the escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Over the past week, I have been inundated with responses to last week's issue. I must say, as an editor, this is absolutely thrilling. Many of you have called for some manner of response to several articles from the "Girl Power" issue. Others just wished to express distaste or agreement with a writer's words. Thank you to all those who wrote, both to me, and on your own blogs and sites, about our issue on women in gaming.

As a female gamer myself, I understand well that there are a bunch of us out there. I also understand that despite this, the percentage of women gamers is much lower than the percentage of women in the population as a whole. This tells me that **something** is going on to keep women at a distance, be it game design itself not appealing to women or the gaming community as a whole not being a very female friendly place (to borrow some ideas from the articles, letters and blogs I've received).

What makes me especially happy about this past issue is that people all over the web are having intelligent, reasoned discussions about that "something" – about why more women are not involved in gaming. This is surely a good step in the right direction, toward balancing the scales of the gaming population, at least in the realm of gender.

This minor rumbling among gamers and developers as a result of this article is a very positive thing. Philosophers and notables over the years, from Aesop to Thomas Edison, have commented on the dangers of complacency. I sincerely believe that it is crucial to examine the beliefs we have, to have them challenged. We cannot truly defend our own beliefs unless we have learned to do so by study, discussion and introspection. And if last weeks' issue has led you to any of these, then from my perspective, and I daresay our writers', it has served its purpose. To quote Nobel Prize-winning playwright, Eugene O'Neill:

"A man's work is in danger of deteriorating when he thinks he has found the one best formula for doing it. If he thinks that, he is likely to feel that all he needs is merely to go on repeating himself. […] so long as a person is searching for better ways of doing his work, he is fairly safe."

In an effort to continue this ideal of eschewing complacency and studying new viewpoints, this week's issue of *The Escapist*, "Otaku," looks east. Pat Miller ponders his experience at the university with Japanese foreign exchange students and what it means to be "otaku." Allen Varney looks at a handful of foreign, in all senses of the word, games. And, returning this week is John Tynes with his Contrarian Confession. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I greatly enjoyed "Women in Games" by Chris Crawford. His article quickly pinpoints the major problems with getting women involved in games. I've always found it significantly easier to get girls interested in *The Sims* than it is to engage them in a riveting round of *Unreal Tournament*.

Another trend I've noticed, however, is that women tend to be very engaged by puzzle games. Perhaps the social aspect isn't the only thing that's missing, but also a "balancing multiple variables" approach that puzzle games have. Puzzle games are a visual task somewhat akin to foraging: you're looking for the right pieces and the right place to make those pieces fit. Often, you need to balance short term goals with long term goals: Do I go for the big point combo now and risk leaving a gap, or play it safe and ensure an easier progression?

A game designer truly dedicated to this question would perform controlled experiments to find out the answer.

J. Azpurua

To the Editor: It was refreshing to read the most interesting and amusing article "Women in Games" by Chris Crawford which comes from a different perspective, that of evolutionary psychology. After the excellent historical wrap-up of our social history, however, the conclusion Crawford draws about what would appeal to modern women in games is questionable. I, personally, never watch soap operas or read "bodice-rippers." (Gag!) And I don't think I am the exception to the rule. (The question of why some people do enjoy such fare is for another forum.)

What Crawford fails to acknowledge is that primitive women didn't just gather berries, roots, etc. for eating, but for medicinal purposes also. This required much trial and error, figuring out doses, what they were good for, and then remembering countless numbers of plants, organizing them, etc. One could argue that while primitive man was out running around hunting Great Wooly

Mammoths, the women were at home using their brains to figure out what plants, berries, etc., served what nutritional purposes; how these could be used to cure various ills and wounds, etc. (Thank Jean Auel and the well-researched *The Clan of the Cave Bear* et al.) Back then, women were the doctors, nurses, teachers, even priests/shamans (what today we would call "professionals").

It is not only **social** reasoning that women excel in and like to use, but reasoning in general. Give me something with a good plot, which requires **brain** power (not brawn power) to figure out and solve the best way to address a problem/challenge. A good mystery, a good adventure, suspense, choices, options, puzzles, etc.

Good graphics and explosions and interminable, mindless battles with enemies mean nothing to my female brain (yawn) without a mental challenge: For example, a quest that requires decisions, decisions that have consequences; a choice of paths to explore; an emotional challenge: Why should I embark on this dangerous journey? What good purpose does it

serve? Tasks to perform that require one's wits, as well as physical prowess. A variety of interesting characters.

Fast forward from primitive to modern woman: Why the "traditional" female roles have become devalued, unappreciated, disrespected, and the consequences thereof for society, is another discussion. However, it is perhaps this devaluation which has led

to the ludicrous conclusion by Crawford that female brains prefer soap operas and bodice-ripping novels and, therefore, games that would include such.

After aptly pointing out in the beginning of his article that some game developers "just don't get it" when they "splashed around banners showing a woman in a low-cut dress," Crawford, ultimately, seems not to get it.

Christine L. Peeler

To the Editor: Mr. Alam quite unintentionally brings up the real problem with objectification in gaming. He acts all offended about the objectification of women with the end level boss of the *Prince of Persia* demo. Yet this is by far not the first case of it at all in that game. What about the main character, the strongly objectified male? Why wasn't that just as offensive?

Has anyone thought to ask women gamers whether or not they're offended? Anecdotally, my wife isn't, and her favorite game is *God of War*, a game that doesn't lack either class of objectification. Heck, when she found the mini-game on the boat, she played it for

a half hour, giggling like a maniac the whole time. And on a wider scale, according to the ESA, 44% of gamers are women. That certainly doesn't sound like women are being driven away in droves.

Robert Myers

To the Editor: Re: "OMG Girlz Don't Exist on teh Intraweb!!!1" I'm a gay video gaymer who plays online all the time. I've had to put up with holding my tongue in raids and matches, and understand the hassle outing yourself can involve.

I've always understood that female gamers have a hard time too, but until reading your article today I've never really made the connection in my head. It's almost surreal people's reactions when they find out who they're playing with, but it's also frustrating when all you want to do is have a fun match with your friends. From now on I'm going to do my best to support the women gamers I meet; maybe one day we'll look back on stories like this and laugh at how different the times were, however I think that day is still far off. If you ever want to have a pride event

supporting women in games please let me know, as I would happily support it.

Keep up the great work, and I love your site design!

Mark Bennett

To the Editor: Whitney Butts' excellent article on her very existence should be required reading for every manager, marketing team member and developer of Internet-savvy games. Here's a list of her qualities I could discern - which one should a game company be working on? She is: Intelligent (she can write); a subscriber (to at least *WoW*); community-oriented (frequenting IRC channels dedicated to the game); and incredibly annoyed with her fellow customers.

I've recently read articles about whether or not the MMOG market is saturating, well, it appears it will miss an entire 51% of the population of any area if it can't manage to not utterly alienate every XX chromosome-owner. Game communities need to do more to avoid reducing their market by half. Every business school in the USA will teach you women are more brand loyal than men--

the first MMOG to realize this and make a great game that doesn't compel its best customers to confront "zomg send me pix pls thx" is going to win.

Jeb Adams

To the Editor: At the end of the article (which was both amusing and disheartening), I noticed the following:

Whitney Butts is the "woman behind the curtain" at The Escapist. Her existence revolves around the fact that Mathematics is the key to the universe, and that she alone is the square root of all evil.

As someone with an interest both in morality and mathematics (among other things), this is quite an interesting statement. Is Whitney Butts the embodiment of an imaginary moral system (and unique to boot)? If so, what does such a system look like? My meager mind has trouble rotating any moral system 90 degrees to an imaginary axis.

Also, this seems to support her theory that she doesn't actually exist, since she is the embodiment of something

imaginary (which implies, perhaps, having both a corporeal nature and not having one at the same time*). Puzzling and illuminating at the same time: puzzluminating, if you will.

Matthew

*Perhaps she's like Schroedinger's cat-- without the vial of poison (of course). Sometimes she's there, sometimes she isn't. This perhaps explains her ability to play *WoW* without seeming to be on the internet, and her ability to shock her fellow guild-mates by spontaneously popping into existence.

To the Editor: I was introduced to your magazine about two months ago and have thus far enjoyed it immensely--that is, until, I read "Regarding Women Monsters and Monstrous Women." Somewhere between being told that I, as a male gamer, seek to control and subvert any female in any video game, and then summarily rebuked for considering not only female gamers, but **any** intelligent female, to be a monstrosity, I began to question what the piece was trying to accomplish in the first place.

The author makes loads upon loads of sweeping generalizations, and likens every male gamer to a pre-pubescent boy, eagerly picking up the next volume of *Dead or Alive: Beach Volleyball* so we can stare at exposed breasts. Not only is this an intensely sexist view, but it's outright wrong - most men think the way women are represented in games is absurd.

A much more worthwhile examination on the nature of the "female monster" could have been conducted if the author, rather than trying to convince me of the inherent evil my genitalia confers, had actually studied Japan's culture. Most of our games are the product of Japanese, not American, developers, and it's a gross and erroneous generalization to assume that the same pathologies extend from Japanese developers to American consumers. The "woman monster and monstrous woman" has a long and rich tradition in Japan, and its examination would probably grant much more insight into how and why female monsters occur the way that they do. Furthermore, Japan's cultural struggle with sexuality and gender equality, not America's, is much more relevant to the portrayal (or lack thereof) of true female heroes.

A. Abadi

To the Editor: You forgot one aspect of why female parts are so sexy—it was answered so simply and shortly by a game developer I asked when I saw him making just such a character—"Because we don't have girlfriends."

With the reported long work hours that many of the developers put in, they just don't have time to develop the fully rounded interpersonal relationships needed for a fulfilled life. Oh yes, as a father, I found the sexy female as a turn off, even for me.

K. W. Randolph

To the Editor: We all feel the pinch of the lack of "diversity" (a horrible buz word that is dangerous to use) in gaming. The demographic is horribly one sided and I think your articles this week have done a great job at showing this imbalance.

I am a graduate student at a tech university in MA. The school population is 92% male. Being a hardcore gamer and a student in this environment is a double-whammy of girl-less-ness. I know no one wants girls to game more than male gamers do. The obvious questions posed by these articles, is how do we get girls to game (or study Computer Science so they can develop the games and then improve the female-motivated content)?

The one point I felt that was left out throughout all of these pieces was the need for grass-roots style campaign to increase children's affinity for intellectual pursuits. Give your daughter a DS instead of a Barbie doll!

You ask a child what they want to be when they grow up and I'm guessing they don't say software developer, electrical engineer or inventor (I did, but I was weird, right?). The other side of the coin is that they aren't going to reply fireman, doctor or whale biologist either, anymore. Pop culture now dictates what we want to be and its pigeon-holing us into anti-intellectualism. The nut of the problem is how to make intellectualism cool.

Andy

I Can't Believe It's Not Gaming!

by Pat Miller

The first time my girlfriend walked into my dorm room, almost two years ago, she sized up the place as only a socially active, dating female could. Unmade bed, dirty clothes and old assignments scattered all over the floor, cartoon and movie posters thrown haphazardly along the walls, a veritable rat's nest of wires on the desk where the computer was ... check, check, check.

But there, sitting in the middle of the room next to my PlayStation 2, was the single biggest risk to my dating gambit: namely, my massive MAS Systems arcade stick. Weighing in at probably around five pounds of pure phallic hardware, the stick had the unnatural ability to demand the attention of anyone and everyone it encountered, regardless of race, gender, creed or any of that fun stuff. I knew, as any savvy gaming male ought to know, the presence of the stick alone could be enough to remove me from the pool of date-able males, and relegate me solidly into the Friend Zone, regardless of how suave and seductive I might have been on the night that I met her.

I will spare you the details of the encounter, dear Reader; suffice to say that my years of *Street Fighter* worked their delicate back-and-forth magic, and we're still together.

All **three** of us.

No doubt many young gamers reading this can identify with the need to conceal our uncool habit when around members of the fairer sex.

But ponder my desperate struggle to reconcile my gaming habit with my women habit; no doubt many young gamers reading this can identify with the need to conceal our **uncool** habit when around members of the fairer sex. So why is it that when my girlfriend enters the room, she eyes my beloved MAS Systems arcade stick with unadulterated dear-god-what-am-I-getting-myself-into suspicion, but when two adorable girls from Osaka named Maki and Mayo come into my room, they squeal in joy and

button mash their way through *Street Fighter: Anniversary Edition*, **all while yelling the names of Ryu's special moves out?** Ask yourself this, dear Reader, perhaps during your daily meditation, perhaps in a moment of vulnerable soul-searching weakness, or at 3:30a.m. amid a pile of empty Starbucks cups and unsettled bedsheets. As it turns out, one only need watch a few Japanese girls play *Katamari Damacy* and chatter to each other (providing running commentary, as it were) to begin formulating an answer.

About a week ago, I asked a few friends of mine whether they called themselves "gamers" or not; predictably, some did and some didn't. When I asked instead if they identified as "movie-watchers," the reaction was substantially different; while all of them agreed that they watched movies for recreation, they generally felt as though it was a fairly trivial way of identifying oneself, as though saying "I watch movies," was about as unique as "I eat," or "I breathe oxygen." Which is to say, movies are ubiquitous, and games – though no doubt the "non-gamers" had played a few games of *Solitaire* or *Snake* – are

decidedly less so. "Well, that's different," they tell me, "That's not really gaming."

A few days later, I sat down with another friend of mine – who happened to be an international student from Japan – and asked him a similar question. He replied that he did not think of himself as a gamer in the sense that I meant it because to him, our conception of the term "gamer" was akin to his usage of *otaku* – that is, a self-professed, obsessed, garden variety geek. I was fascinated. He proceeded to paint for me a vision of a world with a wholly different entertainment culture than I had known, one where men in their thirties, and even forties, would occasionally refer to *Final Fantasy* or *Dragon Quest* in casual water-cooler conversations, where arcades were actually places that people socially played games, where a man, woman or child could play on their GameBoy Advance SP and not have it mistaken for a cellular phone that could play *Street Fighter 2*.

This is Japan, he explained – a country where any young man or woman might have played through *Final Fantasy VII,* but to put up a poster advertising that

fact in one's dorm room would be unthinkably, unforgivably **otaku**. And if this sort of sentiment is not completely alien to you, dear Reader, then maybe it makes a little more sense that an arcade peripheral, unlike a stack of DVDs, would inspire an attractive, interested young lady to briefly consider if she **really** wants a long-term relationship.

Allow me to draw upon a contemporary example; one of my fellow dorm-dwellers came into the possession of a no-questions-asked copy of Square's straight-to-DVD movie release, *Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children,* and held an informal screening in our living room. While I was unable to attend, I returned to find a living room packed; about half were Americans (all of whom had either played through the original *Final Fantasy VII* or had been forcibly dragged along by a friend) and the other half were Japanese (of which a handful had actually played).

As *Advent Children* appeals almost exclusively to people who at least know of *Final Fantasy VII*, this instance speaks very clearly to differences in Japanese and American attitudes toward gaming. While some of the international students

had played *Final Fantasy VII*, the experience of those who hadn't played *FFVII* seemed largely akin to, say, someone going in and seeing *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* without having ever seen any of the original *Star Wars* trilogy; though they won't have experienced the fully continuous *Star Wars* experience, they still have some concept of *Star Wars* as culturally relevant. Conversely, the Americans in the room who had never played *FFVII* were horribly lost in a haze of beautiful fight scenes and choppy editing.

Let us consider gaming as equivalent to a mild narcotic habit, whereby it's perfectly acceptable for Yoshiko from Waseda University to wander into my room during a party and ask if I have *marika* (Super Mario Kart), or to pick up the MAS stick and explain to me during a game of *Street Fighter III: Third Strike* that she used to play all the time with her older brother, back in the day ("no, I'm not a gamer, I just do it socially at parties"). And perhaps that, in turn, explains the puzzlement and surprise with which Yoshiko later confides in me, "It seems everyone here likes *Sen to Chihiro ,*" upon encountering more than a few rooms with movie posters for the

American release *Spirited Away* – **oh, how otaku.** It conjures up that moment of utter solemnity when beginning pot-smokers and beer-drinkers will pass on to each other the sacred Addiction Rule of Thumb – **do it as much as you want, dude, just never by yourself. That's when you know you're an addict**.

So, we are welcome to bemoan the fact that the vast majority of the industry is dedicated to pumping out games devoted to asinine movie licenses, football and life-simulators that consist of stealing cars, buying clothes and hot coffee (which should now be the officially recognized street slang for having sex without taking off your clothes). We can wring our hands at the appalling lack of
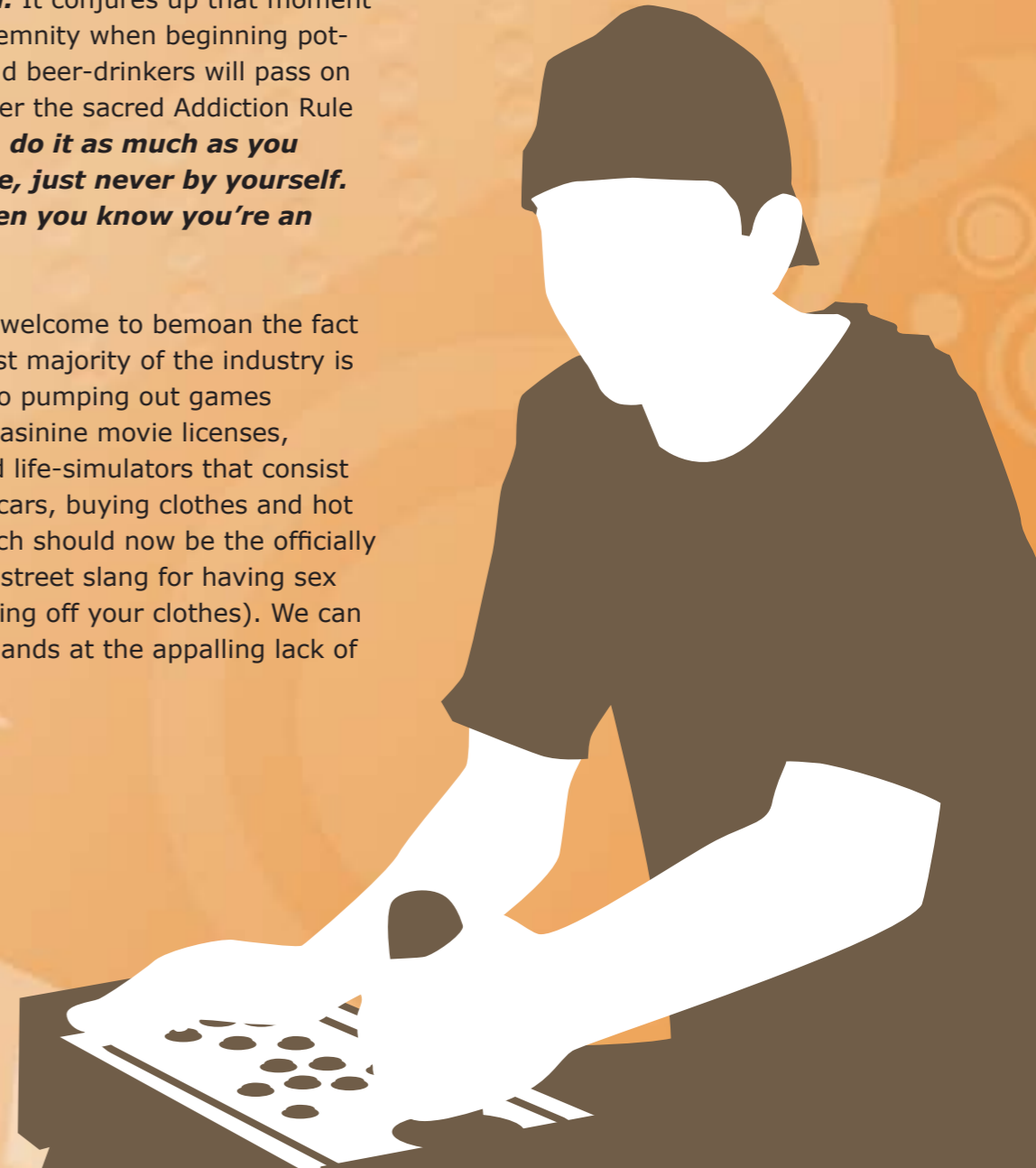
We would do well to remember that a few games every now and then make it out of the pile of *Manhunts* and *Madden 20XXs* and appeal to us on an elegantly simple level.

innovation that runs rampant therein. But we would do well to remember that a few games every now and then make it out of the pile of *Manhunts* and *Madden 20XXs* and *Gundams* and *Dragon Balls* and appeal to us on an elegantly simple level. These are the *The Sims* and the *Icos* and the *Rezes* of the world; they entertain us without making us feel like we have to cross that *otaku* line. Put succinctly, we, as a society, make games that don't make us feel like we have to be **gamers,** just like we can make movies that don't force us to be **movie-watchers.**

And it's pretty easy to tell right now, amid our heady predictions for the Revolution, that the Japanese are fairly competent at doing just that; where American gaming is by and large targeted at a particular hardcore gaming audience, Japanese developers, if ever so rarely, have been able to come out with those *Nintendogs* and *Animal Crossings* that are able to seduce people of all different genders, creeds and colors precisely because they feel so **organic.**

No, I don't think *Advent Children* will attract much in the way of the general American audience quite yet, but there is no question that the space for non-gamer gaming is expanding. Why, just the other day my girlfriend – yes, that same joystick-fearing young lady – mentioned to me a few days ago that she'd like to try that new game for the PS2 that she heard about from her friend – *Calamari Dynasty?* Fancy that – I just picked up *We Love Katamari* the other day.

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.

The Asian Weird

Actual (No! Yes!) unspeakably strange games Americans never saw

by Allen Varney

Observe! My right hand rests on a stack of Bibles. A polygraph cuff encircles my left arm. My brainwaves are being audited by noted psychic Raoul Mitgong. So as you read about these surpassingly unlikely Asian electronic games, keep in mind **I am not making this up**. These games **actually exist** and are, or have been, **actually for sale to the public** - but only in Asia.

Boong-Ga Boong-Ga
("Spank 'Em Spank 'Em")
Year: *2001*
Category: *Proctology simulator*
In this coin-op arcade game from Korean publisher Taff Systems , you jam a finger-like plastic nozzle up into a recess between a pair of jeans-clad buttocks. Onscreen, you choose a dislikable butt-owner - "Ex Girlfriend, Ex Boyfriend, Gangster, Mother-In-Law, Gold Digger, Prostitute, Child Molester, Con Artist" - and watch him or her react in anguish to each thrust. "The funny face expressions will make people laugh and relieve stress," says a Korean sales brochure. "After detecting your power with a sensor, a card will come out. It will explain your sexual behavior."
How well did *Boong-Ga* penetrate the market? Not too deep. The following year (2002), Taff Systems pulled out and lined up a contract to design a Vulcan Automatic Cannon Simulator for South Korea's Infantry School of the Army. In 2003, Taff sold a majority of its shares to Korean netbiz firm NeoWiz, which said it would refocus on "game development based on more stable management foundation."

Roommania #203
Year: *2000*
Category: *Roommate coaching*
From Sega of Japan, a game that casts you as a heavenly emissary sent down to straighten out the life of college kid Neji Taihei (Japanese for "terrible screw"). By clicking around his apartment, you get him to wash, iron, clean the room, bleach his hair, and converse with friends and even (wow!) a girl. *Roommania #203* was weird until *The Sims* became a megahit, whereupon this game became retroactively ordinary.

Cambrian QTs (cuties)
Year: *2004*
Category: *Sailor Moon meets Burgess Shale*
If you were devising a unifying theme for a Magical-Girl anime knockoff about venturesome young things fighting evil, the first place you'd turn for inspiration would be - yes! say it with me! - Cambrian-Era fossils! *Cambrian QTs* beat you to it. Originally a one-page manga strip in the overstuffed monthly Japanese anime magazine *Megami*, *Cambrian QTs* became a webcomic, then a PS2 game from Global A Entertainment.

The leader of the group, the Nice Girl archetype, is Princess Karis, a derivation of *Anomalocaris* . Golly, aren't she and her friends cute? - I mean, aside from the tentacle feet and the tentacle hair-hands and the bulb-tipped demon-mouthed tails. A machine translation of the Japanese website offers this lucid backstory:

"From now before approximately 530,000,000 years, the living thing of the puzzle which inhabits in the Cambrian period. Already those which are the expectation which is exterminated, were accidentally discovered in the last year south Pacific Ocean, just the female among those succeeded in merchandising as a pet."

The game is sort of "Tamagotchi meets Sea-Monkeys," with the difference that QTs are Tamagotchis you can, uh, date:

"Using voice kindly, if you raise, you understand the word of the human eventually, you reach the point where it [the QT] can enjoy also date."

The Large Beauty
Year: *2004*
Category: *Woman of Mass Destruction*
In this PlayStation 2 "scramble action game" from D3 Publishing, you send tanks, choppers, and fighter planes to attack a bikini-clad babe. It's a fair fight because she's 48 meters tall. Peter Jackson, are you listening? Japan has your next Kong right here!

Cho Aniki ("Super Big Brother")
Year: *1992-2003*
Category: *Homoerotic platform shooters*
For weeks, I've tried to write jokes about the *Cho Aniki* games. Ultimately all commentary pales. Here is a plain summary: In *Ai Cho Aniki* ("Love! Super Big Brother!"), the sequel to the 1992 Turbografx side-scrolling shooter that started the series, you control a thong-clad flying bodybuilder, Samson, who fires white blobs of fluid from the top of his bald head. He fights onrushing legions of huge bald musclemen, as well as the occasional fairy with her boat of thonged men. Samson can also sprinkle enemies with fairy dust.

Ai Cho Aniki's cult popularity spawned (if that's the word I want) 1995's *Cho Aniki Bakaretsu Rantou Hen* for the Super

Famicom (i.e., Super Nintendo). This *Street Fighter* imitation starred Samson, as well as Botei (a pink berserker in a thong), Mami 19 (a phallic pink aircraft), and Sabu (a flying Elvis cyborg-ship, complete with dancing geisha). Backgrounds include a field of daisies and a church filled with giant purple men doing squat thrusts.

Next was *Cho Aniki Kyukyoku Otokonogyakushu*, another side-scroller, this time for the PlayStation and the Sega Saturn. This 1996 game, now quite rare, uses animated digitized photos of live actors, which means some real person actually had to act like Samson. In the game, bodybuilders ride other bodybuilders upside-down like pogo sticks. One enigmatic screenshot shows a human pyramid of thong-clad Japanese men.

The most recent entry (if that's the word I want) is 2003's *Cho Aniki Seinaru Protein Densetsu* ("Legend of the Holy Protein") for the PS2. You play a legendary blob of protein that can confer a perfect build on a bodybuilder with a perfect heart. Your two favorite candidates, Samson and his special friend Adon, shield you as you shoot

construction workers, shark-men, and others who desire the ultimate body. Salvaging protein from defeated enemies, you increase Samson and Adon's "Men's Gauge" power. If you max out their Men's Symbol, they let loose a stream of, uh, manhood.

Did I mention I'm not making this up?

Familiar Weirdness
This list is Asia-only, but some strange Japanese games have made it to America. In years past you may have seen Akira Sato's *Mister Mosquito* (buzz around and suck blood from the innocent Yamada family) and Yoot Saito's *Seaman* (raise a bad-tempered human-faced fish to adulthood). And you've at least heard of Masaya Matsuura's rap-music simulator *Parappa the Rapper*, right?

Of course, the reigning Champion of Odd is Keita Takahashi's *Katamari Damacy*. In this PlayStation 2 game, a little-bitty alien Prince of the Cosmos rolls everything in the world into a gigantic ball to create new stars. The original *Katamari* sold okay by odd-game standards - over 150,000 copies in Japan and over 120,000 in America -

Did I mention I'm not making this up?

prompting publisher Namco to issue a new sequel, *We Love Katamari*.

What's next, weird-wise? Hard to tell. On April Fool's Day 2004, Sony Japan announced a forthcoming *Happiness Controller*, where you supposedly must make 100 people happy, including a businessman, a bar hostess, a manga artist, and other despondent types. (What about writers on deadline? That could work.) From the GamePro preview:

"You take on the role of the controller, distributing happiness that is shown by either a heart or skull mark. If a person is very happy, the player can "suck" some of that person's happiness (or sadness) and give it to some unhappy sod by rapidly hitting the circle button. When over 71 people are happy, a 101st person appears, whose mission is to do nothing else than making others miserable [...] When the 101st Rastafarian guy attacks, the game enters a mini-game mode where the player fends off attacks by rapidly hitting the circle button."

Great screenshots, but Sony still hasn't published the game, and it's not yet clear this morale-building exercise is anything but a joke.

The Weirdness Environment

Peculiar games can appear in the unlikeliest situations, taking us by surprise like mushrooms or mutations or William Shatner. But certain environments actively encourage the bizarre. In these specialized ecologies, freaks and curiosities well up in fascinating profusion for years at a time. Examples include British science fiction's New Wave movement in the mid-'60s, the mid-1980s direct-sales revolution in comics, punk rock, and Hong Kong film in the 1990s - to say nothing of the Burgess Shale. What conditions foster such oddities?

Stable distribution system with predictable revenue: A reliable, fire-and-forget channel that accepts pretty much any product and generates a set return on investment. A good example is the 1950s drive-in movie network that accepted dozens of Roger Corman's low-budget exploitation flicks. Alternately, a distribution system or platform that is dying or dead but still holds a cult following.

Small profits: If there's too much money on the table, business people start paying close attention, and inevitably creative risks disappear. Legendary editor John W. Campbell Jr., who led *Astounding Science Fiction* (later retitled *Analog*) to greatness from the 1940s through the '60s, once remarked, "*Analog* is a gold mine - but it's a tiny little gold mine." If entry costs are minimal, "small profits" can also mean "no revenue at all."

Benign neglect by society: If some grandstanding senator decides to hold investigative hearings about how the field's work menaces our nation's children, odd or controversial work disappears.

Artistic freedom: Pretty obvious.

Strange Virtue

Is weirdness worthwhile in itself? Though *Katamari* has passionate fans, most of the games in this article are more fun to read about than to play. Obviously, everyone wants every game to be good, but if you had to balance Conventional-Good and Weird-But-Only-Sort-of-Okay, how would you set the proportions?

A certain seasoning of oddness probably helps keep a field healthy. Offbeat games can indicate new gameplay or new potential in existing forms. If nothing else, playing these games can expand your horizons. Once you play a side-scroller with fey bodybuilders shooting white globules at enemy proteins, you may justly say, "Well, now I know anything's possible."

More to the point, an authentic quality of strangeness can help a game survive, at least in memory. In a field that routinely bulldozes its past into the afterlife landfill of dead platforms and abandonware sites, weirdness can linger. It marks that quality that is rare and valuable in any creative field: an individual perspective.

Writer and futurist Bruce Sterling made a famous speech at the 1991 Computer Game Developers Conference,

...an authentic quality of strangeness can help a game survive, at least in memory.

subversively titled "The Wonderful Power of Storytelling" (a "power" the speech derides and debunks):

"Follow your weird, ladies and gentlemen. Forget trying to pass for normal. Follow your geekdom. Embrace your nerditude. In the immortal words of Lafcadio Hearn, a geek of incredible obscurity whose work is still in print after a hundred years, "woo the muse of the odd." [...]

You may be a geek, you may have geek written all over you; you should aim to be one geek they'll never forget. Don't aim to be civilized. Don't hope that straight people will keep you on as some kind of pet. To hell with them; they put you here. You should fully realize what society has made of you and take a terrible revenge. Get weird. Get way weird. Get dangerously weird. Get sophisticatedly, thoroughly weird and don't do it halfway, put every ounce of horsepower you have behind it. [...] Working seriously, improving your taste and perception and understanding, knowing what you are and where you came from, not only improves your work in the present, but gives you a chance of influencing the future and links you to the best work of the past."

Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay, and Looking Glass.

Japan's Mother

by John Szczepaniak

It's ironic that one of Japan's leading videogame genres, the RPG, is an American invention. Even more interesting is that one of the most creative examples of the genre is a Japanese take on everyday American culture, with a twist. For anyone who has become jaded with the clichés of other Japanese console RPGs, the *Mother* (or *Earthbound*) games will come as an invigorating surprise, showing just how meaningful a videogame can be.

Mother and its sequel *Mother 2*, released for the Famicom and Super Famicom in 1989 and 1994 respectively, are the creations not of a typical games designer but a Japanese copywriter, Shigesato Itoi. He encouraged other writers to try their hand at creating videogames too, with notions of increasing writing assets and creating something meaningful. He also wondered why so many RPGs of the time adopted a pseudo-medieval European setting; since what Itoi-san really wanted was to create games more like "the fantasy films of Spielberg." This very different and more serious mindset is instantly apparent as you wander through the game's locales, all of which

are mainly Japanese interpretations of late 1980s American popular culture.

Having only lived in Southern Africa and parts of Europe, I cannot say if they accurately represent small town American life. But they certainly adhere to the pleasant imagery seen in much written and televised media, which is where the appeal lies. While the mechanics of the *Mother* games (especially the first) follow titles like *Dragon Quest*, the writing throughout is unlike anything else and is a sheer joy to behold, not only its contemporary American setting but also the many subtle elements woven into it.

From the outset, there is genuine warmth in the way the games try to initiate a simple dialogue with the player, allowing all future friends and even your dog to be named. The game also, strangely, asks your favorite type of food. This later appears as an item served to the group by the lead character's mother, a simple idea but one that exemplifies how the games mold themselves in order to make each person's experience unique.
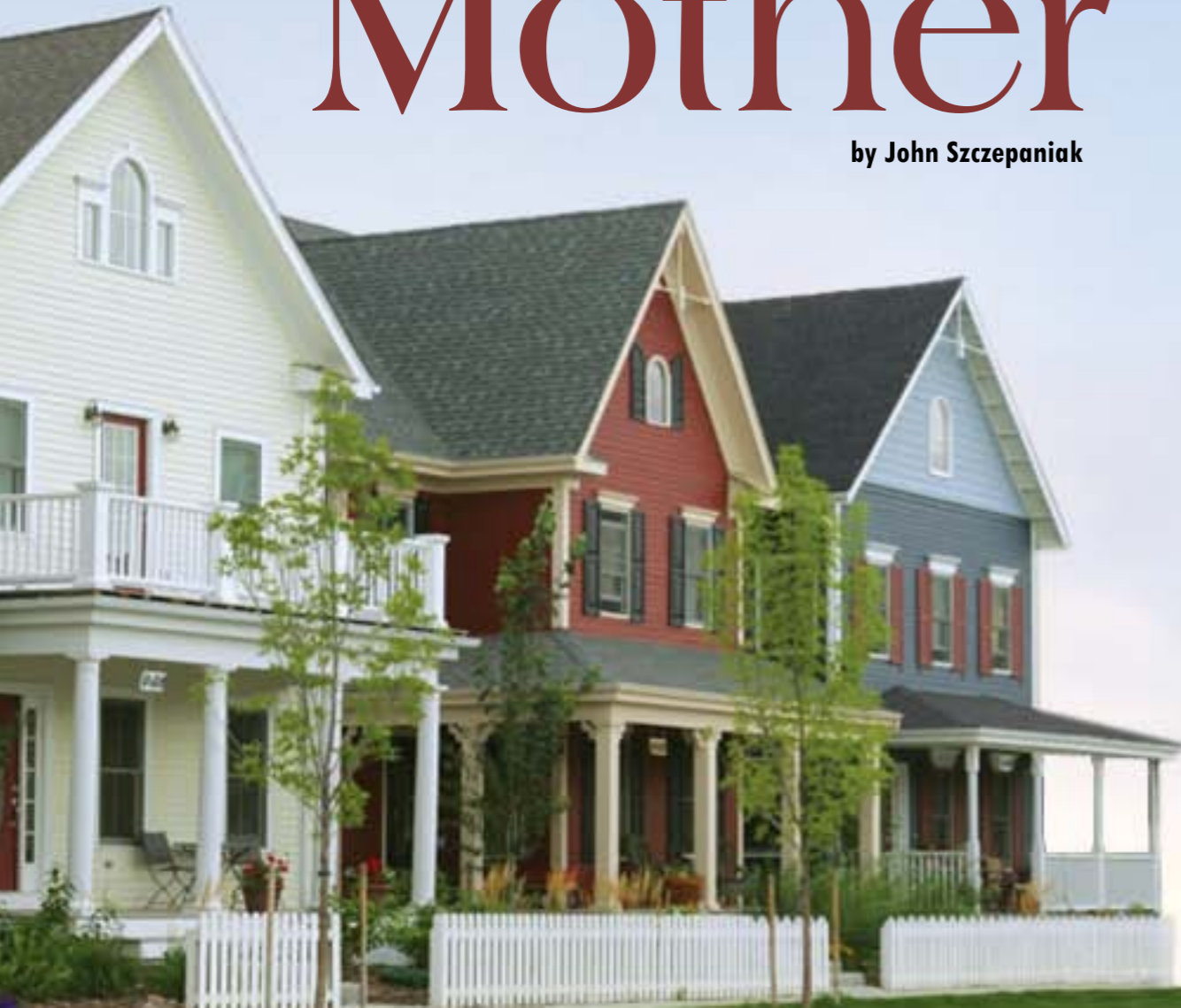
The journey is filled with witty phrases and magical moments that make you smile inside. The aim had been to make statements almost like Haiku, stimulating the player's imagination by leaving them with unanswered questions. Early in the first game there is a surreal debate on existentialism, where the only way to progress further is by ignoring a forgotten old man, thereby making him disappear.

Elsewhere in the second game, in a moment that examines human nature, we are posed with the choice of either helping a well spoken and clean individual, or his polar opposite. Obtaining a reward lies in not judging the two characters by their appearance.

Itoi-san himself symbolically appears in the second title, in the form of Dungeon Man, a creator of dungeons. This character later transforms into a dungeon, allowing you to explore within the mind of the creator, so to speak.

These are just a few examples demonstrating that the game is acutely aware that it's a game, and uses this to communicate directly and more personally.

The *Mother* titles were made to be accessible, at least on a literary level, so everyone can directly relate to events. Your character grows up in a single parent household because his father is always away working, a situation that mimics the childhood of the man behind the game and no doubt many fans. Rather than battling and earning gold, you have to phone your father who talks to you about how you're growing up, before giving you pocket money. Eventually you become homesick, and your mother demands to know why you don't phone her enough whilst on your world-saving adventure.

There is great sincerity in how the game deals with these very real, often uncomfortable situations. The game carries a lot of emotion, but without ever becoming twee or overly sentimental. I have to admit, the ending to the first installment is one of the most moving moments I've experienced in videogames. This invoking of emotion is even more impressive when you realize the game is over 15 years old - quite an achievement compared to other games of a similar age. Both are well worth sticking with until the end, even though the random battles become a bit tiresome in the first of the series.

A final point regarding the Japan/USA crossover, is that *Earthbound* stands as a shining example of accurate Japanese localization. There was a sterling effort to accurately translate cultural jokes and the many subtle sentences that were a play-on-words, helping retain the original humorous spirit.

The moderate following the game has raises the question of when this wonderful narrative will continue. The truth is that the third installment has been in development since the days of Nintendo's 64DD add-on. This was later changed to become an N64 title before finally being scrapped altogether in favor of a redesign. Apparently Itoi-san is still tinkering away, with reports first talking of a GBA and then DS release. There are even jovial rumors that true to his eccentric style, he will have a limited production run of the game specifically for Nintendo's now abandoned Super Famicom system. One can only hope that upon its release under whichever guise, both Western and Japanese developers will be influenced by its light hearted and warm natured style. And perhaps this influence will effect a small revolution in videogames.

John Szczepaniak is a South African freelance videogame writer with a preference for retro games. He is also a staff member on the www.retrosurvival.co.uk project, which contains articles on retro gaming and is well worth investigating.

The *Mother* titles were made to be accessible, at least on a literary level, so everyone can directly relate to events.

THE CONTRARIAN:
The View From Here

by John Tynes

Statements I've made in past installments of this column have inspired groups of lederhosen-clad gaming otaku to storm my lonely castle brandishing pitchforks, torches and Power Gloves to slay the monstrous heresy I have assembled. I shall keep this beast shrouded no more and instead unleash it here for all the world to see. The chains creak, the portcullis rises, and a grim shadow lurches awkwardly forth. There, you see! There it stands! Listen to its yawp!

I really just don't get Nintendo.

Now you see my lurching shame. But it is the simple truth. I've never been much for Nintendo's games and indeed, large swaths of the Japanese gaming field leaves me cold, baffled, or simply amused. I had fun with the NES way back when, but when the Super Nintendo came out I was already a Sega Genesis fan. Nintendo 64? Nope, never had one - I was playing Dreamcast.

Let that sink in for a minute. *Zelda*? I think I played that *Ocarina* one for a couple hours at a friend's house. The 3-D *Marios*? *Sunshine* bored me swiftly. *Super Smash Bros.*? Yeah, at a party I think. *Metroid*? Nope. *Star Fox*? Uh-uh.

That's right. I'm one of those people that looks over Nintendo's offerings, studies the reviews, admires them in the abstract, and then moves on to something else. I'd no sooner play *Odama* than I would watch a movie by Antonioni, but I can tell you about both of them. The ten minutes of *Chibi Robo* I played at E3 this year were charming but there's really no chance I'm going to buy it - let alone a Gamecube to play it on.

My lack of enthusiasm for the cream of Japanese gaming doesn't end with Nintendo. Are you sitting down? I've never played a single minute of any *Final Fantasy* games. Never even tempted. Not my thing.

By comparison, *Super Mario 64* was just hopping around.

There are Japanese games I've enjoyed, but they've mostly been games I'd say are more gaijin-friendly. *Resident Evil*? I'm **so** the master of unlocking. *Jet Grind Radio*? Designed my own graffiti tag. *Ninja Gaiden*? Kicked tall ass. *Panzer Dragoon Orta*? Swoon!

Most of the games I enjoy are very much built for the American/European market. *Halo*, *Knights of the Old Republic*, *RalliSport*, *Splinter Cell*, *The Simpsons Hit & Run*, *Destroy All Humans!*, *Indigo Prophecy* - these are titles I've played the hell out of, not to mention preceding years of *Doom*, *Quake*, *Warcraft* and other staples of the (mostly) western gaming diet. Back in the 1980s, Japan made loads of my favorite games. But somewhere along the path from *Donkey Kong* to *Donkey Konga* my taste and that of the Japanese mainstream diverged pretty sharply.

Take *Super Mario 64*. It's a legendary game. But it didn't mean squat to me because I'd already been playing *Jumping Flash* on the Playstation. This was a 3-D first-person platformer whose specialty was vertical motion - you leapt to truly mind-boggling heights where much of the level was lost in the clouds

below, then you'd come screaming back to earth in an intense free-fall. *Jumping Flash* was an amazing game, marrying the rush of speed I got from the original *Sonic the Hedgehog* with a vertiginous lunacy all its own. And of course, the still-unusual first-person platforming perspective wired all that kinetic activity directly to your spinal cord causing involuntary body motion as you soared and fell. It was a truly intense experience, while still offering the whimsy and charm of a Japanese platformer. By comparison, *Super Mario 64* was just hopping around. I couldn't care less. The wide-open exploratory gameplay it pioneered was lost on me until *Grand Theft Auto 3* came along, adding American-style cars and guns.

The sense of motion offered by *Jumping Flash* as opposed to the ambling boings of *Super Mario 64* is actually a key element in my separation from Japanese gaming. I love games that **move**. More specifically, I love games that let me move in ways I don't in real life. *Sonic* and *Jumping Flash* both offered that. In later years, first-person games in general have tended to grab me, as have vehicle games. *Jet Grind Radio* and its sequel *Jet Set Radio Future* set me on fire. *Rez*

communed with my soul. *Test Drive V-Rally* and *RalliSport Challenge* both honked my horn. Even *Splinter Cell*, the slowpokiest of slowpoke games, lets me plug into a body with intensely calibrated motion, edging forward by inches into the shadows. The original *Halo* almost lost me in the first five minutes with its frustratingly slow movement, but once I got into the groove and realized how important taking cover was (thanks to the clever shield mechanism) my mind and my controller were as one.

Ninja Gaiden's wall-flipping, shoulder-launching badass intoxicated me, as did *Panzer Dragoon*'s morphic flying dragons. *Resident Evil*'s motion was frustrating but I at least felt like I was there - and when those dogs came through the windows I leapt out of my chair. You know what I'm talking about.

I think that's what I'm missing in the major Japanese franchises. Mario doesn't wire up my brain for movement. *Final Fantasy* - well, jeez. *Chibi Robo*, as adorable as it was, didn't make me feel like I was really there.

I want games to transport me, to upload my brain into some other kind of body -

or some new kind of machine. And I haven't seen enough of that kind of thing in the games Nintendo, or much of the Japanese gaming industry, sends our way.

That leaves me with a sort of fond but distant regard for the efforts of Shigeru Miyamoto and his colleagues. Some of them make games I love. I read their reviews and interviews as obsessively as I do the rest of gaming coverage. But they mostly make games for people who are not me. Judging by the slow death spiral of the GameCube outside of Japan, I'm not alone.

The chasm between Japanese and western gaming is widening, not shrinking. Those distinctively quirky, idiosyncratic titles so beloved by our homegrown otaku don't find their way into the dorm rooms and LAN parties of America. Those of you who obsessively import the latest titles for your modded consoles do not comprise a meaningful constituency and your cries fall upon the market's deaf ears.

The battle for the mind of the western videogamer has been fought and won. This isn't a meritocracy and I'm not

saying the games I love are better than the games you love. They're great games, innovative and delightful and bizarre. But the trend in this country is toward the marginalization of those strange and glorious mutants in favor of the well-defined genre assembly lines of EA, Ubisoft and Take Two. And I'm complicit in that process because the games I love are winning. It doesn't make me right and it doesn't make me happy. But I've seen the view from here and I'm telling you straight up: when Sony is run by a Brit and when even Japanese gamers want Xbox 360s almost as much as they want Nintendo Revolutions, you don't have to be a hater to see what's coming.

Otaku today, gaijin tomorrow, sayonara Mario. ▉

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.

the escapist

NEWS BITS

Take-Two Acquires Firaxis

Firaxis, the development studio behind Sid Meier's extremely popular brainchild, the *Civilization* series, was purchased today by publisher Take-Two. James Briggs, the president and CEO of Firaxis is excited about the acquisition saying of Take-Two: "[They are] an energetic label that shares our goals and vision for making great games that stand the test of time. We are pleased to be associated with the energy and commitment to quality work that 2K represents, and look forward to a great future together."

PlayStation 3: Holiday 2006

ARS Technica is suggesting the PlayStation 3 will release around Christmas of 2006. While avoiding direct contact with Xbox 360 and the quickly-following Nintendo Revolution, delaying release by a year threatens to relegate the PlayStation 3 to the number-two console spot. One should note the original Xbox released nearly a year after the PS2, and was forced to compete with a massive games library on an established console, leaving it at a nearly perpetual disadvantage.

Casual Friday

CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!

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Time For The Curtain Call

by Shannon Drake

I grew up in a small town in south Louisiana. South Louisiana is not the place you go to be on the cutting edge of the revolution – any revolution. In fact, it is the best place to go when revolutions scare you and you want to hide from Scary Change. For example, my mom, who still resides in this southern Louisiana town, still can't get broadband.

I knew Japanese culture was officially taking over when I walked into Waldenbooks in this same town in south Louisiana. Keep in mind this Waldenbooks is a mall bookstore, and not exactly a haven for obscure titles and books nobody reads. We're not talking about the dusty racks of the local public library. But, there it was, perched right next to the bestseller racks: a case of manga. Beside it was another case of manga. Another case of manga was beside that one. Walking around to the other side of the cases revealed four more cases of manga and two full bookcases of anime DVDs. The depth of their selection was astonishing, reaching beyond the *Pokémon* and *Dragonball Z* I had expected, into obscure titles my otaku friends would drool over.

I can quote you the statistics that show increasing anime and manga sales in the U.S. I can suggest you go to any games retailer online and look under RPG. Admire the list I just pulled from EBGames.com: *.hack* parts 1-4, *Xenosaga II*, *Arc The Lad: End of Darkness*, *Dark Cloud 2*, *Musashi: Samurai Legend*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, *Fullmetal Alchemist 2*, *Radiata Stories*, *Wild Arms 3*, *Phantom Brave* and *Aetlier Iris*. I can suggest you go look for an MMOG, but you'll find *ROSE Online*, *Ragnarok Online* and *Ragnarok Online 2*, *Parfait Station*, and a dozen others. I can suggest you turn on cable TV and turn to one of the channels showing anime and anime-influenced programs.

Or I can bring you along with me to a Waldenbooks in a now-ruined mall outside New Orleans, where seven cases of manga sat waiting for consumption. From a long stint working in a bookstore circa 2000, I can tell you we weren't in the business of keeping things on the shelves that didn't sell. If your precious volume wasn't making us money, we chucked it out as soon as Corporate gave us the okay. For us to stock seven cases of anything would mean it's either something Oprah recommended or it's huge. Manga is huge.

scrounging for old Led Zeppelin albums, cool used books and props for your next high-concept class presentation. Maybe that was just me.

The generation after mine, the ones who'll be telling us about how nice the home is as they wheel us up the walk, regards anime and Japanese culture as just another thread in the cultural tapestry. I thought it was weird that an ex-girlfriend had a frightening stash of *Card Captor Sakura* recorded from syndicated TV. But a generation of kids

Pikachu and Pokémon are to them what Megatron and the Transformers are to us.

For my generation, anime was weird. Those wide eyes that seemed to stare soullessly out of the late-night showing of *Akira* on SciFi were new and strange. The questionable hygiene of that scary guy who drew way too many pictures of *Sailor Moon* was creepy. Anime was a distant thing from a foreign land, with terrible dubbing on bootleg VHS tapes. It was gritty and bizarre, like one of those scary imported toys you found in the cheap flea market when you went

grew up with it as part of their lives. Pikachu and *Pokémon* are to them what Megatron and the Transformers are to us. Just wait until their nostalgia wave crests, then we'll be inundated with "funny" Flash animations of dancing Charmanders.

And this is only the beginning. American animation is moribund, save for the swashbuckling lads at Pixar. Even Disney is pushing stuff out to Korea. Japan and

While the domestic industry sneers "girls don't read comic books" and wonders why girls don't read comic books, girls read manga.

Southeast Asia are about the only places still in the traditional animation business. The domestic animation industry is busy imploding and shipping work across the Pacific to guys who do it better for cheaper. The kids will buy the foreign animation because they're used to it, because they aren't creeped out by the style and because there's nothing else to buy. Anime is going to win by default, because there's little meat left on the bones of the American animation industry.

Manga follows anime and may even overtake it, as it is light years beyond our own comics scene, which is still largely men in spandex and the occasional *Transmetropolitan* or Neil Gaiman. Manga has entire genres devoted to separate interests and targeted to separate audiences across the age/sex spectrums. There's the silly humor of a *Love Hina*, the dark bizarre Western-themed *Priest*, mysteries, comedies, romance - a genre for everything you could name. Manga is going to roll over the American comics scene still recycling things from 50 years ago, drawing them in a fancier way, and calling them new. While the domestic industry sneers "girls don't read comic books" and wonders why girls don't read comic books, girls read manga.

Seven cases of Japanese culture in a south Louisiana Waldenbooks mean it's time for the curtain call. My generation gave the world terrible nostalgia trips (swing!) and bad revival movies. Now we're being shown the door, ushered off the cultural stage as we dodder toward 30 and cultural irrelevance, at least according to the youth-obsessed mainstream. In our place comes a generation that grew up watching Japanese imports on TV after school, not on grainy VHS tapes they bought from a shady guy in a grimy comic shop.

With our exit goes America's long reign as the king of entertainment culture. The king might not be dead, but he's on his bed surrounded by mourners in pseudo-retro fashion. It's a matter of economics. A generation that's a voracious consumer of Japanese culture is rising towards its economic birth, bringing millions of dollars they will readily spend on something, anything, from Japan.

Millionaire playboy Shannon Drake lives a life on the run surrounded by Japanese schoolgirls and videogames. He also writes about anime and games for WarCry.

An American in Tokyo

A conversation with Gregg Tavares

by Eric Pickett

Prelude

I've been living in Japan for the past three months, and I'm here to tell you that it is not a place for the faint of heart. I'm sure many readers of this magazine dream of crossing the Pacific and breaking headfirst into the land of samurai and ninjas, *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest*, *Ghost in the Shell* and *Dragonball*. This is a dream which usually doesn't survive past the first encounter with a Japanese train station. Forget about blazing trails in the Japanese entertainment industry. Managing to make correct change at a grocery store is considered quite an achievement.

In spite of challenges, breaking into the Japanese gaming industry is not impossible. Gregg Tavares is someone who has managed to do precisely that.

Building on a career in the U.S., which began with programming BASIC alongside school friends on Atari 800s, through a port of Centipede from the Atari to the Commodore 64 for Atarisoft (for a whopping $3000), on up to programming for Naughty Dog's *Crash Team Racing*, Gregg has built a massive portfolio. These beginnings eventually led him to his current digs with Sony Japan, programming for the upcoming hit *Loco Roco* for the PSP. You can check out his blog at www.greggman.com for a sample of his work and observations on Japan. Be warned,

calling Gregg prolific is an understatement. It would take weeks of reading to get through half of that site.

I managed to catch up with Gregg while I was visiting in the U.S. Here's what he had to say:

GMan
Ok, I wanted to start off by asking you what you were doing before you came to Japan and what led you to come over.

Well, originally I had my own company called "Big Grub" with three other partners and 12 other employees. We were doing a PS1 and PC game but it didn't work out, and I decided to leave. At the time I was pretty seriously studying Japanese (or so I thought at the time), and so, deciding what to do next, I thought, "Hmmm, no wife, kids, girlfriend or other responsibilities. If I really want to learn Japanese, then I should go to Japan. Now's my chance!"

That was actually eight years ago. This is my second time in Japan.

Really? How did that happen?

Well, once I decided to come, I actually talked to Mark Cerny at Crystal Dynamics (with whom I used to work), and he helped me get a job at Sega of Japan. I was only there for eight months, because some opportunity too good to ignore came up at Naughty Dog. I took that opportunity, and then used the money from that to come back to Japan 21 months later and study Japanese full time (no job) for about 21 months.

One thing I'm curious about is how your gaming aesthetic has changed. You've been in Japan the better part of a decade; it must have rubbed off on you.

That's a hard question, because I've also gotten older and am more selective just in general. So how much of the changes are because I've been in Japan for five-plus

years or how much because I've just become more jaded, I'm not sure. I don't play nearly as many games as I used to. I think that's true for most people as they get older. They just have more things needing their time.

I **generally** prefer shorter games. Well, maybe that's not true, but the game just has to be really awesome or I won't put up with it. I did spend 80-plus hours on *GTA: SA* this July. I'm not sure Japan has really changed my taste in what I want to play. I was disappointed with *Half-Life 2*, as it was basically just more of the same. I'm sure the *Burnout* series keeps getting better, but three was enough for me. On the other hand, I think my design sensibilities have changed at least a little, having noticed what my fellow designers concentrate on.

Games and Gamers
Have you noticed any broad differences between the typical Japanese gamer versus the typical American?

Well, the obvious is: They like different games. You can just look at the charts and see the difference. *Halo* was a non-event here. *Half-Life*, non-event. RPGs are still popular, as are choose-the-answer story games. The most famous right now outside Japan is probably *Phoenix Wright* (*gyakuten saiban*). They also appear not to be into net games as much, although they might just be late bloomers. The internet started slower here (although it's well past the U.S. now), and PCs didn't become popular until the internet became cheap, which was only about four years ago.

What kind of interest have you seen in MMOGs?

Other than *FF11*, I really haven't seen any. I see ads for *Ragnarok*, but I'm not sure it actually has that much of an audience. PC games seem mostly non-existent here.

So the PS2 is by far the platform of choice?

Currently, yes.

Have you had the chance to play online with Japanese gamers? Or in an arcade, or any other social setting?

Not a lot. I dated some girl that was really into *Lineage* and watched her play. I didn't really notice a difference between watching her play and watching my friends in the states play *EQ*.

You were in Japan when Ultima Online *hit, right?*

Yeah.

Did it generate any notice in Japan?

Zero.

Do you think there's any cultural resistance to online gaming?

I don't think so. I think it's just a matter of getting them wired and ready. Most people don't have gamer PCs, and the internet didn't **happen** in Japan until 2001, **after** the PS2 came out. There's no "Live" on PS2 and no built in networking, and Xbox didn't happen here at all. So, I think if Sony has an "Xbox Live" like service for PS3 out of the box and PS3 does well, then I think Japan is ripe for a huge online market.

Now, everyone in Japan has **fast** broadband, usually 24 megabits or faster. And they pretty much all have routers, which are down to $40 now, so they are ready to plug in a system that is setup for online gaming. They just need one.

So the competitive/cooperative urge is there?

Probably cooperative more than competitive, but, yes, I personally think it's there. I know some famous Japanese designers that disagree; but, personally, I think they are just too old school to "get it."

What are their grounds for disagreeing?

Generally, they don't personally like online games. Of course, if you press them on it, they've never actually played one; and/or, if they have, it was like Dreamcast on a modem or something, not Xbox Live with headphones.

Is there perhaps a desire for an unblemished microcosm?

Well, Japan is not going to be like America with all the screaming, cussing kids in my opinion. It's just a different culture. I'm sure being anonymous might encourage them to be a little more in-your-face, but I don't think that type of behavior is really in their character.

What type of behavior is in character?

Cooperation, working together toward a common goal. Socializing in a relatively safe way.

One difference someone pointed out to me. When the Americans were let into *FF11*, my Japanese friends complained they were all too lazy to read the manual. The typical Japanese person, I guess, will read the manual to learn how to play. That probably comes from a basic guideline of Japanese culture: Never bother anyone if you can avoid it.

The American players would just log in without reading the manual and then "shout" in the game to everyone, "How do I do _____?" "Where do I find _____?" bothering everyone in shouting distance.

Yes, I'm familiar with the behavior. What about the demographic of Japanese gamers? Given that it's a relatively solitary activity, is it mainly young guys?

Hmmm, I used to think there were more girl gamers here than in the U.S., but I'm not so sure anymore. I think, actually, it changed. Famicom->PS1 the girl gamer population grew, but it like completely died at PS2. So, yeah, it seems about the same as the U.S. Young guys. I think it might actually skew younger here. It feels like there are more titles squarely aimed at kids vs. America (although I've never actually counted to be sure). But, for example, if a *Spongebob* game comes out in America, we know it's aimed young, but it's also a non-event. Here, though, Bandai releases kid license after kid license that sells 1 million plus units.

This is also something I noticed on my own team, and I guess I can't really generalize, but our lead, Tsutomo Kouno-san, often designs with children in mind, whereas I design for me mostly. I'm not sure many American designers directly consider kids in their design, unless their game is directly targeted at kids.

I'm curious about gaming's impact on society. I saw that Advent Children *was the #1 DVD sale in the country for a while. Is gaming something that brings people together? A shared experience? It's just now becoming a social thing in the U.S., along with the geek fad. For example, water cooler discussions: Instead of discussing sports, a discussion could revolve around a game of* Madden*, or a map in* Halo*, or whatever.*

Hmmm, well, video games are 25 years old? So, there's lots of adults who grew up with games. I haven't really noticed that in general company. Of course, at a game company, that kind of discussion happens all the time. What I have noticed is either the Japanese have slightly less stigma toward games **or** the people who run the media have more respect or rather more interest in games than the same people in the U.S.

What I mean by that, is that there are lots of TV programs on TV that use music and sound effects from famous video games - mostly quizshows or gameshows.

And in the same way that, say, the Atari symbol is a popular cultural icon in the West, the Famicon, *Mario*, *Pacman*, *Space Invaders*, and many other games (and old Anime)

are huge cultural icons here. More so than in America, I think. Here, new Mario goods come out like every month or two. You've probably seen the Pepsi bottle caps, the gachapon old-game systems, etc.

They are hugely popular campaigns. As another example, the Japanese actually have the slang "ping pong" and "boo boo." "Boo boo" is the exact sound of trying to do something you can't do in *Zelda* SNES. "Ping pong" is the sound of doing something correct in a gameshow or a video game. That type of influence from games and gameshows is all thoughout Japanese modern culture.

Other than RPGs, which genres are popular?

Like the USA, licenses and sequels are popular. *One Piece* games, *Dragon Ball Z* games and *Gundam* Games always sell. Also *DQ*, *FF*, The *Dragon Warrior* Series (sangokumuusou), *Winning 11* and *Gran Turismo* are popular. There are no FPSs on their charts. No basketball, no football and only sometimes a baseball game appears.

There are several (probably Japanese-only) games that have done well. First off, there are the turn-based, strategy games. The most popular one in America is *Advance Wars*, but that wasn't even released here in Japan until two to three years later, because there are so many of those types of games here. Others are games like *My Summer Vacation*, which is a **very** casual game about spending time, as an 8-year old kid, in a country-like area (non-urban), near the ocean on summer vacation with your family. It sold over 1 million units. I would never have expected that. *Ka*, a game about mosquitoes, also sold a ton - partly because of a great ad campaign, but also partly because mosquitoes are part of the national ... tradition. Or rather not mosquitoes directly, but dealing with them in the summer is almost like something you expect to do ... like even though you might hate shoveling snow, the memory of it is kind of comforting.

Does that make any sense?

Yes. These all sound like single-player games.

Yes.

In the U.S., gaming is pretty social/competitive. Is there any of that in Japan?

This is just my impression, but competition pretty much mostly happens in game centers, i.e., fighting games. I'm not sure why, but my impression is that in the U.S., it's common to invite your friends over to play; but here in Japan, it seems like kids play outside when they are together. They don't come over to each other's houses. Even as adults, that lifestyle continues. I'm sure there are many reasons for that. Here in Tokyo, people live far apart. If you co-worker lives on the other side of town, it's an hour or more by train to get together.

Also, Tokyo apartments are small, so there is less room to party.

So this is why arcades have continued to flourish?

Well, I'm not sure they are flourishing, but they do still exist. There's many things different about Japanese arcades than American, though. The typical arcade is 25% redemption games, like *UFO Catcher* and *Purikura*; 25% "arcade games"; and 50% gambling games (not pachinko). So the arcades are not just running on what we consider arcade games. In fact, I suspect arcade games are making the least money compared to redemption games and gambling games. Some of the gambling games are **amazing**! Like Sega's newest horse racing game. There are lots of those types of things from every developer (Capcom, Konami, Sega, etc.)

So what kind of community is there around gaming in Japan? Forums?

The biggest forum in Japan is called "Channel 2," pronounced "nee-chan." It's kind of considered the slashdot of Japan, although it's a forum, not a blog; but all the news in

Japan, especially "geek" news, happens there first. If you want to find out what the fans are talking about, that's the place to check

How would you compare the attitudes and opinions and how they are expressed to an American gaming forum?

This is a generalization, and I know there are exceptions, but Japanese culture is known for being more polite. So I have a feeling, the "my favorite game rulez and your favorite game suxors," type of thing is a little less common on average here.

People seem to offer lots of design ideas. Like "I hope it has this feature," and "I would rock if you could do ____ in some level." My impression is that's a little different compared to American discussion.

How practical do you think Nintendo's aim is at expanding the gaming population in Japan? Are more people open to gaming than are now involved?

Well, it certainly seems to have worked with DS and *Nintendogs*. Lots of the women that got out of games from their PS1 days got back in with *Nintendogs*. I don't know if they are playing anything else, though. My impression is if anyone can do it, it's Nintendo. They seem to at least have the will. I don't see that kind of will from any other company, Japanese or Western.

Is there any stigma around games as not being feminine? Or as being socially disadvantageous?

Not as much as in the West, but yes. There is also the same "games are for kids." Met lots of woman, and I always ask them about games. Only about one out of 15 or so plays, as far as I can tell.

I'm curious about ninjas and samurai. That's a huge thing in the West. Is there similar interest in Japan? Also, is there an analogous interest in feudal Europe?

There's a pretty huge interest here in ninjas and samurai. It's not just games; there are dramas on TV about samurai pretty much constantly. I don't see any interest in feudal Europe though. And, maybe only slightly related, but there is no interest in elves, dwarfs, orcs, ogres, etc. That "Middle Earth" type of stuff is not part of Japanese culture in any way shape or form.

Have gamers there developed lingo the way they have in the U.S.?

Yes. Unfortunately, I don't know much of it. Japanese **seems** to have less slang than English, in general; but, at the same time, they have to take English for lots of new concepts and make up a word for it. That word usually starts like the English word but then it gets slangified. For example a "thread" in a forum was "suredo," but, now, it's just "sure" (suu-ray). That's the only one that comes to mind. I need to start reading more 2chan.

Developers
Can you compare Japanese development to the American approach some more?

Well, it's quickly changing, but, for example, you can read a good description in the latest Game Dev mag. The *Resident Evil 4* postmortem. They talk about their old system where to see the art in the game, a programmer was required. In other words, the artist could not check out something in the game without giving their data to a programmer and waiting for an hour or so for him to compile it into the game. My division at Sega was this way when I got there. I fixed that for them.

Yeah, I read your gamasutra article about that.

It's still that way to some degree. They are just not very tool-oriented. Things like the *Half-Life 2* engine, and now especially the Unreal 3 Engine. I don't mean just the engine, but the entire development environment, that's kind of turning them on to better processes, but it's still got a ways to go.

Many of the programmers are **very** stubborn and want to do everything their own way even if it means they have no tools and have to do everything by hand. I'm not sure where that attitude comes from. I can only guess different things like

1) Japanese colleges don't teach that much programming. A programming major may actually graduate without having ever programmed.

2) Also, generally, Japanese employees have that whole "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down" thing; so speaking up about a better way might be slightly harder to do than in the West.

As far as the no programming in college thing. I'm sure that's not always the case; but from what I've gathered, it's not uncommon, or at least used to be not uncommon, for it to go like this: You cram your ass off in junior high school/high school to get into a respected college in your chosen major. You then party at college for a couple of years, because having gotten into your college of choice in your major or choice, guarantees you'll get a good job. You then get your job, which you expect to keep for life. The company takes you untrained, but with the piece of paper (diploma) that says that you worked really hard to get into your college; therefore, you'll work really hard for them learning how to do what they teach you. They then assign you to someone, your sempaii, to train you. And so, that's how you learn your skill, not at college. That also means they can pay you complete shit, because you come with no skills.

Well, I haven't noticed too many shortcomings in Japanese games. What do they bring to the process that allows them to make such good games?

Perfectionism. It's surprising all the little details they concentrate on that an American developer would just ship with. That's not to say they are implemented in a well-designed and flexible way from a code point of view, but from an end user point of view, they are very polished.

What about from a design perspective? I've noticed that Japanese games seem to take good care of you as you play them.

Yes, that's a conscious design decision and something I butt heads with them on. They claim the Japanese like to be hand-held. The player wants to know what to do. They want it spelled out. Whereas they believe a Western audience can handle more freedom, less hand holding. My point of view is that perfection is in the middle. I always hold up Miyamoto. Both Japanese and Westerners think he's one of the best designers ever, and his games have both more freedom than most other games, and at the same time give the player direction.

How do designers feel about American games? Are there any that really stand out in their minds?

Well, nothing really comes to mind. I did have several Japanese friends mention the *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* PS2 game as evidence that American artists had finally caught up with Japanese artists in terms of quality of art. It was definitely a pretty game, but it was still an exception. Most Western games on average have pretty poor art - especially when it comes to characters. That's something that often comes up in discussion. It seems like most Japanese game art appeals just fine to Western players, but most Western games are actually turn offs to Japanese players. Of course, there's always a few people that like Western game art, but, overall, they find it a turn-off.

For example, last year when *WoW* came out, I saw the gamespot review and the reviewer was gushing more than I've ever seen any reviewer gush. It looked interesting and the art is above average, at least for an MMOG. I showed it to a co-worker, one that is actually into MMOGs and he was like, "That art sucks, the Japanese won't be into it."

So the looks of games are very important to the Japanese?

Yes, aesthetics are very important to the Japanese in pretty much all things - more so than for the West for sure. Everything: clothes, furniture, food and games.

Let me rephrase that, is art style considered above photo realism?

As far as realism, I'm not sure. What's real? Is *GTA* real? Or is *Resident Evil 4* real? For me, games like *The Sims* look like crap (Sorry, *Sims* artists, but those characters turn me off). They don't look more **real** to me. Maybe their proportions are more real? But maybe because they are not actually real people, but lo-res 3-D representations, they need something extra to make them feel real. I think the Japanese might be more open to more stylized characters than the West, but I don't think they are less into reality. *Resident Evil 4*, *Dynasty Warrior*, etc.: There are plenty of popular games that look more real than most Western games.

That reminds me, the Japanese seem to not only accept innovation, but demand it to a certain extent. Is that acknowledged by developers over there?

I don't think the Japanese audience demands innovation any more than the Western audience. I think that's just a matter that from a Western perspective, it's only news if it's different; so all the sequels and non-innovative games are not news in the West, but they are still the largest part of the market here. The perfect example is *Dynasty Warrior*. What's the difference between *Dynasty Warrior 1* and *Dynasty Warrior 5*? They all sold like crazy, but they are probably less different than the five *Burnouts*.

Japan has the reputation in the US for being the place that the next crazy thing is coming from. How was that earned?

By ignoring all the me-too products and only noticing the new titles. There is some innovation. Both Sony and Nintendo spend a lot of money on trying new things.

Nintendo seems to have had a few more hits there. *Animal Crossing*, *Nintendogs*, *Pikmin*, *Donkey Konga*, etc. Sony has had *Parappa*, *KA*, *Ape Escape*, *Vib Ribbon*, *My*

Summer Vacation and many, many titles that tanked. One other thing that might contribute is that, for whatever reason, it seems like the Japanese retail market supports smaller titles. In America it's like it's gotta make it to Wal-Mart or forget it. In Japan, though, you can go into a computer software store and find a few aisles of small, nearly no-market titles, like desktop background CDs, or train picture CDs. In the West, that would be considered wasted retail space. I don't know why that difference exists, but it does, which means a smaller title still has a chance to be put on the shelf.

Finale
Ok, I think I've gone through most of what I wanted to ask you. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Hmm, off the top of my head, directly related to games, no. To tech in general, well, I find it frustrating how behind the U.S. is in terms of net tech. They don't realize it, because they can't read Japanese or Korean, so all the things happening on this side of the world months or years before they happen over there are basically ignored; and they (the Western media) get all excited thinking something new is up, when, in actuality, its been there, done that. I don't know how that will translate into the future though. It could be this generation of consoles, with pretty much all of Japan having cheap broadband really shakes up the market. Twenty-four megabits for $20, 100megabits for $40 a month.

Codetta
A huge thank you to the gman, Gregg Tavares for taking the time to talk. All the PSP owners out there need to sit up and take notice of Gregg's current project, *Loco Roco*.

Eric Pickett is currently residing in Tokyo where he is slowly, but surely mastering his pronunciation of "Gome nasai, nihongo ga wakarimasen."

THE HIDDEN MEANING OF
MICROSOFT'S "360"

by Bryce Edison
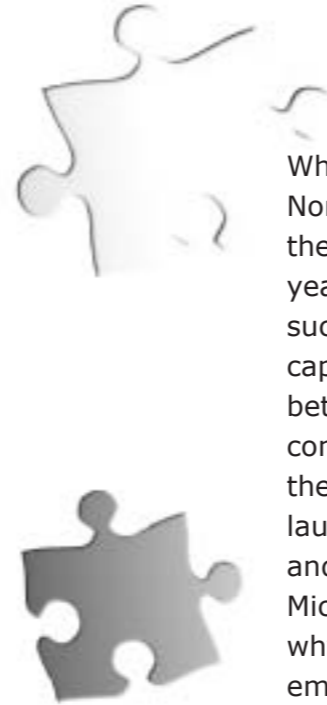
When you look at how the Xbox did in North America, you can tell it's one of the more successful consoles in recent years, from critically acclaimed games such as *Halo*, to hardware-power capacity, compatibility and one of the better online services for a gaming console out there. When you look at how the Xbox did in Japan, however … you laugh. Or cry. And this time, Peter Moore and the rest of the executive staff at Microsoft Game Studios (MGS) know why: Support outside the U.S. was embarrassing.

So we all now can't help but wonder: What's up with the "360" at the end? Well, I hope there is **not** any meaning behind it; as in a 360-degree turn-around, which would only put them right back where they started.

It's true, the PS2 sold the most units worldwide, and this preference was evident in America, as well. Sony had indeed built up a strong reputation with their extremely successful first attempt, PlayStation; but, how exactly did this

phenomenon happen? Both companies' products are quite popular, and they both had some idealistic launch titles – heck, one could even argue the Xbox won there, with million sellers like *Halo*. But, with the exclusion of Tecmo and a few others, Microsoft seriously lacked international support, putting a serious dent in the horde of non-American gamers.

Specifically missing were the games Japan generally does best: RPGs, fighting games, quirky puzzle games and the like. Xbox was a clear winner for fans of shooters, sports, action and bouncy boobs in the sun; however, when it came to turn-based RPGs and the other types of games for which we turn to Japan, Xbox – with a few exceptions – just didn't have them.

But you can't blame Microsoft too much; they showed promise in the beginning. *Dead or Alive 3* was a smash-hit in the states, and is still the best-selling title in Japan for Xbox. However, it stopped there. For example, *Fable*, which has

With exclusive Xbox360 publishing rights for two Mistwalker RPGs - *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey* - Microsoft is working hard to get the jRPG fans from other systems.

sold nearly 1,000,000 copies (and will most assuredly pass this with its recent expansion, *The Lost Chapters)*, barely even hit a percent of that in Japan. With disappointments like this, the desire to emphasize Xbox in Japan obviously decreased. Titles planned to impact Japanese culture (as well as American culture, of course), like *True Fantasy Live Online*, were canned, losing even more trust and interest in the Xbox console in Japan, and for otaku fans here in the States.

But, things are about to take a complete turn, and hopefully not a 360. Maybe they should have called this next system Xbox180. It makes more sense, doesn't it?

It's evident that Microsoft is putting an emphasis on the industry's other gaming origin(s). Microsoft isn't here just to be the console that people will buy for *Halo 3*. They want to replicate what Sony did so fantastically: They want to publish and license games that will attract all types of gamers.

One of the best exclusive deals Microsoft gained is with Mistwalker. Hironobu Sakaguchi – or better known as Mr. *Final Fantasy* – created his own company after

his departure from Square-Enix. Many big names, such as world-famous videogame composer Nobuo Uematsu (yep, the guy who made the classic *Final Fantasy* tunes), have jumped aboard to help Sakaguchi create new RPGs. With exclusive Xbox360 publishing rights for two Mistwalker RPGs – *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey* – Microsoft is working hard to convert the jRPG fans from other systems. While at this point neither game has been revealed, people in message boards all over are listing their expectations and hopes for these two games. Many are even calling these games their "most anticipated games for the system" and "main reason for buying the system."

Companies that aren't even published by MGS (such as Mistwalker) have hopped on the exclusive wagon. Namco has announced an untitled RPG from the same people who have done some *Tales* installments will be released exclusively on Xbox360. Banpresto, developers of the upcoming PS2 game *Magna Carta*, already have declared Xbox360 will be getting the sequel. *[eM] eNCHANT arM*, from From Software, will be hitting the Xbox360 as one of the much-needed launch titles in Japan. It's these kinds of

games that the original Xbox simply did not offer. It's heavily suspected that this title will reach the U.S. shores sometime in the near future.

It's true that Sony is currently the incontrovertible leader. But, with this much support from Japan – from companies, Japanese-oriented games and gamers – Xbox360 could make a total turnaround in the competition.

Bryce Edison is the Editor-in-Chief and Co-Founder of Access Gamer.

MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

"What is your favorite Japanese food, and have you mastered chopsticks?"

Joe Blancato, Contributing Editor
Anything involving eel, and chopsticks are no sweat, provided the rice is sticky enough.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor
Anything Teriyaki, Chicken, Shrimp, Beef Jerky, whatever. And I think that chopstick technique is like a baseball bat swing, and your natural ability shouldn't be tampered with. Mine works for me, but I tried to do the "traditional and proper" method, and quickly found that I would have starved before getting it right.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor
I have taken a recent liking to edamame (http://www.edamame.com/), which isn't **only** Japanese, but you're likely to find it at sushi spots. As for chopsticks, I got quite good at using them one summer in college when I worked at a Japanese restaurant, where if you needed to eat while on a ten-hour shift, it was either chopsticks or your hands.

John Tynes, "The Contrarian"
Pocky! Followed by just about everything else. I do use chopsticks, but don't forget – sushi is actually a finger food.

Shannon Drake, "Time for the Curtain Call"
Covering an anime con for my popular Internet website introduced me to Pocky, which I believe is Japanese for "Tasty crack on a stick." And chopsticks? I don't even know how to use a fork.

Allen Varney, "The Asian Weird"
Teriyaki chicken and yes. I once ate dinner at a Chinese restaurant with the first-generation son of Chinese immigrants. As I watched him struggle with his chopsticks, I contemplated the virtues and costs of cultural assimilation.

John Szczepaniak, "Japan's Mother"
I'm tempted to go for an attention grabbing answer and say something like "Nato." But in truth, I like everything. From Sushi to Sea-Urchin, it's all good. As for mastering Hashi? I diligently practiced during 5 years of Japanese classes, it wasn't easy!