the *e*scapist

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"Well, why don't **we** do it? We have years of experience in communicating with gamers, connections all over the world and, between us all, more gaming paraphernalia than your average game store."

The Bar Napkin Moment came at the end of yet another lively office discussion about gamers and gamer culture. You know, that conversation that inevitably offends one person, sends another two into tirades about the simultaneous injustice and importance of it all, and ends with "well, I know them when I see them." This particular exchange was the "Who are gamers? Why is this culture not represented by media?" one.

Now, please allow me to answer the question that just popped into your heads. What about all the other gaming magazines and websites out there? Yes, there is a veritable smorgasbord of gaming news and game information and developer diaries out there. Some sites and magazines even do an absolutely fantastic job of providing these bits to the gaming masses. Providing this type of information is not what we seek to do with *The Escapist*.

The Escapist is an ambitious magazine, written, edited and styled with a fresh approach to communicating with gamers. We are the complement to the current gaming journalistic efforts. While the others give you up-to-the-second news coverage, we give you broad looks at news over time, discussing trends and proffering glimpses into the future. While the others provide previews and reviews of the next big thing, we give you a taste of the Cinderella game that might just steal the spotlight, plus a look at why. And while others ask developers about their latest projects, we delve into the masterminds' thoughts and histories to find out what makes them tick.

The content covered in *The Escapist* is centered on a weekly theme. Both Tuesday's main publish and the weekend extra, Casual Friday, will revolve around an issue or event important to gamers. Through a lot of questions and research, we've determined topics in the forefront of gamers' minds. You will find these topics, and others you never knew you were interested in, somewhere on our editorial calendar. Planned topics range from player created content to social politics in and around games to one-hit wonders and the people behind them.

In order to achieve this level of coverage on a weekly basis, we have amassed an amazing group of writers, editors and thinkers with decades of collective experience in journalism and gaming. We've tapped everyone from game designers to prolific gaming journalists and well-known digerati to jump on board with us. I have been proud to work with this cast of players over the last several months, from the inception of *The Escapist*, and look forward to continued camaraderie over time.

Seeing *The Escapist* come to fruition has been rewarding, not just professionally, but personally, as a gamer. Gamers' numbers have been quietly growing over the last few decades. As our ranks have grown, our relevance as a population segment has grown. Our culture has become a recognizable force in shaping our society. And yet, there is no medium through which our matured culture is represented… until now.

To celebrate our new validation as a distinct culture, we have created the first issue of *The Escapist*, centered around the impact gaming has had, and continues to have, on our society. In his piece, Kieron Gillen examines games as both art and simulation, showing how gaming is poised to be the most exciting entertainment medium of the 21st century. Tycho Brahe treats us to a few snapshots into his past, highlighting moments bar of realization that games are not just the small, secret pastime we shared in yesteryear. A word of caution for plunging headlong into the mainstream is offered by John Tynes in his monthly column "The Contrarian." These features and more are the substance of the next few pages of *The Escapist*, Issue 1: Gaming Uber Alles.

Welcome to The Escapist! Enjoy!

THE MAINSTREAM IS COMING! THE MAINSTREAM IS COMING!

by Tycho Brahe

Normal people are leaping over the barrier and swarming over the precious electronic games which were once our sole domain. It may be that they are a friendly, benevolent force, but it would be foolish to assume it. In fact, I think it's best that you wait here with me in this impervious, well-stocked bunker while we try to figure out how things went so terribly **wrong**.

We already know that videogames make a person healthier physically while they refine the intellect. Well, we don't **know** know it, but that is our desperate hope, and there is a kind of purity in that. Outside of these beneficial (and quite probably, imaginary) properties, we are aware that playing these games is **completely awesome**. That's pretty much incontrovertible; I don't have to make up a study to prove it. It was really only a matter of time before the vast majority of human beings realized this fact and began living the meaningful, digital lives that we all take for granted.

Games, though, until the last few years, weren't ready to be the default pastime of sentient creatures. If you're the sort of person who would read a magazine solely distributed in Adobe's PDF format, chances are you know what I'm talking about. Graphics have been at a level attractive to people in general for a couple generations. But what the hardcore is willing to tolerate (and in a sick way, appreciate) in terms of punitive gameplay mechanisms and technological hiccoughs is well above the threshold the majority of living creatures are willing to put up with from their amusement medium. Outside of the sports titles which have always enjoyed mainstream attention, there is a vast geography of game experiences that rarely break the surface of the wider culture. That isn't to say there haven't been moves to push it to the forefront, perhaps even before it was entirely ripe for the purpose.

Let me tell you what I saw on MTV. I won't admit to watching that channel on purpose. Let me instead suggest that while switching between two other channels - each one dedicated to the higher pursuits of the mind - I happened

> **"I didn't pick up at the time that they weren't talking to me. They already had me..."**

to stumble upon your Music Television and see something that struck me as odd. I guess I should say that it strikes me as odd now. In 1997, when it actually occurred, I think I just thought it was neat to see a commercial for a game on television. I didn't pick up at the time that they weren't talking to me. They already **had** me, see, since I was three and discerned that the device I was holding held some undefinable **power** over the television. No, they were after the sort of people who watched MTV because watching MTV was actually what they wanted to **do**.

Nestled between commercials for products I would be ashamed to purchase, let alone use, I saw *Final Fantasy VII*'s Cloud Strife engaged in various acts of pre-rendered, post-apocalyptic heroism. Of course, I knew who he was, Cloud Strife as an entity was only slightly less anticipated than

our Lord Jesus H. Christ. The ability of the Compact Disc medium to store data, coupled with Squaresoft's unrivaled artistry and intimidating financial power, had created something that looked - at times - like a blockbuster film.

If the numbers I've read are correct, Square sold one copy of the game for every man, woman, and child on Earth - living or dead.

That **may** be an exaggeration.

What a person snared by that advertisement thought of the game once they got it home is anybody's guess.

You'll forgive me if I assume that the reader has some knowledge of gaming genres, and won't skitter away if I suggest that *Final Fantasy VII* constitutes an **epic RPG** - but suffice it to say that the user "plays" this kind of game by navigating a series of blue menus for up to a hundred hours. For me, hey, I can't get enough of that kind of thing. I crave a good menu. I'll sometimes go into a Denny's and not even order anything. But a person could be forgiven for harboring misconceptions about the experience. All of that aside, it moved a tremendous amount of dedicated entertainment hardware into a truly staggering number of living rooms, and gave Console War I to Sony's Playstation. The fact that we as dedicated gamers were already sold on the series was only part of the success. The game crossed over, beyond the ramparts, and attracted another type of

player altogether. Somewhere in my mind, this has always been the point of demarcation after which playing videogames was no longer the sole domain of pariahs.

And so, the way was paved for the breakthrough megagame - something that would really and truly puncture the mainstream and induct them into our dark brotherhood. It would have to be a little more interactive, a little more accessible. It would have to contain less blue menus, and it did. It starts with the letter H, and rhymes with halo. Because it is *Halo*.

There is a lot of meat in *Halo* story-wise if you want it, but if you can't be

bothered with narrative you won't find your progression hampered. *Halo* included cooperative play - something we're already starting to see the next generation of consoles take very seriously - and it's a feature which no doubt projected the game to a wider audience by infusing what was essentially a single-player experience with camaraderie. PC gamers had already tasted it, and tasted it at exorbitant expense. What *Halo* did was bring the excitement and social experience of a LAN party to virtually

anyone who wanted to have it. That's no small thing.

The conversion of gaming from a solitary activity to a group activity that did not require thousands of dollars and considerable technical savvy is not insignificant. At the time it was released, the lack of Internet play seemed like a serious omission to the old guard - but as it stood, Halo **forced** you to get your stuff, get out of the house, eat Fritos brand snack chips and tote imaginary shotguns in drive-bys on frozen tundra. It's extremely rewarding, and I think it's as responsible for *Halo's* legendary status as anything else you'd care to name.

When I was waiting in line to grab my copy of *Halo 2*, it became clear that what

had started with the original *Halo* had intensified - three years of addictive, communal Combat Evolved had created a culture with its own jokes and shared culture. I could see that the line in front of me all the way to the register was filled with people I would never see in the ordinary course of my life. These were not young men who turned to videogames because - as it sometimes was in my day - the pleasures of a social existence were unavailable to them. These were people just as hardcore, in their way, as I was - and yet they were somehow able to blend into the larger population unnoticed. Mark II, I thought. These are Geeks **Mark II**.
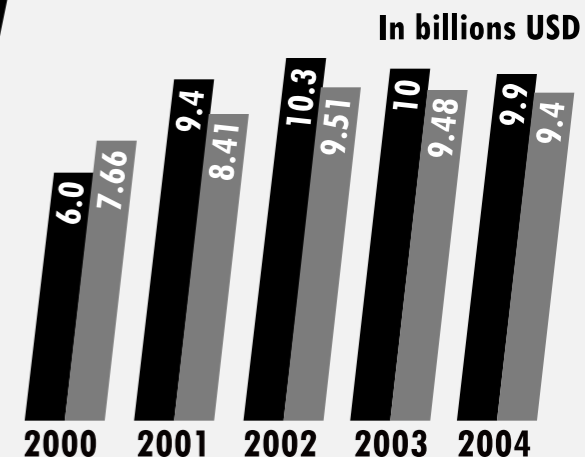
I hid behind a display.

Now, they walk among us. Try not to be startled by their odd cuisine or strange mannerisms! They're here to stay, and the effect of their presence on the industry and the games it produces is pronounced. Look at *The Sims*, or *Nintendogs* - a game whose actual, real objective is to make a puppy love you. They're targeted at, and bringing **in**, an entirely different kind of person. That's something we can get into next time, if you like, but I kind of have to go. I haven't checked my e-mail in, like, an **hour** and I'm starting to itch all over.

> **"I could see that the line in front of me all the way to the register was filled with people I would never see in the ordinary course of my life."**

Gaming is bigger than the Box Office - and has been since 2001

In billions USD

Year	Gaming Revenues	Box Office Revenues
2000	6.0	7.66
2001	9.4	8.41
2002	10.3	9.51
2003	10	9.48
2004	9.9	9.4

*NPD total gaming revenues

■ **Gaming Revenues**
■ **Box Office Revenues**

Film execs claim this comparison is unfair to movies because it ignores ancillary revenues (DVDs, TV, merchandising). But games are beginning to produce ancillary revenues, too. Halo has spawned novels, toys, and a soundtrack; a movie is in the works.

Halo 2	**125 million USD**
Star Wars Ep III	50 million USD

The inescapable fact is that today's mega-release games are as big as any feature film, platinum album, or bestseller, and equally as capable of spawning an IP franchise.

Even more telling, gaming's biggest release day is **more than twice** that of the biggest blockbuster day one to date.

"...in the opinion of some, I am not a gamer."

GAMER LIKE ME

by Jennifer Buckendorff

Am I a gamer? I review video games for various sources, including a major metropolitan newspaper. In May, I made the rounds of E3 for ten hours a day. I have a carefully selected games library, and my adoration of *GTA* dates back to the London expansion pack, when I used a double-decker bus to evil ends. I grew up in the arcades, standing on tiptoes to feed quarters into the slots. I give game recommendations to friends and acquaintances as if I were reading their tea leaves.

But, in the opinion of some, I am not a gamer.

The common archetype of gamer is specific. He likes FPS - a lot. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of every game that was released on the Dreamcast. He customized his own PC, and will argue the benefits of various video cards until the end of days. (He still thinks buying an Alienware system is a cop-out. Real gamers start from scratch.) He would be highly insulted if I ever called myself a gamer in front of him.

Lately, I've been wondering who came up with this idea of the "gamer" and its parameters. Do gamers play *World of Warcraft*, while non-gamers are on *EverQuest II?* Are you a gamer if you take a week off to watch DVDs, rather than play *Half-Life 2* when it's released? Do you have to hit 60 hours a week to qualify, or is 20 enough? Do you have to be playing many games at the same time, or if you've only ever played *City of Heroes*, does that count?

Maybe gamers are the ones lined up at midnight for the big release of *Halo 2* - or maybe *Halo 2* is not really a gamer's game, just a game for people who think they're gamers. It seems like having other interests - such as mine, things

like travel - rule you out from the gamer label forever, because you'll always be PKed by someone better.

To me, being a gamer implies that you play pretty much to the exclusion of everything else. You may stand in line for the opening day of *Spider-Man 3*, but that's an acceptable anomaly. If you're a gamer, you're not sitting down for a few hours a night to read *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* and postmodern musings on the Basque region. You're playing games - a whole lot of them - and you're much, much better at them than I.

To be a gamer is also to spend a lot of money on the act of gaming - getting new games at $50 a pop, having multiple consoles set up in your living room, upgrading your PC system because the new game you want to play demands it. Enthusiastic kids I know - all raised on the PS1, and pretty much game players for life - wouldn't qualify as "gamers" in this scenario, because they don't have the money to spend.

Maybe the whole concept of a "gamer" is outdated, a remnant from five years ago. It seems like a concept from the era when PC titles were the only game in

town. Once the console - with its wonderfully pre-configured set-up - entered the picture, the masses flocked to it. PC players played consoles, too, but stayed involved in PCs, retreating into a world of ever more complicated gaming, where learning the basics of an RPG or a flight simulator could reasonably take 24 hours non-stop.

Like the person who knows all the Microsoft Windows shortcuts, these players take pride in their obscure knowledge, wearing it as a badge of honor. "Yes," they say, "of course it takes fifty commands to get a character out of

the village and into the fields, where you can then begin mining."

PC games have become a bifurcated world of complex, difficult-to-learn gamer games, and "dad games" like golf and solitaire. In a way, PC games are a microcosm of the idea of the gamer versus non-gamer, since the division is so clear.

But is the kid who only plays *GTA* after school - and loves it - any less of a gamer? What about if he has the full lineup of all the major consoles? What about if he can only afford the games in the $20 bin, but he plays each all the way through? Does the amount of money you spend make you a gamer, and the lack of it, disqualify you? What about the girl - and yes, it's often a girl - who has devoted 150 hours to cultivating her crops and neighbors in *Animal Crossing*?

According to the conventional wisdom, the answer is no, none of these people are gamers.

It's time to come up with a new label, or recognize that the old one must expand its domain, as gaming has expanded its

own. It shouldn't expand to the point of becoming meaningless, but it would be good to encompass all of us who enjoy the challenge of games, and spend our time and our energy on playing and thinking about games. I'm not talking about the person who picks up a PS2 to get some aerobic exercise with *Dance Dance Revolution*, and then tries another game here or there. I'm describing the kinds of enthusiasts who can talk about *Beyond Good and Evil* with as much passion as a film-school grad discussing Truffaut.

Plenty of people put in the hours and have the zeal, and I have no interest in taking the label of gamer away from them. We might just decide to agree to disagree, since as long as qualifying to be a gamer means I can't pull out the DVDs for a weekend - leaving my games on the shelf - I'm fine to stay out of the club. But in a way, it's too bad, because if I was a gamer, included in the group of worthy gamer companions, we might have a good time playing together.

CULTURE WARGAMES

by Kieron Gillen

We need a Straw Man. Any volunteers?

Ah, here we are. Could you repeat that for the crowd, Senator Deanna Demuzio of Illinois?

"Video games are not art or media. They are simulations, not all that different from the simulations used by the U.S. military in preparation for war."

Excellent.

Senator DeMuzio is the sponsor for the current legislation being propelled via peristalsis through the bowels of the Illinois State Government. The bill would introduce a legally enforced rating system for games. The current rating system is voluntary, much like that of the film industry in the U.S. The new rating system would hold that if a retailer sells a game to a person below the age limited by the rating, they would receive a hefty fine and so on and… well, so **irrelevant**.

To be honest, I don't have an **enormous** problem with a legally-enforceable rating system for games. As a citizen of the UK, I already live in a country which has a similar (in fact, in terms of fines, more

severe) system in place. If a game features any significant measure of adult content, it goes before the BBFC and gets exactly the same rating as a film or a video.

My issue with the legislation is the reasons it is progressing. First, the text of the bill claims videogames cause definite psychological harm to players. This is, as yet, unproven. Second, related to the quote I've just taken, the position that videogames don't receive first-amendment free-speech rights as they're not actually a form of expression. Games are just simulators, virtually identical to the ones we use to train our soldiers. No one's saying anything through them.

Hmm.

Let's put aside the question, exactly in which imminent conflict the armed forces expect to utilize their finely-honed gold-coin-collecting skills. Let's take the good Senator at her word - games are almost military simulators, so not expression – and move forward

By an odd quirk of fate, I found myself in Prague a few weeks back, visiting

Bohemia Interactive. They're best known for their breakthrough soldier-sim *Operation Flashpoint*, critically acclaimed for its extreme devotion to realism. The critics weren't the only ones who noticed. After its release, they were approached by cheery governmental bodies to transform the game into a training simulator for soldiers. The resultant VBS1 is used by the US Marines and National Guard, among others, as part of their training.

So, in the case of *Flashpoint*, Senator Demuzio is very much right. Flashpoint is exactly the sort of game she was thinking about when making her statement, with the game and the war-simulator merely tweaked versions of one another. Where she's entirely wrong is arguing that this somehow makes the game not a form of expression.

Bohemia is actually one of the more idealistic groups of developers I've met. They talk about their moral discomfort in creating a game about a real conflict, recalling a specific project based on Vietnam. The team disposed of months of work because they thought it impossible to make a game that was both accurate and enjoyable. They spoke of adding destructible buildings to their engine for future games, explaining the addition isn't because they want to give people the visceral thrill of seeing a building fall apart. Rather, it is because they want to create a persistent world where your successes and failures remain to remind you of your errors. Fail to defend a farm, and that burnt out shell is going to be sitting there for the rest of the game.

"Bohemia is actually one of the more idealistic groups of developers I've met."

When thinking of the campaign structure for their future games, Bohemia doesn't choose a life or death struggle for supremacy between equivalent forces. While dealing with fictional situations and antagonists, they base their campaign on the assumption of American Military supremacy in any conventional war. Rather than making the game about whether the Americans will win, they make it how the Americans will win and your character's experiences along the way.

Compare and contrast with the recently released *Battlefield 2* demo, which posits the U.S. Marines and a Middle-Eastern army as equals on a technological footage. Both are rooted in the language of the military, but they're expressing wildly separate views on the nature of a conflict. *Battlefield 2* presents a beleaguered U.S. in a war which is more cowboys and Indians than anything else, while Bohemia reaches for something more akin to a comment on the nature of war using theoretical examples. Even within the genre of pseudo-military simulators, there are clear differences from game to game to what the nature of conflict actually is. Put simply, *Flashpoint's* world is a world away from *Battlefield 2's*.

The conclusion we can draw from this is that simulators aren't, by their nature, neutral. They're as prejudiced as their creators. Simulators say something about the world they describe. Simulation **is** expression.

In fact, simulation is a cornerstone of the history of most cultural forms. Putting aside the obvious history of representation in visual art, even literature demonstrates the pattern of simulation as art. What is *Anna Karenina* other than Tolstoy's simulation of society life in 19th Century Russia? "Simulation" is just another way of saying this is life, and this is how it works. The only difference is, in games, the representation created isn't static; the

"Simulation is expression"

player is placed inside and left to explore its contradictions and limits.

Restraining ourselves to classical simulator games, it's easy to pick out examples where a developer's beliefs, philosophies, prejudices or priorities reveal themselves in a game. Remember how it proved impossible to construct a decent functioning city in *Sim City* without an extensive public transport system? Imagine how the game may differ if created by an advocate of the automobile industry. Staying with Maxis games, consider the egalitarian sexual politics which permeates *The Sims*, with sexual orientation being a matter of choice and all decisions being equally respected. At the other end of the seriousness spectrum, until relatively recently Sports Interactive's incredibly thorough management simulation of the football/soccer leagues, *Championship Manager* (now *Football Manager*), had a terrible tendency for Everton to perform above what their statistical abilities should suggest. Eyebrows will remain unraised when I reveal that the Collyer brothers support a certain Liverpool-based team.

Implicit decisions in design can reveal similar thought processes in general. I remember an early review of *Civilization* written by British games-writer-turned-developer Gary Penn, well before it was enshrined as a modern classic. He was only luke-warm towards it, being disappointed by how it presented a world where everything was inevitable. You had to invent the wheel. You had to invent religion. Rather than being free to experiment in possible civilisations, it implies we live in a Liebnitzian Best of All Possible Worlds. The world is what it **had** to be, and to Gary Penn, it was a shame. I've no idea whether Sid Meier believes in something like the inevitable march of history, but *Civilization* certainly does.

In other words, a simulation is never just a simulation. Equally, freedom is rarely actually free of designer-imposed desires. Even in games with the most self-expressed mandates of "choice" for the gamer, it doesn't mean that there isn't a message. In *Deus Ex*, the generally politically liberal Ion Storm Austin created a world where you could choose between violence and pacifistic approaches, but the charismatic characters urged you towards peace while the monsters suggested violence.

A LOOK AT VIDEO GAME LEGISLATION

Inspired largely by the title JFK Reloaded, HB 4023 (The Safe Game Illinois Act) was introduced after strong remarks on the harmful nature of video games from Governor Rod Blagojevich late last year. The governor's originally stated goal in suggesting the legislation was to help parents who "face unprecedented challenges in monitoring and protecting their children from harmful influences." The bill bans the rental and sale of violent and sexually explicit video games to children younger than 18. The bill also requires retailers to label violent and sexually explicit video games, similar to the "Parental Advisory" label found on music CDs, and to post signs explaining the video game rating system. Retailers who violate the ban face a fine of $1,000. Fines are also imposed on retailers who fail to properly label games or place proper signs.

While it is certain HB 4023 will be signed into law shortly, attempts to legislate video games across the United States are being met with mixed results. In California, Assembly Bill 450 (Assemblyman Leland Yee) was voted down in May by a committee of the California House of Representatives, which later reconsidered and approved it on a bipartisan, 6-4 vote. Reviving most of Yee's original bill (AB 1792) from the year before, AB450 proposes fines of up to $1,000 for retailers selling M-rated games to children less than 17 years of age. North Carolina Senate Bill 2, also addressing game sales to minors, is currently in House committee.

The key problem for video game legislation is making the law durable enough to withstand challenge once it is approved. Federal courts have already struck down various regulations previously approved by Washington State, Indianapolis and St. Louis County in Missouri, stating they encroach upon rights protected by the First Amendment.

To be praised by someone actually worth liking, you had to restrain your more scarlet impulses. *Deus Ex's* central tenet was freedom of choice for the gamer, but it's clear what choice Ion Storm wanted you to make.

At the other end of the ethical scale, *Postal 2* is a genuinely monstrous game. You are positioned as an everyday Joe, going about everyday tasks, whose everyday frustrations lead you to entirely atypical, grotesque violence. Most troubling – and it's this that reveals there's something more than lizard-hind-brains at the developers, Running With Scissors – it's a choice by the player which leads to the slaughter. You are presented with the choice of sitting through a tedious delay or short-cutting it by pulling out a shotgun and starting to blast away. It's a nihilistic, sick gag, but it's only really funny because you've been made entirely complicit. They may have wanted you to, but it was you who pulled the trigger. It's a game which plays games with you.

But that moves beyond the strict "simulations" which our Senator was referencing, which only illustrates by how great a distance she missed her

> ## "Describing Ocarina of Time as a boy-with-fairy simulator fails to really convince... or do justice."

mark. Most games bear no relation to military simulators at all. In fact, what games mostly choose to simulate bears no relation to reality at all. Most of these games can't be called a simulation except in the very broadest sense. You could argue the base laws of physical causality, which form the majority of games, make most games simulations. However, it sits awkwardly when you're describing a simulator of something that simply doesn't (and never will) exist. Describing *Ocarina of Time* as a boy-with-fairy simulator fails to really convince… or do justice.

Except, perversely, that's what it actually feels like to play the *Zelda* pantheon. Even if it's a ludicrous, fantastical situation, it convinces you of its truth. And it's here where we find what I suspect is the central core of gaming's power and why it should be the premier form of interest of the twenty-first century. In this future, games can be

viewed as machines for artificially inducing sensation in the gamer - digital hallucinations creating holidays in places that don't exist.

Well, yes, but the counter-argument to games' rising importance is that's equally true that most forms of art or entertainment induce sensation. For example, reading any piece of fiction, from Dr. Seuss to James Joyce, is an exercise in building images and fictions in your mind. Where games differ is their interactive nature. The feedback loop between your decisions and the game involve you in a way other forms simply can't match.

Games create a cybernetic system between you and the machine, with your senses eventually expanding to possess your avatar when you've sufficiently mastered the control system. This is the absolute magic of the form, where you stop thinking, "I need to press X to

jump," and start thinking, "I'll jump." Just look at the language people use to talk about games to show how much their sense of identity has merged with their in-game character. If someone's enjoying a game, it's, "It hit me," never, "It hit my character," in the same way that a human's sense of self can expand to include the vehicle they're in ("He hit me!" versus the actually correct "He hit my car!").

Videogames are the simulator which swallows your consciousness alive and takes you to another place. While other forms just let you look at how the creators believe the world to be, games let you step inside an artificial construct and allow you to actually **be** there.

> ## "Games create a cybernetic system between you and the machine, with your senses eventually expanding to possess your avatar."

This is a fundamental power of the form and can't be overstated. There's never been anything quite like a videogame before. For this reason, Neophiles gather around games, because they're a form which still has a little bit of The Future in them. While you can argue that games are grounded in postmodernism in that they, by their nature, celebrate the death of the author and explicitly make the "reader" the driving force, the fact there's still so much to do with them makes them absolutely modernist. As the rest of pop-culture plays remix tricks with the past and can't even be bothered to start thinking about ways forward, videogames have a grand vista before them of new, uncharted possibilities. But it's not purely in potential where games are interesting. There's more than

enough in their current actuality, rather than their abstract future, to make them interesting and worthy of discussion. Living solely for the future is just as bad as living solely for the past.

It's in that spirit we find developers and gamers denigrating themselves. The feeling seems to be that even though games are amusing enough at the moment, because they're stuck dealing with primary-coloured emotions and without the subtle blend of emotion that literature manages, games are somehow lesser. When will a game chart the emo-esque moment of seeing someone who reminds you of a person with whom you had an ill-fated affair and now you experience regret mixed with longing with a touch of realization that nothing

will ever be the same again, and perhaps a little bit of the colour mauve, as well as literature can?

All this line of argument does is lacerate games for not being another form. It's bemusing why games are always compared either film or the novel, as if they were the only art-forms worth mentioning. Why aren't games compared to – say – dance or architecture, which are equally accepted as art forms and don't operate anything like the silver screen or the printed word?

This form of inferiority complex has always been endemic in any new cultural form. Last year, I finally got around to reading Aristotle's *Poetics* and was charmed to discover that large sections involve Ari discussing the relative merits between the new-kid Tragedy versus the established form of Epic Verse. He cites other critics who argue that Tragedy, featuring vulgar elements such as singing and creating works of hugely less scale, is a lesser form than the traditional Epic Verse. Aristotle plays it cute, arguing what they've analyzed as weaknesses are in fact strengths, allowing Tragedy to move people in ways Epic Verse simply can't.

I think he missed a trick in his determination to prove one superior to the other, however. Rather than being a competition where one must triumph, the real situation is that Epic Verse succeeds in different things in different ways than does Tragedy. That's all. In other words, things in ancient Greece were exactly as they are now. The new forms are judged according to the standards of the old forms, and found wanting, until someone notes that while the new form may not excel in one area, it far exceeds the old in others.

> "While other forms just let you look at how the creators believe the world to be, games let you step inside an artificial construct and allow you to actually **be** there."

"...things in ancient Greece were exactly as they are now. The new forms are judged according to the standards of the old forms, and found wanting..."

So, no, games aren't currently as able as literature or film at capturing those quiet, sensitive moments. And, while I personally doubt this will prove to be the case, maybe they never will be. Really, it doesn't matter. When you manage to show me a book that captures the exhilaration of flying down a snowy slope while pulling a physically impossible contortion even a fraction as well as *SSX Tricky* does, we'll talk about which one is intrinsically superior. And please bury that absolutely vile concept that primal sensations are somehow "lesser". Saying it's vulgar is just another way devotees of another form admit they can't manage to appreciate it even a fraction as well and, through this label, put limits on what's an acceptable sensation for a work to translate.

Despite the nay-sayers, games are still in the enviable position of being capable of expressing experiences other forms have had difficulties with, where its competitors' possibilities are at least partially quenched. While film, and its smaller-screened sister television, casting the last hundred years in soft, flickering light, still achieve magnificent things, its ideas and boundaries are increasingly well plotted. Games have barely even started.

It even helps games' case that film is a more limited form in what it can present. Games can and have consumed influences from all other arts, and integrated them into a seamless whole. While the academic fisticuffs between the mechanic-hungry Ludologists and the story-obsessed Narratologists have attempted to define what games **should** be, all either has done is make the grand totality of games smaller to fit their prejudices. As much as a classical Narratologist may snort at *Tetris* or a Ludologist take issue with a *Final Fantasy* game, to remove either from the canon lessens the import of the canon. That beloved games with real power have come from both traditions, and successful hybrids appear at every point between the two poles, shows how foolish such attempts are. Games are bigger than that. With games' immersion through interactivity, they can abstractly take us anywhere, show us anything and allow us to do whatever we want.

So, where, precisely, is this brashly confident child of the arts going to take us in the twenty-first century?

I really don't know.

And **that's** exciting.

THE CONTRARIAN
WHEN GAMING IS EVERYWHERE, GAMING IS NOWHERE

by John Tynes

I sat down in the movie theatre. The lights went dim, the curtains parted, and the projector fired up. The big white screen in front of me, the very same one I'd sat before a hundred times, suddenly turned into a clear glass window. The film was *Baraka*, the format was 70mm, and the picture on that screen was so perfect, so detailed, that I couldn't believe my eyes. No film I'd ever seen in this theatre looked like this one. I could step right through the screen.

I'd like to think that you've had this experience, too. But you probably haven't. Seventy millimeter filmmaking is dead, killed by the ubiquity of multiplexes. When the corporate gods behind AMC Theatres, Cineplex Odeon, Regal Entertainment, and all the rest rolled out their massive assault on American suburbs in the 1990s, they decided that buying 70mm projectors and building theatres that would do them justice was just not part of the spreadsheet. They wanted the lowest common denominator of technology, and that meant good old 35mm, the same middling format we've been staring at for decades.

Until the multiplexes rolled out, 70mm wasn't just a curiosity. Big films were shot in this format, including *Lawrence of Arabia*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet*, and even the Tom Cruise historical epic *Far and Away*. But about ten years ago, all that dried up and died. Hollywood got out of the 70mm film business because not enough theatres had the projectors to make it worthwhile. The explosion of screens demanded standardization, and suddenly the movie business couldn't justify the expense of working with 70mm cameras. Why bother, when you were just going to shrink it down to 35mm and pump out prints by the thousands to ensure that 98% of the population could watch *Shrek* on opening weekend.

Ubiquity is a funny thing. It turned movies into a sporting event, with the weekend box offices as scoreboards and people rooting for their team. The entire industry changed, compressing their marketing efforts to nail that crucial first weekend. It's made more films available to more people, which is a fine thing.

But ubiquity only works when it's married to standardization. Species evolve to the point where they reach a plateau of ubiquity, at which point all members of the species are pretty much the same. Humans have the same number of fingers, the same number of eyes. Ubiquity plus standardization equals success. Mutants arise and, for the most part, die off.

When gamers talk about how gaming is everywhere, how game culture has permeated everything, they miss this lesson. The success of our hobby is the jackboot sheathing the downward-driving foot of global commerce, and the snapping neck beneath its heel is innovation.

This is why Nintendo is doomed.

> "...ubiquity only works when it's married to standardization..."

Okay, not entirely. Nintendo's **hardware** is doomed. The Game Boy? Drowning. Gamecube? Buried. Revolution? Dead on arrival. Sony and Microsoft have begun the process of cleaning their clock, and there's just a bit of dust on the minute hand still left to go.

The thing about Nintendo that keeps me awake at night is that they've always innovated. When they made the leap to 3D with *Mario 64*, they designed the controller to fit the game. Shigeru Miyamoto understood that camera control was the single biggest challenge of 3D gaming, and he wanted a controller that would support his camera solution. He was spot on: nine years later, games still routinely ship with crappy camera controls. It's not because the developers are lazy; it's because cameras are **hard**. Miyamoto and his colleagues at Nintendo realized this and they didn't screw around. They built the platform to support the game.

It wasn't the only time Nintendo went out on a limb. There was the Virtual Boy, the Power Glove, the Gamecube to Game Boy Advance Link Cable, the Donkey Konga Bongos, the Game Boy DS. They've made it clear that the Revolution won't be processor-competitive with the Playstation 3 and the Xbox 360; instead, the boys from Kyoto say their innovations in game control systems will drive entirely new types of play.

They're wrong.

"Miyamoto and his colleagues at Nintendo... built the platform to support the game."

This is not a new story. Look at Sega: they ruled with the Genesis, botched the Saturn, but came back strong with the Dreamcast. It was a great console, very powerful, with an innovative controller scheme. The memory card had its own controls and LCD screen, and you could play little games on it by itself or plug it into the controller where it could display additional information during the game. Their online service turned the Dreamcast into a TV web browser and introduced networked gaming to the living room.

The publishers yawned.

Sony was hot. The mutant died. The standard took hold. Sega surrendered, gave up on hardware, and did what they did best: make great games for whatever platform they could.

That's the problem. Publishers want to make one game with one set of art assets, then recompile it and spit it out for every platform they can.

Consider this: some major licensed games in 2006 will be released for **seven platforms**. Let's count 'em: Playstation 2, Playstation 3, Xbox, Xbox 360, Gamecube, Revolution, PSP. This seven-platform window won't last long. The Gamecube has already dropped off the map for some publishers, and in 2007 you won't see many titles launching on PS2 and Xbox. But they'll last longer than you expect, because publishers now believe they left money on the table when they abandoned the PS1 too soon.

What's missing from that list? Game Boy DS for one. Do you think Ubisoft is going to crank out the latest *Ghost Recon* for the DS? If they do, do you think they'll put a lot of work into giving the second screen an interesting use, maybe find

"Consider this: some major licensed games in 2006 will be released for seven platforms."

"This seven-platform window won't last long."

some innovative ways to exploit the touch screen for playing Tom Clancy shooters?

No. No way. There's a bigger chance of EA adapting *NFL 2006* to use Nintendo's digital bongos.

Publishers want to make one game, one investment, and then leverage that investment on as many platforms as they can as cheaply as possible. If the Revolution has some crazy gyroscopic controller that works in a brand new way which is incompatible with the dominant DualShock paradigm, publishers will look the other way. They don't want to make a big investment in tailoring a game for the special features of one particular platform.

That's why the Sony PSP is going to win. Publishers understand it: powerful 3D, familiar controls, absolutely zero innovation. That's how they like it. They can take *Ghost Recon* and slap it out for the PSP. Why not? It isn't fundamentally different from a PS2 or an Xbox; it's just portable.

Even Microsoft paused from chest-thumping long enough to cave on this point. Their mutant Xbox controller departed from the Sony standard of the four shoulder buttons in favor of two triggers and then black and white buttons no one knew how to use. Look at the Xbox 360 controller: Yep, four shoulder buttons. The mutant died. The standard took hold.

Nintendo is already on the mat. Sony shoved their fingers in Nintendo's nostrils and dragged them screaming up and down the block. Microsoft scurried over to their whimpering, bloody body and stole their lunch money. Nintendo blubbered something about the supremacy of the Game Boy, but now they have their first real competition in years and a user base that's ten years older than they realize.

The saddest part of all this is that Nintendo knows it. Some of them do, anyway. You just need to read their awful press release for the Game Boy Micro; it tells the tale. Right at the end of the first paragraph, Nintendo's own marketing people issue their cry for help: "In an instant it attracts attention and positions the image-conscious player as someone on the cutting edge of cool." As soon as your marketing department flat-out says, "Hey kids, our product is cool!" it's time to sell the stock short. The first rule of marketing is you don't say you're cool; you show your product with cool people, cool music, or cool imagery and let the consumer fill in the blanks. But no, Nintendo marketing rants ever on: "Because of its diminutive size and industrial-hip look, Game Boy Micro immediately identifies the person playing it as a trendsetter with discriminating style." It's tiny, "allowing it to sit comfortably alongside today's hippest technological gadgets."

Nintendo's marketing department is the canary in the coal mine. They're losing the war and they're desperate and they no longer care who knows it.

It breaks your damn heart.

When gamers celebrate the fact that gaming has gone mainstream, that it's everywhere, they're dancing on Nintendo's grave. They're rejoicing in a future of narrowly defined genres: the shooter, the stealth action, the character platformer. They're laughing at the burning wreckage of *Feel the Magic: XY/XX* and *Nintendogs* and *Odama*. They're whipping out their PSP and playing *"Tony Hawk: Back For More Cash"* and saying look at the screen, look at the graphics, isn't it pretty, and so familiar. They'll eat at McDonald's and shop at Wal-Mart and listen to The Killers and wear their Hot Topic. And ten years from now, some guy like me will write an article about "Remember Game Boy?", and that'll be that.

Enjoy.
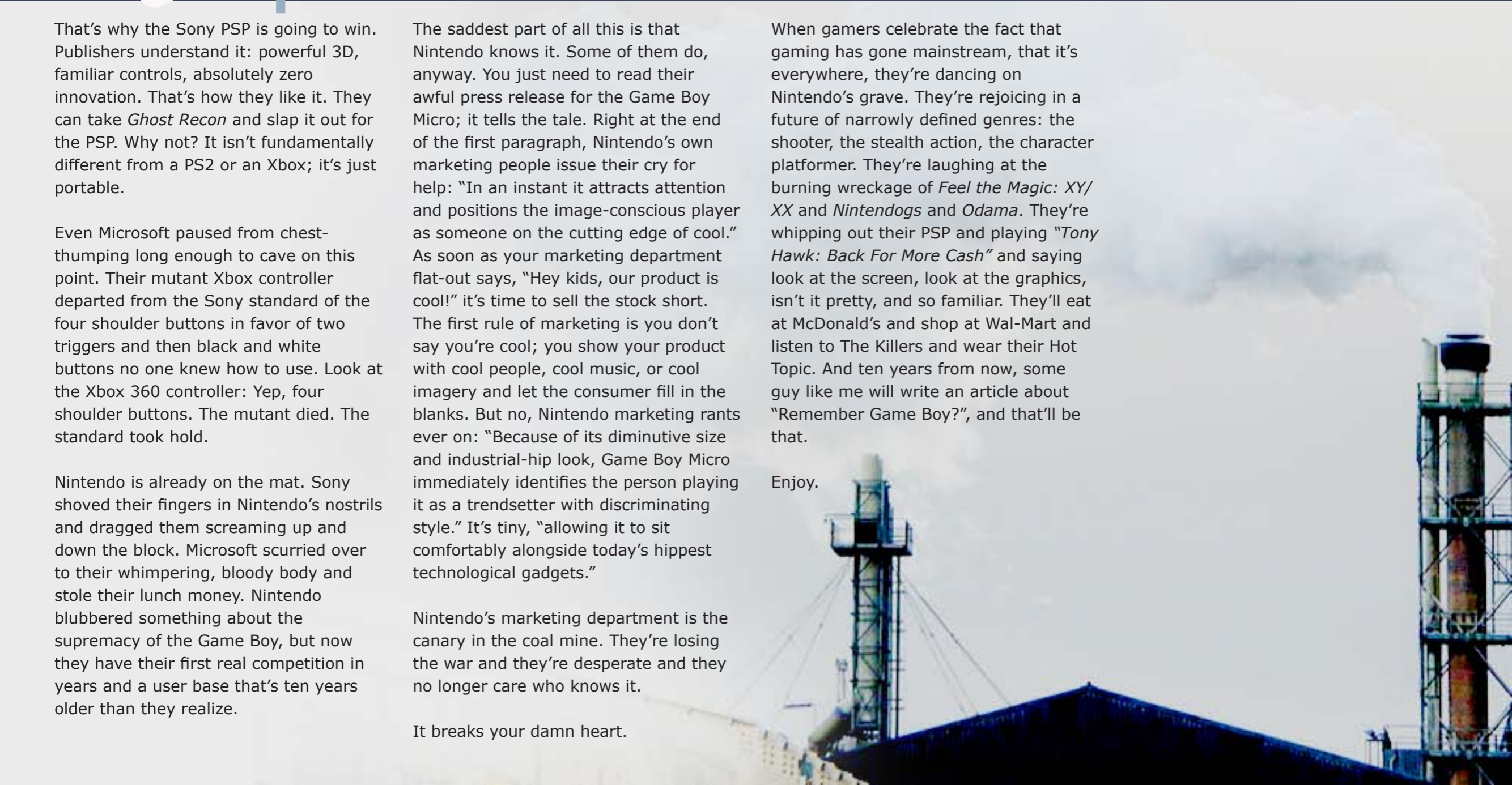
NEWS BITS

Rockstar Stirring the Coffee
The *GTA: San Andreas* "Hot Coffee" sex mini-game "discovered" by Dutch hackers has been labeled as illegitimate by Rockstar. The mini-game, which includes skill gain in certain areas of "prowess," has lit a fire under the ESRB and other pundits to investigate the origins of the mod to see if Rockstar deliberately hid the mod from the ratings group.

PSP Proves Useful
Tech-minded *PSP* users now have the option to install rudimentary HTTP and FTP servers on their handhelds. Now if someone would just get around to writing a decent browser for it.

Harry Potter Claims One Million Preorders
Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, J.K. Rowling's latest addition the massively popular, instant-classic series has sold one million preorder copies at Barnes and Noble alone. The overall total appears to be slightly higher than *Halo 2's* final preorder sales, which topped off at 1.5 million. *Halo 2* sold 2.38 million copies the first day; Rowlings's newest book is predicted to sell 10.8 million. One wonders if there's much overlap.

Hostile Takeover Coming for ATI?
According to an ATI expert, the hardware firm might be targeted for takeover by business giants AMD or Texas Instruments. ATI, which has product in over 70% of video-displaying hardware, extends themselves far beyond just games. Stocks rose after the musing went into publication.

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