

the *Escapist*

DEATH TO THE GAME INDUSTRY: LONG LIVE GAMES 2

by Greg Costikyan

ALSO:

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THE CONTRARIAN: ROLL THE DICE

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OUR GAMES ARE BUILT ON PAPER

It all started with pencils and dice

by Allen Varney

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by Joe Blancato

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

I came at this whole pen and paper gaming thing completely backwards. You see, I hadn't played a pen and paper game until approximately one year ago. Sure I had heard of the games, seen the bizarrely shaped dice and of course, watched Summoner Geeks. I was aware of the culture, and in fact, had many good friends who played regularly. I just hadn't managed to partake.

Electronic gaming, however, is another story.

I grew up with a PC in the house. My parents, even grandparents, saw the usefulness of the home computer from relatively early in the phenomenon. Yes, I played my share of *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego*, *Frogger* and *Trade Wars*. Indeed, from a very early age, I was bound for gamer-dom.

And then, of course, my family got a Nintendo. Really, it was my family's. We all sat together and played, figuring out puzzles, playing against each other in *Jeopardy!* and mapping progress through

dungeons. This NES still lives on, happily, in my current home and still plays most of the old cartridges quite well, if you put them in just so.

I've recently been replaying one of my favorite NES games, *Final Fantasy*. Until after I had played a tabletop RPG, I never knew how alike *Final Fantasy* is to *Dungeons and Dragons*, and other pen and paper games. The turn-based combat and character classes, so novel to me at the time of first playing *Final Fantasy* had, in fact, been around for decades.

I'm sure this similarity seems completely obvious to everyone who has played pen and paper games since they were young. But, as I had come into pen and paper games in reverse fashion (meaning, playing electronic games for years before ever rolling a D20), I was quite amazed.

The strange part comes in when I realized I didn't feel as if I was stepping back in time to play these early pen and paper games. One might think that playing something designed over two decades ago might feel a tad ... old. It doesn't. In fact, it's a very rich, adaptable gaming experience. They

certainly have more shelf life than most of today's current electronic games, which are, I suppose, the offspring of the older pen and paper games.

Funny thing, the evolution of gaming.

And how the gaming industry has evolved from its pen and paper roots is the subject of this week's issue of *The Escapist*. Allen Varney details the numerous pen and paper designers who have made the jump from tabletop to electronic and highlights some of those designers' experiences in the evolution. Our resident Contrarian, John Tynes, returns this week to contrast the skill sets of pen and paper designers versus that needed to design a successful electronic game. Last, not speaking so much to the evolution of gaming to date, but rather suggesting a course of the industry for the future, old-school game designer, Greg Costikyan, returns this week in the second half of his article, "Death to the Games Industry: Long Live Games."

Enjoy!



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the editor: I thought your article "Death to the Games Industry" (Issue 8) summarized well what has long been discussed around the industry. Basically, stuff is getting more expensive in the wrong ways. There are many, even the venerable Will Wright himself, who have noted this and are actively pursuing solutions (his being *Spore*, a procedurally-generated environment with much more programming than asset requirements).

However, while you mentioned the almost-\$1bln collected each month for U.S.-based MMORPGs, I feel you missed an opportunity to highlight this as an emerging trend.

Having players pay for a game once is what has turned this into a hit-driven industry. However, online gaming (not just massive online) enables companies to ship less initially and built the game as players pay for it. Even *Guild Wars*,

which lacks the fee, still plans their finances around the eventual cyclic release of new content. Further, services like Steam and GameSpy are being used to release new content to extend the life of what were traditionally one-time purchased that got supported through player-created mods.

Finally, most MMORPGs don't quickly die off after their initial launch. In fact, to date, only *City of Heroes* seems to have succumbed to the early hit/steady falloff reality that affects most movies nowadays. Meanwhile, most games either grow, or plateau into a long series of periodic subscription spikes when new expansions or major content is released, all along collecting their fees.

Some publishers are convinced that front-loading is the only way to go. I feel this is because it's the easiest way to sell a game. Build it, sell it, move on to building the next one. Conversely, building a game, selling it, and then supporting it with periodically-released new content is just too complex for some traditionalists to want to become a part of. I can understand that of course. Basically, an MMORPG stops becoming a

game the moment it launches, turning into a Service that requires the same level of commitment to maintenance any sort of subscription service account would.

Some just don't want to bite that much of a bullet.

-Darniaq

To the editor: My bro sent me a link to your site. I read the gaming industry article and the Scratchware Manifesto for the first time. I'd say I'm sheltered to news in the sense that unless someone tells me, I'd never know. So this was fortunate.

While reading the SWM I polished up my old feelings about the subject. A few years back I noticed all the things wrong with games (and still wrong today). It's the same crap over and over, nothing innovative. And where an improvement is blatantly obvious or explicitly asked for by the gaming community, it's always being saved for the next release, or there is just not enough time before the deadline.

The SWM did clear one thing for sure, who is responsible. I used to think it was the game developers who are holding things back. As if they are afraid releasing a game with new innovative concepts would be the end. But I know now it's the Publishers who force this incremental linear regime. And it makes sense, that's how a Corporate Machine lives.

Quicksilver doesn't mention *Master of Orion 2* at all on their site. It's like they just want people to forget about it. Did *MoO3* suck so bad that QS had to wipe all traces of the predecessor, just to make it seem less pathetic? Quicksilver doesn't respect the *MoO2*, I can't respect Quicksilver. What a shameful way to continue Microprose's legacy.

How did things get so out of hand? Why did Developers give up the keys?

Thank you for existing so that I may be less ignorant

-Ivan Dossev

To the editor: Regarding "Death to the Game Industry," I really like the writer's take on the industry. It's very true what he is saying but just like all other magazines it seems that he has forgotten to mention Nintendo. Oh sure, he mentions them but only to say that the "Revolution could go the way of the Dreamcast."

All of the stuff that he complains about, Nintendo has basically been addressing. New genres. New ways to play games. Independent developer help. Cheap development costs.

Sure, Nintendo has it's fair share of "brands" but they still manage to make each installment of a franchise new and exciting.

We all hate the games industry for ruining games but when someone finally does something about it (Nintendo) we don't talk about it. I have no idea why either.

Shame.

-Nathan Smart

To the editor: Allen's "Casual Fortunes" article was an interesting and accurate overview of the indie development scene. It's a relief to find some good writing, and I'll definitely be checking back for more.

-Erik Hermansen

To the editor: I know two examples do not make a trend, but I noticed in your last issue, Greg bashes *Doom 3* to exemplify what's wrong with the industry, while Joe bashes *WoW* to emphasize his ideas about piracy. We don't have established criteria for debating the quality of games, and subjectivity plays a big part in any game discussion, but still... I found those examples oddly misplaced:

- Id Software and Blizzard are the kind of studios that Greg's ideal industry would support: free from the kind of scheduling, economic and creative restrictions which publishers impose.

- *Doom 3* is arguably one of the most surprising departures that a popular game license has ever seen: focused on

single-player when the original pretty much invented modern multiplayer, heavy on story elements when the original had the story written on the `Readme.txt` file.

- *WoW* may well be the least pirated commercial game ever made, considering its sales numbers - simply because its model is not open to piracy for any but the most hardcore hacker communities.

Stating personal tastes is fine, but calling *Doom 3* and *WoW* "bad games" is way out of line, in my opinion. Stirring controversy that way is a common way to increase hits, but it's also the quickest route to stop being taken seriously.

-Javier Arevalo

To the editor: The magazine is absolutely great. It's about time games got the positive and serious attention they deserve.

ps. I really like the formatting.

-Kourosh Dini, MD



To the editor: Can you please change the layout for your web site? It makes reading the content very difficult. I understand that it looks nice and pretty like an actual magazine does, but having columns on a web site is a terrible idea.

Or at least, could you offer a lightweight version that displays like normal web pages do?

The PDF version isn't any better, because I don't have a printer.

It's such a shame, because I love your essays, but I hate reading your site as a result of this.

-Robin

To the editor: I found your website from a link at slashdot.org. I am so happy that you are publishing this magazine online. The articles are not only well-written and free from obnoxious advertising filler, but they are intelligent and original. I can't remember the last time I enjoyed a copy of any gaming magazine besides quickly flipping through to look at the flashy pictures. Every issue of every magazine feels like a copy-and-paste excuse to sell me advertising. Not your magazine.

Also, thank you for publishing your work in such an easy to read and use format. The artwork is colorful and tasteful without being distracting or obscuring content. Keep up the good work!

-Drew Yates

Death to the Games Industry: Long Live Games PART 2

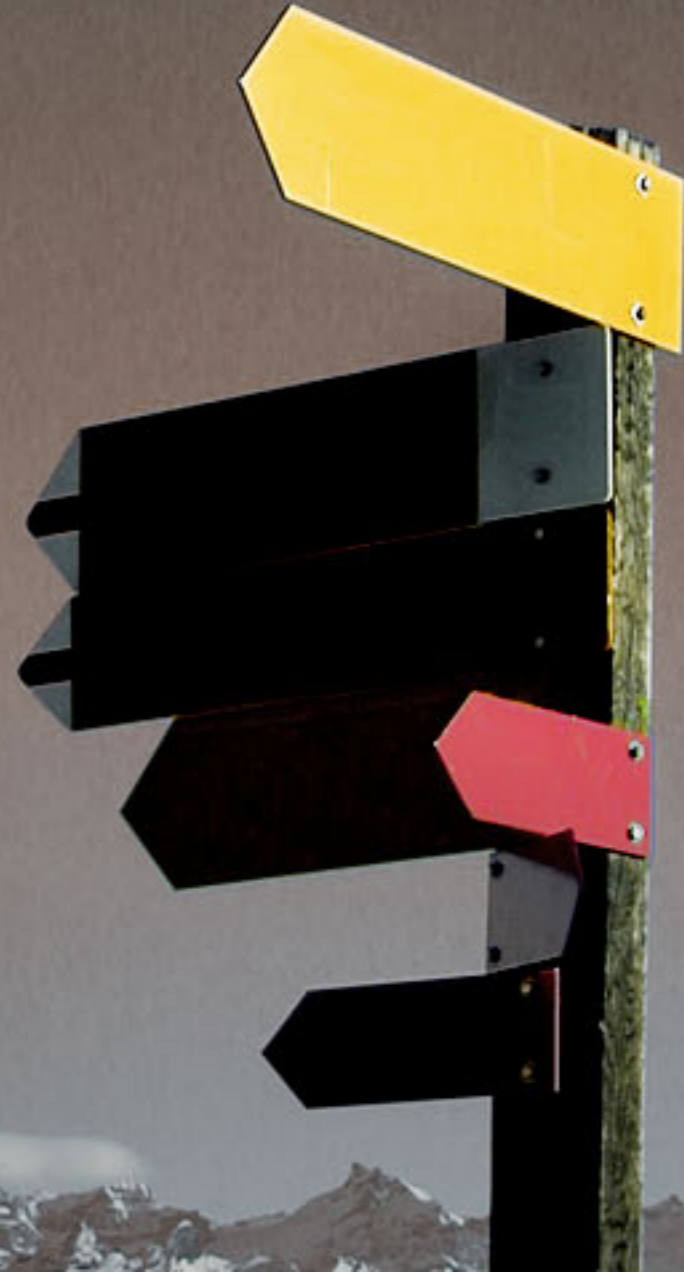
by Greg Costikyan

Death to the Games Industry, Part II is continued from Part I, in last week's issue of The Escapist.

How Do We Get There?

I first started talking about the problems in the gaming industry in a soapbox piece in Game Developer magazine back in 1999, but at the time, I had no clear idea how to address the problem. Today, however, I think a confluence of technological, cultural, and business trends make the outline of a solution visible. But to make it happen, we have to do three things:

1. We have to attack the business model.
2. We have to attack the distribution model.
3. And we have to change the audience aesthetic.



Attacking the Business Model

Let's look at the conventional industry's value chain the way business types do. It looks like this:



When an independent developer is involved (and of course a lot of games are developed at publisher-owned studios), the developer does one thing: the actual work of creating a game. The publisher takes on three roles: It provides development funding; it does the marketing; and it distributes the physical product to the retailer. The retailer also does one basic thing: It sells games to consumers.

One thing developers can try to do - and should do, if they can - is to take over that first additional piece of the value chain. They should try to fund their own development.



If you can fund your own development, you get some big advantages. First, you can negotiate a higher royalty rate with the publisher, because they have less capital at risk. Second, you are not utterly at the publisher's mercy during the development process; if the publisher-side producer wants you to do something really stupid (and

the Escapist

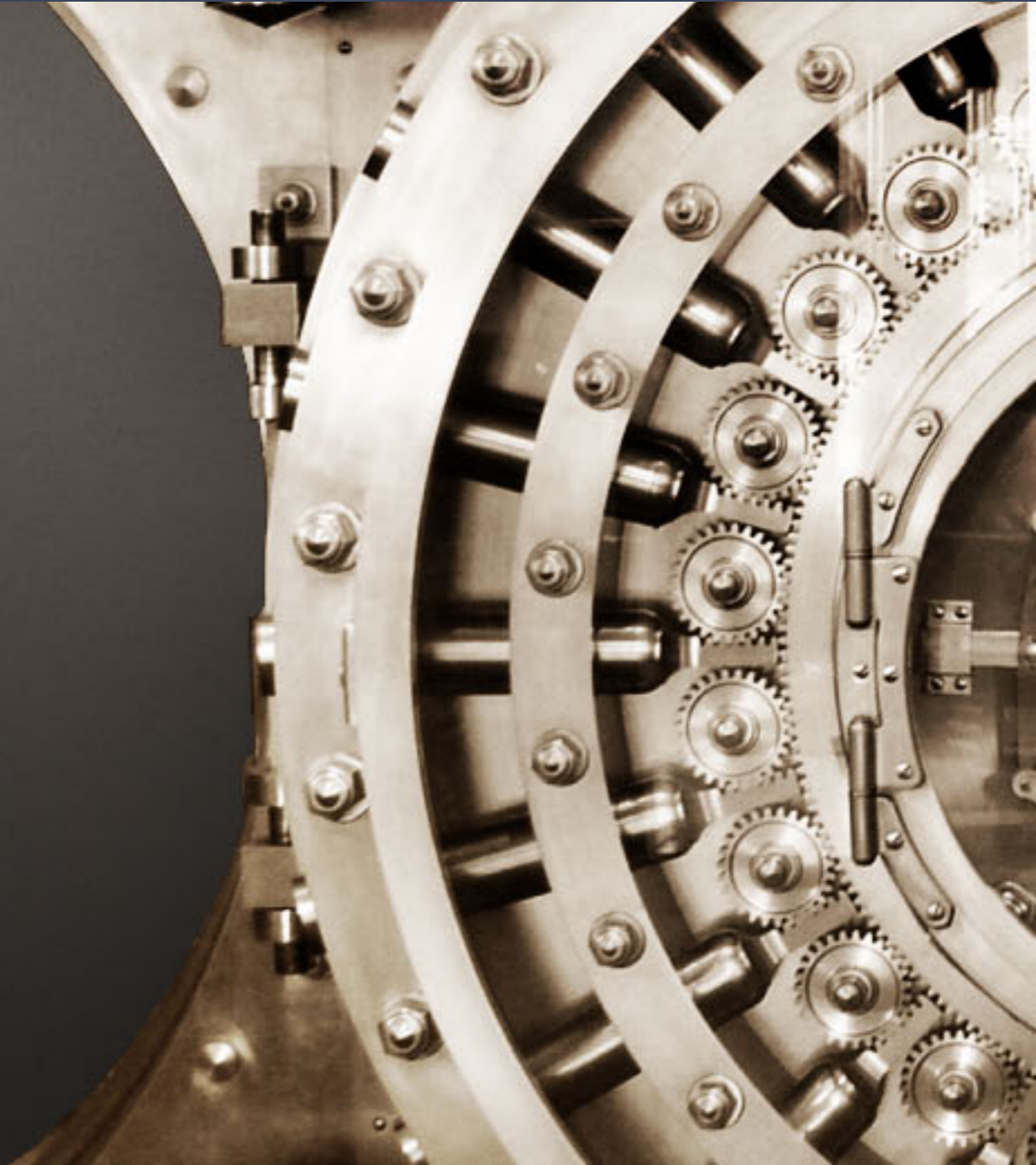
horror stories abound), you can tell him to screw off. And third, you can retain ownership of your own IP, so if you build a successful franchise, you (rather than the publisher) reaps the benefit.

Where to get the money? That's a good question, because it isn't easy. But of course, getting a publisher to greenlight something isn't easy, either. One possible answer is "from VCs." That's the route Mythic took with *Dark Age of Camelot*; they sold equity to get capital. But this route isn't easy, because venture capitalists typically shy away from product businesses - they're in the business of investing in risky ventures, but the fact that 90+% of all games lose money makes game developers a particularly risky business. It's not impossible, though; there's a lot of venture money nosing around the game industry at the moment.

Another route is to look for project finance. This is something that's very common in the film industry: Investors put up money in exchange for a share of the product's revenues. This has its good side and its bad; you're mortgaging future revenues for money to bring the product to market--but you also aren't selling equity, so you retain control of the company. Because it's such a common model in the film industry, the sorts of people who provide this kind of money - typically rich people, but sometimes funds devoted to film industry investments - are comfortable with the idea. Finding and networking your way to them is a challenge, of course, but it's feasible; this is the route IR Gurus took with *Heroes of the Pacific*.

Funding your own development doesn't completely solve the problem, however. For one thing, many publishers won't look at a deal if they don't wind up with the IP. For another, they may not devote the same marketing resources and attention to your game, because they don't have dollars at risk from the inception; *Heroes of the Pacific* was dropped in mid-development by one publisher because of this - the publisher was short on money, and wanted to spend it marketing its own games.

And you're still marketing, distributing, and selling your product through the same channel - the same hit-driven, glitz-obsessed, narrow channel, with all the problems

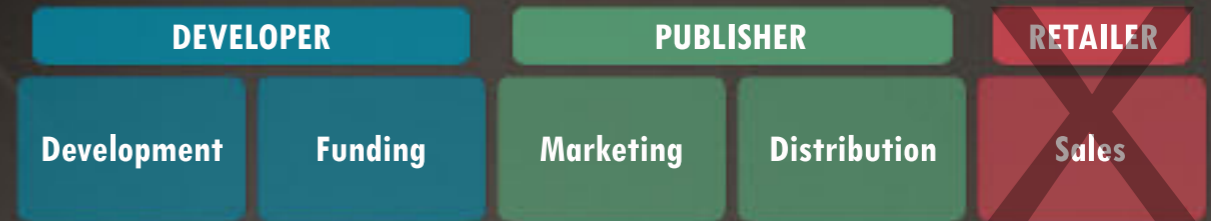


hard-core gamers will spend a half hour on download, if they want a game. Hell, it takes at least that long to drive to the mall, park, and find the Gamestop.

that entails. You don't need a publisher's greenlight, but you still need a publishing deal - and you're still facing a two-week sales window and a glitz-obsessed market.

For developers to take on the funding role is a start - but to really solve the problem, we need to...

Blow Up the Retailer



The casual game space shows that it can be done. Some of these games get into the conventional retail channel (there's a boxed version of *Bejewelled*, for instance), but 90+% of all sales are through portals like Yahoo! Games, RealArcade, and the rest.

Broadband is spreading. More than 50% of net-connected homes now have it - and the proportion is higher for gamers, and higher still for online gamers (80+% for MMOG players). With broadband, even a multi-hundred megabyte application can be downloaded in reasonable time.

Not, it should be noted, in the casual space; casual game developers say there's a big dropoff in sales if you go from 10 megs to 15. But that's casual gamers; hard-core gamers will spend a half hour on download, if they want a game. Hell, it takes at least that long to drive to the mall, park, and find the Gamestop.

When I first downloaded *NetHack* using my 1200 baud modem back in pre-Internet days (I was on GEnie), I had to let the download run over night (at \$6/hour connect-time, too). And I was glad.

Technology is not the problem. There are any number of cheap e-commerce suites that can handle sale via direct download. And yes, there are Digital Rights Management issues, but they're solvable.

Many niche publishers are doing this today. Matrix Games, for instance, still publishes its games in boxed form - but they say they sell far more copies of games like *Gary Grigsby's World at War* via direct download than they do at retail.

The reason that's happening is simple: Many PC game styles that, in years past, got huge attention from the PC game zines and consumers now have a hard time getting distribution. Retailers don't even like stocking PC games - they take up too much space, and they don't sell as well as console - and have cut way back on the titles they'll stock. As a result, if you're a computer wargamer, a flight sim fan, a fan of 4X space conquest games or of graphic adventures, or even of turn-based fantasy - you're going to have a hard time finding product you like on the shelves. Those gamers are beginning to learn they can find what they want on the net.

But "if you build it they will come" doesn't work; stick a game up on your own website, and you'll be lucky to sell a thousand copies, even if it's good. And even for the gamers who have migrated online, it's not ideal; you may know about Matrix's site, but there are a lot of other decent computer wargames out there, and to track on the field, you have to visit a half-dozen different sites. And the magazines and review sites no longer bother with the kind of games you like, so it's hard to figure out what's good and real.

There are any number of developers out there just itching to find another path to market, a way to develop games outside the conventional model - and to make a decent living by so doing. But at present, they don't have a clear path to market - and though the technology exists, the Internet can act as a distribution mechanism, it's not obvious to them how to reach their potential market.

In other words, technology isn't the problem...

download-only product isn't taken seriously; the assumption is that if it doesn't get published conventionally, it isn't "real"

Marketing Is the Problem

Even though the PC magazines are starting to devote some attention to "indie" games, it's still scant. And in general, download-only product isn't taken seriously; the assumption is that if it doesn't get published conventionally, it isn't "real," it must be of lower quality. And, of course, the conventional publishers buy most of the advertising space, so the magazines naturally pay more attention to them.

Additionally, a box on a shelf serves as a billboard for your product; someone browsing a game store might see it, pick it up, and decide to buy. If you look at it as advertising, you're reaching a highly targeted audience - people in a game store are there to buy games.

If you're online somewhere, you're inherently hard for consumers to find. Yes, Google helps, but in general, if someone doesn't already know about you, he's unlikely to find you, without a big advertising spend.

And finally - changing consumer behavior is **hard**. Most people still expect boxed product, and assume that they'll find everything of importance at a brick-and-mortar store. They have not been exposed to, yet alone have adopted, the meme that says "indie is cool, gameplay is more important than glitz."

To solve the marketing problem, we need a new kind of business.



You need an operation that aspires to be **the** place to go for indie product. Not casual games; there's no point in trying to compete with the likes of Yahoo! and Real, the casual games market is well served already. No, you want to be the place to go for

So why are we still shipping boxes of air when we have a network designed to ship bits?

hardcore gamers looking for something beyond what the conventional machine gives them.

And the company needs to be **marketing driven**. Developers (and if truth be told, many publishers) **suck** at marketing. It's not a core competence, and it's not something they've ever done. The purpose of this intermediary company must be to figure out how to get exposure for independent games and niche/indie product - and it needs to spend the bulk of its revenues on advertising and PR.

In other words, the Internet allows you to avoid retailers and solves the problem of distribution; what it does **not** solve is the problem of making consumers aware of your product, and getting them to want to buy it. There's a role for an operation that steps up to the plate and says "We know how to sell online, and we will spend good money to make sure your product does."

Developers can and should figure out how to stop relying on publishers for development funding - but they will always need help on the marketing side. And moving online not only doesn't solve the problem - it makes it worse, because moving gamers online requires a change to consumer behavior.

And yes, that means some revenues need to go to the intermediary - but developers should still wind up with the bulk of the revenues, not the risible 7% they typically get today. And developers will of **course** own their own damn IP.

And anyway - our product consists of bits. So why are we still shipping boxes of air when we have a network designed to ship bits?

Re-Engineering the Customer

In comics, film, and music, there is an audience that has what you might call "the indie aesthetic." They prize individual vision over production values. They believe they are hip and cool because they like indie stuff. They like quirkiness and niche appeal. And they are passionate about the things they like.

We need to establish the same aesthetic in gaming. And while that's hard, it's also pushing at an open door--the meme exists in other media, so why not in games? In other words, some of the marketing you need to do is the conventional stuff--advertising and promotion. But the more important task is getting the meme out there.

And to do that, you need more than ads. You need manifestoes. Brickbats. Slogans. Outrageous stunts. You need to rabble-rouse.

Like, say, by writing articles like this.

Here are some slogans, if you like:

"Corporate games suck."

"Gamers of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your retail chains!"

And one more, but a little explanation: The PC is largely irrelevant to the publishers now--it's the fourth, and weakest platform. When they publish a PC version, it's usually because there's an Xbox version, and the port is easy. But games designed for console controllers and TV screens twelve feet away just don't play so good with mouse-and-keyboard and a screen two feet away.. You're better off playing the Xbox version. And so PC sales continue to slide... Except in the genres that just don't work on consoles: MMOs, RTS, and sim/tycoon. PC games should be **designed** for PCs. Thus:

"Aren't you tired of getting Xbox's sloppy seconds?"

But Is There Enough Good Product Out There?

If you focus utterly on what might be called "true indie" product, the answer is probably not. If you look at the games at IGF each year, there are definitely some gems - but most are student projects, or incomplete, and in general nothing you'd be willing to spend actual money on. Astonishing, first-rate, unconventional titles like Darwinia or Rag Doll Kung Fu exist - but not enough of them.

But there's another side. Because PC games don't sell as well as console, the retailers have been dropping PC product they consider niche. Thus, a whole slew of game styles **that still have passionate fans** either do not get retail exposure any more, or don't get much. We're talking about games that are unlikely to generate six figures in unit sales - but can unquestionably hit five. Computer wargames, graphic adventures, 4X, and the like. *World at War*, *Galactic Civilizations*, *Dominions II* - if you haven't heard of these games, you owe it to yourself to check them out.

So what you need to do is aggregate the games from developer and smaller publishers who are already finding themselves squeezed out of the conventional market - along with quirky indie product - as well as such things as European graphic adventures that just don't see a US release any more. I think you could launch with over a 100 decent titles. And once you build a pathway to market, and developers see how they might be able to succeed with indie product, the floodgates will open.

Or to put it another way, we need to aggregate...

The Old Farts and the Young Turks

There comes a time in the commoditization of any creative industry when the Old

Farts, the people who pioneered it, look up in dismay and say, "This is **not** what I had in mind." Talk to say, Chris Crawford, Bob Bates, Hal Barwood, Julian Gollop, or Noah Falstein, and I think you'll get that in spades.

And there comes a time in any creative industry when the Young Turks, the people getting into the field who have learned what the score really is, look up and say, "Screw this! There has to be a better way." Talk to say, Jason Rubin or Eric Zimmerman or Chris Delay, and you'll hear that story, too.

Typically, the older generation is dead before the revolutionaries show up. The games industry today stands at an unusual moment; the Old Farts are still around, and the Young Turks are arriving.

We have, in short, a unique opportunity to combine the experience and cynicism of the older generation with the rage and energy of the new, and to create from that union something that will shake Redwood Shores down to its 10Qs.

The game industry is broken. It's up to us to fix it. From now on, we must all strive resolutely to bring about the overthrow of the existing order.

We have a world to win. 🚩

Greg Costikyan is a widely-published author on the subject of game design and the role of games in culture. Currently, he is writing and consulting for Nokia on the subject of mobile game design.

The games industry today stands at an unusual moment; the Old Farts are still around, and the Young Turks are arriving.



THE CONTRARIAN: ROLL THE DICE

by John Tynes

The third time I went to GenCon, the big tabletop gaming convention, I was a freshman in college with no money. I borrowed my parents' minivan and an inflatable air mattress, drove to Milwaukee, and lived in a parking garage for four days. I slept in the van, ate Slim Jims and string cheese I stole from a gas station on the drive up, and every morning I'd do my best to get clean in a public bathroom with paper towels and a bar of soap. I was a hardcore gamer, but I refused to surrender hygiene.

You do these things for the one you love.

My love in those days was tabletop RPGs. A month later I loved 'em so darn much I started my own game company, Pagan Publishing, and for the next twelve years I produced books and magazines for the *Call of Cthulhu* roleplaying game. I was obsessed with games, and all I wanted was for tabletop games to be the greatest thing in the world.

I did my best. We made great books, won awards, and had critical acclaim out the wazoo. But our audience was tiny, even by tabletop standards, and as the years went by and my friends were getting married, buying houses, owning cars, and not eating

frozen burritos, I began to wonder if toiling in poverty was worth it. We ran our company as if we were Al Qaeda, living communally in a flea-trap house, doing everything online, surrounded by cheap food, loaded guns, and plausible deniability. We played a lot of games, rolled a lot of dice, and believed we were changing the world – a small part of it, anyway.

One day I did some freelance writing for a computer game company. They sent me a check – enough to buy frozen burritos for a year. My brain exploded.

Unfortunately, so did the brains of the people who played that game. It was Acclaim's long-forgotten title, *Magic: The Gathering: Battlemage*, a game so flawed that it shipped broken – you had to download a patch to even make it work, and "downloading patches" was kind of a wild-eyed idea in 1997. My first experience was a disaster (except for the paycheck), and it was years before I tried again. But already I knew one thing: I hated writing branching-tree dialogue with a passion, or at least branching-tree dialogue for a game whose only permissible conversational outcomes were Gain Money, Gain Card,

I WANTED TO TAKE MY EXPANSIVE TABLETOP VISIONS AND REALIZE THEM ON SCREEN

Gain Territory, and Enter Combat. ("New underwear on Christmas is more fun than this," raved Gamespot, and they were right.)

The next time I wrote for an electronic game, I was in better company. Bungie Studios hired me to write for them, pre-Xbox, and as a *Marathon* fan I was jazzed. I wrote a big, epic story, a real gut-churning tale of empire, conquest, and mystical destiny. It was rich with symbology and put the player in the role of a true conqueror, laying waste to entire regions with the forces at his command. I still love that story, to this day.

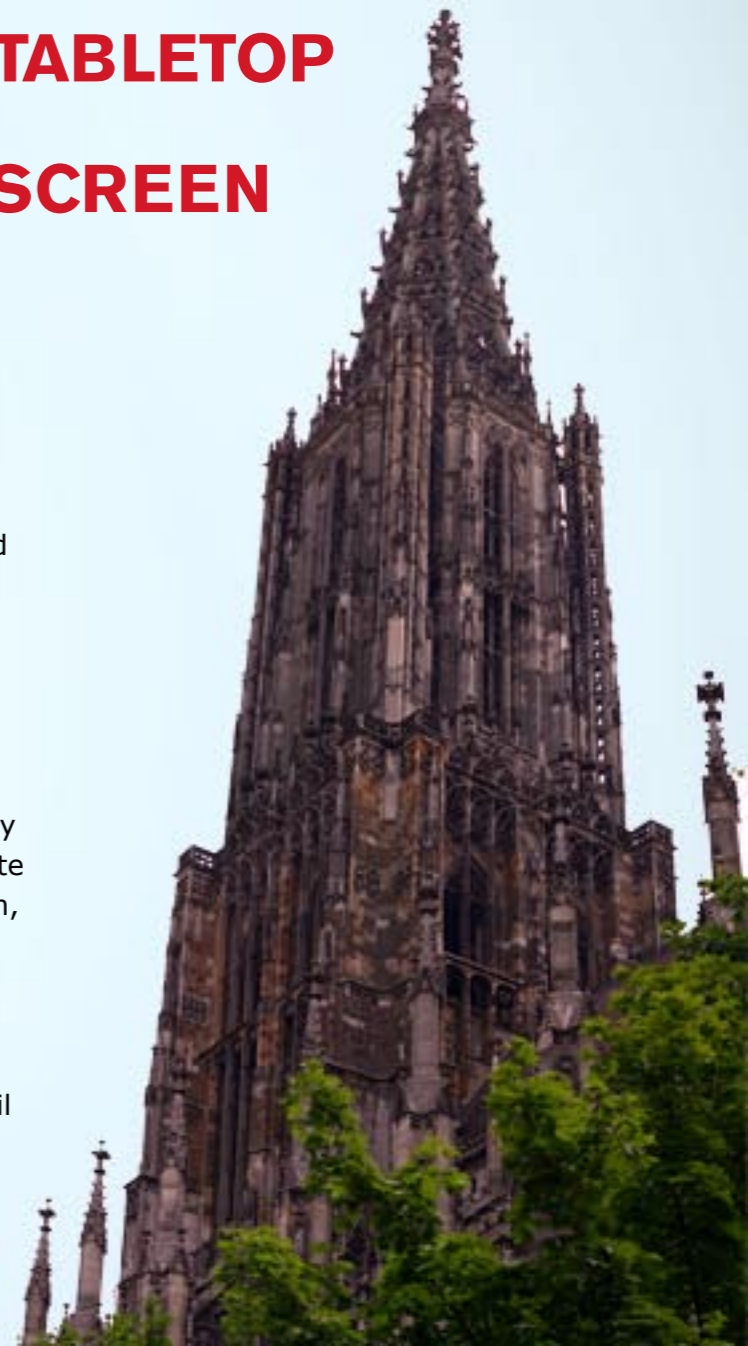
Bungie canceled the title. I was not batting a thousand in this bold new medium.

The problem was perspective. I wanted to take my expansive tabletop visions and realize them on screen, make them

extensible and responsive, have characters who grew and even changed their minds when you least expected it. I imagined a wide-open world of dynamic elements in which themes had mechanics just as detailed as bullets, where subroutines equaled subplots and plot twists, not rocket launchers, spawned nearby.

These are not the traditional strengths of videogames. I had a lot to learn.

I'm reminded of Eric S. Raymond's essay "The Cathedral and the Bazaar." He wrote about the differences between top-down, monolithic software development and bottom-up, open-source development. But the metaphor applies here too. If you've ever seen pictures of a baroque cathedral, you know the obsessive detail and ornamentation the designers put into it. When the city fathers of Seville decided to build one, their stated goal was to create a structure so amazing



that future generations would think them mad. You don't often see that attitude in public-works projects, but European cathedrals were special that way. Money and talent poured into them and they became wonders of the world.

Yet around any great cathedral, what did you find? Poverty, little houses, narrow streets, peasants. All of that work went into one great edifice, an enclosure so vast as to screen the outside world from view. This is how people build videogames: a constricted realm that seems huge, ornate, and impressive, yet is merely an island within an empty ocean. If you escape from the confines of a videogame level, as software bugs often allow you to do, you literally fall off the edge of the world. There is no **there**, there.

Tabletop games take place in bazaars. They are sprawling, diverse creations, and you quickly become convinced you can find anything in them if you look long enough.

That's the cathedral approach.

Tabletop games take place in bazaars. They are sprawling, diverse creations, and you quickly become convinced you can find **anything** in them if you look long enough. You're right: If you poke and prod and chatter for enough minutes, the gamemaster can hurriedly expand the bazaar, right there on the spot, then throw back the curtain and show you what you were looking for as if it had been there all along.

I've run tabletop games with no preparation other than a stack of photographs and an opening scene, spinning that into an intricate, multi-session mystery on the fly. Whatever wild-ass guess my players came up with was the **right** wild-ass guess, because I'd take their idea and run with it. It's

not that hard. Veteran gamemasters do this stuff all the time. Players love to rummage and GMs love to haggle. Between them, they wander the bazaar until they find the plot.

Thinking about this stuff, I IM'ed an old friend of mine from tabletop gaming. These days, Mitch Gitelman is the Studio Manager for Microsoft's FASA Studio. He was the producer on the *MechCommander* series and the first *MechAssault*, and executive producer on the Xbox game **Crimson Skies**. FASA Studio, of course, grew out of a tabletop game company that did *Battletech*, *Crimson Skies*, *Shadowrun*, *Earthdawn*, and other titles.

Mitch got into videogames during the equivalent of the Wild West days, in the heady time shortly before the first Playstation, when people were still figuring out what "multimedia" was and "CD-ROM" was still a cool buzzword. He was one of many tabletop game writers looking to move into videogames, starting with computer projects. "I was a Mac guy. I didn't tell anybody I didn't know how to use a PC," Mitch says. "I just kinda winged it."

This is how people build videogames: a constricted realm that seems huge, ornate, and impressive, yet is merely an island within an empty ocean.

Things were different then. "My writing partner and I got in with Sony and Psygnosis and made our first deal in a goat pasture in Wales. The producer asked us how much we wanted. I pretended to add up some numbers, then quoted a figure double what we expected. They said yes. Then I said I had to talk to my partner. We stood to one side, surrounded by goat shit, and I babbled at him: 'What's a pixel? What's a polygon?' I was scared out of my mind."

In the years since, Mitch has worked with a lot of other tabletop designers who are getting into electronic gaming. It's been a bumpy ride.

"They'd devise context, scenarios for what was going on in the game, but they never thought about how to communicate this stuff to the player. I realized they were unconsciously expecting to have a gamemaster there to set the stage. I told one guy, 'I can't ship you in the fucking box!'"

For one project, testers reported the real-time targeting was frustrating. The

tabletop designer working on the game was used to systems consisting of math and dice, not physical skill. "What he considered game design I considered scribbling on a cocktail napkin. We needed actual mechanics, moment by moment, incorporating physics and player feedback, not just an abstract roll-to-hit system." Finally the lead designer made the bullets magnetic, so they would actually drift slightly to hit

their target if they were passing nearby. Suddenly, the game was fun. "That's the kind of solution tabletop guys don't see, not at first."

Mitch's current project is a tabletop gaming property adapted for videogames. "We've stayed away from hiring tabletop designers for this," he says. "I don't want them slavishly adapting the source material. First and foremost, they have to make a fun videogame for people who never played the tabletop game, which is mostly everyone."

Tabletop designers do bring useful skills to the table – or rather, from it. Mitch cites texture as a big one, and he doesn't mean bitmaps. "It's the feeling

that the world is bigger than what you're experiencing in this moment," he says. "Tabletop people can bring the illusion of depth. They're good at building a world that has internal logic, a sense of **why.**"

He's talking about the cathedral and the bazaar. When you bring the people from the bazaar into the cathedral to spruce up the place, they set right to work on the stained-glass windows, creating mostly opaque views of what lies beyond to convince the players in the cathedral that there's really something outside. They're good at it.

But even here, the strengths of tabletop designers vary by type of game. Bioware has created a series of games that feel and play surprisingly close to tabletop

"Tabletop people can bring the illusion of depth. They're good at building a world that has internal logic, a sense of why."



RPGs, from the +1 Swords of Smurfing to the huge cast of characters and sprawling environments. They conjure up the feeling of an endless bazaar by layering on tons of story, even though your actual freedom to change or direct the story is very limited.

Other games make the effort but don't have a good way to express that texture. Look at *City of Heroes*. It's a terrific game, a real breakthrough in focused MMOG design. But the developers like to trumpet their 560-page story bible, in which decades of superhero history are lovingly inscribed with all their battles and villains and conspiracies and secrets. Tabletop gamers love that stuff, and as the co-author and publisher of a 432-page gaming sourcebook, I know what I'm talking about.

But could anything be **less** relevant to the actual experience of playing *City of Heroes*?

Really, they should touch a match to that whole document and stop talking about it. *City of Heroes* is a game of team combat, not storytelling. There is no

exploration, no problem solving, no rivalries, no relationships. Everything is one superhero fight after another. The game needs cooler tactical scenarios for team combat, not cooler stories. They shouldn't be ashamed of that.

This is the kind of area where tabletop designers screw up. They get wedded to their richly textured worlds and intricate storylines, and they lose track of the fact that videogames are a completely different medium. They're capable of being fun without any story or world whatsoever. *Tetris* is one of the best games ever made, and there isn't a tabletop designer on the planet who would have thought that one up. But there are plenty who would have ruined it.

Even so, story **has** come a long way in games, given its albino, blind-eyed beginnings in the *Colossal Cave*. Look at the evolution of *Doom*. The first game had no story at all, just a premise: Space marine fights demons on Mars. A decade later, *Doom 3* had a seemingly endless series of audio journals left by dead scientists spilling out their grim

Tetris is one of the best games ever made, and there isn't a tabletop designer on the planet who would have thought that one up.

portents. You couldn't go five minutes without somebody downloading their life story to your datapad. *Half-Life* and its sequel showed us how to tell stories without cut scenes, by having events unfold right there in front of the player in the game. They're simple steps, but important ones.

It's pleasant to contemplate these simple steps, but the sad truth is that this sort of storytelling doesn't particularly need



VIDEOGAMES HAVEN'T CAUGHT UP.

tabletop game designers like me or Mitch. It's mostly straight-up writing, in the style of movies or novels. Like movies, in fact, games can achieve that sense of texture through visuals as well as exposition. The unresolved mysteries of the Combine in *Half-Life 2* had little narrative presence, but visually they were subtle and intriguing.

So what is there for tabletop designers like us to do? What makes us genuinely valuable and different from the latest twitch punk promoted out of QA?

The good news is **convergence**. Thirty years ago, some bearded grognards on a college campus drew some dungeons, rolled some dice, and realized they had entire worlds in their heads for players to explore. Sitting around a table, the gamemaster was omniscient and omnipresent, able to conjure up characters, dialogue, plots, and settings out of the very air and weave them into a coherent experience. The players

could, quite literally, go anywhere and do anything, and the gamemaster would keep expanding the bazaar around them. They created a place bigger than any one person's imagination, a bazaar big enough to encompass all of them.

Videogames haven't caught up. They aren't even close. But on a clear day you can look out from the windows of development studios around the world and see a distant glimmer of what might be. Unlike the bazaar, the cathedral is constrained by technology; indeed, by architecture. As technology improves, the possibilities do, too, not just for prettier graphics, but for smarter games and extensible, dynamic worlds. When I finished playing the first *KOTOR*, I was baffled that the game simply **ended**; momentarily, I expected the final cinematic to fade out and then return me to wandering around the universe having adventures. It would have felt so natural. That was a glimpse of the future of videogames, just a tease, but there's

more to come. Another ten years and we may start having some **real** fun.

Those of us from the tabletop world, the hardcore gamers camping out in parking garages at GenCon, have been living in the future that videogames are now starting to comprehend. We may be slow to learn about magnetic bullets, and our cherished storytelling may sometimes prevent us from seeing when the gameplay is what's really good. But the truth is that we've mostly just been waiting for you to catch up.

We've got **lots** to talk about. 🗨️

John Tynesh has been a game designer and writer for fifteen years, and is a columnist for the Stranger, X360 UK, and the Escapist. His most recent book is Wisser Children, a collection of his film criticism.

OUR GAMES ARE BUILT ON PAPER

It all started with pencils and dice

by Allen Varney

IN THE BEGINNING – which is to say, 1974 – there were E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, two tabletop miniatures gamers in Wisconsin who begat *Dungeons & Dragons*. And *D&D* begat an orc-horde of paper-and-dice imitators and emulators. And it was good.

And on the computer, *D&D* begat the original text adventure game, *Adventure*, aka *Colossal Cave*, aka *Zork I-III*. And the text adventure begat the Multi-User Dungeon (MUD), which soon ramified into endless variants: MOOs, MUSHes, and a zillion others. And *D&D* begat the computer roleplaying game: the *Wizardry*, *Bard's Tale*, and *Might & Magic* series, and many more. And *D&D* ensnared Skylab astronaut Owen Garriott's teenage son, who played so much *D&D* he nearly flunked out of high school. Young Richard Garriott adapted elements of his campaign in his computer games *Akalabeth* and *Ultima I*, and earned his first million dollars before he turned 18. And that was good too.



And 15 years later, *D&D* begat the computer roleplaying game all over again. BioWare used the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* rules and the *Forgotten Realms* setting in its landmark mid-'90s Infinity Engine games (*Baldur's Gate* and sequels), which revived the dormant computer RPG form. Black Isle Studios used the same engine and the *AD&D Planescape* setting to bring forth the form's finest example, *Planescape: Torment*. And it was really good.

And *D&D* eventually begat MMOGs. In the '80s and '90s Garriott, as "Lord British," masterminded eight more *Ultima* RPGs and the early development of *Ultima Online*. Meanwhile, Verant Interactive borrowed one MUD subspecies, the fantasy hack-and-slash "Diku MUD," and gave it a slick graphic overlay to beget *EverQuest*. And it was good, depending on whom you talk to.

All this begetting shows how a paper-and-dice roleplaying game built the foundation for much of today's electronic entertainment. Turbine's new *D&D Online* MMOG, now in beta, proves its influence continues.

But *D&D* is just the start. The foundation of computer gaming is large and deep, and much of it is made of paper.

The Paper Invasion

Dungeons & Dragons looms large. But there are thousands of paper, board, card and roleplaying games, and experienced gamers can spot their influence on computer equivalents. Obviously Sid Meier's *Civilization* series was inspired by its boardgame namesake, and practically every turn-based computer wargame uses concepts propounded in early Avalon Hill and SPI paper games. Then there are the licenses: Warhammer lately, *Magic Online*, and, stretching further back, *Space Hulk*, *Diplomacy*, *Autoduel*, *Ogre* ...

How many computer RPGs use numerical attributes? How many let you create characters by allocating points to ability scores? Lots. They all borrow from the paper RPG field, which explored every imaginable variant of the idea well ahead of computer versions. For instance, the oldest surviving superhero RPG, *Champions*, shaped the character

How many computer RPGs use numerical attributes? How many let you create characters by allocating points to ability scores?



creation systems in *Freedom Force* and *City of Heroes*. *RuneQuest* inspired the *Morrowind* skill system, and *Call of Cthulhu* (which adapts the *RuneQuest* rules mechanics) spawned the *Alone in the Dark* series and other horror games. And so on.

(Another paper RPG figures notably in computer history by its absence. Interplay licensed the Generic Universal Roleplaying System [GURPS] for the *Fallout* series, but dumped it after friction with GURPS designer Steve Jackson. The Interplay team created a replacement system and went on to make history.)

But more than the paper games themselves, though, and more than their rules systems, the paper legacy has powerfully shaped the computer gaming field through its designers. Today you'd have to look hard to find an electronic game designer who didn't fritter away his or her youth playing RPGs and boardgames. It's part of the standard geek resume. Quite a few of them got their start in the low-paid plantation fields of paper gaming before working their way up to the big house on the hill, computers.

DESIGNERS: FROM PAPER TO COMPUTER

Designer	Paper Background	Notable Computer Work
Chris Avellone	<i>Champions</i> freelancer	<i>Planescape Torment</i>
Kevin Barrett	<i>Mage Knight</i> , <i>Silent Death</i>	<i>Cel Damage</i>
Mike Bennighof	Publisher, Avalanche Press	Scripted <i>Panzer General II</i> , <i>Silent Hunter II</i> , etc.
Mike Breault	TSR staff editor	<i>Red Faction</i>
David "Zeb" Cook	100+ AD&D adventures	<i>Metroid Prime</i> , <i>City of Villains</i>
Greg Costikyan	<i>Paranoia</i> , <i>TOON</i> , boardgames	<i>MadMaze</i> , mobile games
Richard Dansky	<i>Wrath: The Oblivion</i> line editor	Manager of design for Red Storm Entertainment
Dennis Detwiler	<i>Magic</i> illustrator, Pagan Publishing, <i>Godlike</i>	Senior designer, Radical Entertainment
James F. Dunnigan	Dozens of SPI wargames	<i>Hundred Years' War</i> , other sims
Jack Emmert	<i>Conspiracy X</i>	<i>City of Heroes</i> , <i>City of Villains</i>
Alan Emrich	Gaming magazine publisher	<i>Master of Orion III</i>
Mitch Gitelman	<i>Champions</i> freelancer	Microsoft lead designer
Eric Goldberg	<i>Paranoia</i> , many others	mobile games
Greg Gorden	<i>DC Heroes</i> , <i>James Bond 007</i>	<i>Elder Scrolls: Travels</i> series
Andrew Greenberg	<i>Vampire: The Masquerade</i> line editor	<i>Mall Tycoon</i>
Dave Gross	<i>Dragon</i> magazine editor	BioWare designer
Bruce Harlick	<i>Champions</i> line editor	<i>Matrix Online</i> , <i>Sigil Games Online</i>
Shane Hensley	Publisher, Pinnacle (<i>Deadlands</i>)	Lead writer, <i>City of Villains</i>
Paul Jaquays	writer, editor, cover artist	<i>Quake III: Team Arena</i> (id Software), Ensemble Studios
Sam Lewis	Editor and manager, FASA	Sony Online Entertainment
Sandy Petersen	<i>Call of Cthulhu</i> , many others	<i>DOOM</i> (id Software), Ensemble Studios
Mike Pondsmith	Publisher, R. Talsorian Games (<i>Cyberpunk</i>)	<i>Matrix Online</i>
Ken Rolston	<i>Paranoia</i> , <i>RuneQuest</i>	<i>Morrowind</i> , <i>The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion</i>
Warren Spector	editor at Steve Jackson Games and TSR	<i>Deus Ex</i> and many others
Michael A. Stackpole	many Flying Buffalo games	<i>Neuromancer</i> (Interplay)
Henrik Strandberg	<i>Mutant Chronicles</i> , Target Games (Sweden)	producer for Atari
John Tynes	Pagan Publishing	<i>Pirates of the Burning Sea</i>

Why Paper Works

What do these designers learn from paper and dice that they bring to the computer field? "Brevity," says historical wargame designer Mike Bennighof. "The forced limitations of a physical game (number of words, number and size of pieces) enforce a certain design discipline that helps create a more focused computer product as well. It makes you ask, 'what is the why?' Thanks to many years of paper game work, I can grasp in my mind how the game's different processes should come together in a working virtual machine."

"The pen-and-paper industry is like a crash course on what's fun and what's not ... because we crank out so many more products than a computer game company, we get to test out more theories."

Shane Hensley, who owns the paper publisher Great White Games, designed the *Deadlands* weird-west RPG, and is now lead writer on Cryptic/NCSoft's *City of Villains* MMORPG. "The pen-and-paper industry is like a crash course on what's fun and what's not," he says. "Because we crank out so many more products than a computer game company, we get to test out more theories." His own design experiments have given Hensley insights into the minds of the paper game audience, "many of which are cut from the same cloth as our video/computer game audience."

And did Andrew Greenberg's experience with White Wolf's gothic-punk *Vampire* paper game help him with – uhh – *Mall Tycoon*? Actually, yes: "When working in computer games, it is too easy to focus on the individual components and forget the overall design," Greenberg says. "That is impossible in tabletop gaming, where you have to ensure everything meshes together well. Having come from a tabletop gaming background helped me avoid that trap."

The engineers like the way I wrote design specs... I tended to write things such as loot tables as though they'd be treasure charts from a paper RPG.

Most important, Greenberg says, "Tabletop gaming creates innumerable opportunities to meet and get to know the people who play the games I make. Gaming with them, without the barrier of a computer, really helped me understand why they play games and what they most enjoy – assets that are hard to develop when one designs solely for computer games."

The background helps in mundane details, too. Bruce Harlick of Sigil Games says, "The ability to create (and prototype and test) a system on paper is a big help; it can save time and effort in the long run. The engineers like the way I wrote design specs. For example, I tended to write things such as loot tables as though they'd be treasure charts from a paper RPG. This might have made them a little easier to read."

Possibly most useful to a paper designer making the transition to computers is a habit of mind, a propensity to simulate. Paper games have modeled all kinds of interactions, from social climbing to persuasion to interrogation to missionary work, and topics from soap opera to *Wuthering Heights* romantic melodrama to Venetian Renaissance politics, not to mention every variety of combat and magic system. That skill in quantifying dynamic interactions helps designers adapt well to a silicon environment where literally everything is a number.

Not every paper game designer has that inclination, and those that lack it run into trouble. Paul Jaquays made the jump better than most. A versatile creator, Jaquays did remarkably fine work in the paper field as designer, editor, and painter before moving to id Software to

the Escapist

design levels for *Quake III Arena*. In his view, "There aren't as many ex-pencil-and-paper folk involved in computer gaming as you might think; it's actually fairly difficult to make the crossover. Most RPG gamers are novelist wannabes, and writers aren't as needed in computer game production as they are in the roleplaying biz."

Of the designers who successfully negotiate the transition, most stay in computers, or try to stay. Compared to paper, computer games promise a far larger audience, and the money is a lot better. (For that matter, the money is a lot better in fast food and janitorial, too. Hensley comments, "Many people in the electronic world hope to get into pen-and-paper endeavors – until they realize the financials.")

And they love having the computer do the paperwork, as it were. Greenberg's Holistic Entertainment recently restarted development on their *Noble Armada* computer game, based on the miniatures game of the same name, which in turn was derived from their *Fading Suns* roleplaying game. "This is a perfect example of the advantage of having a

computer do all the hard work of number crunching and record keeping, allowing me to do the things I like as a player: fly spaceships, explore the galaxy, trade with weird aliens, and blow the bits out of other players' ships."

Some designers miss the old days and the old ways. Hensley says, "The ability to explore so many different worlds and concepts is definitely where my heart (and short attention span) is." But Harlick enjoys both fields. "Even though I'm working in the computer industry, I tried to do a freelance project each year in the paper game world, just to stay in touch. I think paper games are fun because you don't have the whole huge development cycle and waiting to see the final game that you do with the computer games. On the other hand, I love seeing the concepts and systems translated over to the computer for the video game projects." ■

Allen Varney is a freelance writer and game designer based in Austin, Texas. His published work includes six books, three board games, and nearly two dozen role-playing game supplements.





Dungeons and Dreamers

by Joe Blancato

Like founding fathers of entertainment, people such as Steve Jackson, John Carmack, and John Romero blazed a trail of innovation others still follow, hoping to learn and improve on the design fundamentals The Great Old Ones established. Gaming's infancy produced some of the greatest development minds to date.

In the early days, everyone knew everyone, and everyone worked for everyone. Warren Spector worked with Steve Jackson, before moving to Origin to work with Richard Garriott. The industry is still very small and incestuous, but in the 1980s, playing Six Degrees to Any Game Developer rarely had more than two hops. Geeks, like other humans, are pack animals at heart. They build small tribes - or brain trusts, in the case of early gaming - and focus intently on what stimulates them. Brad King and John Borland, the authors of *Dungeons and Dreamers*, tell the stories of some of the most influential game designers in history.

Reading like a collection of short stories, *Dungeons and Dreamers* draws us into the primal years of gaming, before huge budgets and formulaic story lines ruled the day. Companies were big if the staff broke 10, and more money was spent on pizza and beer than packing materials to ship finished titles.

Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic
Brad King and John Borland
McGraw-Hill Osborne Media; 1 edition (August 19, 2003)

The book pays special attention to Richard Garriott, creator of the hugely popular *Ultima* series. Richard Garriott's Origin Studios, built on the nest egg his first few games helped him accrue, was based out of a rented house in New England, where he began throwing the Halloween parties for which he's now famous. His work helped establish the game industry as something people could actually make money in, and inspired numerous other developers to create games in new ways.

Origin, back then, was more of a fraternity than it was a company. Designers lived in a communal state with one another, arguing the finer points of development between *D&D* sessions and all night benders. The industry was **pure**. Games brought the developers into your living room, their personalities leaving notable marks on their creations.

As gaming grows, the book draws away from Garriott and pays more attention to the rainmakers at id Software, John Romero and John Carmack. Their drive to bring people deep into *Doom's*

universe revolutionized gaming. As multiplayer communities organically grew around *Doom*, the internet was just beginning to blossom. Players from all over the country were congregating both on- and offline, and were forming one of the earliest tribes of gamer culture. Later, conventions such as *QuakeCon* would be held near id's Texas offices, and members of the team would play deathmatches with their fans. id's chieftains eventually parted ways, moving on to individual endeavors, both in and out of the industry.

King's and Borland's book centers around a theory that *Dungeons and Dragons* had a profound effect on early videogaming. This theory finds support in the fantasy setting Garriott chose for the *Ultima* games, and is further solidified by the fact that id's two premier games were based on *D&D* sessions. But *D&D's* effect goes beyond mechanics.

King and Borland offer an underlying mission every developer seemed to share: connect to people in intimate ways. The great minds of electronic

gaming's formative stages were all concerned with reproducing the same feeling you get when you're surrounded by your friends, collectively imagining a scene as a game master unfolds the bowels of a dungeon. Experiences just don't exist until you share them with someone else, even if that person is thousands of miles away, as in the case with *Ultima Online* and the multiplayer versions of *Doom*. Garriott, Romero, and Carmack realized the power communities

have, and helped form the culture gamers now comprise. Ultimately, *Dungeons and Dreamers* tells a story about people finding ways to connect to others, no matter what the medium or the subject, and weaves the tale in very can't-put-it-down way. 📖

Joe Blancato is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist Magazine, in addition to being the Founder of waterthread.org.



NEWS BITS

Blizzard's DMCA Ruling Upheld in Appeals

Blizzard's win against the creators of bnetd has been upheld in appeals court. The program, created by Ross Combs and Rob Crittenden, reverse engineered Blizzard's battle.net code and allowed players to connect to non-standard servers, reportedly to ensure better ping times between computers. Blizzard's contention was bnetd allowed players with pirated copies of the game to play online; providing such a utility is in violation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. The 3-0 decision by the St. Louis Court of Appeals agreed.

Sony Moves 17.2 Million UMDs

Sony announced at the Electronic Media Expo that they've sold 17.2 million UMD discs worldwide. 9 million of the UMDs were games. While the numbers are encouraging, they're nothing

compared to what Sony has planned: they're shooting for 130 million UMD sales by 2008.

Many Ways to Donate to Katrina Victims

Big names across the industry have started numerous drives to assist people affected by hurricane Katrina. Bungie, creators of the popular *Halo* series, is selling "Fight the Flood!" t-shirts on their web site, with proceeds going to help victims. Sony Online Entertainment has also introduced the "/donate" command into *Everquest II*, which automatically launches a browser window to a Red Cross donation page. Popular web sites Penny Arcade and Something Awful have also started similar charity drives.

Casual Friday

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