

# the *Escapist*

A Conversation  
with  
**Chris Crawford**

by Max Steele

**ALSO:**

EDITOR'S NOTE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NEWS BITS



The *Back*  
The *Arcade*

by Spanner

**CHASING**  
Phantoms

by Joe Blancato

## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

I have a secret. You know all the times I've mentioned my NES? Well, it's not because I'm some minimalist, older is inherently better, classic-game-o-phile.

The truth of it is, I "stepped away from gaming" for a few years. Between the lack of desire to shell out another few hundred dollars for a SNES by my parents (and me, as I didn't have that kind of cash) and my difficult workload in high school and the university, I just didn't have the access or time.

Sure, I took my NES to my dorm room, and was quite popular for it, but that didn't exactly keep me up-to-date. I also played the occasional game on the computer, but upon discovering that it took my Sim approximately one hour to walk from the kitchen to the bathroom, yelling and grumbling at me the entire way about needing to relieve herself, I was done. I had enough stress in my life without having to worry about a slow-moving videogame toon.

And then, access was restored. I found myself in a relationship with someone

who also enjoyed videogames. Upon hitting this critical mass of two previously-avid-gamers, each lacking a gaming console, we decided we should procure a Playstation 2. Excited to get back into a pastime I looked back on with fondness, I researched titles, talked to Electronics Boutique clerks and found a game I was pretty sure I would like. I was set.

Then a strange thing happened.

I looked at the controller. Whatever happened to the two buttons and Directional-pad that controlled 95% of the game? There were now four buttons where there were once two. There were little joystick-thingies **and** a D-pad. Plus, there were these weird trigger-like "shoulder buttons" or some such.

Overwhelmed, I turned the controller over to my then-boyfriend and said, "I'll watch. You control. I have no idea what all that's for." We played the game. It was fun. But when we broke up a year or so later, I let him keep the Playstation 2.

Since then, I have plunged back into the gaming pool, owning my very own Playstation 2 and playing the occasional Xbox and PC game. But how many others out there stuck a toe into the pool and came away, never to return?

Gamers and designers alike have felt disenfranchised in one way or another by the unforgiving march of Time. And that is what this issue of *The Escapist* is about. Max Steele returns to tell of a recent conversation with gaming great Chris Crawford. Spanner takes us on a trip down memory lane, to a back alley arcade. Joe Blancato gives insight to the believer and fanatic found in all gamers, no matter how they might hide this under a hard, cynical exterior. Join us for another week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**To the Editor:** There appears to be a mistake in the article "Don't Ever Take Sides Against The Corps Again" (Issue #10), by Mark Wallace. Mr. Wallace interprets a study by PlayOn as finding that in *WoW*, players that belong to guilds level faster on average than players who don't. Looking at this study, it appears that the results are quite the opposite. In the chapter "Guild Affiliation and Leveling Time", PlayOn claims: "... we found a significant, but small, effect where characters in a guild have a longer leveling time than characters not in a guild". ([http://blogs.parc.com/playon/archives/2005/07/guild\\_affiliati\\_1.html](http://blogs.parc.com/playon/archives/2005/07/guild_affiliati_1.html))

I'm a devoted *WoW* player and cooperation and chatting are my favorite parts of the game, so I would have loved it if the results where different, i.e. that being in a guild would reward the individual directly by yielding faster level advancement. Although this isn't the case, it is my opinion that being in a guild is well worth the sacrifice, because it rewards you with companionship,

wider horizons, and the joys of giving and receiving.

## -Aviv Hurvitz

*As a result of this letter, we wrote Nick Yee in an effort to clear up the matter. In addition to clarifying a graph, he commented on the findings of the study:*

"Characters who solo level faster. The biggest caveat in interpreting this data, though, is to keep in mind that players who solo are probably different from players who love to group in more than just that aspect - that they prefer to solo for a set of reasons etc. In other words, we're looking more at a difference between achievement vs. socialization rather than a direct difference between grouping and soloing."

*Mark Wallace wishes, also, to speak to the discrepancy found between his article and the study:*

I'm sorry to see I misinterpreted PlayOn's statistics. But although their data doesn't support my thesis, I continue to see guilds and corps as beneficial for new immigrants to virtual

lands. I value my own time in MMOGs by how much fun I have in them and how compelling a story I can create there. So, even if I do level more slowly in a guild, I'm happy to trade a few hours of playtime for a richer experience.

-Mark Wallace

**To the Editor:** Matthew Hector's piece in this most recent issue was a reasonable case against this wave of legislative fervor aimed at games. Outside of the futility of arguing reasonably and rationally against any issue which can be framed in "what about the children?" terms, Mr. Hector appears to have forgotten the lesson of the Supreme Court's disastrous decision in *Gonzales v. Raich*. If growing medical marijuana on private property for local use affects interstate commerce - and can then be acted upon via the Controlled Substances Act - then surely selling video games falls under federal jurisdiction as well.

The Commerce Clause is now much like "what about the children?" - it applies to anything and everything, and is difficult to counter. That political concerns are

geared against liberty and adult behavior in our current cultural climate is about as remarkable as water being wet; it's a shame, however, that it takes personal attacks on hobbies for game players (as a whole) to notice this trend, as it has been applied many times in many places against a whole host of rights and liberties for far longer than most of us have been alive.

## -Michael O'Connor

**To the Editor:** I'd like to offer a counter point to Mr. Nolan's view that the article on The Syndicate in issue 10 was "slightly misleading."

The real core of the matter is what is meant by "successful," as a definition of success is necessary to determine whether claims made are misleading or not. The definition of success really is one of personal choice. There are no defined standards of success in the online gaming world. Some people measure success by specific game related goals.

Some measure success by the size of their guild. We feel that we are successful for a number of reasons that

matter to us. Some of those measures of success, that matter to us, include:

**Our Yearly Conferences:** For the past four years we have been holding yearly guild conferences, each one larger than the previous, with this year's reaching over 130 people.

**Our Internal Unity:** Despite being a huge guild, we are extremely close and, over the years, have grown into a group with very nearly no infighting, no backstabbing and no internal quarrels. Our early days, where we were fleshing out our rules, policies and direction, things were certainly more dynamic but, for many years, we have had smooth sailing. More than half the guild has been with us 4 or more years.

**Longevity:** With hundreds of guilds rising and falling each day in the online world, and 99% of all guilds failing before they reach even the two or three year mark, being around 10 years is an important success factor, for us.

**Our Developer and Community Relationships:** We sit on many of the developer's player council boards. We do chats, roundtables and feedback

sessions with them online and at our conferences. We regularly participate in internal alpha/beta tests. We are proud of our relationships and we seek to continue to use them to make online gaming better for all gamers.

Certainly everyone has and is entitled to an opinion. One person's success may not be the measure of another's. In nearly 10 years of existence, we have had our challenges and made our share of mistakes. Yet, here we are, stronger for overcoming those challenges, and we are committed to each other and the path we are on. We are extremely proud of our accomplishments with every expectation of an even brighter future.

**-Sean Stalzer**

*Regarding "The Coward:"*

**To the Editor:** Couldn't resist throwing in a bit of Bush bashing? I'm sick of loony liberals who have to insert their Bush hatred into everything they write.

How is anyone suppose to take the rest of the piece seriously once they realize the author is a moonbat?

**-Robert Davis**

**To the Editor:** I found Mark Wallace's article "We the Avatars" pretty well covered the bases in terms of what games provide what level of interactive economies. However, I do feel *Star Wars Galaxies* should have gotten a mention.

From the moment a new player enters the game, they are part of the economy. Every resource they gather is used in every weapon, armor, furniture and building created. While it's no *Second Life*, since everything a player can build is coded-into the game by SOE, it's far more advanced in what players can opt to do.

And that "opt" is the most important feature. *SWG* is by no means perfect. It comes with a huge array of longstanding bugs and has gone through a number of overhauls. However, it also is the broadest experience an MMOG fan can get. From PvE to PvP to running a semi-real business with partners, contracts, and employees, to dabbling, you have the freedom to live a virtual lifestyle most other games don't have.

While it's fun to watch the emergence of real money trading (RMT) and project the eventual establishment of codified

social constructs, we shan't forget there are some games designed as games simply to explore the depths of social interaction and what players would do in a near-boundless environment with no accountability.

RMTing, and à la carte financial relationships between developers and players changes that immersion. Players are no longer motivated by the desire to Escape. Now they need to worry about the finances for doing so.

Sad in a way, something lost.

**-Darniaq**



# A Conversation with Chris Crawford

by Max Steele

The man known as the Dean of American Game Design toils alone, unfunded and underappreciated, in a forest in Oregon. He has renounced games; or perhaps, one might say, games have renounced him.

Who is Chris Crawford, and why does he toil alone?

Is he Don Quixote, a dreamer slaying dragons that exist only in his own imagination? Is he Albert Einstein, an unsurpassed genius fruitlessly spending his winter years chasing an impossible, grand theory while his peers reap high praise for incremental improvements in proven fields? Or is he Miyamoto Musashi, a peerless master soon to emerge from the wilderness of his isolation with brilliant insights into his craft?

I've hunted him down to find out.

### **A Portrait of the Designer as a Young Man**

I didn't know where to start, so I started at the beginning and asked Crawford about his life before games. He didn't say much.

"I studied physics, got my masters in physics, and then I taught physics for two years. Then I moved back to California and had a teaching job that was kind of crazy. I did high school assemblies on the Energy Crisis." He was quick to add that "I was working on games pretty hard, even then. I built my first computer game back in 1976 on an IBM 1120."

Crawford joined Atari in 1979, where he created two educational simulation games, Energy Czar and Scram, for the Atari Home Computer System, before he was promoted to manage programmer training. In his spare time, he created Eastern Front (1941), which went on to become his first best-seller.

Eastern Front (1941) was one of Crawford's most noteworthy creations so I decided to press him for details. "Eastern Front was a creative implementation of an obvious idea. 'Let's do a good wargame on a computer!'" he said. "Pulling it off involved an awful lot of creativity, but it required tactical creativity as opposed to strategic creativity."

I was puzzled by what he meant. Crawford has a reputation for being outspoken, but it's a cryptic sort of outspokenness, profound to the point of incomprehensibility. Talking to him can be like reading A Brief History of Time at 120 words a minute. You always feel like you're missing something.

"Tactical creativity is implementation creativity. How do we build a good map? How do we move units around? How do

we build a good AI system? You already know where you are going and you are just figuring out how to get there."

"So would you say in today's game industry we have a lot of tactical creativity and less strategic creativity?" I asked.

"Nowadays the stuff we call creative is tiny, tiny stuff. It's hard to even call it creative at all. Technically, yes, I see a lot of creativity. But I see almost no design creativity in the stuff that's coming out there."

I decided we should review the rest of his work before we moved into philosophy. We got back to the details. After Eastern Front, Crawford created Legionnaire, Gossip, and Excalibur, and wrote The Art of Computer Game Design, the first of his many books. His reasons for the book were intensely introspective.

"I wrote Art of Computer Game Design really as a self-education exercise. The best way to figure something out is to write a book. You don't realize how ignorant you are until you try to write it down," he explained. "The book took me

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Conversation opener.

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a year to write and there isn't that much prose in it, and that's because it took me so much time to sort things out."

The intellectual self-development paid off, as Crawford's following game, *Balance of Power*, was his most successful. It sold 250,000 units in 1984 – a staggering number for the time, more so given it was in the Dark Age after Atari had imploded and before Nintendo came onto the scene.

In 1987, Crawford founded the Game Developers Conference, which he would chair for the next seven years. He also created *Trust & Betrayal: The Legacy of Siboot*. "It's the game of which I'm most proud," he said. "Trust & Betrayal went further beyond games than anything else I had done. It had major innovations. If we think of an innovation or creativity as a leap, then *Eastern Front* had some good sized jumps, *Balance of Power* some very good sized jumps, and *Trust*

& *Betrayal* had a bunch of truly mighty leaps. It was completely alien."

Alien indeed. *Trust & Betrayal* put the player in the role of an alien acolyte competing against six computer-controlled acolytes of other species for the title of Shepherd. Each of the computer-controlled competitors had a distinct personality and the core of the gameplay was figuring out which ones to ally with and which to oppose. It was a

pioneering attempt to put real characters into computer games, relying on artificial personality and language parsing solutions that were innovative or clumsy. No one had ever made a game like it before, nor since.

It sold only about 5,000 copies.

*Trust & Betrayal* was the beginning of the end of Crawford's pursuit of computer game design. In the eight years prior he

## Q&A with Chris Crawford

### Q: Where are you from?

A: I was born in Houston, Texas. I spent about ten years there. We moved when I was eleven to California. I lived there til I was 21, went to grad school in Missouri, taught for two years in Nebraska, then returned to California. I came to Oregon about nine years ago.

### Q: How old are you?

A: I'm 55. That makes me one of the oldest people in the business.

### Q: Do you have a family?

A: A wife, but no children.

### Q: Favorite game to play?

A: Well, I don't play games that much anymore. They're... boring. I'll occasionally play solitaire to kill five minutes.

### Q: Last movie went to see?

A: That would be *Star Wars Episode III*.

### Q: Alcoholic beverage of choice?

A: None.

### Q: Favorite flavor of ice cream?

A: Chocolate.

### Q: Vacation?

A: I don't vacation. I live in a forest. When I want to refresh myself I go out in the forest and chop wood and thin thickets and so forth.

### Q: Person You Most Respect in the Industry?

A: Gordon Walton.

had designed twelve games. In the next four, he did just four, and two of them were sequels (Balance of Power II and Patton Strikes Back). The other two were global simulations, both released in 1990: Guns & Butter and Balance of the Planet.

When I asked Crawford about Balance of the Planet all he said was "it was good, but it was not one of my best." A few years ago, he was not so circumspect. In a 1997 essay, Crawford spoke of his reaction to the release of Balance of the Planet:

I was so proud of that design! ...I wanted to create a game that honestly addressed environmental policy problems, something to show just how powerfully a computer could present a complex issue. I did just that... Yet when I released it to the world, the reaction of industry, press, and consumers was unenthusiastic. Perhaps their reaction is best summarized by a review of Balance of the Planet appearing in Computer Gaming World. The reviewer noted that "it is the closest thing to art to be sold as computer entertainment...but it is just not fun...if the game is not fun, it

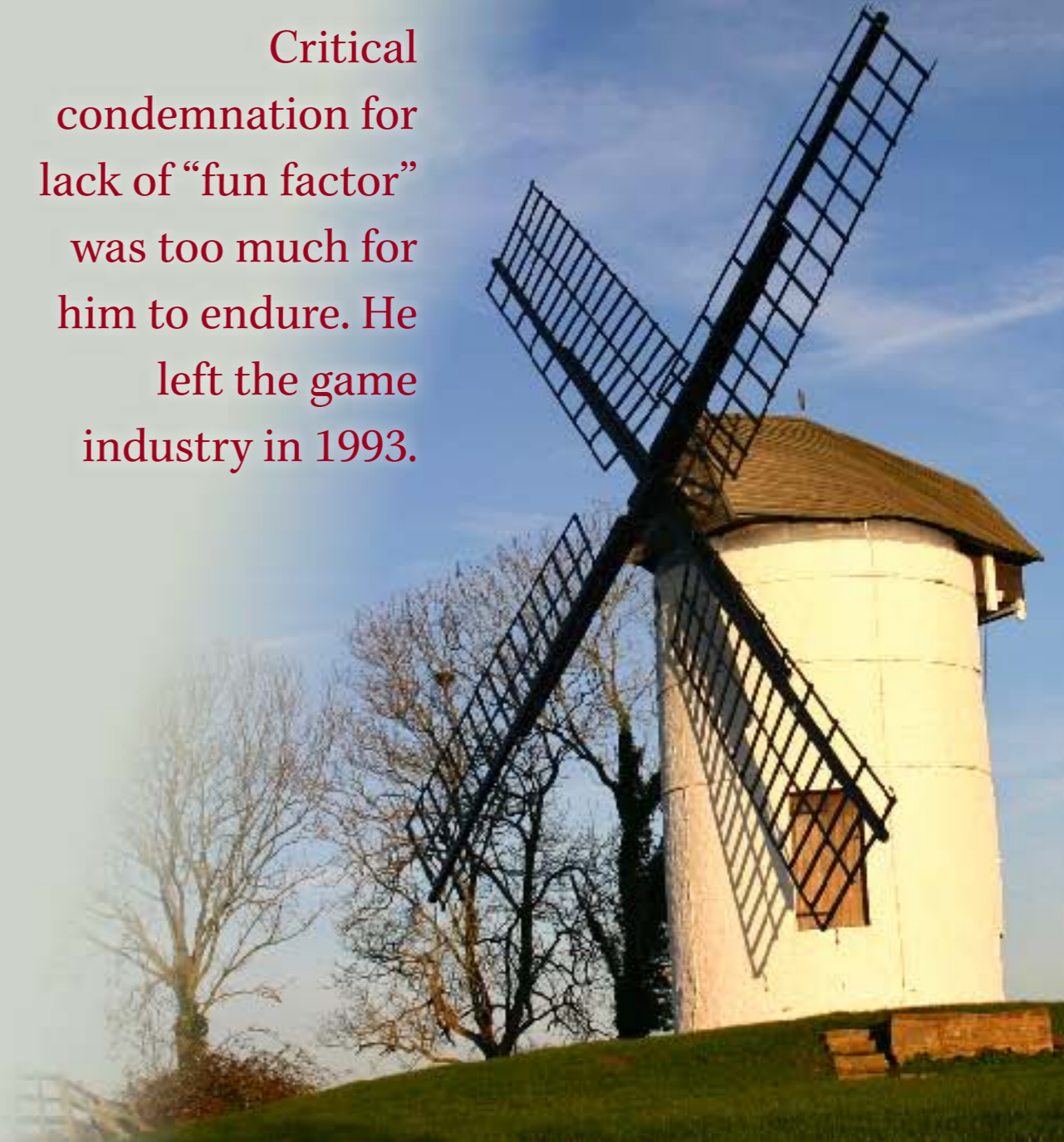
simply wouldn't be right to endorse it...' Here we have an acknowledgement that Balance of the Planet is some kind of art, yet the review refuses to endorse it because it isn't fun! ... perhaps our reviewer would react to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony like this: "Gosh, Mr. Beethoven, your symphony made my heart soar in awe at the majesty of the universe, but you know, it's just not fun. We need some tunes we can dance to, or catchy jingles we can snap our fingers to.

### **Ulysses**

Crawford, I believe, could have endured commercial failure for his artistic work, if he had received critical acclaim as a visionary. But critical condemnation for lack of "fun factor" was too much for him to endure. He left the game industry in 1993, beginning a decade-long odyssey of false starts and fresh ideas that continues to this day.

Crawford announced his departure in a famously histrionic lecture known as the Dragon Speech. "It was the greatest lecture I've ever given in my life," Crawford told me. "It talked about my pursuit of games as an art form, and how I had seen the industry moving

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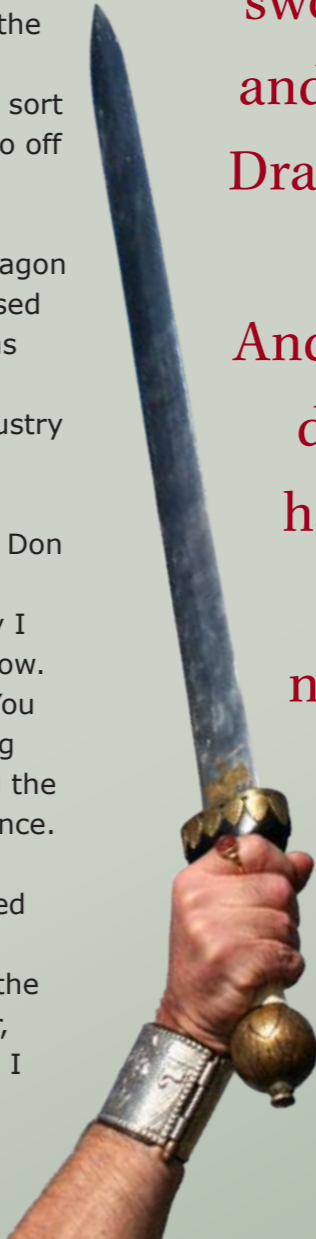




away from that dream in the pursuit of money. It had completely discarded any pretense of doing anything worthwhile. It was just pure money-grubbing of the most short-sighted kind. And the industry had no real future with that sort of an attitude. So I decided to just go off and do my own thing.”

I asked him why it was called the Dragon Speech. “Throughout the lecture I used the rhetorical device of the Dragon as the artistic ideal, with me as Don Quixote – the fool who defies all industry logic and imposes his own reality.”

“I concluded the lecture speaking as Don Quixote. ‘All right, I am leaving the industry. And by leaving the industry I can see the Dragon. I can see him now. Yes, yes, you frighten me, Dragon. You hurt me! I can feel your claws ripping through my soul.’ I almost screamed the words out. It really scared the audience. I pulled out my sword—a real, leaf-bladed sword—held it up, and shouted ‘Come Dragon, I shall fight you! CHARGE!’ And went galloping down the lecture hall, ran right out of the door, and never came back. That was how I announced my departure from the games industry.”



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If Crawford’s departure was larger than life, his post-departure ambitions were even larger. Crawford’s goal was to create a new art form: Interactive storytelling. “I thought it would take me eighteen months, maybe two years, to put together interactive storytelling. I’ve been working on this for eleven, or twelve years now.”

What exactly is interactive storytelling? “Games about people instead of about things,” explained Crawford. “It’s very difficult to understand. It’s just like the problem they had with the cinema – it took them about fifteen years to figure out what cinema really is. Around the turn of the century, the thought was that cinema was like a play with the camera sitting where the audience sits. That’s where we are with interactive storytelling – people can’t conceive of it.”

The closest anyone has come, said Crawford, is an interactive story called *Façade*, by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern. *Façade* has been broadly praised by mainstream commentators such as the *New York Times*, which called it “the future of video games,” as well as by Crawford, who called it “without a doubt,

the best actual working interactive story world yet created.”

Crawford wouldn’t be Crawford without at least a few criticisms. “*Façade* is the only genuine interactive story-telling thingamob out there, but it only demonstrates just how difficult the problem is. The story has only three characters, takes place on a single stage, has a limited repertoire of behaviors... It’s still very good – And it works, which I can’t claim the *Erasmatron* does. But they defined *The Problem* more narrowly.”

The *Erasmatron* is Crawford’s own interactive storytelling technology. And *The Problem* is the richness of human social interaction.

“Social interaction can’t be built in incrementally,” he explained. “Take romance. You can’t just permit a gesture called *Kiss* and expect to get some romance in your game. Because romance involves a hell of a lot more than just kissing, it’s a huge array of behaviors. Real social interaction is one giant step that has to be taken at once. You can’t approach it a tiny step at a time.”

# the Escapist

Crawford, in other words, seeks to create a platform that encompasses all real human interaction in a computer environment. "I want to bring the whole set of human behaviors in at once, complete in a mathematical sense, covering all dramatically important activities. And the set must be closed, not open ended."

I asked for more details, and Crawford really started talking. He was theorizing at Faster Than Light speeds, and my note-taking went from inadequate to moot.

"My first solution with Erasmatron was inadequate. I asked too much of storybuilders. The solution I have now is to create a language, 'Deikto.' It's a small language that has only around a thousand words, it's very skeletal. But it permits you to do anything, describe any human behavior."

We were looking at samples of Deikto code for a bit when I suddenly realized I'd been interviewing Crawford for almost two hours. I decided to press him for a self-evaluation: "You remind me of

Albert Einstein, post-relativity. Have you, like Albert, lost your way?"


Crawford thought for a moment. "I think it's a fair comparison, me to Einstein, post-relativity theory. I am searching for a grand, unified theory – a grand wonderful solution to all of our problems, and I have not produced an answer yet. The difference is that Einstein really was groping the entire time. He never showed a major step forward. Whereas I am much more confident that Erasmatron will solve the problems. And Mateas and Stern have published a tiny version of Unified Field Theory – so we know it can be done. But it's weird and immensely difficult. I may not have the strength to pull it off, but I retain great confidence in the likelihood of success."

It is the peculiar tragedy of genius that the greatest minds of any generation find themselves drawn to challenges that are beyond the limits of their era. Tesla invented the radio and the alternating current before embarking on a fruitless quest for broadcast power. Einstein gave us the special and general theories of relativity before turning his attention to

the unified field theory that eluded him to his death. It is quite possible that Chris Crawford, perhaps the most gifted designer of his generation, is destined for a similar fate.

But I actually think not. When Crawford emerges from the wilderness of his isolation, like Musashi with the Book of Five Rings, count me as unsurprised. 📖

*Max Steele is an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. When not actively being mysterious, he passes his time manipulating time and space to fit his plans for world domination.*



**"I think it's a fair comparison, me to Einstein, post-relativity theory. I *am* searching for a grand, unified theory – a grand wonderful solution to all of our problems, and I have not produced an answer yet."**

## The Back O' The Arcade

by Spanner

Traditionally, in England, an arcade was the kind of place where delinquents could get out of their council flats for a few hours a day (well, 16 to 20 hours) without leaving their beloved TV drug too far behind. There were two distinct flavors of arcade. The first of these were large, well-funded, noisy, neon-soaked temples to the Japanese God of Joysticks and Buttons, with all the latest titles in tight regiment and brand spanking new uniforms (or cabinets, anyway). These magnificent establishments generated their light and thunder at the epitome of the British working-class holiday locations; sea front resorts, such as Blackpool and Scarborough. Families were welcomed, the staff in the change booths were only mildly belligerent, and a five pound note would buy you a ten minute digital fix. Regrettably, the average English joystick junkie only saw these sea front retreats once or twice a year; nowhere near enough for a dedicated, addicted player.

The mid-week alternative to Blackpool's Central Pier was the seedy, dank, back-alley-hole-of-a-crime-den that could be found in any town center in England boasting an unemployment figure in excess of 75,000 (which, since the late 70s, is a good 85% of the country). Here you could find last years machines; beaten and abused, retired from the glory of the Golden Mile to live out their lives in a decadent, smoke-filled lair.



EXIT

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– *London Times* 4.16.05

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## ...despite the sticky floors and weeping walls, England's back alley arcades were a thing of horrid beauty.

When school kids bunked off for the afternoon, this is where they would go. And quite rightly, too, because despite the sticky floors and weeping walls, England's back alley arcades were a thing of horrid beauty. Here you could find the games that were made by the smaller, less successful publishers - who were nothing but a lonely arrow head frog in Nintendo's vast coin-operated jungle - but they made games that were **meant** to be played. These were also the machines that Uncle Ronnie in the downtown Yorkshire ghettos could afford to buy, and we could afford to play; the lowly, devoted, arcade creepers. We had very little money, but what we had, we shared with the iniquitous operator.

Every so often, a new machine would be brought to this digital knacker's yard and placed in the doorway to entice young urchins and their 10p pieces. At the back of the room, however, would be the old faithful campaigners - that constantly and reliably took money, so were never

replaced - where only local yokels and the bravest of the stupid would venture. Their cabinets were crumbling, the coin return buttons didn't work and the joysticks were, quite literally, sticky, but these were the machines we visited more often than our own grandparents, spending not only pocket money with them, but heart felt, quality time.

There was no competition in the home market that could compare to a dedicated arcade game. What did we have at home? Most of us who would frequent Alassio's Café and Arcade (**the** most dangerous, sordid hole in a brick wall before it "burnt down"[sic]) at best worked on a kind of hand-me-down system. When the Spectrum was released, we could afford the Atari 2600; when the Amiga was released, we could afford the Spectrum. But it was only in recent years that an "arcade perfect" home edition of *Double Dragon* appeared, so what else could we do? We **had** to go to these places.

# the Escapist

There were kids in these arcades whose socks were a substantial part of their shoe leather and had their hair cut by their sister with a knife and fork, but give them the price of a single credit and they became rich men and kings alike. They were revered among their people for their prowess at making that single coin last longer than their melancholy trek home in the rain.

When I see a video game show on the TV, populated by affluent, sharply dressed 20-somethings talking their insipid talk while walking a 30 second walk on some photo-realistic 3-D football simulator, I remember those down and out 10-year-olds who stood on a milk crate to see the screen as they thwarted the final boss on *R-Type* with cramping knuckles and aching fingers. These were **real** video gamers, who played because of a need to take their minds out of a bleak reality, where the hostile space of the Bydo Empire or the back streets of Metro City was more of a home than their own bedroom.

And harsh as these arcades were, it was a place where they could go to be with their own kind, be it Shinobi or little Tim Green from Collier Street, banding

together for the single most important reason that arcades existed across the world (the same reason that has been forgotten by today's video game industry) - to have fun. Sadly, as the scene changed, there was no longer any place for these video game graveyards, and they are now a long lost, but not forgotten, piece of a single generation's childhood. A dim and murky light was extinguished, exchanged for a faint flicker of hope when the internet appeared, though it will never replace our beloved raster lit muck hole that was the back of the arcade. 🎮

*Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.*



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## Chasing Phantoms

by Joe Blancato

The internet has turned into the Wild West of a generation. Bullies and gang leaders rule with an iron fist while Good Guys try to stick together. Unfortunately, the Good Guys usually end up having to use their arsenal of bansticks liberally when trying to clean up a message board.

In addition to the struggle between Good and Evil, snake oil salesmen and evangelists roll into town and convert hundreds and thousands of followers before disappearing in the middle of the night, leaving behind bewildered good people. This is a story of one of those flashes in the pan. What happened to this flash? The answer rode off into the sunset.

Headed up by Peter Baumann, Jr., a 15-year-old wunderkind, and his father, Red Dragon Software set out to create the holy grail of MMOGs. Announced when *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest* and *Asheron's Call* began losing their luster, *Rune Conquest* promised fast-paced combat, interesting crafting and skill gain that made sense.



## As the realization that even preliminary art hadn't yet been created, discussion began flying, and testers started yelling "scam."

Back in the dark ages of MMOG development, the concept of a two man team building the foundation of a game engine, along with designing the aesthetic and promoting the game, was eminently more believable. Even *EQ's* team was relatively small by today's standards, and *Meridian 59's* development team was just a handful of talented guys working in cramped quarters. Besides, the Baumanns never planned on going it alone; as soon as they acquired more funding, they'd hire an entire development team. But they planned on getting funded in an avant garde manner: players could pay \$50 to guarantee entrance to an online beta, as well as receive special God powers once the game went live.

Money from hopefuls poured in. Here it was, a chance to be a part of something, to have a financial stake in an idea you believed in. And hey, God powers. Red Dragon was able to play on hope and greed, and the powerful combination got

people talking, which only drew in more interested gamers. As more people grew interested, more people began wondering exactly what it was they were buying into; the scheduled public beta was fast approaching, but Red Dragon had yet to hire any new developers, aside from a web designer named Chris Anderson.

The Baumanns defended themselves by claiming one of the programmers they were planning to hire was a corporate spy from another firm, and they nixed the entire group in a fit of xenophobia. Red Dragon was in a bad spot: They were still a three man company without a game to show people, whose money they were holding.

Red Dragon disintegrated into panic. The Baumanns became extremely aggressive on their message boards, taunting members who questioned the game's development. The actual website went through turmoil, as Chris Anderson took

it down after a dispute between he and Baumann, Sr. The drama came to a head when Anderson declared he and his wife felt their lives were threatened by Baumann. Anderson later retracted his statement and transferred ownership of the website and its content to Baumann, but the episode shook many of the beta testers' resolves.

In a bid to keep people interested, Red Dragon finally released preliminary screen shots, a tidbit of the great things to come from a company who finally overcame their growing pains. Unfortunately, the screen shots weren't even theirs. They were stock footage from developers of a middleware engine used to promote their software.

As the realization that even preliminary art hadn't yet been created, discussion began flying, and testers started yelling "scam." Some asked for refunds on their investment, which took weeks to arrive. Others remained hopeful, and stayed





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**Despite the cloud of apparent cynicism, gamers do enjoy liking stuff.**



with the game until it fizzled away, never to be heard from again. By the time screen shots actually eked their way out of Red Dragon Studios, anyone with an outside view could easily say the game wasn't going to materialize.

The hiring episode was what piqued my attention. Call it a love of corporate espionage, or perhaps I'm just some sort of drama vampire, but I had to jump into the *Rune Conquest* fray, just to see what made these fanatics tick. When I got there, it was just a message board full of upbeat people who wanted desperately to enjoy something. But things became so haywire by the end, the only people who remained were the ones who were there at the beginning.

What kept people there? To hear them talk, it was the emotional investment. Try spending months or years believing in something, only to resolve yourself to the fact the dream isn't coming true. Some people can't handle the strain, and prefer to continue on, eventually turning into evangelists for their ideal. But it's not a flaw, it's just a byproduct of hope.

Despite the cloud of apparent cynicism, gamers do enjoy liking stuff. Questing after a comfortable niche can catapult anyone into psychoville, be it the manic high point that is the super fan, or the overly aggressive burnout who remembers the last time he reached out for something, but drew back a bloody stump - and won't let anyone forget about it.

It's easy to criticize with a bird's eye view. Everyone has been a fanatic at some point or another. They've also been the abused dog too afraid to come out from under the porch. Find someone who hasn't, and you'll find someone who can't embrace their own humanity. There's no sense resisting the urge to believe; it's eventually going to get you. I only hope you don't wind up chasing a phantom. 🐾

*Joe Blancato is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist Magazine, in addition to being the Founder of [waterthread.org](http://waterthread.org).*

## NEWS BITS

### Age of Empires III Goes Gold

The second sequel to the smash hit Age of Empires series has reached gold status, with a stated release date of October 18. Original Age of Empires developers Ensemble Studios, are again the brains behind the game's production, a feat that's becoming rare as large publishers shuffle studios around internally. Age of Empires III will retail for \$49.99.

### SquareEnix Purchases Taito

SquareEnix initiated a friendly takeover of Taito, acquiring 93.7% of the company's stock for roughly \$565 million. Taito's recent focus has been on the mobile games market; they've produced numerous arcade classics for cell phones on multiple carriers, as well as titles for the Nokia N-Gage.

### Guild Wars Reaches 1 Million Subscribers; EVE Online, 70,000

ArenaNet's Guild Wars has reached the 1 million mark, meaning 1 million game accounts have been created utilizing the game's free online play. While not traditionally an MMOG, Guild Wars' profit strategy, which provides free online play with the assumption that players will purchase expansions periodically, may indeed prove viable if they maintain a high conversion rate with the debut of their first expansion.

Additionally, Icelandic developers CCP announced EVE Online has 70,000 subscribers, and has surpassed a concurrent user total of 15,000. EVE's growth in the era of World of Warcraft may suggest that WoW isn't only "stealing" subscribers from other games, but also is introducing first time MMOG players to other facets within the industry.

# Casual Friday

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