

the Escapist

GAMER NATION

by Allen Varney

ALSO:

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor - I just received the Friday Extra notice... the content and tone of the magazine is excellent! Keep up the good work. It looks wonderful. I love it!

-William

To the editor - I say but this: Oh my, it's all going a bit downhill really, isn't it? I mean, after a cracking first issue, you go and publish that trollop.

For a start, you didn't even reply to people's letters! What kind of letter-section is that? No sharp reparté. No serious discussion. Nothing. Not a sausage. How lazy!

Secondly, I couldn't manage to find a "point" in any of the articles except for Tom Chick's, and even then it seemed a bit tentative.

Thridly [*sic*], that awful Max Steele person. I can't believe you gave such a high word count to the cretin. Kieron's article in the first one was great. Well written and you could follow it. Max

Steele's, being the main article of the second issue, was a match to Gillen's floodlight. It was crap. Not only were his Mr. T impressions tiresome and wretched, but they were just plain poor. He can't do the humourous-third person-thingy very humourously to be frank.

Fourthly, whilst I understand the Mag is an American 'based' one, could it be less Amerocentric? The first issue managed it quite well, but the second one was a slop of flag waving rubbish.

I hope the third edition will be as good as the first.

-Pod aka Lee

To the editor - Just wanted to say thanks for another fine issue. Although it may not have been your intent, I thought that all the articles in this issue - along with "The Contrarian" from the last issue - actually form a great sort of "buyer's guide" to the mobile market. Part of the reason this works so well is because your articles don't dwell on purely "hardcore" technical issues like

other publications do - the speed of the processor, the polygons it can push, how feature-loaded it is - which tend to present a very unilateral view of gaming.

Instead, each one of your articles reframes the mobile market in interesting ways that are relevant to consumers, and in so doing they helped me decide which system I identify the most with. (Hint: it has the letters "D" and "S" in it.)

By the way, is "Max Steele" that guy's real name? If I had an awesome name like that, I'd always refer to myself in the third person too.

-Atul

To the editor - How is it *The Escapist* fails to display itself adequately in my browser, while other people talk of the magnificent fit? I can only conclude that you hate me, and others like myself.

I see this as a harsh and unfair judgment about people you have never met, and hope that you will endeavour to see past this unjustified belief and present some tips to allow *The Escapist* to be read as it deserves, rather than as it currently

appears, with the navigation bar obscuring some text, while other text runs off the page and disappears to who knows where.

-Tom Camfield

To the editor - I just had to tell you the thrill I got when I found my way to *The Escapist* (through Slashdot, I believe) this past week. I was raised on Atari and old DOS games (I never did master pole vaulting in Decathlon); last year I finally bought myself an X-Box specifically so that I could beat Jet Set Radio Future, after getting sucked back into gaming through ARGs. I've just recently started to really ponder the swirl of debate surrounding modern gaming, particularly the intense disapproval that games like GTA and Halo provoke in most of my otherwise very liberal friends. *The Escapist* is precisely what I've been thirsting for: intelligent, insightful, and written by people who truly understand games.

Thanks for putting this amazing publication together, and keep it coming!!

-Beth Long

GAMER NATION

An entire country that makes your Counter-Strike clan look like wimps
by Allen Varney

Envision an alternate reality we might call "Gamer America."

In Gamer America, every home and office has 20MB/s broadband that's cheaper than milk. Everywhere that real America has a Starbucks or a fast food restaurant, Gamer America instead has LAN hangouts where, for a buck an hour, you can play online 24/7 with all your friends and socialize with the opposite sex. The coolest kids in Gamer America high school go out for the *StarCraft* team. Gamer America's Commerce

Department heavily funds a Domestic Gaming Agency to promote games to your mom and your grandma and the world. And there's a Gamer America network TV channel (not cable, network) broadcasting online game tournaments round the clock. No, wait, there are **two** channels.

Sounds like an *EverQuest* fever dream? A console fan's Robitussin high? Okay, Gamer America doesn't exist – in America. But it lives for real – right now! today! – in the Republic of Korea (RoK).

They don't use the term "broadband" because there is nothing else.

Land of the Wired Baang

Most urban South Koreans live in apartments the size of a walk-in closet, and some may eat nothing but 200 kinds of kimch'i, but they are truly, deeply wired. They don't use the term "broadband" because there is nothing else. They can get a 100-megabit DSL line for \$20 a month. The internet streams glass-smooth HDTV and better-than-MP3 music on demand. Korea's Daum.net, a hydra-headed Yahoo!/eBay/Amazon/PayPal/Blogger/Skype monster, is one of the world's most popular sites, despite accessibility limited only to those who understand the Korean language. The online community Cyworld.com (sort of a Friendster/MySpace/Blogger/IRC/Flickr) has pulled in a fifth of all South Koreans, including 90 percent of all Internet users aged 20–29.

And everywhere, there are the PC baangs – twenty thousand of them.

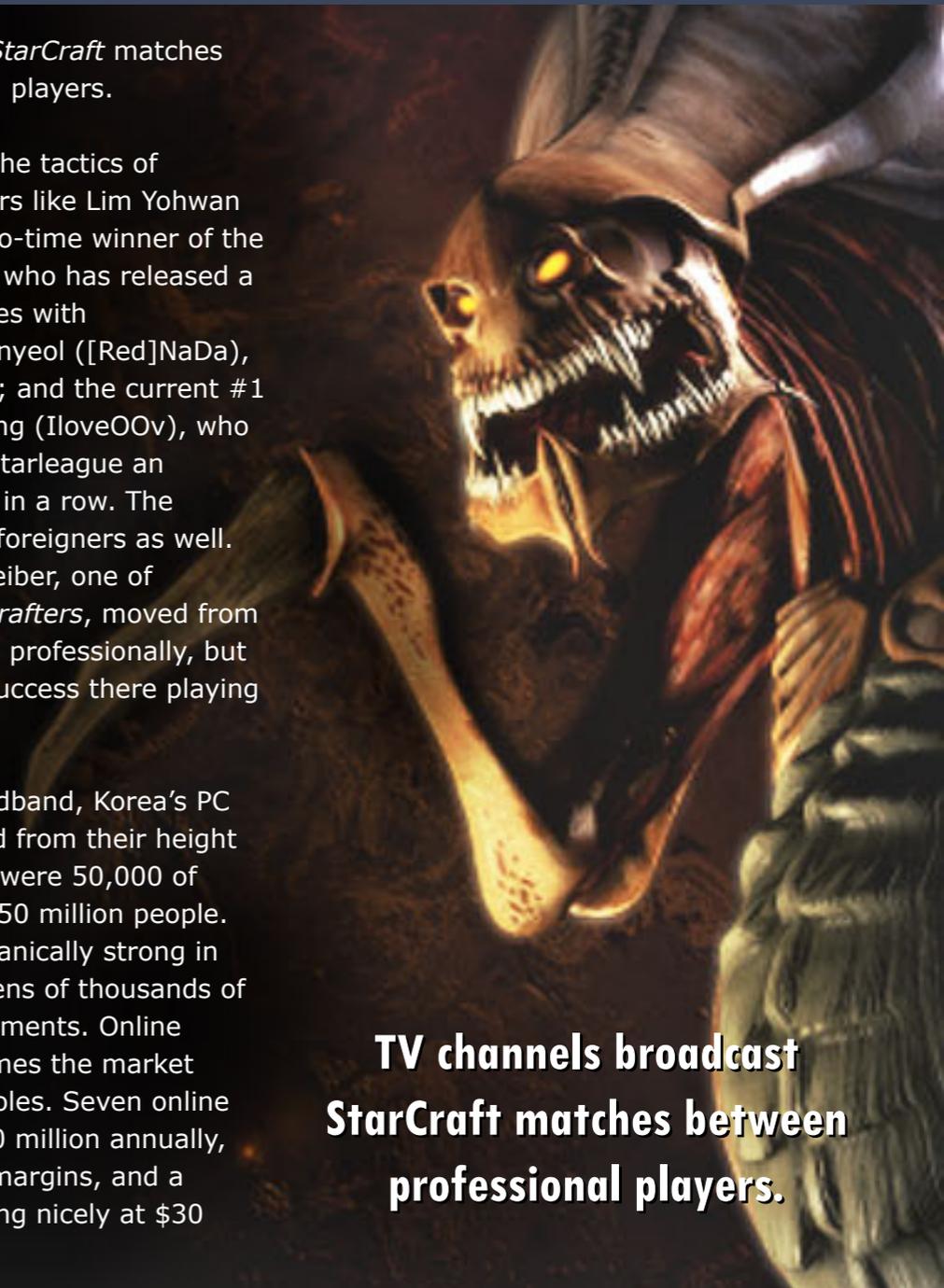
A PC baang (pronounced "bahng," "room") is an information-age temple with two or three dozen computers on a fat-pipe network. They all sell computer time by the hour, along with terrible coffee and (for those long gaming sessions) ramen noodles. Under bad lighting, in air gone blue with cigarette smoke, amid an **insanely loud** thrum of spellcasting and explosions, young and old men sit in Aeron-knockoff chairs. They're downloading bootleg movies in the background and maybe Skyping with friends in Hong Kong or Taiwan, but mostly they're playing *Lineage* or *Ragnarok* or a horde of smaller online games like *Shot-Online* (online golf), *APB* (cops vs. gangs), and *Wiki* (time-traveling quests around a World Tree – oh, that old cliché).

Above all, they're playing Blizzard's venerable 1998 real-time strategy game *StarCraft*. Omigod, do Koreans play *StarCraft*. Competition ladders rank hundreds of thousands of names. Two TV

channels broadcast *StarCraft* matches between professional players.

Fans devoutly track the tactics of celebrated media stars like Lim Yohwan (SlayerS_BoxeR), two-time winner of the World Cyber Games, who has released a DVD of his best games with commentary; Lee Yunyeol ([Red]NaDa), the "Tornado Terran"; and the current #1 player, Choi Yeon Sung (IloveOOv), who won the MBCGame Starleague an amazing three times in a row. The Korean scene draws foreigners as well. Daniel "Rekrul" Schreiber, one of America's best *StarCrafters*, moved from Ohio to Seoul to play professionally, but then found greater success there playing poker.

With the rise of broadband, Korea's PC baangs have declined from their height in 2000, when there were 50,000 of them for a nation of 50 million people. But gaming is still titanicly strong in the Gamer Nation. Tens of thousands of people attend tournaments. Online games have three times the market share of PCs or consoles. Seven online publishers pull in \$80 million annually, with 40–50% profit margins, and a dozen more hum along nicely at \$30



TV channels broadcast
**StarCraft matches between
professional players.**

A decade ago, a visionary government initiative funded a huge effort to wire the whole country, building the massive broadband infrastructure that propels Korea's digital culture.

million. Hundreds of companies "farm" virtual property to resell for actual money. Some Korean MMOGs even connect to the physical world: Players use an SMS gateway to send text messages to their teammates' cellphones.

How has the landscape of Korean gaming developed so differently from our own? The Korean government has gotten involved. Not like in America, where grandstanding Senators bluster about restricting videogame sales. No, the Republic of Korea **promotes** gaming.

KOCCA and KGDI

A decade ago, a visionary government initiative funded a huge effort to wire the whole country, building the massive broadband infrastructure that propels Korea's digital culture. In the same way, the RoK government has now initiated major programs to develop a national gaming industry. KOCCA, the Korea

Culture & Content Agency, established in 2001 by the Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism, promotes Korean media worldwide: movies, comics, music, licensable cartoon characters ... and games. KOCCA offers pro-level training programs for the "culture contents industry" through its Cyber Culture Contents Academy.

KOCCA is a sister agency to an industry trade group the Ministry founded in 1999, the Korea Game Development & Promotion Institute, which proclaims, "Game utopia in digital age, we build them together!" KGDI's avowed goal is to make Korea one of the top three nations in the game industry by 2007. On the organization's home page, KGDI president Jong-Sik Woo pellucidly remarks, "Our government founded this KGDI and has been trying to accomplish its enthusiastic goal of annual game export of \$300 million until year 2003 to prosper (rear) the game industry as the

export-leading industries with competitiveness in global market by developing it as the core-industry in the era of knowledge based higher information industry." With KOCCA, KGDI has set up an incubator program for developers, hosted conferences, published reports, and started a lobbying group, the Game Industry Policy Advisory Commission, to promote game business evaluation and research.

Imagine the President of Gamer America making a speech about the importance of funding American online games, and setting up an agency of the Department of Commerce to produce ad campaigns and public service announcements about the virtues of videogames. You can't really imagine such weirdness, can you? Gamer America doesn't exist.

But could it? Ever?

Korea's embrace of gaming at all levels proves the pastime isn't inherently geeky...

Can it happen here?

So Korea is a gamer's paradise. Who cares? Is there any reason to hope America will follow?

Korea's golden age of gaming is built on broadband. Everyone in the US telecom industry recites, by rote, good excuses why the RoK has crushed us in broadband penetration: Koreans live in dense urban constructs that are easy to wire. Broadband costs are driven down through feverish competition, in contrast to the somnolent Baby Bell cartels in America. Absent a government push on the scale of the interstate highway system in the 1950s, we'll never match Korea's success.

Then, too, Koreans have been game-crazy since well before the Internet. Some argue the new cybergaming culture is just existing Korean culture with a coat of fresh pixels. Before PC baangs there were noraebaangs (karaoke lounges), DVD baangs (for watching movies in private rooms, just you and your lover), boardgame baangs, and a general baang culture.

But don't the *StarCraft* TV channels (for instance) represent a potent symbol of a

new gaming culture, a possible model for America? Not necessarily; there's also a channel for Korea's chess-like boardgame, *Paduk*. Hmmm, a nation where TV viewers were already watching Chinese checkers – what lessons do we really want to take from them?

Still, it's worth looking closely at Korea to see a truly game-tolerant society. Korea's embrace of gaming at all levels proves the pastime isn't inherently geeky; it's not inevitably a reason to feel outcast. It's part of a culture's attitudes, and can be changed like any other arbitrary attitude.

Let's get to it.

Allen Varney:
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KOREAN GAMES IN AMERICA, AND VICE VERSA

by Allen Varney

The Korean National Tourism Organization pushes a buzzword, "hallyu" ("Korean wave"), the new enthusiasm for Korean pop culture in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Over there, hallyu is driven by Korea's feverish TV soap operas. Here, "hallyu" is only just now impinging on American awareness. The dedicated trend-watcher can find a few Korean films, some manga and, most notably, online games.

Seoul's online giant NCSoft runs the world's biggest MMORPG, *Lineage*, which has seven million subscribers. To import *Lineage* to America, NCSoft established a beachhead office in Austin, Texas, run by Richard "Lord British" Garriott and his brother Robert. But *Lineage* made disappointing headway here (though *Lineage II* has done better). Another import, Webzen's *Shattered Galaxy*, tanked. Prospects aren't much better for online golf and the like.

Other attempts to cross the Pacific have been hit-or-miss in both directions. In the RoK, Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* bids fair to match its blockbuster precursor, *StarCraft*. But the games distributed by NCSoft Austin – *City of Heroes* and the new *Guild Wars* – hit big in America, yet have met only tepid response in Korea.

The two nations' games show different cultural assumptions. "Korean games are all about community, prestige, and hierarchy," said venture capitalist John Woongjae Lee at the 2003 Austin Game Conference. "Graphics aren't as important as customer service, fast patching, and speed-of-light adaptation" to new customer desires. Conversely, the graphics in some Korean games can turn off a Western viewer. Magic in these games is showy, spectacular, with vivid rainbow colors. Show these effects to an American *EverQuest* player and he may sniff, "That's not what a fireball looks like."

BANNED OF BROTHERS

by Julianne Greer

Don't camp the main spawns. The concept is really quite simple. Why should that feel newsworthy? We all know it's lame to hang out next to the spot where a player reforms, post-death, only to kill him again before the newly-spawned is able to move to retaliate.

Oh, but it happens – entirely too frequently. Why? Well, that's the best place to get "kills," to improve your stats. If you hide yourself just right, within enemy territory, you have next to free reign on all the spawn points. That's right, your name, too, can be at the top of the list, for achieving ... stuff. Stuff like sitting in one place for an hour and shooting at the same place over and over again.

Right.

While that kind of focus and ability to accurately complete the same task over and over is certainly admirable, it feels a little too much like some of the jobs I've held in the past. I'm not working at

those jobs anymore for a reason. And while I respect others' right to enjoy a game, I don't want to be in a stats race.

I'm not the only one who feels this way.

The five guys at DontCamp.com, a popular first-person shooter community, have created a gaming environment where "all players have the right to fair and fun gameplay, provided the fun does not come at the expense of others." No, really. It's in the rules. And they are not afraid to ban people who break the rules.

Since switching to *Battlefield 2* on their server, they haven't been able to track bans and kicks, but in the days of

Battlefield 1942's Desert Combat mod, they did. Co-founder Jonathan Woodbury ("Butter") relates, "We kicked over 28,000 people, distinct CD keys, and we had 60,000 events of kicking or banning. No warnings either. Go read the site during your two minute kick. It's all there."

These guys seem serious. But, they were able to have a bit of fun with it, keeping a ban and kick counter on the front page of the DontCamp website. Sean Myers ("dst"), another co-founder, quickly adds, "The bans only lasted 12 hours, or if it's really bad, a week."

How do they justify this high number of ban/kick actions? It's all about

maintaining the quality of teamplay. "We've got simple rules, but they're rules. You gotta follow them," states Damien Ryder Grosser ("Ryderstorm"), a third co-founder.

But the banning and kicking doesn't seem to harm their population. Their community has over 800 registered members, of which approximately 75% have been active in the last three months. In fact, Myers explains that half the members learned about the rules by being kicked. "On other servers, you've gotta play the game the way everybody else does to survive; so, you've gotta base camp and all the other stuff. And they get kicked for doing it here and they're like 'What? That's wrong? Great!'"

Indeed, it is a formula that appears to work for them, but how do they keep up with the sheer volume of banning? Deputies. These are volunteers in the community who have full kick and ban privileges. Chosen over time, these deputies have "proven" themselves to the five founders as those who understand the purpose of the server and its rules. They've helped create a *Battlefield* home for people ranging in

age from 10 to their late 50s, as well as fathers and daughters, and husbands and wives. Ex-military, IT professionals and college students from several different countries are regulars on the DontCamp server. Co-founder Glenn Wilkinson ("Super Wabbit") explains this success is a result of the community's involvement in DontCamp. "The only reason a community like this works is because people get involved."

While the community is involved with running the day to day operations and keeping the server teamplay friendly, the five administrators are working on the big picture. Aside from creating art to decorate the site or icons to bestow upon deserving forum members, they plan events for their community. These events are often suggested by the DontCamp Teamplay Committee, a group that formed on its own, to help the guys out. Myers and Woodbury built an elaborate web application which allowed them to accept plans for and OK events as others came up with them, allowing them to maintain control of the community, but still have lives outside of it.

"We kicked over 28,000 people, distinct CD keys, and we had 60,000 events of kicking or banning."

With all this community involvement, one might say the devotion to teamplay extends beyond the actual game map. Maybe it is not about a type of gameplay at all, but rather a type of person. Hearing about Monday Mod Night events and planning committees popping up “just to help out,” I can’t help but think that perhaps the founders of DontCamp are on to something.

Participating in groups that work well together is not new territory to the founders of DontCamp. The five friends met at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro’s School of Music, where they participated in several ensembles together. This other passion, music, laid the foundations for all cooperative efforts in the future. “I have a theory about musicians and gamers. There’s a lot of unspoken communication when you’re a musician,” Grosser explains. Myers chimes in, finishing Grosser’s sentence, “Making five people sound like one is not easy.”

While they hone their own abilities to work in concert, the friends help others learn the joys of working together. And the others are loving it. In fact, the

community surprised the guys with \$1,000 in donations to keep the servers running on DontCamp’s first anniversary. “We had no idea. We were completely surprised,” says Woodbury. Apparently the strict enforcement of rules is going over well.

That is DontCamp in a nutshell: Self-policing, self-supporting, and generally, a very pleasant community. By the standards of Battle.Net or Gamespy Arcade, it’s tiny. But the server’s positive vibe and low-pressure atmosphere makes it worth talking about. In an era when games have replaced rap music as the media’s favorite punching bag, and first-person shooters are charged with being breeding grounds for killers, it’s worth pointing out when gamers and their culture embody something positive.

“The only reason a community like this works is because people get involved.”

DONTCAMP CODE OF CONDUCT FOR BATTLEFIELD 2

Gameplay Rules:

- Don’t camp main spawns.
- Vehicles/Artillery cannot fire in or into main spawns.
- All players have the right to fair and fun gameplay, provided the fun does not come at the expense of others.

Warnings:

- No solicitation.
- Racism or bigotry of any kind will not be tolerated.
- Questions and complaints are best presented on the forums and not as in-game chat.
- If you are not on TeamSpeak, you may be kicked for ANY reason!

Things to keep in mind:

This game is not about kills. This game is about playing as a team. This game is about capturing and holding flags. Base camping does not help your team and is rude towards other players. If the only reason you play is to rack up kills, find another server.

DontCamp.com provides a gaming environment that is enjoyable for gamers who live for teamplay. Users who work contrary to the goal of teamplay will be removed from the game. If you have a problem with this, please find another game server that better suits your gameplay style.

Our administrative staff will ensure high quality gameplay to the best of their ability. If our gameplay does not meet your standards, constructive feedback is always appreciated on our forums.

DontCamp is hosting their first-ever LAN party in Greensboro, NC September 30 – October 2, 2005.

A HORSE OF A DIFFERENT COLOR

by Kyle Orland

Heather Dubé knows horse racing inside and out. In her short career she has done it all: picking out sires and dams to produce winning foals; working her horses through a specialized training regimen; and selecting carefully controlled diets to maximize her steeds' potential. Heather even serves as the jockey, utilizing an early whipping strategy that she says "leaves them in the dust in the end."

Heather's latest horse, a chestnut-colored thoroughbred named Crypto's Fate, has gotten most of Heather's attention recently, and has quickly become her favorite. Crypto's Fate has only won six of his 33 races, but Heather has plenty of time to improve her skills. After all, she's only been training horses for two days. She's 13 years old.



If you haven't been to one of the mega-arcades that are the only locations large enough to house a full DOC setup, you are missing out on a unique experience.

The game that has turned Heather into a horse owner, trainer and jockey overnight is Sega's *Derby Owners Club (DOC)*. The massive machine she plays sits along a dark sidewall of Jillian's arcade/restaurant/dance club/Japanese hibachi megacenter at Arundel Mills Mall in Anne Arundel, Md. The game is set far apart from the arcade's lines of beeping ticket-redemption games, auto-racing simulations and shoot-'em-ups in both location and subject matter.

If you haven't been to one of the mega-arcades that are the only locations large enough to house a full *DOC* setup, you are missing out on a unique experience. The *DOC* arrangement is made up of eight individual 19-inch screens, comfortably spaced in two rows of four. Each screen faces up at a 45-degree angle for players seated in attached, padded, doublewide stools. On these individual units, first-time players can create a new horse to race and returning

jockeys can insert a thin, magnetized card containing the data of a horse from a previous session. Each player then trains their horses in one of 10 exercises, and feeds it a good meal in an effort to maintain good health and a good relationship. Happy horses will whinny and gallop appreciatively – unhappy horses might kick over the feeding trough.

Then it's off to the races, where the action transfers to two 50-inch widescreen monitors hanging above and in front of the eight individual units. An animated bugler sounds the call and the horses are off, with an excitable announcer calling the positions and screaming things like "Go, baby, go!" in the background. Players use large, brightly lit "whip" and "hold" buttons on their units to control the speed of their horses. A sliding scale on each screen shows the whip's effectiveness, which goes down with each strike but increases

with time, according to the horse's stamina. When the race is over, players are awarded virtual prize money and get the opportunity to give the horse encouragement or derision, based on its performance on the track.

The game then asks players to pay another \$1 to \$2 (depending on the arcade) for another race, which they often do. "It's not uncommon for players to remain on the game for over eight hours, in some cases taking their lunch and dinner right at the game," said Peter Gustafson, Sega Entertainment USA's director of sales and marketing, in a press release announcing the game's 2002 US release. "In fact, one of the most loyal players, a man in his early 50s, owns a stable of over forty horses. He keeps track of [them] on an excel spreadsheet. I'm not familiar of [*sic*] any other video game that elicits this kind of passion."

On the Thursday night when I visit the arcade, Heather and her dad Keith, 44, are showing this kind of passion. They've already dumped eight hours and hundreds of dollars into *DOC* over two

nights of play, and they're just getting started. Heather is visiting her dad on a summer vacation trip from South Carolina, where she lives with her mom, and the pair is making the most of their time at the machine. Heather is on her fifth horse already, while Keith is on his second (horses are usually good for 20 to 40 races before they can't keep up with their younger competitors).

They've already dumped eight hours and hundreds of dollars into DOC over two nights of play, and they're just getting started.

When Keith first saw the game, he said he "didn't think it'd be interesting at all," but his horse-loving daughter, a four-year show jumping veteran, dragged him over. Now he admits he's hooked. To Keith, there's a sense of pride in developing a good relationship with his horse, indicated by a series of small hearts at the bottom of the screen. "I like to see the hearts. I take the card with me. It's **my** horse."



Keith's pride has extended into the real world, where he has showed his personalized trainer's card to his coworkers and, as his daughter laughingly admits, "the video store guy." Explaining what the card was took a little doing, according to Keith, but once people understood it "they thought it was pretty cool. I told them, 'if you go once, you'll be hooked.'"

Both Heather and Keith say they play lots of games on their PlayStation 2 at home – Keith prefers sports games while Heather enjoys fantasy and adventure. Keith says he enjoys *DOC* because "it's not as stressful" as other games, but it still gets exciting. "It gives you a break occasionally and allows you to enjoy your horse," Keith says. "You can go back to your farm and relax, train it a little. When the race comes in the blood pressure goes up and – "

"– It's got a lot of tension," Heather adds.

The game's unique premise and loyalty-building memory card system can attract a pretty varied audience. "Players

representing every demographic you can think of are spending time on *DOC*," Gustafson said in the same press release, and the crowd at Jillian's seems to confirm it.

He doesn't play many video games, but admits that this game "could be addictive."

Among that crowd are Mike and Scott Diurso, gruff-looking 40-somethings who are playing the game for the first time. Mike admits he doesn't really know what's going on, but says the point seems to be "just trying to make the horse happy so it makes you money." Mike has named his horse "A' Bird," after his grandson's nickname. Scott has named his horse "KickMikesButt." For him, the goal of the game is "just beating [Mike], really."

Victor Lagunez, a pre-teen in a red basketball jersey, sits to their left. Victor said he has been playing the game for over a year, spending roughly \$20 each time he plays. His current horse, (which he named with a string of capital A's

because he “was in a hurry,”) is “pretty good ... but other horses were way better. I trained them better, [but] they were getting too old, and they stopped winning, so they had to be retired.” His voice remains steady as he says this, but you can sense a hint of regret as he describes his past accomplishments.

Fernando Lagunez, Victor’s dad, sits in front of his son. He doesn’t play many video games, but admits that this game “could be addictive.” His early performance hasn’t encouraged him, though – in his first three races he’s had one 11th place finish and two 13th place finishes in a field of 13 horses. He’s not sure whether or not he’ll keep his horse card to continue the futility later. In the end “I’d rather watch them play,” he says.

Danny Ripple, a white-bearded tractor-trailer repairman from Glen Burnie, sits on the opposite side of the setup, nursing a Bud Light. His wife stands to his side, looking on with a mix of confusion and excitement. Danny admits to knowing nothing about the game when he sits down, but he’s plenty confident when it gets to the

feeding portion. “I figured that horse would like carrots,” he says. “I’ve been around farm horses. They like carrots.”

As each of these players drop in and out of the game’s periphery, Keith and Heather remain seated in the two front-row center seats, whipping their horses for at least an hour after Keith says they’re “probably finishing up for the night.” Heather laughs as her dad describes their friendly competition, which “hasn’t been friendly all the time,” Keith says. Despite a focused training strategy and careful jockeying, Keith admits he usually isn’t able to keep pace with his daughter’s horses. Heather is quick to console her dad, reminding him of a recent neck-and-neck race that Keith actually won.

When most people think of video gamers today, the image quickly coalesces into the nerdy teenager or college student, sitting alone in a darkened room for hours at a time with no interaction with the real world. For me, the laughing, talkative racers at the *Derby Owners Club* provide a much stronger image of today’s gamer.

Sega’s Derby Owners Club, World Edition

by Nova Barlow

Derby Owners Club, World Edition is an eight player role-playing game, placing players in the roles of breeder, trainer, jockey, and owner of a thoroughbred racehorse. Statistics are kept on a magnetic-strip card, which can be re-used as often as a person would like, creating instant portability between machines. A thriving and steady market has shown up on eBay for ‘trained horses’. According to Sega, there are anywhere from 75 - 300 horses available to bid on at eBay at any time.

With its close affiliation to horse racing, *Derby Owners Club, World Edition* came under fire in Minnesota, where it was considered a form of gambling by state authorities. Sega waged an intense legal battle in response, and earlier this year the Minnesota Gaming Act was modified to state that “a video game that simulates horse racing and does not involve a prize payout is not an illegal video game of chance.” This permitted *Derby Owners Club, World Edition* to be legally operated throughout the state, an obvious big win for Sega.

Currently found in sports bars, arcades, and other amusement areas, *Derby Owners Club Online* is listed as “in development” for the PC but with no current release date. Selling points to arcades include the friendly pace of play, the ability for everyone to have fame, the fairness of play, and the portability offered by memory cards. While US venues include adult-friendly hotspots such as Jillian’s and Dave & Busters, Japan’s arcade business thrives in large all-ages “game centers.”



THE LEFT BEHIND

by Joe Blancato

I'm a gaming hobo. While my bindle is digital, I'd still like to pretend it resembles a red and white handkerchief slung over my shoulder as I meander from game to game, from genre to genre, in search of "home." I've pondered the aspects of my nomadic rambling before, dueling fanboys and pragmatists, while defending my position that I'm not a picky whiner but someone in search of a gaming identity. Realization of my search came a few years ago, when it hit me that it just didn't make sense to play *Quake III* when *Quake II* was so much better. Good luck justifying that epiphany to the collective crowd that is mainstream gaming; according to the groupthink, "it's better because it's new, and you're a grognard if you can't adapt." I never really earned the "gamer" title because I couldn't fall in love with anything put in front of me.

I don't consider myself a gamer; I consider myself someone who does things, and sometimes plays games. I read and talk and write about them more than I actually play them; I'm a fan of the ideal, the hype, the **promise**. I've argued design theory with masters of code to the point of profanity, but when the games finally hit shelves, all I could do was read the box quotes, shrug my shoulders, and wait for the Next Big Thing.

I know I'm not alone. I've seen entire tribes of refugees during my travels, people fixated on one dead game or another. There are die-hard *Ultima Online* fans, *SubSpace* freaks and *Fallout* geeks. As the Great City of Gaming builds itself on top of its history, an undercurrent of homeless gamers wander between high-poly games, in search of their previous gaming peak. Rarely do they find it. The tribes converge from time to time, occasionally trading stories, their artifacts from ages past. The common theme is always the same: Where's home?

So many games are going by the wayside that even The Great Ones are starting to fall off the map. As with anything great, it's hard for us to say goodbye. The games become a strange version of home, a personal place into which people channel themselves. And the ones without crap on the walls are hard to let go, because you're never quite sure when the next one you'd show off to your friends is going to come around.

Some people have just given up. They're the disgruntled faction of "classic gamers" that peaked during an ancient

era and refuse to modernize, whether it's because of an objection to new commercialism, the new emphasis of graphics over content, or to a controller with more buttons than an arbitrary figure they've allotted in their heads. They're the old timers of gaming, the people who liked it better when "then" was "now," and make no bones about telling everyone why.

The online era has only made things worse. Other hobos can now congregate and lament over new games together, and even delve into those ultra-addictive MMOGs, only to be left wanting months later. A few lucky ones find what it is they're looking for; *World of Warcraft* (WoW) has garnered numbers like nothing else, which has injected hope into the ranks of a surprisingly optimistic crowd. Curmudgeons rule the community, but the majority of gamers are more than willing to give anything a chance. They were genuinely interested in Molyneux's *Fable*, even though it didn't meet anyone's expectations. You can't find home without searching, or so the vibe goes.

Finding a game to love is definitely not hopeless for anyone. Companies are



**I'm a fan of the ideal,
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the Escapist

beginning to realize people had good ideas beyond, "Hey! Let's add polygons to that!" and are re-envisioning old classics in some form or another. Bethesda Softworks owns the rights to the *Fallout* license, which should elicit a collective deafening cry of joy from every fan community in the world. *The Bard's Tale* remake sent a wave of jubilation through many circles, rippling from deep within central communities. And while many of my fellow hobos might not want

to admit it, good games **have** been made since the late '90s. *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* by the now-defunct developer Troika is guaranteed to bring some new refugees into the mix. *Katamari Damacy* has brought jaded gamers out in droves, all tittering over how much fun they're having.

Maybe *Katamari Damacy* is the secret. It's not all that deep – you run around with a giant ball of stuff which you convert into a bigger ball of stuff. It's simple, it's fun, and most importantly, it's new. We hobos understand it's hard to go home again, but finding a new place to dwell is almost as exciting as taking off your boots in familiar territory. Strange innovations from the Orient might just usher in a new era of gaming

for the old school. Maybe it's only because it's hard to have an old school mentality toward novelties previously untouched by Western hands. Or maybe those same novelties are created by groups who know how to instill **spirit** into games instead of just the standard "more is better" formula.

The revolving door of the gaming homeless never stops spinning, each generation of consoles and video cards sucking in new hopefuls and spitting out disoriented derelicts just looking for "not *Halo 2*, damn it!" The horde is finally getting big enough to collapse upon itself; sharp developers are beginning to listen to our beleaguered cries. As I continue shuffling around, I bump into other zombies like me, some of them

occasionally lighting up, snapping out of their melancholy like a coma victim emerging from the ether of the subconscious, discovering their latest place to squat for a time, or even taking up residence with a new lease on their gaming lives. These awakenings leave me wondering, when is it my turn?

Maybe tomorrow.

NEWS BITS

Hot Coffee Lands San Andreas AO Rating

In a precedent-setting decision, the ESRB decided to retroactively rate *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* "Adults Only," prompting major retailers to pull the title off their shelves until new versions of the game are released.

Web Browser Coming to PSP

Sony has announced that version 2.0 of the handheld's firmware will include an integrated web browser capable of viewing most web pages. Sony also announced Portable TV, a site for providing PSP-formatted video to PSP users.

Thompson Moves toward Sims 2

After a victory over *San Andreas*, attorney Jack Thompson has turned his gaze toward the *Sims 2*, claiming its pixilated nudity hides sinister parts of the human anatomy.

Thompson says people are capable of writing mods which remove the blur over naked sims' genitalia, even on children. According to Jeff Brown of EA, "This is nonsense. We've reviewed 100 percent of the content. There is no content inappropriate for a teen audience... If someone with an extreme amount of expertise and time were to remove the pixels, they would see that the sims have no genitals."

Sony Unveils PS3 Development Kit

British company SN Systems has been acquired by Sony Computer Entertainment. Its highly regarded ProDG products will become a part of the PS3 development kits. The kits will also include evaluation copies of *Unreal Engine 3* and the AGEIA PhysX and Havok physics engines. Developers often complained about the PS2's environment, saying it was too proprietary to create easy ports of games from other systems.

Casual Friday

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