or sound of people, I lie to them, and sometimes they get their feelings hurt. If I apologized for that, I'd be hurting myself, so I won't apologize. I'll just say I'm sorry. This habit isn't so bad, and it's hardly noticeable when I'm alone, or when I'm playing *SMB3.*

She emailed me one night in September, during Tokyo Game Show, when I was deathly ill with an ear infection and had to sleep sitting up. She said, "I saw you on Tokyo Broadcasting System interviewing [Kazunori Yamauchi,] the producer of the *Gran Turismo* games. I liked what he said about the helicopter in *Choplifter*. Your hair was *perfect*." I replied with "Oh yeah?" It was meant to prompt her for more. She never gave me more. God, it's been almost a year now, and she never gave me more.

Would the game continue? Did I have any reason to play *SMB3* ever again? I couldn't tell.

My birthday drew near without ceremony. I was now many kilometers removed from the house I'd set up for myself in Itabashi, perched over a highway ramp on Nakasendo that marked a place where Miyamoto Musashi once crossed a river, and staying in a little square room in a small-sized four-story apartment building overlooking a street where Miyamoto Musashi had once killed a bandit by throwing a golden coin at the back of his head. Wherever I go in this world, wherever I decide to hang my jacket, it seems a far greater man has already been there, and done far greater things.

I fell ill under a kidney infection weeks before E3. With a fever of 106 degrees, I almost died, twice. I went to the hospital and received (expensive) emergency treatment. I was told to keep my activity to a minimum, and then got winked at by an elderly nurse. I went to America, where my appetite was dreadful and pathetic, and then returned to Japan, triumphing at the immigration checkpoint, only to fall violently ill the day before my birthday. I had planned a get-together with some of my friends for my birthday. I'd imagined we'd get together and eat a curry buffet in Shibuya. It was my birthday, my twenty-sixth, which marked the beginning of my "late twenties." Just four years ago, I reasoned, I was in Rome feeling despondent about love. Now, I am here, engaged in a long series of interviews for a trivial job position at a law firm, and seriously trying to run a rock band. Who knows what I'll be in four years, aside from thirty years old? I can't think of myself as that old. The first time I ever asked my mom how old she was, she replied, "Twenty-nine." I suppose I could wonder, here, how old I was when I asked her, though I honestly don't remember. There used to be a time when I remembered everything. Now I only remember *SMB3*.

On June 6th, the eve of my birthday, I figured it out. I'd drop in on Kevin, my drummer, who was living in the house that had been mine until that fateful night a jar of bean dip arrived from my brother Roy in Indiana and tore us all apart, exposing the seams of our allegiances, forcing me to take flight. (Bean dip is a big deal here, and it was an exceptional brand. A Frito-Lay brand, even.) Kevin had a top-loading Famicom with a semi-working Disk System. The Disk System didn't interest me - I just wanted to play his *SMB3* cartridge. Kevin had a week off school, so I'd gladly play a little with him, maybe even a two-player game. I'd already completed the ultimate goal as regarded my aspirations with that game. I might as well keep playing it. I've been playing it too long to quit.

I emailed Kevin about the idea, and he said he was leaving for Kamakura early in the morning to look at temples he'd been neglecting to look at until then. I revised my plan, and decided I'd do it like this - with a little flair for the dramatic: hours before the curry party, I'd go down to that Famiclone kiosk at that crappy little duty-free electronics shop in Akihabara, and beat *SMB3* standing up, non-warp, on that 2,000-yen Famiclone.

It was perfect. I'd passed the stage where I can beat the game without getting hit, and now I'd hone my skills, like Heath's friend from one of his computer classes, who could totally beat *NG* without looking at the screen. I wouldn't try to beat the game without looking at the screen, yet - for now, I'd just try to beat it standing up, with a terrible controller.

I fell violently ill in the middle of the night, and got up violently ill in the morning. I was vomiting base and shitting acid. I called off the curry party. I rolled over in my futon and stared at the wooden ceiling. I was thinking of *SMB3*, and wishing I would sweat, anything to break this fever. I slept the sleep of the long-dead for five more hours and woke up pissing popcorn butter. I was dehydrated. I drank a big tall ice-cold pitcher of barley tea and sat on the futon. My head was still swirling. I checked my temperature - it was only 102. I looked over the videogames I had, with a sigh. The two newest titles were *Killer7* and *Namco X Capcom*.

I played *Killer7*. In my very ill state, it didn't make any sense. It hurt my head. It's

a videogame that regards itself highly. It has characters designed carefully and a completely idiotic story thrown together in such a psuedo-random fashion that one might mistake it for artistic. In it, the intertia of natural gameplay has been stripped out, and all we do is aim a gun at zombies. There's no joy of running and changing direction, sliding on your heels. You move by pressing a button, and change your course by choosing an item on a menu. It is bloody and disturbing, and though it looks exactly as the producer must have wanted it to, I can't help getting the impression that if I had to pick one game to play my birthday, I'd rather play *SMB3*.

I beat the first stage, save, and turn on *Namco X Capcom*. That one, I played for two hours.

Namco X Capcom's box indicates in a lovely fashion that it belongs to the "other" genre. With a battle system like *Final Fantasy Tactics* meets *Xenogears*, remixed music that punctuates *Street Fighter II* themes in all the right places (seriously the best mixes I've heard of *Street Fighter* music), excellent, exuberant sound effects and voices, and a story that begins with two special police officers in the year 20XX getting caught in a confused crossfire between Chun-li chasing Cammy's flunkies and Shion Uzuki and KOS-MOS chasing the Gnosis aliens from Xenosaga to Hachikou Crossing in Shibuya - well, it's kind of idiotic. To think that M. Bison's Shadowloo forces could be conspiring, across the galaxy and over many millennia, with the Gnosis aliens! How this comes to include Arthur from *Ghouls 'n' Ghosts* fighting against Dmitri Maximoff from *Darkstalkers* in a graveyard, I will not reveal.

Every spring here in Tokyo, when the cherry blossoms bloom, and they only bloom for a limited time, company offices and gatherings of friends and relatives alike have parties in major parks. These parties are called "Hanami." "Hanami" means "flower-viewing." You're not really viewing the flowers, however; you're merely gathered, with the good excuse that flowers which bloom once a year will be all dead in just a week's time, drinking as much as possible in the presence of people you either haven't seen since last year or won't relax with in such a fashion until next year. Though you may be a man cheating on your girlfriend with a secretary in your office, and though your girlfriend, who works in another office, might be in Ueno Park on the same night at a hanami of her own, the fact stands that there are just too many people around, too much general chaos for anyone to notice if you kiss that secretary right there, or even if you punch your boss. Yes, the hanami is often called the "one time of the year when you can punch your boss." None of this is the point of the hanami, however - not the floral tragedy of the crisp-aired evening, not the secretary's lipstick on your collar, not the drinking, not the boss-punching - the point is that it is this jumble of loopy chaos, no matter how the motives and the paths one may take are always clear: drink that beer, eat that croquette, watch that screaming guy with the guitar when he waltzes in front of your party, laugh appropriately when so-and-so throws up on such-and-such. After two hours' experience playing it, I was able to declare *Namco X Capcom* the videogame equivalent of a hanami.

Yet, hours later, deep into the night, I felt broken and bruised. None of the playing fields in the game had any terrain. The characters - I... didn't like any of them. That's the most important point of this entire piece: **taken out of the contexts of the individual games that made them famous enough to remember in the first place, none of these characters were people I wanted to invite to my birthday party.** I felt tricked by so many things, inside and out, and delirious, as my fever broke and I let loose a torrent of sweat all over my blanket, I felt very stupid and insignificant and used, like Miyamoto Musashi felt every night when he laid in bed with his sword thinking about the path of the warrior. Only - what did I have to similarly aspire to? I decided many years ago that my only goal was to grow up to be a great man,

through whatever means necessary. Go ahead and laugh if you want - that's what I wanted. I wanted to grow up into a fine man, and give the world something no one could deny, preferably some act of virtuoso performance of something. Have you ever felt like that? Tell me you have, please.

The thing is, everyone has to feel like that, at some point, or they're not what Musashi called a "real human being." I've believed this since before I was conceived. If you do not aspire to give the world something it cannot deny, then you are false, as false as the word we use to describe a banana is when you compare it to a banana. There is still peace in this existence; there is less peace in mine. I feel terrible, and sometimes I want to blame videogames.

Last night, for example, while I sat on my straw mat in my kimono pondering the Way of the Warrior (that's a euphemism for . . . I don't *know* what, actually), two cars collided with a loud crunch in the middle of the Senzoku. The Senzoku, the street of a Thousand Prom-ises, makes up the eastern side of the square kilometer that is the Yoshiwara, Tokyo's oldest and most celebrated sex district. Meiji-Doori, Tokyo's main thoroughfare, runs parallel to the Senzoku, just two blocks away. The wind cars kick up brings a marine sound to these windows. The sultry air is stirred up, creating a miracle named a cool breeze. Two cars banged together, and one man got out of one car screaming. "You won't get away that easily!!" There was then the sound of a gunshot, and a woman's scream. The woman continued screaming for five seconds, during which I went over the gunshot using my amateur drummer's rhythmical hindsight, and realized there were actually four gunshots, not one, and that they sounded much more like guns in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* than guns in *Vice City.*

I felt really stupid for making the compari-son, though not as stupid as I did for playing *Namco X Capcom*. Klonoa, for example - what the hell is he? A rabbit-thing with a little Pac-Man badge on his hat. He can flap his ears

like wings to float between platforms, because the designers of his first (and last) hit game needed something to elevate it above a typical two-dimensional platform game. Putting Klonoa alongside boredom-makers like Taki from *Soul Calibur*, Chun Li from *Street Fighter* (with those bowling-pin legs), and Shion Uzuki from *Xenosaga* (for God's sake) does little more than reveal that these characters are not interesting, and that putting them in a game where they all control pretty much the same way (jag buttons to make them pull off combos in the context of a flat strategic battle), puffed up with a story about as ridiculous to the common gamer as the idea of controlling a 2nd-century Chinese mili-tary battle on your television must have seemed to old Japanese men in 1982, and you get the most mysterious videogame perhaps ever made.

In *Namco X Capcom*, it is trusted that we love Namco and Capcom games enough to love their characters, and that we love the characters enough to see them doing stupid things with paper-thin context.

It is *Akihabara the Videogame*, is what it is. You know what Akihabara is to the common otaku? It's like the girl character in a cartoon about a young boy. The girl is the same age as the young boy protagonist, yet she looks so much taller, and meaner. She hates the young boy, even though she really loves him. She'll never show the love, only the hate. And the boy is so confused about why the girl hates him that he loves her back.

This is how Akihabara makes money: it tells the boys what they love, and cute girls put these things in boys' hands and ask them for money.

What, really, is the joy a man feels when he holds a plastic *Gundam* model? There's a certain solidity to the plastic, to be sure. If a man had never seen a Gundam anime, or heard the very word "Gundam," would he care about the model in his hands? Maybe. There are things about the Gundam's design - white, with pleas-ing and sparing use of red and yellow and blue - that could excite a person who is excited by

simple yet rich design. Could a man grow to love *Gundam* because of a run-in with a *Gundam* model? Perhaps.

Now, could a child grow to love *Super Mario* videogames because of a little plastic figurine of Super Mario? I wager that he could not. I wager that it just plain isn't possible.

I love *SMB3* because of its nature of a videogame. I love it because of the care that evidently went into the placement of every bouncing enemy, moving platform, and bottomless pit. I love it because of the progression of its challenge. I love it because of the way it moves, not because of the way it looks while standing still. The producers of the movie "The Wizard" knew *SMB3*'s virtues extended as far as the way it played and moved.

Mario himself, I couldn't care less about. He's little. He's chubby. He's got that stupid hat and those stupid overalls. Sure, we're told he has the hat because he had the hat in *Donkey Kong* and he had the hat in *Donkey Kong* because they couldn't afford to animate his hair. He has white gloves because otherwise he hands wouldn't show up; he has suspenders because it makes it look like his arms are moving. Mario is a character that evolved into a Mickey-Mouse-y work of modern art from a single tiny sprite. That he remained unchanged from *Donkey Kong* until his latest appearance, in *Dance Dance Revolution Starring Mario*, is something we can attribute to either his owners' sense of pride in the character or their refusal to make anything different. Nintendo has created and owned many brands in the past two decades. It has, at every opportunity, refused to not use something it owns (unless that something is *Kid Icarus*, though come on, let's stop kidding ourselves and forget about that one).

Why do I feel this sudden animosity about Mario? Maybe it's his current overpresence. In *Mario DDR* and *Mario Baseball*, as well as *Mario Tennis* and *Mario Golf* and *Mario Party*, we have opportunities to look at a three-dimensional, cleanly shaded Super Mario doing things like swinging golf clubs or tennis rackets, or running on a treadmill as a means of entertaining party guests. It's tacky. It's not cute. And yet I know why it's being done. By giving Mario a golf club and putting Camelot software in charge, we end up with a capable team of golf-game-makers making a golf game starring Mario, which will sell because it stars Mario. The games themselves would be good even without Mario, which is crucial (except that new Gamecube *Mario Tennis* game, which is a cheating son of a bitch): Mario is merely the wallpaper to assure people's purchase. In the case of *Mario Baseball*, which is made by the Namco team that handles the *Family Stadium Baseball* series, the Mario characters are used to replace the series' blander, trivial, generic characters. Anyone who would love the *Family Stadium* games despite their dead-boring bobble-headed players would embrace *Mario Baseball*.

Yet, what is Nintendo trying to do with Mario? What is he, to them? Is he a character? Or is he a brand? Or is he both?

As a brand, he will never be as popular as Mickey Mouse. Mickey Mouse has cursed world thought for close to a century. It was rumored, back in the 1980s, that more kids recognized Super Mario than recognized Mickey Mouse. I think this has something to do with the videogames. The kids only knew Mario because they played the videogames. It was Nintendo of America that took the first steps down the path to the dark side with *Super Mario Bros. 2*; called "*Doki Doki Panic*" in Japan, it originally starred Arabian-nights-looking characters. It was designed by Shigeru Miyamoto and had an altogether bouncy enough vibe. So they added Mario characters - Mario, Luigi, the Princess, and Toad - and made them all look so bright and delightful that it could not be denied that this was a Mario game. *SMB3* was a Mario game as well, and by the time Mario's green dinosaur pal Yoshi was introduced in *Super Mario World*, Mario's stardom was essentially over. Sure, he set the world on fire with *Super Mario 64*, though the conceptual gusto of that game is, even now, rated higher than its execution. It is programmed

tenaciously, though maybe not executed as well as it could have been. The world is still learning to deal with the third dimension.

Mario debuted as a videogame character in a videogame released to a world that had already played videogames. For Mario's games to be as successful as they were required them to first reshape people's perceptions of videogames, which they did. Nintendo's president Hiroshi Yamauchi must have thought this mere luck, because he refuses to pay Shigeru Miyamoto more than a secretary's salary even today.

It was no small feat, what Miyamoto did. He looked at a medium that had been stagnating in games starring unlovable - sometimes despicable - characters engaged in one-screen labyrinth-like or straight shooting affairs, and birthed a genre that scrolled and moved. Mickey had the good grace to be crunching on new snow with his debut. With "Steamboat Willie," he created the perceptions of the people who witnessed talking cartoon animation. Mickey also happens to be a mouse, and a rather harmless-looking one. He was able to grow up and evolve, looking rather the same throughout the decades, and he's never actually *done* anything actively in a motion picture, and supposedly that's why people love him. Mario, though - little, short, fat, Italian porn star Mario, has this years-spanning platonic relationship with the tall, blonde Princess Peach. And he also has that . . . mustache.

I remember when I was six, and my dad gave me sound advice. I think it had something to do with his divorce, and his beer:

"Son - don't ever trust a lawyer with a mustache."

Two years later, I noted the weatherman on television, and said, "Dad, is it okay to trust a weatherman with a mustache?"

He was drinking a cup of coffee, before bed. He always drinks a cup of coffee before bed.

"No. Don't trust a weatherman with a mustache, either. Especially not that one." He went on to explain that the man's habit of shaving the top mustache so it stood artificially apart from the bottom of his nose made him look like "a filthy liar."

Super Mario has a mustache, and it was because of this, maybe, once I started to think about it every once in a while, that he seemed so far away from me, so real yet so fake at the same time. This mustached little chubby guy had to surmount incredible obstacles worthy of the real men my dad had told me about, men like Patton and MacArthur, only he was doing it to save a woman, which made him, well - what did it make him? A man who saves women? The princess is hardly the goal of the game. The goal of the game, to the focused, pre-pubescent boy, was merely to proceed, and to win, warps be damned.

Yet the mustache is a target of confusion. All it did to us, the pre-pubescent of the world, was identify Mario as older than us. He was like a big brother. He had a mustache - that *definitely* meant he had pubes, and that might means he's already had *sex*, we once mused on the playground, in those cautious weeks leading up to the mysterious release of *SMB3*. There was always that kid who claimed he had the game already, and that Mario and the Princess get married at the end, which *totally* means they're going to *bone*, like you know all those Disney princesses and princes do in the Disney movies.

This kid was, of course, a filthy liar. He probably grew up to grow a mustache.

And now there's me, at age twenty-six, and I can finally grow a mustache. I guess I'm about Mario's age when he set off to rescue Princess Peach the first time; thinking about his quest in such basic, self-serving terms makes me feel kind of stupid. I wonder for a second, who thinks about the stories in these games? Not the

children who play them.

Summer has come in full force, temperatures of more than 36 degrees Celsius are not uncommon for the middle of the night in Tokyo, and reasonable adults in their mid-thirties with unreasonable children in their upper single-digits are inspired to run around in the dead of the afternoon, boarding a train, getting off at the next station, running down the stairs and out of the station, exiting the turnstile, waiting in line, sweaty, running back in through the turnstile, running up the stairs, knocking people over while doing so, scrambling to board the train headed in the direction they were going previously, and then getting off at the next station and repeating the whole process. What, exactly, is the reason for this strange behavior?

Well, quite simply, it's *Pokemon*. The contest has a Japanese name. That name is stupid and long and impenetrable to dictionaries, outside of the words "Stamp Rally." I call it the "*Pokemon* Super Catch-Em All Explosion Madness Wacky Heat Stamp Rally 2005." The rules of the contest are simple: armed with one shiny paper leaflet per person (as per contest rules, each person can only fill out one sheet; normally the parents each carry one to humor the children), run to a kiosk outside each station in the greater Tokyo area and receive a stamp (bearing the mark of a specific Pokemon) proving that you went to that station. Fill up the leaflet with stamps and send it in for a chance (a *chance*!) to win a plastic "Pikachu" teacup or a blue baseball cap with the new *Pokemon* movie's star embroidered on its front.

This has been going on for eight years now.

Every year, on that first weekend in August, the hottest weekend of the year, parents and kids run, get stamps, run, ride trains, get stamps, run some more, and get more stamps. There's very little love to it; a cynical friend says it resembles leveling up your Pokemon in its tedium. Except the kids are really getting out of the house - to do *what*, though? I could see if the prizes were great, or if the family members were paying for individual train tickets, though

hell, they're just running on an all day pass, and it's not like they're *visiting* these towns they'd otherwise never have a reason to visit. They spend 98% of the day, usually, yes, the hottest day of each year, crammed in a train with other teacup-winning hopefuls and bumping into a guy trying to mind his own business, tapping his fingers together mysteriously on his way to a rock show.

I suppose you could say that the contest encourages young kids to learn about the train system, and remember facts about which lines run through which stations. I can't help feeling that trivial knowledge is trivial knowledge; numerous train simulator games point to the fact that Japanese people sometimes go nuts over train system trivia (more than 600 stations, in this city, here), though at the end of the day, what does it matter if a kid remembers how long it takes the Keiyo Express to get to Maihama, or if he remembers how many levels it takes Myu to learn Confusion? Is this the best way to train kids to enter middle school? Kids in Japan grow up obsessed with either Pokemon or trains; the ones who choose Pokemon as their gateway to the future end up bitter, hardcore gamers who collect shoot-em-up arcade boards. The ones who choose trains collect train simulators, get a job driving trains, or just descend into an inescapable pit of weirdoism.

What the yearly Pokemon Win-A-Teacup Hell Marathon should enlighten us all about, above all else, is that though *you* might be getting bored of Pokemon, the kids who were born the year the first Pokemon was released are still in elementary school, and they *sure* aren't bored of *Pokemon* yet. Nintendo might be losing the older fans; however, as people continue to meet in bars or company parties, fall in love, and have accidents (condoms are about two hundred yen each, and all other contraceptives are dead taboo), Nintendo's got a steady stream of customers coming down the tube.

I was in Odaiba, Tokyo's biggest tourist trap, the other day, armed only with a pair of drumsticks, seeing a large man about a bass

guitar. He had a wife (who time later revealed to be gorgeous) and quite possessive of her two little children (not that I tried to take them from her or anything). They had spent the day at the *Shonen Jump One Piece* Pirate Ship Museum out on the harbor. The tickets had been about twenty-five dollars each, though only twenty-two for the little one, because he was under three. I thought about this, and I thought about what Nintendo's doing with *Pokemon*, and I figured it's as good a business as any, appealing to kids. I mean, isn't that how they got me, by appealing to me as a kid? Besides, *Pokemon* games are good. I can say this despite the fact that I don't play them at all anymore.

Hideo Kojima joked to me that he'd like to set *Metal Gear Solid 4* on Odaiba Island, overrun with terrorists. He thinks that'd liven things up. What's wrong with Odaiba, that it needs livening up? Well, semantics have spoiled it. For a decade or so, it's been called a haven for couples on dates. Now many of the couples wooed by Odaiba's charms are grown up. Some of them even live there. Most of them have two or three children. The clothing boutiques' monopoly over the shopping mall has waned, and now the retail space concentrates mostly on things concerning the children that the women, now turned mothers, find themselves wheeling around everywhere.

I was shocked, while eating a gelato, at the number of women who looked like girls who were leading children that looked like babies.

Many of them were holding a Nintendo DS. The giant, spacious *Shonen Jump* Official Goods Shop required a ten-minute wait at noon. The kids who stormed in and bought *One Piece* plush key holders even though they had no keys were too young to realize *One Piece* is brain dead and continues only because you aren't old enough to tell it to stop. (Really, *Naruto* is like a hundred times better.)

Maybe I'm being mean, though? My distaste for the new cool in pop culture might stem from my own deeply rooted love in *SMB3*. Maybe, sometimes, really, I feel a little wasted in the path I took through life. Every man has this right to consider himself a failure, and if so considering inspires him to continue striving to be a great man, he has even more of a right to do that.

Maybe, I'm bitter. The game made me, partially, into who I am today. I never take the time to thank it for that. Whenever I think of thanking it, I think of Mario's mustache, and I freeze up.

I haven't played it in a year, now, though I'm guessing I'll play it again when the time comes. The time is always coming.

Could I have foreseen this night, years ago, where I'd be staring out at Tokyo by myself, pleasantly warm, thinking of *SMB3*? I suppose I always could have taken a warp zone ahead. You know, just to get a peek. I promise I'd have reset it right after.

Misters and Miss...

Across

1. A gathering of geeks
4. It comes before 51
8. Hacker Mitnick
13. Year, to Street Fighter's Vega
14. Alien race in Forbidden Planet
15. Like the ocean
16. Like most games reviewed by Seanbaby
18. Mythological trickster
19. Aztec-themed puzzle game
20. Where a gamer puts his quarter
22. Like 54-Down's Kate
26. Mario's is big and round
27. "Get your _____ gear!"
29. Falls off a platform, perhaps
33. Diego _____ (from a small British territory)
35. Wall-dwelling Deadly Rooms of Death monster
36. When the next iss. of The Gamer's Quarter comes out
37. Interactive fiction by Emily Short
41. Structured computer language
42. First arcade game to use a 32-bit processor
44. What 1-, 8-, 18-, 33-, 51-, 60-, 68-, and 70-Across
46. It comes before 51
47. Gizmo, for example
49. Comic-book artist Johnson
51. Website of Herr Carsten Sulzmann
54. Like the investigative force that discovered Gillian Seed
58. Cube creator Rubik
60. Sci-fi author of Fahrenheit 666
61. Visible to the player
65. Negatively charged particles
66. Salvatore Leone, Johnny Sindacco, and Sonny Forelli
67. Rockstar North, before 2002
68. Scheming Lady of 48-Down
69. Makes a move in "Monkey Kombat"
70. Master ranking of Go or martial arts
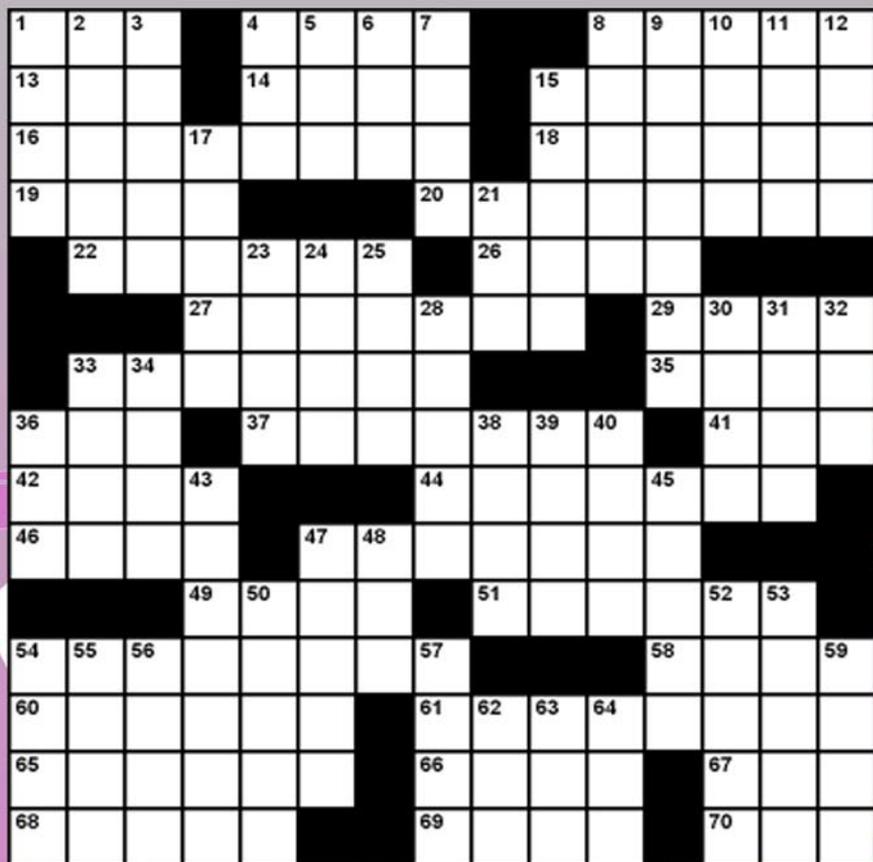
By: Tony Delgado

Down

1. Mad _____
2. Green mushroom, for example
3. Straw-wielding Tales of Legendia character
4. _____ or Die
5. City-dwelling Sim
6. Keyboard key
7. Hero of Arc the Lad III
8. Unstable subatomic particles
9. Champs-_____ (DOA Extreme Beach Volleyball bikini
10. Antique string instrument
11. Really enjoying
12. Term that refers to the Japanese youth opposed to the salaryman's work ethic
15. Orphen: _____ of Sorcery
17. Resource in many stealth games
21. Only game from Bungie West
23. Org. featured in Cold Fear
24. Japan setting
25. Author Stephenson
28. Solid character?
30. Rise up, like Epona
31. Spot on a roulette wheel
32. One from Libidinex costs ten thousand simoleons
33. It could be guilty or metal
34. Animal Crossing unit
36. Dirk Gently monogram
38. Batman animator Bruce
39. Neil's counterpart in Mario Golf: Advance Tour
40. Sister of Nero Landale
43. It could make your computer cooler, in more ways than one
45. Energy-reflecting robot from Dr. Wily's Revenge
47. Makes progress
48. Rapper playing Stake in Getting Up
50. Character played by rapper Talib Kweli in Getting Up
52. _____ vs. Death
53. What Gotham City needs (according to The Joker)
54. Common quotation attrib.
55. Org. that once comprised only Jon Postel
56. True last name of Lady Lumiya
57. Network terminal
59. Librarian in Serious Sam II
62. Game co. in Grossostheim, Germany
63. Capcom competitor?

untold tales of the arcade: taito think tank

A Look Into Old and Obscure Arcade Games
Francesco-Alessio Ursini

I've played a lot of arcade games in my life. Most of them have been Taito games.

Ah, Taito. They created a shortage of 100-yen pieces in 1978 with Space Invaders, but times have changed and they have since moved out of the arcade market for good with the exception of the occasional dedicated machine [1]. Shortly after a group of former programmers, who had worked on *Raystorm* and *G.Darius*, decided to make their own company, G.Rev. But that's another story - this is an homage to Taito. The second volume of their Taito Legends compilations for the Playstation 2 is due at the time of this writing, and many great games will be reprinted again, so let's celebrate and promulgate the superbness of their magnificent and glorious titles!

Maybe I'm overstating things. But, well, it's "The Taito think-tank," not the "objective evaluation of Taito games," so you're supposed to take all of my comments *cum grano salis* [2]. And maybe not. That's something you will discover by playing the games yourselves.

Let's start the celebration!

PART 1 – THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF OUR JOURNEY

[1] Recently *Zoids: infinity* in 1998
[2] Latin for "With a Grain of Salt"

There is one thing that can be said about Taito that should be enough to make them win. What they'll win, I don't know, but it will make them the winners, ok?

That thing is this: Taito are the makers of *Bubble Bobble*.

Yes, the two bubble dragons, Bub and Bob, are the genial creation of Taito designers, inspired by (unless I'm mistaken) the genial intuition of designers V.A.P. and Peacock, to be exact. The basic idea behind the game is pure genius: shoot bubbles from your mouth (with a hilarious animation) and capture your enemies in them. And after that? Hit the bubbles with your horns, of course!

If you never played this title in an arcade, you should seriously question the purpose of your life. Don't finish reading this article - go outside, find a place with a Diamond cab (or whatever they're called) and check if it contains *Bubble Bobble*.

Bubble Bobble is pure bliss.

While some score mechanics work better in the sequel, *Rainbow Islands*, *Bubble Bobble* is still one of the most elegant and complex engines ever. Surprised? You shouldn't be, as the '80s had one genre as its supreme ruler, as far as score-fests went: the platformer. I have already covered another masterpiece, *Psychic* 5, in Untold Tales' first installment. *Bubble Bobble* came a year earlier, and shared the same philosophy about scoring: lots of secrets, big rewards for one-life performances, and a killer rhythm.

Actually, *Bubble Bobble* is from the older generation of platformers - no scrolling, one screen full of enemies, destroy them all and go to next stage, etc - and in this case, you have 100 stages to get through before you arrive at the bottom of the pit and save your parents from the evil drunken sorcerer. While doing this, you can obtain a shitload of bonuses, secret doors, special items and random stuff. It works like *Chack'n Pop*, and they have recycled this mechanic in many other games, one of them being *Rayforce*. Taito equals exponential scores.

I think that it was the summer of 1986 when I saw this game for the first time. It goes without saying that the queue was incredible. I had to wait about an hour, and people were playing in tag play the whole time.

My first impact was pure violence as the other person was credit-feeding. If I wanted to play, I had to join them - at the 91st stage! I don't remember what stage that is, but I remember it being brutal. My few credits lasted a few more stages, then someone else took my place and managed to finish the game.

I thought, "what the hell, this is one nasty

spoiler," and was pissed for the rest of the day. When you're eight years old, these things matter.

However, summer and lovely, colourful games tend to work flawlessly together. So the next day I woke up early to be the first one playing *Bubble Bobble,* only to find many others who had had the same idea. This must be a really good game if people wake early during summer to play it, no?

Let's stop for one moment and analyze, with scientific rigour, one of the best aspects of the arcade settings: social life. To start our inquiry, I will define this setting: my uncle's arcade, in its old location, very close to the centre of the city, during the hot summer of 1986. *Bubble Bobble* is the coolest game of the moment. There are the usual customers: various kids of all ages, teenagers, 20-something guys (and girls - girls love platformers, that's the official dogma) which are usually CS or Engineering students, older people who are engineers or programmers, random nerds, a few punks, etc.

The common thread between us was a sheer love for *Bubble Bobble*. I clearly remember at some point, small meetings in front of the cabs (my uncle had 3 copies of the game) with people discussing tricks and strategies. At some point, my uncle, who was a passionate gamer himself, started compiling a guide: all the tricks, secrets and bonuses were stored in this small guide, which could be consulted while playing. After a while, the standard habit of many people was to organize "threesomes," two players in tag play with a "navigator" telling them which tricks to apply and when.

Now, let's get back to the ending: the game can only be completed in tag mode. If you're good enough to complete it all by yourself, the game will send you back to stage 66. I'm not sure if you loop the last 34 stages all by yourself if you're playing alone. As I told you, it was impossible to play this game without a partner, so I never found out the truth. Not that it matters, after all. What matters is the sheer passion and cheerful atmosphere that this game
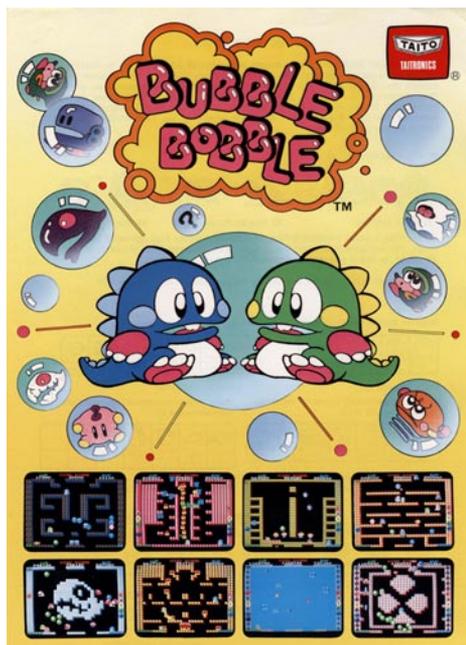
brought to our lazy and hot summers of 1986, shared with many friends, in search of all possible secrets that *Bubble Bobble* could offer us.

So, let's examine the other side of the coin.

PART 2: ESCAPE FROM THE HIVE, ONCE AND FOR ALL

Raimais is one of the most peculiar and intriguing *Pac-Man* clones around. Winter 1988. I can clearly remember the order of games on the second floor, after the pool tables. The cabs started from the window side, which looked out over a covered gallery, facing south. There were four cabs - *Contra*, *Raimais*, *Black Tiger*, *Double Dragon* - then two cabs, *Pac-Man Jr*. and *Side Arms* - and then *Wonder Boy*, *Wonder Boy in Monster Land* and *1943: The Battle of Midway.*

I could write an entire book on that room alone, but for the moment, because I'm in a Taito frenzy, I will focus on *Raimais*. I don't know what the hell the title means, however, I know what it's all about. Picture the future, *Akira*-style. You are a young woman who has been enslaved by a mad scientist, and the only hope of survival for you and your imprisoned brother is to escape from the Hive.

In order to escape from the mad professor's clutches, you have to clear a sequence of labyrinths of their dots and then choose which cell of the hive to work on next. Every once in a while (depending on which pattern you choose) you have to fight giant insect mechas, because the mad professor wants you to stay safe and warm in his gigantic prison to study you for his

experiments.

You clearly disagree with his wishes, so the journey begins.

Raimais was really loved by the girls, to my memory. I don't know why, and I don't remember girls loving *Pac-Man*, but I do remember me loving this one girl, at least ten years older than I, who was an absolute *Raimais* genius. Personally I am a disaster with maze games, and I would surely never have escaped from the hive. But she did it all the time, and she liked that I showed her attention. I still know her after almost 20 years; she owns the gym that took the place of the old arcade.

I don't love her anymore, of course. But I loved her when I was a kid. I loved her grace - her hypnotic precision in playing *Raimais*. *Raimais*, in my personal opinion, is the best maze game around.

Let's start from the OST: Masahiko Takaki, known as MAR, and obviously a Zuntata member, did a terrific job. It's impossible not to be enthralled by the hypnotic main theme he composed for the game, or by the majestic boss battle theme.

In hands other than Taito's, this would have been a "kill them all!" theme. It is not; as Taito always had a passion for building complete worlds behind a game. Vision, Conception, Organization: these are the three main ideas behind Taito's design style, as stated in most of Zuntata's booklets. I suppose they mean something like, "we decide to make a game with a given argument, then develop the game concept with this vision in mind, then we organize various aspects to make it worthwhile."

Well, the strength of *Raimais* is this: *Pac-Man* with various power-ups, the ability to choose your path (like *Darius*), a great sci-fi design, a cool plot and an atmospheric soundtrack. Add a cute girl that can play the game to perfection, a young kid who easily falls in love, and mix them together for a perfect scenario. I remember that I usually spent my time silently watching her play, looking at her cute, expressionless face showing a singular focus on her

task.

When we became friends when I got older she never knew of my silent love pains. I'm not sure whether I was in love with her, or with her skill and her fight to get outside the hive. Speaking of skill, she had plenty, I have to say. Her best score, to my memory, was only a few thousand points less than the current Japanese one. I wonder if she was actually the best at that time.

I don't really like *Raimais* as a game. This is an old fault of mine: if I can't be competent at something I tend to dislike it. I mean, I like everything about the game and have fond memories of it, but I don't like its gameplay because I could never get anywhere. Shame on me, I'd add. I also have to admit that after all these years; my fascination is still strongly attached to the core plot.

I go back in my memory and I can't distinguish clearly what made me so enamoured with *Raimais*. Or even with the girl. However, am I sure that I am in love with the OST. Maybe it was the dedication of the girl to the game, or maybe just the girl. Regardless, in the last two cases, I still think that she has influenced me as far as my attitude toward gaming goes. And I still wonder: was she mastering the hive in order to escape from it?

PART 3: A TALE OF THE OLD WILD WEST – THE STORY OF PLANET GLORIA

Gun Frontier is a peculiar game. First and foremost, its title indirectly pays homage to an old Matsumoto series, the one with the Harlock and Tochiro characters. Like all Matsumoto anime, it was permeated by a sense of "romantic fascism [3]," which is closer to the reactionary spirit found in Mishima's works. This Taito shooter does not delve deep enough to match this dimension, but did manage to found the steampunk design often found in later shooters.

Varth, *Battle Garegga* and *Giga Wing* all have a "retro sci-fi" look heavily influenced by this game, to name some of the most famous ones.

Planet Gloria, somewhere in the future. The space age has become a reality, but colonists are having a rough time and their lifestyle is not much different than the one found in the wild west days of old. Space ships and saloons populate the all-but barren planes at the same time. When things seem like they can't get much worse, the space pirates attack the planet and enslave its population. It's high time for some heroes to come to the rescue and rustle up a healthier future for planet Gloria.

I don't know if Sergio Leone, director of many great Westerns, would have liked this game, but surely his sense of gritty darkness has crept into many parts of the game. Let's return to 1990. I remember that summer (it's always summer in my memories) as being pretty hot and stimulating, game-wise. I remember spending this particular summer playing this game, *Liquid Kids* (another great platformer by Taito, of course) and *Carrier Airwing*. These other two are both great games, but I will not cover them in this particular article.

(3) I am indebted for this witty definition to Sergei "Seryogin", see issue 2 Four Games:From Russia to New York via Games

Two players can play at the same time. Whenever one person is playing, another can join in the play at anytime!

EXTEND — Get all the letters. They appear when destroying several enemies at the same time!

1—P BUB   2—P BOB   Benzo   Bonnie-bo   Boa-boa   Blubba   Boris   Bonner   Baron von Blubba   If you take too much time, you are no match for him!

I remember *Gun Frontier* with very mixed feelings. Have you ever played it, maybe on Saturn - where you might have exploited the auto fire feature to make the game easier and more enjoyable? Back in 1990 I had a lot of problems with it, courtesy of the insane number of enemies and the necessity to button-mash like a fiend. My uncle made a simple hack to partially overclock the fire rate, which was helpful, but made me feel like a cheater.

I discovered recently that this game (and since I mentioned it, *Carrier Airwing* too) were some of the targets of such cheaty practices in many Japanese arcades. Hell, at some points programmers gave up and started putting auto fire in as the default option in shooters.

Gun Frontier hasn't aged well. Rendering techniques were pretty primitive, gameplay was a bit stiff, even for the time, and the game has a nasty ranking system and even worse restart points. Yet still, there was something about the game (even if this has by no means the best audio work by Yack and OGR), about its peculiar and truly original atmosphere, about the space shuttles half-covered by the dunes in Stage 4 and the incredibly climatic duel at the end of the game.

The game itself is pretty simple. Well, one original idea is its power-up system. You need five small icons to get one extra power level, and 40 small bomb icons for an extra bomb. Ok, this is not a true innovation as most Compile games worked in that way, but that was the first time that I saw such an approach in an arcade game. Small but meaningful change, eh? There is at least one point in which you can send a mid-boss to its resting place in such a way that it gives you a few extra points if you destroy it by targeting a specific area. There are so many

shooters since that use this mechanic that I find it pointless to stress again how influential this game has been.

Back when I was 12, I couldn't predict that this game would have such a deep impact on future shooters. Well, I didn't care, nor do I really care now. My enjoyment wasn't a question of gameplay. I mean, the gameplay is simple - shoot stuff before it shoots you. The final boss battle works like an old western duel: you need to be the quick if you don't want to be the dead, leaving Gloria to be engulfed by an eternal nightmare. This is but one great thing about the game, much in the vein of the epic duels between the white hats and the black hats. Except nobody is wearing a white or black hat. Actually, I wouldn't even suggest shades of gray: after all, it's just a game.

The important thing is that there are two main reasons to play: score and atmosphere. As I said, the game hasn't a particular score-system to talk about, so frankly, I played it for the atmosphere. Speaking of which, I think that its melancholic atmosphere is what made me think of Sergio Leone's western movies in the first place.

Atmosphere was why other people played this shooter as well. I wouldn't label it as a very successful game – not in the sense that I needed to queue to play it, which is usually a good indication of success for an arcade game. Despite its relative unpopularity, there were a few people playing it with gusto and passion - among them my father and uncle. They were the ones who constantly made comparisons to westerns by Leone while I kept thinking of Matsumoto's anime.

I don't know if the true West had improbable heroes flying on planes built like Smith and

Wesson's guns, but I couldn't avoid imagining that I was the lone rider fighting against all enemies to save the poor citizens of Gloria - feeling like a romantic knight who made justice where there was none. Well, that is more Clint Eastwood than Sergio Leone, and as a kid I was a bit of a reactionary. Luckily, I grew up and stopped taking Matsumoto, Eastwood, or romanticism too seriously. It's embarrassing, but I think we're all little Nazis at 12.

Another shooter, *Battle Garegga*, had a plot involving two brothers, John and Bruce Wayne, fighting against an evil dictatorship that uses their father's weapons to enslave people. John Wayne's true name was Marion Morrison, and he used the nickname "John Wayne" to pay homage to Saint John and Bruce Wayne, also known as the Batman. Why mention *Garegga*? Because *Garegga* is the unofficial sequel of *Gun Frontier.*

Not that I knew it when I was a kid, but many games, such as *Batsugun*, *Rayforce*, and *Giga Wing,* were heavily influenced by *Gun Frontier*. This realization goes beyond my fond memories of this title, my arcade memories especially. Other arcade games captured my attention after this title of course, and a good portion of them were made by Taito.

BACK TO NOW

So, Taito's glory is back again on PS2. Ok, I must admit that hi-res is not my wet dream, but if you don't mind emulation you can cough up a few bucks and get 25 great games in one package. These packs will, in some sense, allow you to enter the marvelous palace of gaming pleasure which was the arcade market of the '80s and '90s. Have fun!
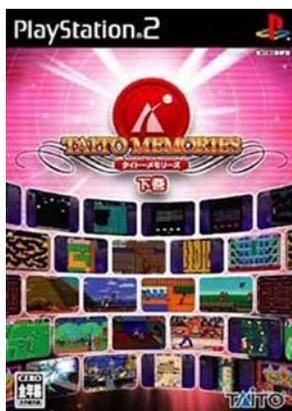
The Gamer's Quarter EXCLUSIVE Preview of
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: Twilight Princess

The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening
Andrew Toups

In order to gain access to the third dungeon in *The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening*, you must first find a banana and give it to a monkey who stands in front of a gap over a river. In order to get this banana, you need to trade a can of dog food with an Alligator who is hoarding bananas. The dog food is awarded for trading a ribbon to a bow-wow pup in Mabe village. The ribbon was given to you in return for donating a Yoshi doll to a family for their son, who, of course, is a Nintendo fan. The Yoshi doll is found, stationary, in the center of the crane game shop, where miscellaneous powerups and rupees rotate around it on a conveyor belt. Because it's the easiest to get, it's likely to be the first (and perhaps only) thing you pick up in the mini-game. Rupees, bombs, and arrows are plentiful on Koholint Island, anyway.

Back to the monkey and his newly-received banana. Perhaps due to some good nature that the gifted fruit has awoken in him, he calls his other monkey friends who hoot and jump around while assembling a small bridge across the gap which grants access to Kanalet castle. Kanalet Castle, as it happens, is not the third dungeon; instead it is a sub-dungeon that hides five golden leaves. What do these golden leaves have to do with anything? Well, an unrelated character named Richard, who himself holds the

key to the third dungeon, will only relinquish said key once the aforementioned leaves have been retreived for him. Why he has the key in the first place (or, really, even why this particular dungeon, already surrounded by a large moat, is locked) is not clear, nor is his interest in the golden leaves.

Before any of these things can happen, however, it is necessary to cross the bridge that the monkeys built. The bridge is one tile wide, and in the middle of it sits a sprite representing a stick. While heading into Kanalet Castle, there is no choice but to cross over the bridge and pick the stick up.

After accepting the steps neccessary to make this exchange possible, the average gamer is likely to shrug off this odd little episode. If nothing else, by now the pattern is clear. But it gave me pause. At least with all the other random items I could come up with some reason why they might otherwise be useful. I can imagine, for instance, Link having the motivation to accept a can of dog food in exchange for a ribbon while stranded on a desert island - that may indeed come in handy; and I can imagine further why he'd rather have a bunch of bananas instead of dog food. By this time I'd already come across this monkey who wanted bananas, and even if I hadn't, I could at least imagine that the bananas in question might be more useful as a bargaining tool.

The stick however, I can't accept. First of all, why *this* stick, of all the other sticks on

the island? Earlier, I spent a good deal of time trudging through an enchanted forest. Surely there were many equally fine, well-wrought sticks laying about there. Why didn't Link think to pick up one of those? Why, suddenly, does he feel the need for one now? Further, what use could the notoriously well-equipped Link have for a stick like that, anyway? Did winning the Yoshi doll trigger some kind of deep, obsessive compulsive reaction in Link? Is he simply unable to sacrifice one trinket without replacing it with whatever other arbitrary trinket might be at hand at the time?

Despite my protestations, and despite how stick-picking-up averse I may potentially be, I must pick the stick up. I can't cross the bridge without walking over it, and Link, God bless his heart, can't resist picking up *anything* that he passes. When I walk past the stick, Link holds it up over his head, the familiar "you found an item" fanfare from *The Legend of Zelda* plays, and a message reads "You're not sure how, but it seems the (banana) [the game uses graphical icons to represent in-game items] has become the (stick). You decide to keep it!"

After my initial quandary with the stick, this is almost too much. Who is this voice, reminding me not only of how absurd this whole charade is, but also vainly trying to rationalize it? Is this the same voice that tells me, when I find a chest with 100 rupees, that "you're ecstatic!" (or, even more pathetically, for a chest with 20 rupees, "JOY!")? Is it the same voice that tells me every time I push up against one of those pointy, crystal shaped rocks that can only be broken with the dash boots that they are an "unusual object" but "there must be some way around it," even AFTER I've received the dash boots and have already dashed through countless instances of the same obstacle?

I have a theory about this, actually. *Link's Awakening* was released maybe a year after *A Link to the Past*, and like many Gameboy games following a 16-bit franchise, there were many touches that may have been "reverse-engineered" to fit into the more limited

Gameboy processor. Those of you who've played *Link to the Past* might remember an episode where you jump down a well and sprinkle magic powder on an alter, which causes a small demon to appear, who "curses" you by doubling your magic meter. This same demon makes a cameo in *Link's Awakening* serving the same purpose. We are never given an explanation of how this demon fits into the greater mythology of the game; he seemingly exists independently of it, for no reason other than give you a magic upgrade. What's notable about him, however, is the fact that he insists that he's cursing you when he's actually giving you an upgrade. In the Gameboy version, after doubling your powder capacity, he says: "Now just think of all the stuff you'll have to lug around!" I guess it's supposed to be ironic, and it is, though perhaps more than intended.

My theory is that this demon is a manifestation of the aforementioned in-game voice; the same one that rationalizes Link's occasionally odd taste in luggage, and the same one that would later go on to remind players that a small heart fills up one heart of your life meter in *The Minish Cap*. I say this because the silly kind of irony he speaks with is a concentrated version of the silly irony the franchise has been speaking with since it first appeared on the SNES, spouting its non-Engrish text boxes and dialogue. This same irony would later pervade *Wind Waker*, which is constantly reminding you of the silly, annoying, and downright crippling artificial limits and obstacles in place - leftovers from the Miyamoto school of design. *Link's Awakening* is notable in just how

indulgent it is in this vice, perhaps more than any of the other games to date.

Despite all this, it's difficult for me to dislike it. In fact, I'm still rather fond of this one; and find it more playable and accessible than all but the very first in the series. What's more, though I am bothered by the arbitrary fetch-questing, it doesn't really interfere with my enjoyment of the game.

I suppose the question that needs to be asked here is: is all of this really a vice in this case? Let's suppose, for a moment, that the answer is "no", which I think it is.

What is the difference? Why, when *Ocarina of Time* tells me for the 100th time that a small key can be used to open a locked door, (but only in this dungeon!), do I feel like wringing Miyamoto's neck and screaming "I KNOW ALREADY!", but when *Link's Awakening* does it, it just seems like one of the game's quirks?

Looking at things on a psychological level, things maybe start to make a little more sense. After all, what's really at stake in *Link's Awakening*? The premise, if you don't know, is that Link has been stranded on a desert island. Princess Zelda is presumed to be safe and comfortable. Hyrule is not even given mention, and is presumably experiencing peace. The island too, though subject to the usual "monsters are increasing" phenomenon of most RPG's, is a relatively happy place. Presumably Link has some kind of motivation to leave and return home, but on the other hand, can the player really share this motivation? Given that it's implied that Koholint Island is all there is to

the game, where else would the player want to go?

So what then, is the player's motivation?

Eric-Jon Waugh, weekly columnist for Next Generation Online, once said, "the worst thing a videogame can do is assume that I have nothing better to do than play a videogame." In many ways I think that sums up where the *Zelda* franchise has gone lately: they have become games for people who like playing videogames. *Link's Awakening* succeeds as it does, I think, because it kind of reverses this position.

Bear with me here.

I can't speak for anyone but myself. But what really rubs me the wrong way with regards to modern *Zelda* games is not so much the way they take the player for granted but the pretense with which they do so. These are games that, using often beautiful, breathtaking visuals and storytelling, do their best to convince you that you have embarked on a quest of great, dramatic import; and then, as a means of completing that quest, they give you the most inane, insulting tasks possible. They take the player for granted. Even something like fighting a boss can often be broken down into a mechanical, easily reproducable set of actions once the boss's weak spot has been discovered. (PROTIP: it usually involves using the treasure you found in that dungeon.) Wash, rinse, repeat.

That's kind of insulting, isn't it?

Link's Awakening, on the other hand, is in a unique position. Coming on the heels of the resounding-yet-shocking-to-nobody success of *A Link To The Past*, it does its darndest to reverse-engineer as many elements of that game into its framework while at the same time, being released on a platform which, at the time, wasn't the core of Nintendo's business. The Gameboy was more a side project. Nothing was riding on this game, and this allowed the developers to take some unorthodox liberties with the license. For example, Will Wright, as he appeared in the Sim City SNES games (as Dr. Write), is a character in *Link's Awakening*. His

character is incidental to the above-mentioned fetch quest; you deliver a letter to him that has a photograph of Princess Peach enclosed (here though, she is called "Christine"). Also, the dungeons contain occasional sidescrolling segments, where Mario Bros.' Goombas make frequent cameo appearances. You can kill the goombas with your sword, but if you jump on them with the roc's feather, they squash with that familiar poo-quah sound, as they ought to, and you are rewarded for catching the reference with a hit point restoring heart. Even HAL's Kirby appears as a one-time-only enemy in the seventh dungeon [1].

Given what is eventually learned about the nature of Koholint Island [2], this playful, let's-throw-in-whatever-we-can-for-the-heck-of-it approach makes a little more sense. It also contributes to what might be called a certain levity of tone. Nothing within or without the series is taken seriously. At times it's tempting to read the aforementioned "demon's voice" as a sort of parody of the what the series is all about. It strikes me, in this light, as similar to *Final Fantasy X-2*, or maybe *Parodius*, in that it is a game that transcends the limitations and stagnant problems of the franchise it comes from by more or less pissing upon everything the franchise has set up.

If Zelda games are guilty of assuming that the player has nothing better to do than play videogames, *Link's Awakening* instead, before assuming anything, recognizes that you **are** playing a videogame, and a portable one at that. This is the level of awareness that makes the nagging demon voice seem like satire where it just seems bone-headed elsewhere. From this follows the understanding that you aren't actually playing a "real" Zelda game anyway, so why bother taking it seriously? Ironically, it's easier to take the little diorama dramas, silly narratives/fetch quests and what-have-you more seriously in this context, without the game urging you to "listen!"

Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess is set to hit stores the first quarter of 2006. Stay tuned to the Gamer's Quarter for further updates.

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[1] This charming abandon is also seen in the basic gameplay of *Link's Awakening*. Although the exploration is more rigidly set out here than ever, the modular combat equipment system is cleverly implemented. Nearly all the various items can not only be used individually, but in combination with each other. I've played through the entire game twice without even realizing that if you equip the bow and arrow and bombs at the same time, and use them both at once you fire a bomb-tipped arrow that is twice as powerful. Compare this to *Ocarina of Time*, a game that features discreet "targets" that had to be pasted into the levels to make the hookshot useful.

[2] This is a spoiler, if you've never played the game: Koholint Island exists as an illusion in the dream of a Wind Fish, one of the gods of the Zelda universe. Apparently. In order to escape the island, you must wake the fish up, thus causing the island to evaporate, leaving Link stranded on the remains of his raft in the middle of the ocean. It's a pretty great way to end the game, come to think of it. In a great "it was all a dream... or was it?!?" moments, the camera pans up from Link drifting on his raft to a view of the Wind Fish floating across the sky.

Frustration in an Aerial Fantasy World

SkyGunner - PS2
John Szczepaniak

Videogames can be frustrating things. They especially frustrate when trying to proclaim the joys of an exceptionally well crafted title to a crowd deafened and desensitized to gaming; a crowd who is blind to the many nigh-on-perfect facets of a game where genuine love, blood, sweat and tears have been poured into it. *SkyGunner* on the PS2 perfectly exemplifies this frustration.

It's difficult to know where to begin when talking about *SkyGunner*, arguably one of this generation's, and Atlus', finest games. Magazines at the time were seemingly apathetic to its many charms, giving it a lukewarm reception with mostly mediocre reviews and average scores. At a time when everyone seemed to be clamoring for bigger and more amazing 3D graphics (not to mention free-roaming, off-rails control), a game finally arrived that did everything everyone seemed to be screaming for, and people ignored it. To correct this heresy it fell on the gamers themselves to spread the news via word of mouth, though as you can imagine little ended up being said. A few years late, the aim of this article is to unashamedly slam some sense into you and encourage everyone to try it before the next-generation arrives and consigns it the annals of gaming hell.

A Wonderful Life Experience?

Attempting to describe the whole, instead of each of its parts, would take very long and could easily be ignored by a generation of now cynical and jaded gamers. After all, everyone plays for different reasons.

For those purists who regard gaming as an experience and take the entire package into account, this title is without doubt the most perfect localization of a Japanese game known to Western civilization. This becomes apparent on the long bus journey home when ripping open the packaging. Not only has the original cover art remained intact, but the whole comic book atmosphere of the original is retained as well. Eschewing a traditional Japanese manga style, small Francophile and sepia toned images adorn the many pages, introducing you to its lovingly-crafted fantasy world set high in the air. To highlight just how much care had been invested in the booklet alone, the final pages not only contain the entire intro song written in both Japanese *and* English, but also a page of French translations explaining the meaning of every character's name.

This high quality is a sign of the game that follows. At every stage of the journey it betters itself, reaching greater levels of craftsmanship and enjoyment.

The animated intro depicts a beautiful, Miyazaki-inspired, steampunk world of aerial battles, huge airships and quaint villages. This world is delivered to you through the voice of a diva, singing as if she carried the dreams and wishes of every inhabitant through her majestic voice. It reminds us of the innocent days before crude CG renders became standard. As an added bonus, while the intro song is only Japanese, American gamers have the choice of choosing between dubbed voice acting for all future cut-scenes, or Japanese dialogue with subtitles. Even here, that dark cynicism which dwells in all of us can come to the fore. How many times have people viewed such painstakingly created footage, only to find that the game within betrays them?

Thankfully *SkyGunner* doesn't rest on such atmospheric styling, and it's clear that Atlus didn't hold back when building the world seen in the intro. Each of the two selectable characters [1] have unlimited free reign of the skies in each stage. The ability to dive in and out of intense dogfights while hurtling over a giant flying piano becomes second nature, but be fast because those crab-ships and flute biplanes will soon be on your tail. Within minutes of starting the opening level, not only will most people be questioning why it hasn't become mandatory for all games to have sepia cut-scenes, but they'll be hit by the distinct style. This is not a gritty war simulator, as even the villainous rogues have an endearing side to them.

The temptation now is to create long lists of many excellent things that can be experienced during play, but anyone with an ardent desire to convert others into playing this must resist such foul temptation. It would do no good to briefly skim through the facts: the AI is dynamic and second to none, the levels and goals are diverse, the wealth of extras to unlock.

[1] With three further to unlock.

No, if you were to explain these things to possible converts, you would have to explain them individually.

It may be frustrating, but players need to realize that unlike almost every other game ever invented, your aerial comrades here never do stupid things like get in your line of fire, accidentally kill you or somehow jeopardize your mission. On the contrary, you can rely on them to save your hide or paralyze a boss on several occasions. Any mistakes the AI makes only lowers their personal scores at the end of a stage, thereby allowing you first place and granting extra bonus material.

Such material is well worth the perseverance. Who wouldn't want extra playable characters? Of course, explaining such facts requires tact, since these procurable avatars are not merely window decoration. Each comes with their own set of stages, objectives, narratives and special signature attacks. These too, will, of course, require in-depth explanation when trying to encourage people to partake in the "gaming funs." For the meantime let us move on.

It's all about the system baby!

If up until this point you had been attempting to relay such information to someone else, say on the train, while clutching their overcoat in order to ensure their complete and utter attention, they may at this point attempt to leave your company. This is probably because such

an individual is in fact a "system manipulation" gamer. They care not for the experience, the narratives or innately sublime delight that can be had from simply playing frivolously. They require systems and rules which can be broken, used and abused before finally being mastered and controlled. You know who they are, they play *Devil May Cry 3* with the grace of an athletic ballet dancer. They partake in *Virtua Fighter* as if the control mechanism between man and game simply don't exist. They're the ones on *Shikigami no Shiro* who fly through bullet hell without blinking an eyelid. These people need *SkyGunner* explained to them along slightly different lines.

What the US magazines of the day failed to grasp was that underlying everything in *Sky-Gunner* is an incredibly deep combo system as rich and finely balanced as anything found in a good shmup or fighter.

Destroy an enemy craft and not only does its tiny pilot, replete with tiny airman goggles and billowing scarf, parachute through the air, but the destroyed vehicle gives off splash damage. Anything in the vicinity is then automatically damaged too. This is where the science comes into play, and you need to be sure to explain this fully to any possible converts.

If anything nearby has a sufficiently low enough health, be it a gun turret, aircraft or simple porthole, it too will explode in a shower of pyrotechnics and accompanying splash damage. This domino-like chain reaction will contin-

ue, and in an ingenious move by the designers, the damage will increase with each subsequent enemy. What this means, is that while some of the tougher enemies early in chain might need weakening, once things gain momentum it's entirely possible to take down entire fleets of relatively tough enemies with a single shot of a missile.

Some added benefits of this are that it increases the score multiplier. First to x2, and if you're really good all the way up to x13, allowing for some huge scores. And remember, the higher the score, the higher the rank, and high ranks equal prizes such as faster engines and unlockable extras.

As mentioned, this combo system underlies everything and later enemies can only be destroyed using it. The first time it seriously comes into play is during a stage that features a castle on a lake at sunset. Amidst a backdrop of orange-hued carnage, with ships and planes all battling it out with caricatured ferocity; keen eyed players may have noticed the seemingly indestructible cannons around the perimeter. The trick to defeating these are waiting for the small lines of enemies that eventually make their way to the giant cannons. Timing is very important here, but if these lines are used to set off a combo, then the cannons become history, allowing for easy approach to the final target.

Falling on Deaf Ears

Even with the lavish attention to detail and the hard work that has been invested into such a product, some people are still reluctant. To add to such frustration, critics will feel the need to balance things out by listing arbitrary, irrelevant and nonsensical problems at the end of supposed reviews.

Some will complain of slowdown. They complain that during a level with fifteen enormous cargo ships in the sky, not to mention dozens of large missiles, smaller enemies and a variety of other gunships, that when they fired a barrage of fireworks that set off a long

chain-combo, the game slows down slightly. The fact that the PS2 is also dealing with two sets of individualistic and highly competent AI for your allies, as well as each and every one of those dozens of enemies, makes no difference. Even when other games such as *Bangai-O* intentionally use slowdown to aid in what the game is trying to achieve, it is apparently not acceptable. Games simply must run at full speed, at all times, regardless of anything else, otherwise they should be consigned to hell itself. Apparently. That's right, you will find people slighting *SkyGunner* for its slowdown while totally failing to realize that there is a "variable processor mode" that locks the framerate and removes all slowdown by slightly lowering the impeccable visual quality.

Others still will lament the controls, saying that the camera is too difficult to use. The fact that it tracks a specifically selected enemy makes things tricky to navigate. Again, such faults are not due to the game, but due to people failing to read the manual and experiment with the options. The camera can be locked behind-the-player, and the controls simplified to be more like those of an arcade title.

In the grand scheme of things there is little to fault with *SkyGunner*. The only thing going against it is its genre; those who dislike light-hearted and blithe settings or even the notion of flying, will not enjoy *SkyGunner*. Still, you just can't reach some people, and so for different reasons it has become similar to *Ico*, or *Rez*. Some people at the time were simply empty inside and would not allow themselves to be swayed.

This is a terrible shame, since the things *SkyGunner* attempted should have been adopted by the games industry as a whole. They weren't, and as such we have games like Forbidden Siren that in all honesty should have had both English and Japanese dialogue, with the option for subtitles. With the medium of DVD now commonplace, why aren't all games like this?

Often we have endless and generic CG rendered cut-scenes, crude and quick to age as technology progresses. Just think to yourself, how many games this generation have used hand-animated cinemas as opposed to CG? Look at manuals, forgotten is the skill of hand-drawn artwork it seems.

People were also so quick to judge the *optional* slowdown and overlook variable processing, one of the most innovative highlights of game design this generation, alongside the 60Hz option for PAL gamers.

As if this frustration at the masses could get no worse, the hard work that went into each of the different characters, each with their wildly different levels, some of which housed within them the most spectacular set-piece battles ever seen, was all ignored and overlooked. People simply could not see the devotion that went into the game.

To add further insult to injury, lesser games by lesser developers would go on to hold that acclaimed number one spot in sales lists. Utter generic tripe by companies such as EA, games not even worthy of being mentioned, went on to be bought by the thousands.

Well, this madness ends here and now. I can only hope that this is sufficient to convince you of the quality of *SkyGunner*, and encourage you to play it. Once you have seen these things in action for yourself, it is then your duty to spread the word, not only about *SkyGunner*, but all great games released this generation that have been overlooked and ignored. Go forth and play them before the looming next-generation of powerhouse systems arrive, and then tell others. These games deserve the recognition.

It's a phallic joke.

Putting that aside, it's pretty obvious that you're gay for Sol, Ky!

Gay?!
You want to see GAY?!?

Uh, not really.

PFWAAAHH!! GW AAAAHHHH!!!

...elephant?

PFWAAAAHHH!!

So cute!

If it sounds, looks, and acts like a girl...

Johnny! What are you doing here?

I SWEAR TO GOD I DIDN'T TOUCH THE BOY LOOKED HIS BREAS HE'S DICK

Leave him alone, Millia san.

Johnny is trying to win money so he can hire an attorney and fight Bridget's lawsuit.

oh... Yuck.

YEE HEE~!

It's a phallic joke...?

She's rooting FOR her.

Concluded on Page 124...

Open Letter To Rockstar

Hot Coffee Controversy
M. O'Connor

Dearest Rockstar;

As you have realized by now, lying about secret stuff that's easily uncovered is a public relations no-no. You end up looking shameful in the eyes of the public, especially when you sell material that some of your more advanced end-users pick through for fun, and trying to place blame on those modders in turn is even dumber. Your colleagues in the industry aren't going to be too excited about jumping to your defense, and Mr. Lowenstein over at the Entertainment Software Association is going to hold you up as proof that their ratings system works.

How you guys got caught with your pants down on this one will no doubt be covered in future PR classes, but the past is what it is, and you have bigger fish to fry.

Most importantly, that ravenous pack of jackals and jackboots we call "politicians" - those guys currently lining up to feast on your bones - have been given a free pass to take as many stupid, ill-informed and immature rhetorical cheap shots as they can possibly fit into three minutes on CNN. Senator Hillary Clinton is lining you guys up for a reaming by the FTC, and you've been handily equated with child molesters and pornographers of the lowest sorts.

You've helped set a new standard for non-Jack Thompson commentators on the role of video games in society. (Or more accurately, on the role of how saucy and somewhat tasteless games can help pols score points with the "what about the children?" brigade.) Aside from being dumb enough to lie about content that's on every single one of the gazillions of copies of San Andreas you've sold, this is the only other thing you should be truly ashamed of.

If I were a different kind of man, I'd quote Sun Tzu or something equally profound and contextually useless about warfare in pre-capitalist societies. Or perhaps something from one of those semi-cultish retreat weekends that bankers go on, carpe diem crap wrapped in a few thousand dollars worth of fees. Instead, I will respectfully ask you to consider the following path. If you are bold, Rockstar (and Take Two Interactive and whomever else is currently sweating the financial fallout from this gaffe) can blaze an entirely new path in game retailing. Befitting my eurocentric cryptoracism, I will reference Niccolò Machiavelli, the original Italian Stallion (or, if you like, Sun Tzu with clams and marinara sauce).

Embrace the Adults Only rating! Not for this reiteration of the Grand Theft Auto series, mind you. For now, embrace the path of The Prince and appear as timid as possible, without rolling over entirely for every lawsuit-toting moron headed your way. Engage in a public round of penitence and horsewhippings until things die down - then head back to the lab.

The next edition of GTA will sell another

gazillion copies, barring some unforseen disaster befalling your company or the industry. Create the normal game as you've no doubt planned - double dongs, cheap jokes, dead pedestrians, decent NPR parodies and the like. Then create an AO-rated version, where you cram in some silliness, some sauciness and extra heapings of violence and raunch. It doesn't have to be any more than some additional content and slightly different cover art with the requisite AO plastered on the corner of the box.

Sell it from your website for $5 to $7 more than the retail price and watch the orders roll in. If it takes off, you can sell retailers who dare to stock it a gaudy display box with a lock and chain around it; something that makes every 12-year-old in the vicinity feel like a jerk for being underage. You will be condemned for your actions from all corners, but condemnation still equals sales in the world of media and entertainment.

In case you guys haven't noticed, the political hammer is going to drop on you no matter what you do. You make games that allow people to do some vile stuff, and you all live well because of it. You are Willie Horton - Hillary Clinton and Rick Santorum have combined to form Bush the Elder and the ESA is too busy playing Dukakis in a stupid tank to stand up for you. Everyone's too worried about the FTC and congressional sessions to give thought to the most important opportunity here.

Embracing the AO label, rescuing it from the mire of tentacle rape and strip poker games and turning it into an object of resistance and boob jokes the likes of which this world has never seen - this is the path of legends. It's fraught with danger, but your brand is so strong that you'd have to pull a repeat of this Hot Coffee screwup to not score big.

There are other incentives, like pushing forward the industry by boldly drawing the line between adult and child-safe content, helping add insulation to future dealings with politicos and press and creating a precedent for courts to easily reference in regards to the artistic merits of video games. Most exciting is the idea that some day an adult game maker will make a game for adults, with adult themes, for an adult audience, and turn to the AO label - not out of shame, but out of a desire to make our generations' digital Ulysses or Tropic of Capricorn.

But these are less important for a company in the long run than the pursuit of better sales, and if they come to pass it will be as a side-benefit of the creative destruction of capitalism rather than Rockstar putting their nose in the line of fire for the sake of artistic freedom.

As of early August, word came through that EA is hosting a 1,000USD-per-plate fundraising dinner for Senator Clinton, which Mr. Lowenstein will be attending. Even if you guys have been too busy stomping hookers to read classical Italian political science revenge fantasies, the IP-bots at EA clearly have a tremendous interest in keeping the industry static. If this doesn't worry your merry little band of Scottish sociopath simulator stimulators, then you deserve to become just a footnote in history.

luv,
mike

REACHING ADULTHOOD THROUGH STREET FIGHTER 2

How I Learned To Love The Fight
Pat Miller

Back in the preschool days of late eighties, us kids used to spend our recess periods playing along to the cartoons we had watched that morning: *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *GI Joe*, maybe - if we were lucky (or late for school) - *Super Mario Brothers Super Show*. Even then I was never one of the alpha-male popular kids and so when we'd choose roles for our games I would never get to pick the good guys. The leader of the pack was a kid named Brandon (I forget what made him the leader of the pack - I think it was the cool flannel jackets he wore. He was the first kid I knew to get a Super Nintendo, years later.) and he'd always get to pick Leonardo. His cronies would pick the rest of the Turtles, and I would inevitably get stuck with Splinter (whose job was to do approximately nothing) or Shredder. Shredder's role was even less compelling than Splinter's; as it consisted primarily of running away from Leonardo-Brandon until he caught up with me and mimed beating me up, presumably justified by some crime committed previous to the recess period.

Fast forward through the tender years of Kindergarten all the way up to about third grade, where I switched schools and befriended a misunderstood kid named Adam, who was my best friend and recess-time game buddy. We played *TMNT*, of course, later *Legend of Zelda* and *Power Rangers*. Unlike the games of

preschool, however, these games were always against hordes of invisible enemy ninjas, Ganondorfs, and other Saturday morning bad guys. While I have long since lost touch with Adam - last I had heard, he had moved back to live with his father in New York six or seven years ago - I still retain a fondness in my heart for two-player beat-em-ups.

Growing up amid the powerful influences of TMNT and Power Rangers ingrained in me a deep desire to become an amazing fighter. There was satisfaction in looking back at the playground at the end of the day and knowing that I had done my part to keep the city safe. But it wasn't enough just to be a fighter; years of playing the bad guy had given me a conviction that hurting other people was wrong unless it was somehow justified. Adam and I could plow through the dozens of invisible enemies because they were tacitly complicit in some evildoing, and we could destroy Rita Repulsa with no compunction because, well, she deserved it. I studied the faux-fighting of the Power Rangers as deeply as only an entranced eight-year-old boy could, dreaming of the day that I could fight against a bully or a criminal or a bad kid and know that I didn't have to hold back because it was justified, just like it was for Leonardo. Perhaps as a result, I was never a violent kid in school; despite the unabashed appreciation for fighting, I was terrified of letting loose on my classmates, gravitating more towards the good guys than Shredder.

Anything but Shredder.

Shortly thereafter I discovered *Street Fighter 2*, clamoring my dad to take me to the local 7-11 so I could spend my weekly allowance on two precious rounds with Ryu, only to lose in a flurry of button-mashing and return with bruised pride but renewed determination to my GamePro strategy guides and movelists. *Street Fighter 2* was something else for me: it was no longer about the justification for fighting - this was a fighting tournament, so the characters had to have expected to get hurt, and besides, it's just characters on a screen. The honor no longer belonged to he who had done the right thing; storyline "good guys" and "bad guys" were both fair game at the character select screen. It was all about whoever possessed the superior knowledge of special moves - and, I would learn years later, execution, move range, priority, and 'footsies' - and reflexes capable of doing the right move at the right time. There was no more right or wrong. Fighting had become a game.

I returned to the *Street Fighter* series a good ten years after being introduced to it, as a sophomore in high school, bored with role-playing games and too broke to keep up with the hardware necessary to remain competitive in *Quake III*. I still remember the formative point in my *Super Street Fighter 2* revival (pardon the pun); it wasn't the first time I picked up the *Gundam Wing: Endless Duel* ROM, which would reignite my interest in fighting games in general (leading me to pick up *Street Fighter Alpha 3* for the Playstation). Nor was it brought about by the few games I had played with my good friend David, who would regularly bring his Dreamcast to school so we could play a few games on a TV in an unused classroom. It was during a high school debate tournament, of all times, and a buddy named Brian dragged me down to La Vals, a shitty pizza place in Berkeley with a big TV that attracted most of the local poor folk and a *Capcom vs. SNK* cabinet that the guys occasionally got rowdy over. Debate was fun and all, but the adrenaline of playing against someone sitting right next to you with a crowd of people thirsty for dragon punches and big super combos - it was something else.

From there began a journey that has lasted more than four years. I've read thousands of forum posts and dozens of movelists. I've spent hundreds of dollars on arcade tokens in arcades in places from UC Berkeley and Castro Valley and Sunnyvale in Northern California to UCLA and Southern Hills Golfland in Southern California to a run-down little arcade in downtown Atlanta to a lonely little *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* machine in downtown London and a number of mall arcades in Manila. I make no secret that a factor in my choice of college was its relative proximity to James Games in Upland, which is about three miles from my campus, a fifteen minute bike ride if I'm desperate. I own two MAS Systems arcade sticks, a trusty *SNK vs. Capcom* edition Japanese arcade stick, a crappy Interact Alloy stick that I'm trying to get rid of, and an also-crappy X-Arcade two-player unit that I received for a review (and am also trying to get rid of). I have contemplated buying an Astro City arcade cabinet for my dorm room instead of a car. I have worked at my local arcade to help defray the costs of playing there. I have competed in dozens of tournaments in several different games, including making it to Evolution 2003 and 2004, the largest fighting game event in the United States. And I've met some of my best friends with nothing more than the line "So, you like *Street Fighter*, huh?"

In short, I've been Ryu.

What I have found in my four-years-and-counting stint as a *Street Fighter* player is that

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the series is, by accident or design, efficiently tailored to encourage this kind of fascination-bordering-on-obsession. The visceral thrill of pressing buttons to see your character beat up another is all well and good, but *Street Fighter* - in its various incarnations - de-emphasizes this. That kind of thrill alone is short-lived and shallow –(see *Mortal Kombat*). What *Street Fighter* encourages is much deeper; when you beat your challengers at the local arcade, you can feel with brutal clarity that it was your superior command of the arcade stick, your elevated understanding of cross-ups and high-low mixups and character matchups, and your calm balance of offense and defense that delivered your victory.

Street Fighter gamers treat their games like sports, for the most part. Some of us play casually to blow off steam and enjoy the game, others play semi-professionally because they can win tournaments consistently. We talk excitedly about the latest strategies and combos employed by upper-echelon players in important matches, and review hours and hours of combo videos and tournament footage. We bond with other people over the game, and then go and eat dinner together at the local Denny's afterward. We develop regional and animosities toward each other that fuel rivalries and keep things interesting. And we cannot, as a rule, resist the siren temptation of stopping by arcades when we travel - especially to other countries - to size up the competition and see if we can't pick up a few new tricks to wow the guys at home. Some of us even bet on the damn tournaments. This is a group of people that take their games pretty seriously, and it was this

community that caused me to mature from a tech porn gamer - the type who drool over specs and read IGN - to someone who can just love the game.

Three years or so after getting serious about *Street Fighter*, though, I had to leave the beautiful urban mishmash of the San Francisco Bay Area for the rolling strip malls and desolation of Southern California for college. I immersed myself in school - the classes, and the people, the clubs and activities. I gradually began to wean myself from *Street Fighter*; I'd play once a day to keep myself sharp, then maybe once a week - go to the arcade a few times a month, no more. There were new things to keep my interest, and I had seen way too many dedicated *Street Fighter* gamers sacrifice their grades every time a new mixup or unblockable or combo was released to the general public. But I needed something to channel that carefully cultivated desire for competitive gaming into. I had tried teaching my roommates to play *Capcom vs. SNK 2* and even *Soul Calibur II* but nothing seemed to stick.

And then while browsing the class catalog for the upcoming semester, my eyes lingered on a Shotokan Karate class.

The next two semesters saw me learning Shotokan Karate, which led to ground-fighting in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, which in turn had me watching the no-holds-barred Ultimate Fighting Championship. Two years after beginning with Karate, I am spending my post-sophomore summer training in American Boxing and continuing BJJ for a combined four hours a day with the goal of reaching a complete fighting system that includes elements from collegiate wrestling and Muay Thai Kickboxing as well. What I have discovered in mixed martial arts is in many ways an extension of what I found in *Street Fighter*; it satisfies the childhood desire to learn how to fight and to practice fighting without actually hurting someone, it provides a game for me that is as deep and individualized - if not more so - than anything ever found in an arcade, it provides a great community that brings people

together through each person's desire to improve, and it forces me to expand my horizons and meet all sorts of people I would have never encountered otherwise - and entrust in them my physical well-being. In many ways the appeal of *Street Fighter* is similar to the appeal of mixed martial arts; while any bloodthirsty fool can watch either one for nothing more than the thrill of watching violence, true fans watch it for the sheer complexity of the underlying game and appreciate the so-called 'duller' moments with an eye for the technique and strategy each player is employing.

Street Fighter took me in as a naive high school sophomore and brought me through the world. It gave me my first job (at an arcade), my first real friends outside of school, my first experience traveling without any authority figures (Evolution 2003) and gave me a home away from home. I credit it helping me develop as an individual just as much as others might talk about learning life lessons from Little League baseball. Just as I grew into *Street Fighter* and grew from *Street Fighter*, I can feel myself gradually growing out of *Street Fighter*. Someday, I imagine, I will grow out of mixed martial arts. But I feel confident in saying that *Street Fighter* has taught me more about violence, fighting, and life than I ever learned from Kindergarten teachers or Saturday morning cartoons. Fighting and violence are not ways to solve problems - I still don't want to be Shredder. But the two are not inextricably linked, and people can grow - just as I did - from learning how to fight. From learning how to play the game.

And for all the hubbub about children being raised by the TV, I have to say maybe that's not such a bad thing, being raised by a video game. Because sometimes it can teach you so damn much.

Raystorm and Its Legacy

Rayforce, Raystorm and Raycrisis
Francesco-Alessio Ursini

It's one of those days.

The sun shines but dark clouds are on the horizon, it's hot outside and a cold breeze moves my hair, which keeps getting longer and longer.

I am listening to the *Raycrisis* OST and thinking on life and trivial matters. Maybe they're trivial because they're matters of life. Maybe they're trivial because I perceive them as such, because I make them trivial.

1994.

Taito released one of the best shooters ever. You may not agree with this statement, fine, but there's a reason behind this conjecture of mine. *Rayforce* is one of the first titles to start the modern era of shooters. I have written in my own journal about a possible (and pretty questionable) arrangement of shooters, based on their phases of evolution. One of the basic ideas that I have proposed in that entry is this: by 1994, the waning of the classic arcade platformer and its domination in the matter of score and points will be overtaken when the shooter picks up the mantle of the most score-driven genre.

That's life, once the alpha male isn't that alpha anymore, someone else will take his role. Or maybe the hierarchy of constraints changes and suddenly one competitor becomes the

optimal one. Regardless of the different shades of theoretical background I choose to use, one thing is certain: in 1994, there were three shooters published that marked the transition of the genre into a more score-driven attitude.

These titles are *Batsugun*, *Raiden DX* and *Rayforce*. I won't talk about the first two titles, even though they might deserve a lengthy and flamboyant treatise too. I just want to talk, more or less, about *Rayforce*, *Raystorm* and *Raycrisis*. My personal life, in some parts, will leak in. But, as you may already have guessed, there's a reason for that.

Rayforce is one of the few titles on the Taito F3 hardware that is not a remake/sequel/etc. At the very first glance, it's not even a particularly impressive title. The attract demo is very simple; a pilot - a girl with green hair - chases a few ships across an asteroid belt. After the hunt is over, the title zooms in.

Rayforce.

Or Layer Section, or Gunlock, or Galactic Attack. These were the various names branded to the home versions, but I always played the arcade version *Rayforce*. Beside that, the sequels are called *Raystorm* and *Raycrisis*, so I'll use this name. Now let's go on - or better, let's go back. It is October of 1994, and things are changing. I don't really remember what was going in my life at that time, but it was probably some trivial matter of love. Those trivial matters

still haunt my life, but that's because we live in a world of teenagers, or at least that's my sensation. I'm almost 27 (at least, I'll be 27 by the day of publication), and I am bored by silly issues like who loves whom.

But there's one happy emergency exit to such trivial matters, which can be used at will. It features several good sides and almost no bad sides, but that too, is debatable. It has been the necessary discipline and meditation technique required to get rid of stupid and childish issues of bored people. Love is not enough, sometimes. I need to think in a more regimented way most of the time - this doesn't mean that I go around like Spock, talking about the ways of logic and denying that I get moved a bit by lovely sun-sets.

I'm a logician. Well, I'm a semanticist who's studying linguistics and cognitive sciences. Eventually I'll finish my Ph.D., but that's not the point. Because of my studies, I could resolve the trivial matters of love in the most rational (and least painful) way. What I have now is a more powerful method, so to speak. But, again, that's not the point.

1994.

If you read my previous article on the Darius series, you know by now that I'm a Taito fanboy. This is an official declaration. But well, we're speaking of Taito - do I need to make a list of their masterpieces? I'm not entirely sure it is late October - it's more a fuzzy sensation of the incoming autumn of 1994. I'm a teenager with a lot of frustration, and a single excellent method for discharging this frustration: video-games. It's fall and I'm just waiting for a stupid and trivial matter of love to end.

Not mine, I have to admit. Actually, I am a bit cold and logic-driven. I tend not to care about petty people, even if they have nice boobs, or a nice smile, or whatever sexual element most would find attractive. Hormones or not, I had to grow up quickly, and I have never developed the ability to stand childish attitudes.
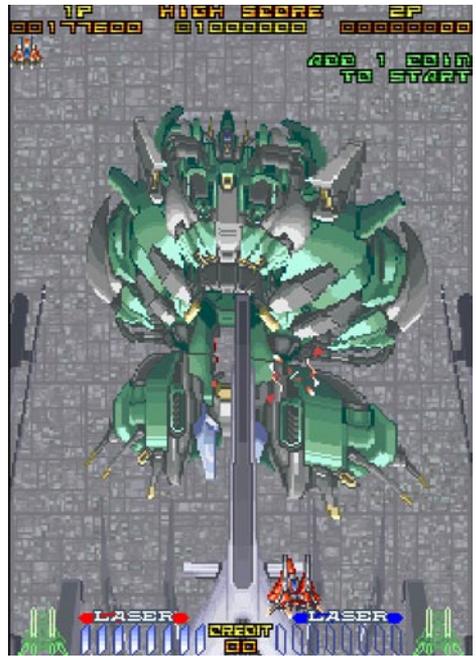
Sometimes you can't punch people on the face to make them understand that you're not interested in their petty personality. You have to be a bit more rational, and try to solve the problem in a better way than futile flirting.

Especially when you don't want to flirt.

This generates stress and frustration, which can be easily discharged by intense activities, physical or intellectual. Arcade games, before the Bemani revolution, involved mainly the latter type. I enter my uncle's arcade and my uncle tells me that there's a new shooting game, and that I will surely like it. The first approach, as I've said, isn't all that exhilarating. I'm mostly under whelmed by the minimalist design of the intro.

But that's before I put my first coin in the cab. When this happens, the screen fades to black and a simple text message appears. The usual "Press start button."

But something else happens.

On Standby.

One simple musical loop that opens an entire world of memories and thoughts every single time I listen to it. The simple loop of the starting screen on standby. A hypnotic se-

quence that compresses in a few notes the essence of life. Waiting for tomorrow, for the end of school year, for the reply from your lover, for a better occasion, for a happy event.

Waiting for time to crunch away the days of our lives, focusing on what tomorrow may give us, while today is spent contemplating trivial matters.

On Standby.

Then, after entering a whole alien world and its majestic symphony, the pilgrimage begins.

Rayforce, as I have written so many times across the chaotic ocean of the internet, is a simple but elegant game. It's basically *Xevious* on steroids; you have to lock-on to enemies on the plane below yours and shoot them with lasers, while using the main gun for the enemies on the same plane as you. The more enemies you can destroy with one row of lasers (up to eight), the more points you get. Basically, the value is:

Value of enemy$*2$^$n-1$ (for $1 \leq n \leq 6$), value of enemy$*2$^n (for $n = 7,8$)

With n being the number of enemies

locked-on and destroyed with a single volley of lasers. It's easy to figure out that yes, the game is pretty simple and all you have to do most of the time is learn how to get eight lock-ons at once. Power-ups and peculiar techniques to destroy bosses complete the score-based aspects.

But I'm omitting some important particulars: first and foremost, the entire game is based on the ability for the F3 hardware to easily handle scaling effects. This means that all objects that are located below you can actually move up to your plane. As if this wasn't cool enough, the plot is perfectly integrated with this simple design trick. What you must do is penetrate the Earth's defenses and enter the planet's core in order to make your enemy implode.

Wait, who is fighting whom?

Let's go to 2003. Actually, *Raycrisis* was published in 1998, but I only bought it in 2003. I had – for years – the OST and, like the other two OSTs, I can spend entire days listening to it. *Raycrisis* is somewhat disappointing gameplay-wise, but this is another issue. This jump into the future is to explain *Rayforce*'s past.

The plot is simple. In a distant future, the Con-human, a vast artificial network, is created to easily handle all of the data floating around cyber-space. The problem about the birth of Con-human is its awareness, and it begins encroaching all of the man-made objects in space and remapping them as part of its cognitive system – its body.

In *Rayforce*, the last survivors of humankind live in a base on the dark side of the moon, because the Con-human was successful in absorbing the whole planet as its body, and started exterminating human beings or enslaving them and cloning individuals for feeding purposes – human psychic energy being the best for the Con-human's purposes. The project Meteorite is then launched: an attack to the core of the planet, to the glandula pinealis of Con-human – the centre of the now hollow Earth.

Since you have to penetrate the Earth's core, all of the stages are designed in such a way to tell this story – First you penetrate the

external defenses, then enter Earth's atmosphere, then the first underground city, then the centre of the planet, and finally to the Con-human itself for the final battle. This means that there are marvelous effects like your ship gliding into the higher strata of atmosphere, or battling the fourth boss on a rift that will take you to the first underground city.

Let's skip to 1996. It's summer and I was almost 18. Tempus fugit [1], eh? When it's summer and you're in love when you're 18, well, it seems like nothing's more important than love, right? And then I got a sequel to *Rayforce*.

How could it be? The world ended with a bang in the first chapter, and now they were doing a second chapter? Ah well, it seems like they'd just exploit their previous ending as a story mechanism, but for some reason this plot is unrelated to *Rayforce*.

Two empires are at war. One, Secilia, was an ex-colony of Earth, which broke free of Earth's rule and decided to go against their former rulers. Since they're going up against Earth, they may as well have become new tyrants. Earth decides that it's time to strike back. It's time to send the elite forces to Secilia and destroy the whole planet by blowing up the Judas system.

Seven billion people will die because there is no room for more than one empire in the Galaxy. Seven billion people will die because, well, humankind, no matter how far it stretches its presence on space, still has the fundamental urge to exterminate itself. Factions, religions, ethnic groups; it's all about intolerance.

Again, it's just one intro screen.

Origin.

A simple, hypnotic loop of pure musical delight, a few notes of piano repeated forever and ever. But, this time, there is a different flavor, or perhaps something else, that defines the game. *Raystorm*, regardless of the even more dramatic plot, has a lighter atmosphere. I

[1] Latin for "Time Flies"

don't how exactly what it is, but maybe it feels less brooding. After all, who wouldn't be happy to exterminate seven billion people? But maybe there is something about this ultimate clash that goes beyond the simple, dark sense of destiny, and reaches the level of the old epics. Maybe it's the basic idea of intolerance and the supreme sense of peril. That only one empire can survive after this war. What it is that defines human nature, in this instance, is one thing.

Intolerance.

And even if the game has such a tragic and epic setting, it's set to music by a lovely soundtrack that exists as a promise of summer and magnificent evenings spent dissecting the game. Let's see:

Raystorm is 3D, or better, it's played from a slightly inclined perspective (20°) and uses polygonal graphics. In case you wonder, it is still one of the most beautiful 3D shooters around, albeit some of the latest Naomi titles are even better looking. It has a better visual design than *Rayforce*, an enterprise that is nothing short of a miracle. Not only that, but it also has some of the most brilliant gameplay ever, provided that you can deal with the peculiar perspective. If so, you can't avoid enjoying the pure genius behind the gaming engine.

The premise is like *Rayforce*, however this time you can lock-on to enemies that are on your plane as well. This seemingly minor change is extremely important for scoring purposes. There is also a new R-Gray ship, which works

higher the increase of your bomb bar will be.

Smart, eh?

Yeah, it's a pretty complex game: gorgeous early 3D graphics, killer design and a lovely soundtrack. I have to be honest and clarify one thing - I never got that good with the X-Gray 2. With the X-Gray 1 though, summer months passed by in an instant, and my best score rose to 16.8 million. Not too distant from the official record, but that's something I didn't discover until recently.

in quite a different way. Its main shot never powers up, but it locks-on with 16 lasers instead of eight. Well, actually, you just get one laser, which travels from one locked-on enemy to the other: if the laser can't hit any enemies the combo is over. This means that you don't need to lock-on to 16 enemies at once, but instead can lock-on to one enemy on one side of the screen, fire your laser blast, then move and continue to lock onto subsequent enemies while the laser follows its path. Once you start locking-on to more than 8 enemies scores skyrocket, as shown in the scoring formula:

$2^{n-1}*$enemy value (for $1 \leq n \leq 8$), 2^n (for $9 \leq n \leq 16$).

This means that a full 16-hit combo can be easily be worth about 1M, even if accomplishing this feat is extremely difficult. However, as the game is fully 3D, it allows you to exploit the depth between your enemies by having the laser travel back and forth between planes, thus prolonging your chain. If this wasn't enough (and you should learn how to do all the chains in stage four to properly appreciate the genius of the engine), you can increase your score by bombing in the right places. This works because, once you have a chain going, your bomb's scoring will be equal to the highest lock-on value given before its triggering. This means that if you're at a 384k (16 hit) value when you shoot the bomb and destroy three more enemies, they will each be worth 384k points. In addition, in order to refill your bomb meter you need to do chains, as the more enemies you chain, the

2001.

I was slowly re-discovering the lost Arcadia of my youth. Once I discovered the wonders of peer-to-peer, I spent my time downloading porn and Zuntata soundtracks. Well, naked women mainly - I don't like true porn. One of the most frequent OSTs being sent around was *Raycrisis*.

Rayforce, *Raystorm*, *Raycrisis*? Could it be? Was it a third chapter? I browsed around, and found a site, shmups.com, that had a review defining it as an excellent game, and from the images, I realized that it was like *Raystorm*. Cool, but the soundtrack was different from *Raystorm*'s. It didn't even sound like the same composer. Its dark, slow, hypnotic rhythm screamed hopelessness like the first *Rayforce*. Time passed, tempus fugit, and I finally got a Playstation. Hell, it was a big jump for me to buy a Dreamcast, but I wanted to play a few games that will require ages to appear on MAME.

Then I remembered *Raycrisis*. I bought it almost out of boredom, in the sense that I didn't know what to play and ended up bidding on one random auction. After a few days I finally was able to see the final chapter of the saga. The game itself was not bad. It must be played (at least when playing for score) like *Raystorm*, however, there are a few changes. First, you can select the order of your stages. Second, the lock-on grid can be retracted to its default distance when it reaches the bottom of the screen. Third, the X-Gray 3, which only shoots lock-on shots, and can shoot chains that last for

an entire stage long. Surprised? You shouldn't be. Not after *DoDonPachi*.

However, something's wrong. There's a dynamic enemy sequence implemented so that the more stuff you destroy, the more it appears on screen. It's called "Encroachment," and it measures the rate of the planet absorbed by the Con-human in its mainframe. Yes, this is a prequel to *Rayforce*. The Con-human is absorbing the planet in its system, transforming it in its body, and exterminating human beings in the meanwhile. What you hope to do is act as a virus, attempting to hack the system, to infect the body, before it's too late. Of course, it will be too late. But at least you will be given enough time to flee.

To the black side of the Moon.

This is, in some sense, the world ending in a whimper. However, as proven by *Rayforce*, humankind will be able to deliver its final blow when necessary and end things with a bang. Que descansen en paz [2]. Before things end with one final meteor strike I must go back and reflect on things. Let's put aside love - love is not enough. Let's put aside sentimentalism - I'm all for non-sentimentalism.

Taito and *Rayforce*, well, *Rayforce* at least, is not completely original, right? It's not, and since I grew up with Taito shooters I'm supposed to tell you why. Let's start from Tokyo, ok? Fighting enemies in the skies of Tokyo, *Rayforce* was one of the first examples of the steampunk setting in a shooter - well, not literally steampunk. Does a biplane against futuristic vehicles classify something as steampunk? The more enemies you hit with one salvo of bombs in bomb mode, the more points you receive. Actually, it's 2^n*1k, basically the same as *Rayforce*.

Or *Bubble Bobble*, or *Chack'n Pop*. I mean, c'mon, good ideas can be recycled forever, can't they? Well, I adored that game. Let's add *Master of Weapons* - no, it didn't have multiple lock-ons for greater score, but it did have lock-ons, and a bar to tell you how many bullets you've shot. As

you can see, they just used (or maybe abused) the opportunities given by their new hardware. It seems to be a general rule:

"If you have new hardware to fool around with, recycle old ideas for new games."

That's why we've come back to *Rayforce*. *Rayforce* and its prequel, *Raycrisis*. Maruyama-san, the boss behind G. Rev, recently said that Taito wanted to quit the arcade market except for big productions with dedicated cabs. You may have noticed a trend of late - most of shooters are published by Taito but developed by someone else. This wasn't Maruyama's goal. Among other things, they wanted to do another shooter.

You know already this story, don't you? Let's get back, again, to 1998. Well, there was one final shmup to produce. There was also one successful series to complete. So, we have to go back, back to its beginning. Back to the rise of the Con-human, the almighty soul of a dead Earth. These are the times of the *Raycrisis*.

Raycrisis is not a bad game. It lacks the extremely tight chains of its predecessor, but other, more important elements make up for its deficiencies. Let's start from the futile details: graphics and background music. Graphics-wise, it's as nice as a G. Net game can be. It's still a Hideyoshi Katoh game, with elongated, abstract ships and flower-like shapes. The settings are bizarre, as you're supposed to go around the planet to destroy the Con-human's minions, but there are some bizarre analogies implied by the stage names.

You're trying to hack the Con-human's

[2] Spanish for "That they may rest peacefully"

ly, I feel like the Con-human itself, shattered by one meteor strike, the blow from a green-haired woman that makes me implode in my newfound body, the Earth.

Maybe I'm too catastrophic in my ramblings about the future. Well, at least, this fictional world ends with a bang. All reactionaries in the world, including Eliot, would be happy. Maybe Taito wanted to end things with a bang, too. Oh well, Ave atque vale [3], *Rayforce*. May you rest in peace.

mainframe. The Con-human has given you options, in the sense that, after the initial stage, you are able to choose your path among five possible areas, each named after cognitive senses. The first and last stages are always "Identity," the core of the mainframe, but between these stages you have to hack at least three other zones in order to get back to Identity and fight the big bad Con-Human. The zones are named after such things as Emotion, Perception, and Memory. Choose three of them with any order and try to arrest its onslaught.

The Con-human's story is intertwined with mine. I was just a teenager and I wanted to save Earth. Damn, this is why I was so sad. I still remember the first time I completed the game. Ok, we're speaking of Taito: synonymous with sad games. I don't know why. In this specific case, I would say that the lack of good endings whatsoever was a bit of a letdown. Perhaps a stab wound to the soul. Maybe I should just not care about these things, but I had a tiny bit of hope left unfulfilled.

Now it's hot and dry. The sun is shining on my head. The sky has that peculiar cyan color so typical of August - when it's hot, but the days have already gotten shorter. I have played all three titles in a row, trying to remember my gaming story and its bizarre sub-plot called *Rayforce*. I think back to the buried fragments of gaming experience that I was lucky enough to experience thanks to Taito. Sometimes, honest-

[3] Latin for "hail, brother, farewell"
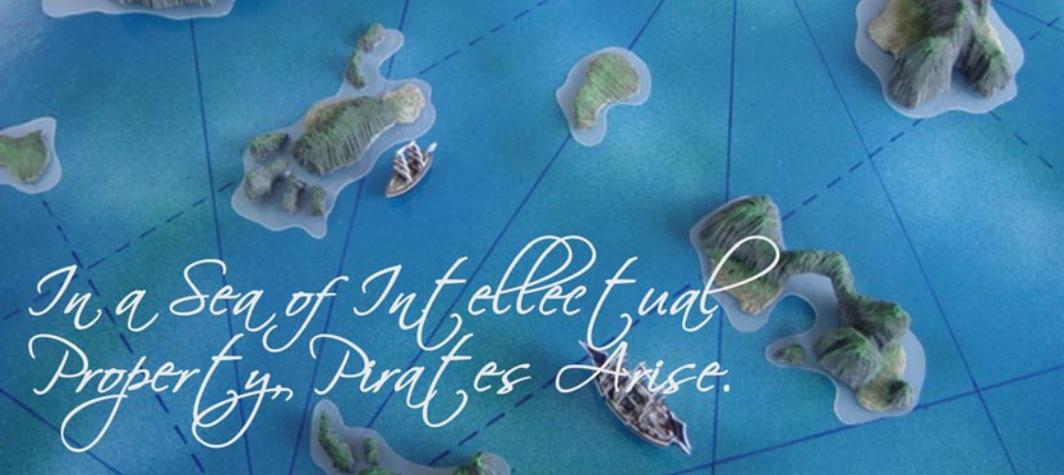
Morality and Emulation on the PSP
By Matthew Williamson

I admit it: I bought my PSP with the knowledge that I would most likely be playing NES and Genesis games on it. In fact, I know more than a few other people like myself. There is a certain joy to be found in loading up my PSP to a game of *Contra*.

Despite what Sony's marketing is trying to tell us, the PSP is the underdog out the gate. They're losing money with every system sold, but with Nintendo's dominance over the handheld market it was their only way to get a foot in the door. A small (though noteworthy) release line-up, low battery life and long load times make it even more difficult for Sony to lighten wallets with their $250 price tag. To their benefit, they offer a beautiful, wide screen and the ability to play MP3s and "DVD quality" video out of the box. In order to take advantage of these features, Sony's PSP uses the same Memory Stick Duo that they've been using with nearly all of their digital cameras, mp3 players, and VAIO computers for the past three years.

It's this Memory Stick Duo that is the key to getting emulators working on your PSP. If your PSP has version 1.5 or earlier firmware, all it takes is a little know-how and either a USB to Mini-USB Cable or a Memory stick slot on your PC then it's as simple as moving a file from your PC to your PSP, adding some backup ROM files and selecting the emulator from the PSP browser. It's almost *too* easy. Of course, in order to reach this point, crackers and hackers had to break the security measures in the PSP's firmware. Apparently, hacking the 1.00 firmware, which was installed on the first batch of PSPs shipped in Japan, was pretty easy, but Sony threw a band-aid on these efforts by shipping the US PSPs with the unhackable version 1.50 firmware, or so they thought...

Like a low-level drug dealer, Sony foregoes profit at the beginning only to make it back later by selling their games, movies, and high-capacity memory sticks at a price well over cost. Everything you'll need to enjoy the system is handed to you in the beginning. The first systems to hit shelves even came with Spider-man 2 on UMD and a disc of PSP trailers giving you just enough of a taste to get you addicted. You're even given a small but competent 32mb Memory Stick Duo for which to use as a memory card and experiment with the MP3 and photo features at a small scale. All of this comes with the "value pack" that Sony has made available for a high fetching price.

Sony intends for gamers to buy their games for $40 to $50 - the same price as games on their current home console. In exchange, gamers are offered top quality, near-PS2 level graphics. To reach this quality without the battery dying too fast for the publishers, we are given decreased polygon counts and increased load times. For a 1 minute, 30 second race in Midnight Club for the PSP - one of the worst

offenders yet - players have approximately 1 minute and 15 seconds of load times. That's not an exaggeration.

On the other end of the spectrum are games with short load times and very long play times such as Lumines. After all, what is a portable game console without a good puzzle game? The PSP has delivered in that category, and this game alone was more than enough to win over a few hearts and dollars. The PSP also got help from some major companies bringing their grandest franchises over: Metal Gear, Ridge Racer, Wipe Out, Twisted Metal, Tiger Woods, Hot Shots Golf, Spiderman, Tony Hawk, Dark-stalkers and promises of Grand Theft Auto cover just about every genre for Playstation users. It's a pretty impressive launch line-up. But we've played all of these games before.

Without any games on the horizon - Memory Stick in hand - those who like to tinker did. Initially, early adopters with their Japanese PSPs were working on circumnavigating security so they could play emulations of their favorite Famicom games. When the word got out, all involved in the emulation and homebrew scene jumped aboard. At first were rumors and hoaxes. A trick video, using the PSP's built-in movie player, fooled some into thinking that Super Mario Bros. 3 was playable. Still, little was released to the public for quite some time.

Finally a breakthrough occurred as a flood of emulators hit the net with status reports ranging from working but unplayable to playable with bugs. Around this time, US players were getting their feet wet with the PSP while Europe was still in limbo. Shortly after, PSP emulators hit the scene which allowed hackers to play and test games on their computers, speeding up the process of homebrew and emulation by allowing even those without PSPs to take part. Then the 1.50 firmware that shipped with US PSPs was slowly cracked, initially via a Memory Stick swapping exploit, and days later by abusing holes in the firmware which made swapping Memory Sticks unnecessary.

Europe, wanting a piece of the action, was

left to import systems from overseas. With the September first release date still in the future, sitting back while the rest of us got to play was just not an option for some. To put a halt on imports Sony put out legal threats to several retailers (including eBay) who were selling early PSPs to Europe. This rubbed some people the wrong way - was this step really warranted? Sony was losing money with every import system sold to Europe, which might have "very significantly impact(ed) the excitement and anticipation of the market and the way we can exploit that (excitement) in the run-up to the September launch." Sony was grasping at straws to maintain a hold on their own system.

Then, on July 11th 2005, just when Sony was starting to cool things down a bit, WAB Launcher software was released for the PSP.

"Leaked" is a probably a better description than released. So what is this and why did it get its own paragraph? Well, this is what the pirates use. It allows you to put an image of a UMD (Sony's optical disc format for the PSP) onto your Memory Stick Duo and play any game without a UMD in the drive. Of course, the memory stick has to be large enough, and most games require quite an investment to obtain the proper sized Memory Stick, but even with Sony's inflated Memory stick prices it costs no more than that of two PSP games. With a bit of searching and the use of a few chat programs, you can find someone who will let you download the latest PSP games to play without ever touching an actual, physical, game.

This makes a system that: Sony is losing money on, has the ability to play thousands of games through emulation, faces stiff competi-

tion and - as a final nail in the coffin - plays "free" games. If it sounds familiar, this is because it happened before. This was one of the key factors in putting the Dreamcast under and Sega out of the console business.

All things considered, Sony was pretty lenient about their security. They allowed gamers to play, out of the box the US PSP came in, Japanese PSP games - rare for an optical disc system, but unheard of for Sony. Considering the 29 wire connections you needed to solder to get a PS2 to play Japanese games, this is a blessing for those familiar with import gaming.

We were greedy. We abused Sony's lenience. Like children, we looked a gift horse in the mouth. It wasn't enough to play imports, we needed more, and the emulation coders have allowed us to play everything from classic NES, to Turbografx, to soundless Game Boy Advance games.

Of course, not everyone is out to use the PSP as an emulator. Some are genuinely out there to make full games. Most homebrew games are simple board games or ports of DOS games, but there is the occasional innovative game of vertically-oriented *Break-Out* or quirky Japanese dating sims. Perhaps had we left well enough alone we would have been permitted to keep the ability to run these programs, but the taste of emulation was too sweet.

Sony struck when Japan saw their first mandatory firmware update in the form of Coded Arms, a Konami published game. If you had an original Japanese release PSP with version 1.00 firmware and wanted to play Coded Arms, you needed to upgrade to version 1.50. At least they made it so that the system won't upgrade on its own with out your knowing. You're given a prompt beforehand to physically plug the system in during a firmware upgrade so that you don't lose power while flashing the bios and turn your system into a $250 paperweight. Forcing upgrades is Sony's way of giving emulation users an ultimatum: "Play our games, or play your games."

Who cares, this is just the evil Sony empire. Right?

Then why do I feel like someone crashed my party? I don't really like Sony. I bought a second Playstation when my first one completely stopped reading discs after months of only playing them when the system was turned upside down. My original PS2 also stopped reading discs, and its replacement has recently been having trouble booting up from time to time. The first shipment of PSPs had flaws, illustrated by a high system return rate, which were initially passed off as "design features" by its designer. Currently, just as games like *Okami* and *God of War* are making the PS2's graphics and potential shine like never before, we are being urged to buy a third Playstation that Sony has been quoted as calling "a device consumers would be prepared to work overtime to afford."

So why should we care if the lining of Sony's pockets gets a bit thinner? Morals are a good enough reason, but heavy piracy of the Dreamcast's GD-Roms proves that we as gaming consumers don't have morals. Or at least - we don't listen to them. What about keeping competition healthy? Nintendo has not had any competition in the handheld department in years - no stiff competition, anyway. Competition breeds excellence. Now Sony has mandatory firmware upgrades with each new game, making it even more difficult to play emulators alongside PSP games. The already-high cost of UMDs, when compared to DS and GBA games, should be expected to stay or even rise. Who knows, piracy and emulation could even chase Sony completely away from the portable market.

But who cares, it's just Sony, right?

In a Sea of Intellectual Propery, Pirates Arise. 123

Fight 3: The Fly vs The Car
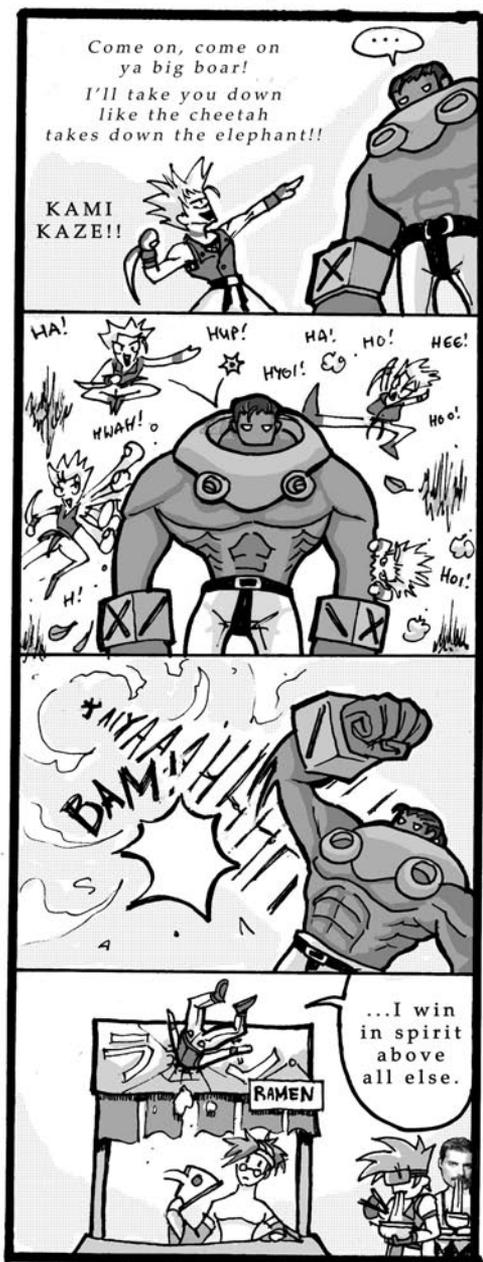
Fight 7: The Lover vs The Dead
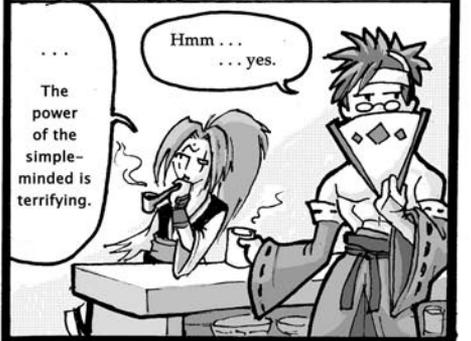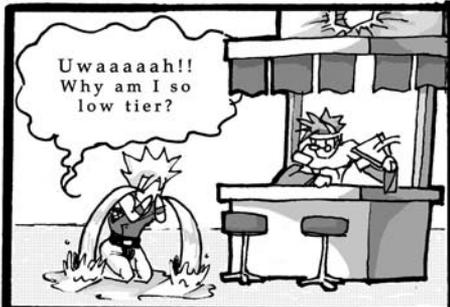
Fight 27: Johnny vs the State

Johnny! This is why we're bankrupt!!

"There is no final solution."

I still wonder who Mister Trojan is.

As do I.

What the hell is wrong with you all?! Can't you see "Mr. Trojan" is just -

FAUST!!

Will Mr. Faust please come up to the stage?

ok.

So mysterious.

So who could it be?

Final Battle: Guilty Gear XXX

Sol...   Ky...

Sol!!   Ky!!

OH MY GOD!!
WHAT THE HELL
IS WRONG WITH
THIS DOUJINSHI?!?

WHY GAME?
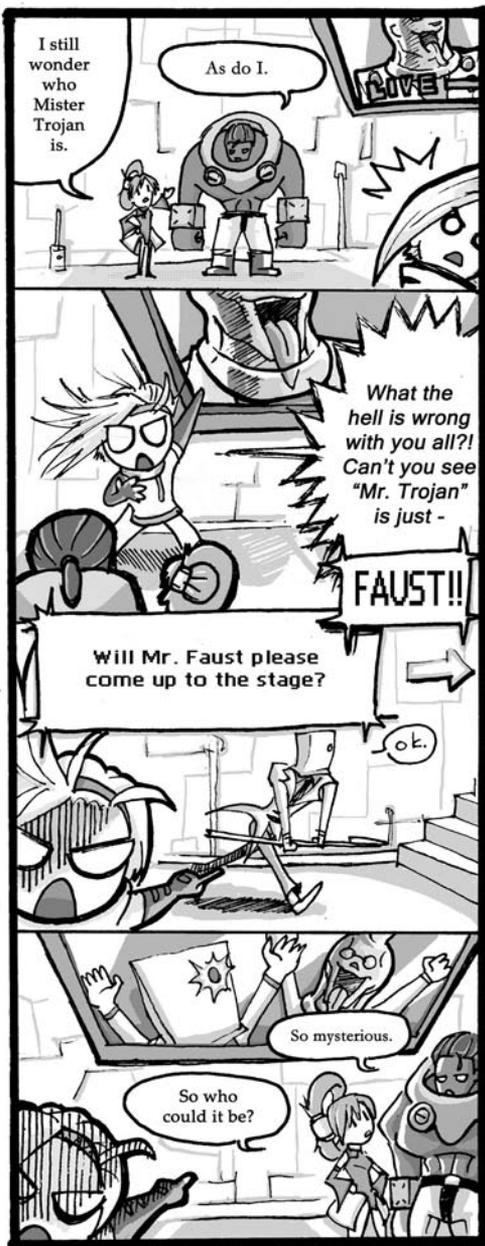
Reason #2: Internationalism
John Szczepaniak

I grew up in an unusual part of the world and was introduced to gaming in an unorthodox way. My reasons for gaming may seem a little bizarre as a result.

While growing up in South Africa, Japanese Famicoms vied for my time against American Genesis systems. Limitless international choice was at my fingertips, even if my pocket money couldn't quite take advantage of it. I gamed then because it was exciting, exotic, fresh and new.

Later in life, I would squander entire days at massive open air markets in the African sun, searching for grey import goodies from abroad. This would be followed by an evening at a friend's house in Chinatown, drinking beer and playing import Neo Geo beat-em-ups, while the sounds and smells of sizzling ginger and garlic permeated the air. Gaming at this time meant a juxtaposition of exotic imagery reinforced by the thrill of human competitiveness.

I still game because gaming can still be exotic, exciting, new, fresh and bursting with sights, sounds and competitive gameplay, all capable of making me giddy. I game because all these exciting memories come flooding back, also because it helps form new ones. People I know from Lake Baikal all the way to central Nigeria and even Malaysia play games. People all over the world, no matter what the political or economic situation in their country, like to game. Perhaps ninety percent of the world's population loves gaming in one form or another.

This is why I game. It's an international and thrilling pastime like no other - able to transcend the boundaries of language, culture and religion, with a greater impact than passive movie watching could ever achieve. It brings together people from all walks of life under a single action, and no one can deny that they love a good multiplayer challenge.

In short, I game because it's the common bond I see between all people. And it keeps rocking my world as I travel across it.

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www.gamersquarter.com

Multiplayer

The Gamer's Quarter magazine is a collaborative project between dedicated gamers who don't just play games, but experience them. Rather than sitting in a lonely room plowing through a game just to attach a few numbers and witty quote for the box art, we play the games we want and write about how and why they attach themselves to our hearts and minds in a way that no other form of media is capable of. It is our intent to publish honest, provocative, and entertaining writing which reflects our belief that video games can be more than mere vehicles for entertainment, but also creative, meaningful works.

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