

# the **Escapist**

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## A LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

by Alexander Macris

It's my sorry duty to inform you that issue 13's Editor's Note summarizing the topic has been replaced by a Letter from the Publisher. Unlucky 13, I suppose. Not to worry - since we're a weekly publication it'll be only seven days until our Executive Editor returns.

Until then, I'm going to bore you by talking about advertising. Many of you wrote in to express feedback - or outrage - about our decision to place ads in issue 12. There's ads in this issue, too, and you should expect them to be an ongoing part of the magazine from here on out. It's a step that's been planned from issue 1, but it was an important one for us to make. I'm especially pleased that our offering of big, attractive print-style ads has been successful.

I did want to respond to those of you who took umbrage at our decision to place a beer ad in a game magazine. I made a brief post on this issue on the CTRL-V blog, but I'd like to expand my thinking there a bit further. Would the

Wall Street Journal be a better newspaper if it only hosted ads from investment banks? Should National Geographic only accept ads from travel companies? Nonsensical to imagine, yet all too often, game magazines only feature ads for games. It's what's expected, but I don't think it's a good trend. I feel strongly that one of the best ways for a magazine to ensure that the advertising-editorial border is not breached is by ensuring that it has a wide breadth and scope of advertisers outside its industry.

That's not say that you will never see a game advertisement in *The Escapist* - far from it; indeed, we've already run one. But you should also expect to see ads from Fortune 500 brands, technology companies, consumer and luxury goods, a whole range of companies. I think it's a good thing, and I hope you do, too.

Best regards,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**To the Editor:** I get enough adverts from traditional media without being told by an "independant" games mag what beer I should be drinking. Frankly, an advert has never convinced me to buy anything, and they do nothing except breed annoyance. Don't you have any respect for the magazine you set up, not to mention the authors of the articles which have been cut in half by your corporate whoring?

**-Doug Inman**

**To the Editor:** I of course was disappointed by the appearance of ads in your magazine but I understand that financial support has to come from somewhere. I'm sure there will be much wailing and gnashing of teeth over this change, but don't worry. As long as you exert a bit of editorial control over the ads to keep them within the aesthetic boundaries of the magazine, most of us aren't going anywhere. I don't mind ads when I know that they are enabling a company to bring me an excellent (and

free!) product. Please just don't let them get out of control, and never, ever let them use Flash.

**-Jerrod Hansen**





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**To The Editor:** I recently discovered your magazine after it was linked on [www.hardocp.com](http://www.hardocp.com). I have been an avid gamer pretty much my entire life, as my parents had a TI 99/4A computer before I was even born. However, I have always gone to great lengths to dissociate myself from the fanboys and zealots, and the idea of a magazine that appeals to the intellect, as opposed to consumer impulses, is fantastic: not only giving me something to read and look forward to, but as a sign that the industry is starting to mature. The creeping backlash against big-business gaming gives hope to a person who's newest console is a Dreamcast that they bought used for \$20 and steadfastly stays a generation or two behind on PC hardware.

Anyways, many words have been spent on lauding your publication, and almost as many discussing your layout. I for one am in favor of it, however I think it is seriously lacking one small feature: page numbers. It would not only be very convenient but also contribute to your goal of replicating the feel of a printed magazine to have each page numbered, and to include a "Go To"

function so that your readers can skip around at will.

**-Jason Begy**

**To the Editor:** I know a lot of people will criticize you for including advertisements in your e-zine. I will agree that it is "annoying", but please take these complaints with a grain of salt. What the addition of advertisements really means is that you have crossed the threshold from the web-blog-with-nice-formatting stigma into the world of professional, magnificently entertaining literature. Well done!

**-Andy**



## The Buzz Is Gone

***Race Into Space* went to the Moon and then to oblivion**

by Allen Varney

**BUZZZZZZZZ!** Where are you, Buzz Aldrin? I'm playing your old 1993 Interplay game, *Buzz Aldrin's Race Into Space (BARIS)*, about the 1960s U.S.-Soviet space race. Things are bad. I've got two Apollo 9 astronauts in a Jupiter rocket on a direct ascent to the Moon, in fall 1968. Looks like they're about to burn up on reentry. This will knock my capsule reliability down to 46% and also - speaking just on general principle - sucks. Why does your *Race Into Space* keep frying my astronauts, Buzz? Is this supposed to make me want to go into space? You've got me so jumpy I can't drive to the supermarket.

Now that I think on it, Buzz, I don't want help from you. Even though your name is on this game, you were an astronaut, not a NASA engineer. If *Buzz Aldrin's Race Into Space* were about piloting the Apollo 11 LEM to the lunar surface in July 1969, you and Neil Armstrong would be my go-to guys. But to help me win *BARIS*, I need someone who can plan a whole space program - some high-profile, fully-empowered Space Czar who is working even now to get America back to the Moon and beyond.

Oh, wait - there isn't one.





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Does that help explain why we can't buy *Race Into Space* any more?

We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard.

- John F. Kennedy, Sept. 12, 1962

## No Space Available

Pop culture defines society's desires. A zillion *Wing Commander* and *X-Wing* knockoffs let you zoom around space and zap alien bad guys, but astonishingly few electronic games take a realistic, contemporary approach to space travel, let alone a historical treatise like *BARIS*. People just don't seem to want them.

You'd think a plausible approach to colonizing the Moon, the Solar system and other stars - the future of humanity - would make a good game. Think of the grandiose goals you could present: constructing orbital habitats, mining asteroids for metals and water, and terraforming Mars! Building a space elevator (<http://www.worldchanging.com/archives/003429.html#more>), which seems tantalizingly possible even today, would present a wonderful

challenge. Heck, you can easily spend a day or more just tooling around the Milky Way with Alessandro Ghignola's 1996 space simulator, *Noctis* (<http://anywherebb.com/noctis.html>), and that's not even a game.

But the vacuum is near perfect. Hardly a dozen electronic games have covered space travel with anything like realism. In 1984, Lawrence Holland created a fine NASA mission simulator for Advantage, *Project: Space Station*, before moving on to Lucasarts and *X-Wing*. And in 1987, Electronic Arts published Karl Buiter's odd space business simulation *Earth Orbit Stations* for the Apple II.

We've also seen a few space shuttle simulators, notably the excellent Virgin Interactive *Shuttle* from 1992. Microsoft never produced a sequel to its 1994 *Space Simulator*, though in 2001 we got a superior freeware equivalent, Martin Schweiger's *Orbiter* (<http://orbit.medphys.ucl.ac.uk/orbit.html>). Another worthwhile indie effort is Kai Backman's 2003 space station simulator *ShortHike* (<http://www.shorthike.com/>). Legacy Interactive's 2001 *Moon Tycoon* is OK, but limited, god-game about building a lunar colony. Beyond that, we reach

conventional real-time strategy games like Humongous Entertainment's 2002 *MoonBase Commander* (mistakenly marketed as a children's game) and goofy sims, like FireFly Studios' 2003 *Space Colony*; realism recedes into the blackness.

Just as interesting are the tantalizing projects that never made it to liftoff. In the late '80s Origin Systems, run by Skylab astronaut Owen Garriott's sons Richard and Robert, started an unannounced, untitled space colonization simulation. The company made decent headway on the project until somebody realized it made a lot more financial sense to do another *Wing Commander* game instead.

**...somebody realized it made a lot more financial sense to do another Wing Commander game instead.**



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"Second Life is an extraordinary alternative world where you can do anything you want...The only limits to the ways characters can interact are the player's imaginations and a Utopian code..."

– *London Times* 4.16.05

**JOIN NOW AND GET A BASIC SECOND LIFE ACCOUNT ABSOLUTELY FREE**

**JOIN NOW!**





The highest-profile space-colony game that aborted before launch was undoubtedly *SimMars*, an ambitious title Maxis announced in 1998. Having presented a Mars terraforming scenario in *SimEarth*, Maxis would now use actual NASA research to portray a realistic, accurate effort to colonize Mars. From a 1999 IGN.com *SimMars* preview (<http://pc.ign.com/articles/132/132191p1.html>) by Vincent Lopez:

You select a section of the planet to colonize, then launch a lander from Earth filled with vehicles, or your first set of scientists and engineers. Unlike earlier Maxis sims, you control vehicles and characters in a full 3-D environment. [...] The design of the

vehicles and astronauts are still in the classic Maxis style, realistic but full of character and life, as well as the small details that continue to make the company's games so charming. It was important to [Maxis producer Matthew] Thornton that the astronauts add a true character-based feel to the colonization process, and the company used EA's capture studio in order to get correct animations for everything from repairing a faulty vehicle to golfing on the planet's surface. You'll never forget the first moments watching a team of astronauts exit a lander and begin work on the colony - and when one of the team loses their air hose, you'll definitely feel it. [...] Though the game begins in the near future, Thornton

says that the goal is to follow humanity into the first few hundred years of development, when research has allowed scientists to create concrete and steel structures on the planet, and combine colonies into "cities" in order to prepare for long-term habitation.

But in 2000 Maxis cancelled *SimMars*. Today the only Martian sim activity is an unrelated fan effort, a mod for *SimCity 4* creatively titled *SimMars* (<http://www.simmars.simvision.net/>). Why did Maxis pull the plug? Because somebody realized it made a lot more financial sense to do another Sims expansion instead.

Do you see a pattern here?

## Top Ten Ways to Tick Off Buzz Aldrin

10. When you meet him, make buzzing sound like a bee.

9. Squeegie his space helmet and ask for a buck. [...]

5. Every time he eats cheese, wink and say, "Wonder where you got that, moon man?" [...]

2. Refer to Apollo Eleven as "That guy from the 'Rocky' movies."

1. Hog the Tang.

- David Letterman, The Late Show (September 12, 2002)

**Why did Maxis pull the plug? Because somebody realized it made a lot more financial sense to do another Sims expansion instead.**

**If a mission fails and astronauts die, your reliability can drop calamitously while the program regroups.**



## **And Cancel His Computer Game...**

For historicity and strategic depth in realistic space games, *BARIS* remains the gold standard. *BARIS*, Interplay's 1993 computer game by Fritz Bronner and Michael McCarty, was adapted from *Liftoff!*, an obscure 1989 Task Force Games strategy board game designed by Bronner (with John Olsen and Robert L. Sassone).

In both board and computer versions, you can direct either the American or Soviet space program in a race to land astronauts on the Moon and return them safely to Earth. You manage a hardware budget, teams of scientists, and crews of astronauts/cosmonauts. You research various projects - capsules, rockets, boosters, kickers - to increase your missions' all-important reliability percentages. If a mission fails and astronauts die, your reliability can drop calamitously while the program regroups. You progress through a sequence of

programs (Mercury/Vostok, Gemini/Voskhod, Apollo/Soyuz), and decide the sequence of unmanned and manned missions that will maximize reliability. Throughout, random events, such as a command from the government to make your next mission manned no matter what, complicate matters

A director faces many interesting decisions: lander type (Eagle/Duet vs. Cricket/L-3); Lunar-Orbital Rendezvous (LOR) vs. Earth-Orbital Rendezvous (EOR); and exactly how to get to the Moon: two-, three-, or four-person capsule, reusable three-person shuttle, or the science-fictional Direct Ascent? When do you research what? What hardware do you need? How much will it cost? You face the same choices the United States and the USSR faced, and in making decisions you start to understand why history played out as it did.



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There has never been another computer game like *BARIS*. It is innovative, balanced and highly replayable, but complex and extremely hard to win. It appeared first on floppy disk, and proved so difficult, the CD-ROM version the following year reduced the chances of mission failure.

**There has never been another computer game like *BARIS*.**

Nowadays, that's not the game's only tricky aspect. The *BARIS* copyright has reverted to the designers, who have made the game freely available. (Abandonware sites usually offer just the floppy version, but the CD-ROM version includes scarce archival video footage of actual launches, so get it if you can.) But *BARIS* is for MS-DOS only. The players who couldn't run the game back in 1993, because they lacked a CD-ROM drive, now can't run it from (so to speak) the other direction. Setting it up under a modern Windows installation requires a DOS emulator and lots of finicky attention.

Yet fans still cherish *BARIS*. Leon Badarat maintains a fan site (<http://www.geocities.com/raceintospace/>) with all kinds of emulator tips, background, and useful material. It's a Geocities site, so if you get bandwidth limit errors, be patient. The website, The Space Race (<http://www.thespacerace.com/>), has an active forum discussion (<http://www.thespacerace.com/forum/index.php?topic=64.0>) of *BARIS*. There's also a

Sourceforge project (<http://raceintospace.sourceforge.net>) to recreate the game for modern platforms, but it appears to have stalled.

Could there ever be a commercial remake or spiritual sequel? In today's market, the idea is increasingly unlikely. A small group of players passionately loves the game, but a mass audience would be only mildly interested - not unlike the way America's diehard community of space enthusiasts cannot overcome general public apathy toward the space program. NASA wants to

spend 100 billion dollars and 12 years to return astronauts to the moon, but the political will for this remains unclear. Some people do get excited about private companies striving to reach low-Earth orbit, such as Armadillo Aerospace, co-founded by *DOOM* and *Quake* programmer John Carmack. But without a compelling vision and a worthy opponent, most people appear unwilling to imagine reaching for the stars, either in a game or in reality.

*Buzz Aldrin's Race Into Space*, like the space race itself, proved a magnificent dead end. 🚀

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## Pigtails, Pioneers and Polygons

### Bringing Real American Girls to a Virtual World

by Kris Naudus

A little brunette girl walks down the street, clutching a blonde-haired doll with a toothy grin. The doll is a foot-and-a-half tall, and wears a pioneer dress reminiscent of Melissa Gilbert in *Little House on the Prairie*. The little girl and her parents turn a corner, and now you see another girl, this time red-haired, holding a doll with a similar expression, except that this doll has a darker complexion, and wears the buckskin clothing of the Nez Perce tribe. Further down the street are two sisters, one eight and the other looking about six. Each carries a doll - the elder holding a brunette dressed in Victorian garb, the younger child has a redhead in Colonial wear.

It may seem weird to be out in the world and see little girls all carrying essentially the same doll - but in outfits that were trendy long before you were born. Yet this scene is becoming more and more common among the playgrounds, birthday parties and family outings of America. These are American Girl dolls, and more than 11 million have been sold since the company starting selling them in 1986.



**The American Girl "experience" has expanded to include not just the dolls and books, but also a magazine, a stage show, two high-class retail outlets in Chicago and New York, and a movie on the WB (with another to follow this November).**



American Girl was founded in 1985, when Pleasant T. Rowland saw a gap in the market, a lack of dolls that were neither the buxom adult beauties of Barbie nor the round dumpling baby dolls that have been a mainstay of girls' playtime for centuries. Three characters were created, little girls from varying points in America's history (the series eventually expanded to eight main characters from different eras). Each girl was introduced and fleshed out in a series of books, each book telling a particularly themed story - a school story, a birthday tale, a holiday story.

They were meant to be educational, with unique stories little girls could explore through play. But what made this interactivity possible, what made the experience really different, were the dolls. Each girl was made into a doll (purchased separately or bundled with the introductory book), and every subsequent book was accompanied by

the release of a collection of outfits and accessories straight from its pages. The accessories were more than just fashion accoutrements - they included vintage-style lunch boxes, pets, furniture, even miniature dolls for the dolls. Each set was meant to make history interactive.

In 1998, American Girl was purchased by Mattel, the company who so famously brought us the Barbie doll back in 1959. In a time when Barbie sales have taken a hit from the multi-ethnic, urban-themed Bratz line, the American Girl series has proven to be a consistent best-seller. The American Girl "experience" has expanded to include not just the dolls and books, but also a magazine, a stage show, two high-class retail outlets in Chicago and New York, and a movie on the WB (with another to follow this November). Despite all these attempts to make American Girl even more interactive, not much has been done to take the franchise into the electronic arena.

In the 90s, The Learning Company **did** release software based on the American Girls franchise: *The American Girls Premiere*. Players were given the opportunity to create and watch their

own theatrical play based on the American Girl stories, selecting a script and casting characters to perform. They could even write their own play, and the level of control was such that players could adjust the lighting and sound. It garnered mostly positive reviews, though not necessarily for its educational value.

The problem is while the software certainly encouraged creativity, users had more fun inputting their own ideas, eschewing the rich historical universe of American Girl. The characters and their stories were just window dressing, not integral to the experience. For any piece of software to really make use of the American Girl license, it needs to play to one of the major strengths of the brand - the detailed historical universe and the engaging adventures that take place in it.

Imagine a fully immersive environment where the player gets to explore the house of one of the girls, like the pioneer girl, Kirsten. Players could walk around inside her humble farmhouse, check out the barn, explore the closets and trunks and all the clothing they may contain, pick up different items, and operate various household devices like looms or water pumps. Each book in the American

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Girl series has an appendix in the back which describes the historical context, divulging some factual information on what life was like for the people of that time and what their everyday lives might have been like. A video game could integrate this function into the gameplay. A player could highlight an object and get information about it, information that would be vital to using the item in-game.

A large part of what made *Myst* popular with casual and non-gamers was its pacing. They could explore the environments; walk around without the need to be somewhere right away. It wasn't frantic - it was relaxing, inviting.

Each American Girl game would be similar to that. For each girl, there would be a story to follow, certain objectives to be achieved, but no urgent clock to push the player forward. Gameplay would be similar to an old adventure game like the ones LucasArts and Sierra used to produce, with the environmental detail inherent in *Shenmue*. The story would be akin to those presented in the books, perhaps even written by the same authors for a sense of consistency. There might even be multiple stories in the same game - but regardless of the

number of stories, none of them should ever take longer than a handful of hours to complete. Since it's inside the environment of a 10-year-old girl, none of the games would be too expansive, too intimidating. It would be an intimate experience that even a non-gamer could approach with confidence and become comfortable with.

With a ready-made concept - and their gaming pedigree - it is certainly surprising that Mattel has not taken their successful acquisition and expanded it into the video game medium with a true interactive experience. It seems like a missed opportunity - American Girl is about celebrating femininity. Turning it into a video game would allow girls to experience a medium normally dominated by boys, but not sacrifice any of their girlish characteristics or ideals.


But that is exactly the problem - the thing that makes the brand a perfect choice for a video game is also the perfect argument against it. American Girl is about celebrating ideals, old-fashioned concepts of what it means to be a child, specifically a little girl. Each doll will set back a family about \$100 - and that's not counting the myriad of





accessories. Yet many parents gladly spend this money, as the dolls represent a childhood their little girls are still interested in. People often remark that kids grow up too quickly these days, and part of that is because many kids would rather have personal electronics than a simple teddy bear or a toy car. Electronics and designer clothing are already pretty high priced items. So it's not much of a leap to spend the money on a doll instead, and people will jump on the opportunity precisely because it's not an iPod, a cell phone or a video game. It's something they can identify with, something they understand.

Some may say making an American Girl video game goes in a different direction than Ms. Rowland was trying to achieve when she created the brand (educational software is held to a different societal standard). This however, does not make the concept of a video game a bad one, or an impossible idea. A lot will depend on what the American Girl Company and Mattel decide the future of the franchise should be. Is it just a way to educate children about history? A tool for empowering little girls? Or is it a way to prolong the ideal of childhood for just a few more years? Given how ideals

change, and how our own industry is catering more and more toward the young adult male gamer, perhaps it would be in their best interest to embrace the video game medium while there's still a place for younger children in the industry - as well as in our best interest, to capture a larger female audience before they leave both their childhood and gaming behind them, heading into adult mainstream pastures. 

*Kris Naudus has written articles for Anime Insider and Anime News Network, and currently provides editorial at The-Brand-Management-Firm-That-Must-Not-Be-Named. She also keeps a video game blog which can be named over at 1Up.com.*





## THE CONTRARIAN: Feature Creep

by John Tynes

When *Shrek 2* hit theatres, there were no banners trumpeting “Now with more polygons!” or “Three extra jokes per minute!” Yet those are the kinds of back-of-the-box bullet points game publishers slap on sequels to excite us. And you know what? It’s a stupid, stupid idea.

The sports games were among the first. When you have to sell *Madden* yet again, the marketing department goes pale at the thought of ad campaigns trumpeting nothing but “This year’s stats!” or “Those annoying bugs from last year have been fixed!” Instead we get upgradeable mansions, manager mode, hot-dog concession price simulation, stadium design, licensed music and EA’s ridiculous Game Face. Marketers’ sweaty animal fear drives this style of development, and as more games get more sequels more often, we’re seeing this crap everywhere: *Prince of Persia*, *Splinter Cell*, *Warcraft*, you name it.



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Welcome.

**Carlsberg** Probably the best beer in the world.



**Ten years from now, the entirety of Splinter Cell will probably be played in Sanskrit.**

It's called **feature creep**. Way back in the 1980s, there were more word processors on the market than *Microsoft Word*, and back then it was still possible to come up with a new feature that would quickly become essential. Once upon a time, younglings, there was no such thing as spell checking or smart quotes. Magazine ads trumpeted the dreaded feature-comparison checklists in which *Word* and *WordPerfect* would be stacked side-by-side, check marks pointing out the glaring deficiencies in the competitor's products. "Better" became synonymous with "more." If you've ever wondered why you spend half an hour turning off features after installing *Word* on a new computer, feature creep is the reason.

Over the long term, feature creep is the doom of gaming. Can you imagine someone new to this medium picking up the 12th iteration of *Splinter Cell* with the thought, "Hey, I'll try that online multiplayer mode I heard about." Jesus God. When *Pandora Tomorrow* introduced its asymmetrical multiplayer, it was a terrific idea with a lot of promise. By the time *Chaos Theory* hit shelves, that same game mode was ratcheted up with so many new features

that only the hyperattenuated fans still playing *Pandora's* version a year later could possibly enjoy it - because that was the market the developers listened to, the fools. The learning curve went from steep to moebius. Ten years from now, the entirety of *Splinter Cell* will probably be played in Sanskrit.

Games today are built by and for gamers who have at least a decade of play behind them, with all those hard-earned assumptions and skills. I'm not talking about people who live for *Counterstrike*. I just mean basic literacy issues, like knowing that shooting crates is good but shooting barrels is bad, or that weapons in first-person shooters usually have an alternate fire mode. Long-time gamers take that stuff for granted, and obsessive 12-year-olds with lots of free time catch up quickly. But if you aren't a veteran gamer or a kid, there's no front door to this medium. (Except Nintendo, whose new Revolution controller is a guaranteed system seller - for the Playstation 3.)

Recently, I picked up *Namco Museum* for the Xbox. It's terrific. My girlfriend was a major *Mario* fan on the NES when she was a teenager, and sure enough, she



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blew three hours one night playing *Pac-Man*, *Galaga*, *Rolling Thunder*, and so on. She had a blast. And I had a natural thought: I should pull out another game from my library that she might enjoy, something current. She hasn't played a 3D game before, and that's a skill that takes some getting used to. *Star Wars: Republic Commando*? *Fatal Frame 2*? *Halo 2*? No, no, and no. None of those games are suitable for new gamers - and indeed, not much is.

Gamers and game reviewers alike demand new features. If a sequel offers nothing but more of the same, it's considered a failure, even if that same thing was absolutely fantastic a year ago. So we get sequels of increasing complexity and scope, ensuring that only existing gamers will ever enjoy them.

Feature creep can also screw games up. Look at *Halo 2*: Bungie normal-mapped the hell out of the graphics, and in exchange we got glitchy-looking cutscenes and no ending. Could the story of Master Chief and the Arbiter been resolved if Bungie hadn't felt the pressure to ramp up the graphic technology so much? I'm going to go out

on a limb here and say yes, the new graphics features cost us a real ending.

Then there's *Knights of the Old Republic 2*. It's a terrific game - assuming you're a hardcore gamer - and it's the first game I've played where I thought the voice acting was genuinely interesting and worthy of critical appraisal. All we really needed was a good story and good characters, more of the same stuff we enjoyed in the first game. What'd we get? The ability to break down and recreate almost every item in the game, allowing us to min-max every piece of gear, for every character, at every level. I did it. I'm not proud. Give me an obsessive, tweaky feature and I'll fall for it like Popeye for spinach. But we also got a butchered ending, incomplete character arcs and an entire subplot about a planet of droids that abruptly cuts off partway through. Fans of the PC version even located the completed script and voiceover files from all the content the developers had to cut, still there but stillborn. Could we have had a complete story if we didn't have that entire item-creation system? Maybe. Start cutting new features and, God forbid, there might be more time for new content.






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Imagine the world we could be living in. What if, for \$5 a month, you'd get a new *Splinter Cell* level to download? No new features, no new gadgets, no graphics upgrades. Just another level, another hour of fun with Sam Fisher. I'd buy that. Wouldn't you? There are plenty of games I could keep enjoying for a long time with new levels and no new features. But parade that kind of approach past the marketing staff and they'll hiss at you. Instead we get new weapons, new gadgets, new game modes, more complexity and less accessibility.

I'm not just going to whine about the problem of feature creep. Let me offer a solution. Don't just make sequels. Make **prequels**. Prequels in the sense of stripped-down feature sets and easy-entry gameplay at budget pricing. Call it *Splinter Cell: Training Ground*. You can sneak, shoot and grab. No gadgets. No funky bullets. Sneak-or-shoot multiplayer. Twenty bucks. After six months, you give it away free in magazines, pack it in the console box or do an AOL-style mass mailing a month before the next sequel ships. Imagine an Xbox 360 that shipped with ten prequels like this on the hard drive, everything a new gamer would need to get up to

speed with the state of the art in racing, shooters, fighting, football, stealth, squad tactics, you name it. Simple, fun, accessible. Every year you refresh the prequels with new levels and **no new features**.

Then, when the budget prequels start outselling the hardcore sequels, you can tell marketing to shove it. And my girlfriend will finally have something to play that isn't 20 years old.

What a wonderful world it could be... 

*John Tynes 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 Wiser Children, a collection of his film criticism.*





## Someday, I'll Hack the Gibson

by Joe Blancato

It's your first job of the day. A mid-sized corporation lost a million bucks to a cyber thief, and their bank isn't providing any information on where the money went. They're willing to offer you a 10% commission to track down their money, and an additional 5% if you're able to identify the person responsible. You begin to list your "hops," familiar terminals you ritually log into before a big hack, designed to slow down automated trace programs, so if the unthinkable happens and you screw up, the authorities won't be banging on your door.

You break your way into the bank's security using a mix of brute force crackers, decrypters and an engineered version of the system administrator's voice. As you poke through the access logs, looking for records of transactions that add up to one million, you notice something in the way the paper trail unfolds: You've seen this hacking style before. A few quick steps around the network and you're sure of it; you've worked with this hacker in the past.

A trace-detection program **chirps** to alert you; the bank's system is now trying to figure out exactly who you are. You fire up your IM program and toss a message to your buddy, Spectre.

"Hey man, did you hit up a corporation for a million bucks earlier this week?" you ask, cautiously mindful that the tracing program is getting caught up on a network where you're logged in as the administrator.

"Maybe," Spectre replies. "Why?" **Chirp.**

**You dip and dive through a "virtual virtual world," covering your tracks as you rob banks and destroy other hackers' reputations and lives.**

"Oh, no reason. It's just that I, well, you know, logged into First Bank on behalf of a Large Corporation, and your fingerprints are all over their money."

"You can't prove anything." Defiant, cocky. **Chirp.**

You beam over the access logs you've uncovered.

"I have you by the balls, Spectre. Give me 60%, and maybe I'll tell my contact I couldn't find any information. 'The hacker was just too smart to leave a trail.'" **Chirp, chirp.**

A long pause, then: "What's your account number?"

*Uplink* really was an amazing game. A cyberpunk thriller created by British developer Introversion, the game dropped you into a fictional hacking circuit responsible for much of the cyber crime, and cyber crime detection, in the world. As a player, you climbed through set ranks of skill, unlocking missions with higher payouts and higher risk. Eventually, you come into contact with a computer version of a pandemic plague, and you have to decide to destroy it or

sell it to a high bidder. The interface is clean, functional and just **feels** how hacking should feel, giving nods to movies like *Hackers* and the old *Shadowrun* Genesis game. You dip and dive through a "virtual virtual world," covering your tracks as you rob banks and destroy other hackers' reputations and lives. But there was something missing. The hackers you sent to prison weren't real. You were alone in an infinite universe.

Hacking is largely a solo sport, but very few net runners have existed exclusively in a bubble. When you're traipsing over the internet with bravado, much of the incentive to hack - beyond the normal "we only want information" mantra - is being able to brag to other hackers that you've been somewhere, climbed the Everest of hacks, established a new high watermark for script kiddies across the globe. Groups will collaborate to bring down massive networks (a few years ago, Yahoo was brought down by a group who managed to use thousands of computers to run "denial of service" attacks on their servers), but *Uplink* focused on one-hacker runs because it was a single player game.

Imagine a massive version of *Uplink*. Hundreds or thousands of hackers moving around a virtual cyberspace, working with and against each other to steal money from banks, engineer viruses and anti-virus programs, or create an organized crime syndicate. Everyone works together to remain just a few steps ahead of the law enforcement capable of killing your online persona with a search warrant. Players could communicate via a souped-up version of IRC and instant messaging programs while they worked. "Younger" hackers could organize diversions while their mentors run through a large network. Currency moves around at light speed, but all that really matters is your credibility.

But that's not what would make a massive version of *Uplink* so engaging. *Uplink's nuance* was in the details. There were "shadows" of other hackers everywhere. You had to chase fictional enemies around the internet, follow logs or locate a guy's house. With hundreds of people online, that latticework just explodes with activity. You're chasing someone who's chasing your buddy who's chasing someone who's chasing you. On top of that, your epic Hack of



## Introversion are the type of guys with the vision to pull it off, too. Now, they just need the investors...

Hacks could be completely ruined by some newbie dinking around in a network three hops behind you. One log file edited incorrectly by a guy you've never met may result in your untimely incarceration.

And that's where an online *Uplink* could pave all kinds of new ground. Players, through direct competition, could shape the world in any number of ways, while the world remains completely cogent. It has the potential to be the holy grail of game design: Players will have the keys to the car, but they won't be able to crash it into a tree five miles out of the garage, because the mayhem still occurs on the rails of the game's design.

Introversion are the type of guys with the vision to pull it off, too. Now, they just need the investors, which have to this point eluded them. And that's why *Uplink* was single player. It was a garage band effort that managed to be the best

game of 2001, and even their second release, *Darwinia* (which has yet to secure a publisher), pushes more envelopes than you can count. But until investors feel comfortable enough to take risks again, chasing holy grails is going to have to take a back seat to cost-benefit analyses and cold, hard cash.

*Uplink* is a platinum mine while everyone is still panning for gold. It's only a matter of time before someone realizes what Introversion is sitting on, and that's when you and I can team up to hack the Gibson - as long as you give me my 60%. ■

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



## NEWS BITS

### Best Buy to Sell Used Games

Best Buy is considering going into the used games market in an attempt to cash in on the massive amount of profit Electronics Boutique reported last quarter.

As games become more expensive, more consumers are sure to look to used games as a purchasing alternative. While it can be argued this is bad for the industry - used game revenue doesn't get back to the publisher - the staggering profit EB has boasted only guarantees more retail outfits will be considering the practice.

### HD-DVD Pushed Back, but Still Ahead of Blu-Ray

Toshiba is holding off until February of 2006 at the earliest to release its HD-DVD technology to consumers. But it's still speculated they'll come in ahead of Blu-Ray, which means the Xbox 360 may

offer high definition solutions to consumers before the Playstation 3 has shipped.

### Sega Inches toward 360 Dog Pile

Sega's Yuji Naka revealed his appreciation for the Xbox 360's development scheme in an interview with GameSpy. He compared Microsoft's networking vision to Sega's when they were developing the Dreamcast. He had less complimentary opinions about the PS3, mentioning its lofty system specifications surpass what even the most advanced TVs on the market are capable of displaying.

Although it's still early to call which side of the camp developers seem to be choosing, numerous developers have expressed admiration for the 360's development tools as of late. Naka's comments put him in company with outspoken *Gears of War* developer Cliffy B.

# Carnal Friday

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