

the *Escapist*

Casual Friday

Scrappy Kids Trying To Make It Big
Hardcore Casual

MEET THE TEAM!

Obscurity

Below

the Radar

by John Szczepaniak

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

As some of you have found, we have been busy over here at *The Escapist* hive. In addition to our semi-weekly publish of *The Escapist* magazine, we now offer a blog. At the blog, you'll find our staff, writers and readers discussing articles, gaming news and culture, and behind the scenes happenings here at headquarters.

We've added the blog to provide a more casual and interactive facet of *The Escapist*. Many of you have sent letters asking for a place to discuss the contents of our issues, and others have asked for a more "human" side of the magazine. We felt a blog was the best way to accomplish both of these goals and got to work building one. *The Escapist Lounge* has launched and we're pretty excited to finally have the opportunity to express and hear opinions about our articles and gaming in general. Please stop in and say "hello."

And while you're there, you might notice an information block mentioning our podcast, *The Escapist Pod*. This project is in its infancy and we decided to bring

our readers into the loop to get your thoughts and ideas on what you might like to hear. Check out *The Escapist Pod #0* and let us know what you think!

Now, with all *The Escapist* news out of the way, we move on to this week's issue – "Gaming Below the Radar." Naturally, as any industry grows, it gets more press and more mainstream recognition. But even as more light is shed on some aspects of it, small pockets of gaming and gamers quietly grow.

This week, we uncover a couple of these little niches. John Szczepaniak shares months of research into the underworld of high-priced, one-of-a-kind gaming collectibles. Bonnie Ruberg discusses the oft-overlooked realm of "girl games." Bruce Geryk takes a look at Days of Wonder, a company that's bucking the trend of Bigger is Better and creating simpler, but no less fun, strategy games for the masses. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I love your magazine! I've been in the game industry since 1991, but I've been a grognard wargamer since I was a teenager in the 1970s. I wanted to point out a few inaccuracies in the "Les Grognards" article by Allen Varney. First, a minor point, but *Strategy & Tactics* magazine is now up to issue 232, not 228.

Also, while the number of people in the hobby certainly has declined, the production of new games is even more vital than it was when I first started playing over 30 years ago. In fact, if you do a search for wargames by year published you will see that from 1976 to 1985 there was an average of more than 90 games a year. From 1986 to 1995, it dropped to about 85 a year. But from 1996 to 2005, it jumped to more than 130 games a year! In fact, in just the last two years, the average is over 200 games a year! Granted, many of these are small run, desktop publishing efforts, but companies like GMT, Avalanche Press, Clash of Arms, Decision Games,

Columbia Games, Days of Wonder, Eagle Games and Phalanx Games continue to publish numerous high production value, high quality "professional" titles. So, more games on more subjects reaching a smaller audience. It's weird.

Another thing: If you live in a large metropolitan area such as the S.F. Bay Area, you will find dozens of potential opponents. I'm part of a group of nine gamers who get together almost every week, and I know of several other groups. My group plays the whole range of games, from beer 'n' pretzels games that can be completed in one sitting, to the multi-map monsters that take hours for a single turn. As your article notes, the more serious simulation games are amazing learning tools, and as such have found their place in our nation's military academies and staff colleges.

David Wessman

To the Editor: First, thank you for another wonderful issue. The magazine has been strong from day one and shows no signs of slowing down. One area that I hope you will start covering more is the international game scene. Having just come back from the Korea Game

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Conference, I sense that our American insularity and ignorance is hurting this industry.

While personally being relegated to the ever-shrinking grognard ghetto was not surprising, Mr. Tynes' article, "Why We Fight," was a depressing eye-opener. Within the past year, I read another article citing that MBA's leave the degree program with lower ethics than when they enter. And, with the ongoing concern about violence in games, perhaps we should be a little more thoughtful about what kind of a creative industry we are building.

Game creation is an art. However, if it is going to grow as a form, it needs to move past the basest animal goal - kill or be killed. For all of the tools game developers have at their disposal, today's games emotional range seems to be all the way from "Boo!" to "Argh!" and "Die!"

I'm not advocating censorship, but the philosophy "games for game's sake" seems pretty thin, given the overall artistic poverty of what is being produced today. While it is a choice to simply follow the bottom line, we all do

live in the world and it should have some impact on our work.

Just like with films and books and paintings, you "earn" your right to mature themes with mature artistry - otherwise it is simply exploitation.

Steven Davis

From The Lounge: I wonder how important wargames are for countries that haven't got a recent war history. I live in a country that had to fight for its independence, like all countries in North and South America. But that was 200 years ago, and lately we haven't had any kind of military conflicts. The U.S., on the other hand, has had its share of conflicts in the last 50 years, provoked or not. That leaves a mark on the people that live there, for those who were there physically, or for those who are related to them. Having this in mind, wargames for those people have a different meaning.

For the rest of us, who haven't been in or lived a war, wargames are just one of the many kinds of games we can play. Do we take them lightly? I don't know. Games are games, that's my point of

view. But what does it means for someone who was actually there, in the real thing?

Andrea Appel



Obscurity Below the Radar

by John Szczepaniak

I want to tell you something about gaming below the radar. I want to speak about an entire subculture that is so awe-inspiring it causes you to re-evaluate the concept of gaming.

Normal retail methods make you can feel limited by the videogame items displayed. Anyone can buy a copy of *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, *Metal Slug AES*, *Ginga Fukei Densetsu* or even the entire Fujitsu Marty collection. Throw enough money at eBay, and a myriad of apparently rare gaming items are yours. But these things are not unusual. It takes intense passion and hard work to get hold of truly obscure goods. There is a secret underground community of high-profile collectors who deal strictly in these most limited of oddities.

Oftentimes, such groups run the risk of the law, yet still dedicate their lives to the acquisition and recording of things. In trying to uncover this secret realm, I was graciously granted access to some

of the more high profile members, including the head of one such community. A renowned American gentleman who wishes to be known only as ASSEMBler, he tells us a little of himself and also the nature of such undocumented people, "Truth be told, I own large amounts of items, code, and tools that have never been released, are sometimes of legendary status, or are of singular extant. I also own the names and intellectual assets of several defunct studios. I own the masters and even the rights to some unreleased games. However they were not free, they were not easy goals to attain or items to acquire. It's not easy to track people down and coax them to sell items, to create a company to buy things, to take out loans and risk your financial future to acquire things. I've been sued, threatened and watched for what I do. Why do you think no one has ever seen a picture of me? And now, being part of the industry, working for a games company, it makes it even more

complex. I judge [a collector's status] by the amount of non retail items owned. If you have dev units, prototypes of consoles and games, or unreleased hardware. Those take effort to get, everything else is just throwing money at eBay."



...all of those I spoke to wished to remain anonymous throughout this article.

Unsurprisingly, all of those I spoke to wished to remain anonymous throughout this article.

Why go to such great lengths? Because it's forbidden fruit. Items that gamers shouldn't have, they inevitably want. It's cloak and dagger, certainly far more exciting than stepping into Wal-Mart, and in a way, replicating the role of Indiana Jones discovering that Holy Grail.

The entire videogame community is like a microcosm of society, with those at the top and the bottom, and also those hidden from view who control events. Let's take a look at the big game these prestigious hunters track.

Hard-line Hardware

Desired hardware takes many guises,

with unreleased prototypes, development and debug equipment, weird hack-jobs, and even commercially-released-but-poorly-marketed-failures all being focused on.

At the lowest end of the commercial spectrum, console bootlegs from places as far flung as central China and Brazil will pique people's interest. Many are Famicom clones, but go further afield and you'll find all manner of obscurities. How many varieties are there? As many as there are industrialized towns north of the Baltic. Yet people are determined to collect and document them all. For the cream of the commercial crop, your everyday 64DD, Bandai Pippin, and Marty systems will be vying for collectors' money. Released mainly in Japan with a limited audience and small selection of games, these are prized products for displaying.

For something with a little more flavor, check out Nintendo's top secret line of development equipment. Ever heard about the dark pink **cartridge** based Gamecubes that exist, the fabled NPDP systems? Some even come emblazoned with Nintendo Dolphin logos. For tastes a little more vanilla, seek the green boxed

NR Reader machines. Great for playing prototype games six months before they hit the streets. You can be sure Nintendo doesn't want you knowing this. Their court actions prove the point. But like moths to the flame, I can't help but be fascinated by what I'm not supposed to see, especially when I know the four figure prices. But not all dev equipment is valuable. Dev Jaguars can be bought for little more than retail models, it's the 4Mb Alpine II programming cards that push the value over \$1,000 a piece.

A little documented fact is that games journalists are actually a reliable source for underground goods. How do you think they manage to play gold copies of burned proprietary discs? Because the games companies supply them with specialist modified hardware.

The real action, though, is unreleased prototypes. We all know about 3DO, but what about it's cancelled M2 successor? Never made it public, though the technology was used in Japanese drink machines and Russian ATMs. So enamoured is the underground hardcore collective, there's jovial banter of trying to smuggle said ATMs across the border, just for the hardware.

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As for modern dev kits and prototypes, ASSEMBler tells me: "Usually a developer does not own the console, and has to return all [proprietary] equipment when the lifespan is over. [They're] usually asked to be destroyed in the field. Unless more companies go bankrupt, you will see them either return the hardware or archive it for spares. You might see some on sale due to employee theft, but considering it took ten years for Saturn items to surface... They technically don't own it in some cases, just the right to make games on it."

Meaning Microsoft wants their recently stolen X360 development kits back. Merchandise so hot to handle, not even the underground traders are dealing? I'll wager the scene's best modders have these babies, trying to create X360 mod-chips.

And with owning such hardware, you will, of course, need games to play!

Scintillating Software

If such underground groups are like virtual societies, then unreleased software and rare data is their specialized currency. Games are often traded like-for-like. I spoke to one of the

scene's most generous dealers, a Mr. L from England, who explained why: "Some people will only trade [rare items] for unreleased games - money you can come by any time and is easily spent on junk, but unreleased games are harder to acquire. You can offer someone a million and they still wouldn't take it, but if you offered them an unreleased game then they're more willing to part with their [rare items]."

It's this refined attitude that elevates proceedings to levels comparable with wine and antique collectors. Considering games such as the PAL version of *Kizuna Encounter* reach \$12,000, the prices are also comparable. Lower down, the *Nintendo World Championship* cartridge still manages to clock over \$6,000 on auction. If you can manage to find someone willing to sell, that is. The willingness to sell is, due to the fact they're already available digitally, buying them is purely for completeness' sake. Singular items which have not been duplicated command greater reverence, since there is no other way to experience them.

Of note, here, are the unwritten rules traders live by. When unreleased games



“You think just any Japanese collector knows about this stuff? Rare in Japan means business, there are specific ‘people’ to go through.”

are used as trading currency, it’s accepted no one will leak them, unless everyone agrees. Some things are never allowed to be made public. A collector of unreleased PS1 titles, who amassed a **staggering** amount of games and dreams of collecting all such prototypes, offered to trade duplicates to further his goal. His rules were simple: trades only, strictly no community releases. He proved his ownership by showing watermarked images of his treasures, such as the fourth installment of *Star Control*. All attempts to contact him for further info proved fruitless; contact is obviously limited only to fellow aficionados. The lengths gone to acquiring these are immense. Said individual was later contemplating a trip to India to locate bootleg copies of the rare unreleased *Clayfighter Extreme* on the PS1.

Again, games journalists are a good source for unreleased games. They’re sent early review copies, and if a game gets cancelled, it’s instant money. Journalists live by a different code, and so once articles get published, there’s no problem selling merchandise. An Australian I know made obscene amounts of profit selling unreleased

review copies of DC games, while another from Belgium is holding onto his English Xbox copy of *Rent-A-Hero*, no matter how much money is rubbed in his face.

But Japan is still Mecca, with Yahoo! Japan closely monitored by the influential seeking precious goods. But not everything is so easy, one Mr. Kyu from Massachusetts reveals, “You think just any Japanese collector knows about this stuff? Rare in Japan means business, there are specific ‘people’ to go through.” Duly proven to me when investigating the upper echelons of the collector fraternities in Japan; virtually impenetrable due to the language barrier and sense of security. You need connections to move in their world, and sometimes it takes upwards of 10 years to convince and gain the trust of such recluses. People like ASSEMBler simultaneously own both a home in the U.S. and an apartment in Japan to further such activities.

Luckily a few generous people, such as Mr. L, enjoy buying prototypes purely in order to release them to the community. One such (unsuccessful) attempt was *Ochouchi Gengorou Ikka* on the N64,

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selling online for \$500. The idea was to fund its release, rather than it disappearing into a collector's hands. Mr. L was eager to speak on such matters, "It's a chance to play stuff that most will never see. Smaller items can cost a few hundred, but purchases can often be in the thousands. Usually it takes a lot of time to acquire items - 6 to 12 months easily, some things take years to surface. Companies should provide more information, instead of leaving it to flimsy press releases, leaked documents and speculation - it would help clear up the facts and paint a better picture of gaming history." So popular is his generosity, there is constant discussion as to which title should be pursued next. Long may he succeed.

But many people abhor public releases, complaining it devalues things, and with CD media, allows people to sell duplications for profit. ASSEMBler is more concerned about the legal implications, "Software allows reverse engineering, and potentially, piracy. Everyone remembers the damage done by the code that became Dreamcast boot CDs. It would be foolish to openly distribute software for dev kits. I don't know if you have ever been sued [or]

threatened with legal action, but it's expensive and not fun."

I also spoke to the legendary Lost Levels founder and all around nice guy, Frank Cifaldi, about the reluctance to release publicly. "A lot of people have this elitist need to be the only person able to play a game, some have this weird belief that holding on to a one-of-a-kind game gives it 'legendary' status and makes it more 'historically valuable' than it would be if [publicly available], and still others just mouth off about how much they paid for the damned things. No one but the game's copyright holder is entitled to have a game never sold at retail level. The rest of us either rely on the kindness of strangers, or spend a hell of a lot of money dealing on the black market. To me, once I'm over the excitement of being Indiana Jones and discovering something special and new, I specifically want to see how other people react to it. Seeing people actively playing and discussing the game I found is much more gratifying to me than being able to brag about having something."

There have been two very big events in recent months. The first is that a short playable Saturn demo of *Sonic Xtreme*





Some unreleased games are legally so hot, corporations feverishly pursue those who have copies in order to stop their mere mentioning.

surfaced, the seller being an employee of Sega. It was done via proxy with the final bid coming at a cheap \$2,500, though only after a rather unpleasant fiasco involving betrayal and vindictive revenge. The community was shaken to its core. Thankfully, when the dust cleared, ASSEMBler assured us it was in the safe hands of a trusted collector. A piece of history was saved, though people wept because it wouldn't be publicly released.

The second event is, four blue 64DD development disks have appeared, and they may contain *Mother 3*. Speculation is intense, but there are problems getting the disks to load. It requires specialist equipment, which is in short supply. But many are pledging assistance. Collectors are also reported to have offered undisclosed five figure sums to own these disks, assuming they're genuine.

Some unreleased games are legally so hot, corporations feverishly pursue those who have copies in order to stop their mere mentioning. Mr. F from Florida elaborates, "There are a few wealthy collectors who have been generous and shared with the community, but

companies dislike such people, and have threatened and/or taken legal action against them. Because of this, people who want to contribute to the community, and help build the archives, need to do so discreetly. Until the day that companies realise that people are interested in these games and would love to see them, archiving such information and media will remain a relatively underground task." And so, I assure everyone I won't mention that people are playing *Shenmue* on the Saturn, *Robotech* on the N64, or running the halls of *Biohazard 1.5*.

Community Camaraderie

And there I was, thinking I'd hit the big time when getting hold of *Propeller Arena*. Like so many previously exalted commodities, it's now common amongst the ranks, becoming part of the great online data stores used for archiving. A treasure trove of illegal and oh-so-highly prized ones and zeros. I was granted only brief access to just one such secret and bountiful oasis of data, strictly for research purposes and validating people's claims. These watering holes are reserved specifically for loyal community participants, and is indicative

of the camaraderie present. If you want to take, you have to give as well.

“Some people have gushed over how amazing and wonderful it is for someone to amass these things and be willing to share them. I archived [such media] until a time when I had the means to share it with others who cared to see what the corporations [were hiding]. Much of the software collected has been submitted either by contacts I know, or anonymous individuals who for various reasons I have decided to trust. At one point, I was open to letting [everyone] have access, but it became a problem as everyone would come in, get what they wanted, and never contribute anything. After changing it so that I had to approve each person’s access, I saw a dramatic improvement in how people treat the service that I provide.” - Mr. F from Florida again, one of many illustrious data keepers.

And playing by the rules is certainly worth it, since within their bosom is kept things such as unreleased copies of Sega CD, Turbo Duo, PS1, Dreamcast and Saturn games. There are also NDA protected documents for all the latest hardware, not to mention an abundance

of exclusive video footage and images. Plus other data that would make a man’s blood run cold with awe.

How do communities acquire such hardware, software and data? Simple. Employee theft, company bankruptcy and liquidation, sheer luck, and anonymous contacts. Several set up dummy companies for the sole purpose of purchasing assets when others go into liquidation. It doesn’t cost much to set up a registered company, allowing you to transcend the black market. ASSEMBler explains, “I have started my own company devoted to such efforts. It allows me to legally buy items, to have an ability to preserve whole failed companies or at least some of their assets as complete.”

The close-knit community spirit is strong, while the group is also apprehensive of outsiders. These communities have no promotion, those who seek the rare find their own way. Readers seeking them out should avoid the social faux-pas of demanding free access to items, as ASSEMBler points out, “I would release all I have, but the result is that I can be held legally accountable. Information wants to be

A silhouette of a person wearing a hat, looking out a window. The person is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the image, with their back to the camera. The window behind them is brightly lit, creating a strong backlight effect. The overall tone is moody and mysterious.

The close-knit community spirit is strong, while the group is also apprehensive of outsiders.

free, and eventually it will be, but not with my name directly attached. I shouldn't be expected to give away the fruits of hard labor."

Even if you relentlessly pursue this underworld, some doors forever remain locked. There are secret, strictly guarded, members-only IRC channels and message boards. Like a maze within a labyrinth, in them resides a small group of maybe 20 of the most wealthy and powerful. If a floundering company has items they want, they simply buy said company and all its assets. In a

smoke-filled room with low lighting, one regales me about the time he privately shipped a Harley Motorcycle to Japan in exchange for a one-of-a-kind piece of hardware stolen by Indonesian sea pirates. While another muses about the time he had to call Korea and explain that a mysterious MSX labelled package did not in fact contain MSX missile parts.

When conversing among them, one notices familiar people. I've recognized several who frequent various other online communities, often holding moderator positions, or are prominent

speakers. Look at the forums where *The Escapist* is discussed. Within these you will find elite international collectors and dealers, moving like shadows amongst the loquacious debates. It would be too much to jest that they infiltrate these gaming communities to keep tabs on developments, rather comparisons should be made to groups such as the Freemasons. An underground secret society for the digital age, dealing in knowledge and acquisitions not meant for the masses. Like a secret hive that archives information that would

otherwise be lost, virtual book keepers so to speak, who are everywhere.

There is so little known about these things and so much to learn. I'm just through the looking glass. Just how far does the rabbit hole go? 🐇

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

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Casual Wonder

by Bruce Geryk



Eric Hautemont breathes enthusiasm for gaming. His French accent carries it through the telephone and into your brain as you listen to his plans for his company's big bet on computer gaming. Which is odd, since the company of which he's CEO, Days of Wonder, is a big player in the very low-tech world of boardgames. This makes Hautemont's crusade (and it is a crusade, don't doubt it for one second) that much more unlikely: Bring turn-based, multiplayer strategy gaming to the PC casual games market. Even more unlikely is the fact that his first game, *Ticket to Ride*, isn't really casual. It's just very good.

Casual games are that huge segment of the industry that hardcore gamers don't want to acknowledge – over-35 soccer moms and solitaire-playing old ladies, visiting big portals like Yahoo! Games and Pogo.com. Often, the media that serves these gamers doesn't want to acknowledge it, either: When Hautemont was marketing the standalone PC version of *Ticket to Ride*, one of the largest gaming websites told him they simply didn't look at casual games, period. *Ticket to Ride* for the PC will be released in December, minus that coverage. The way Hautemont sees it, that website's readers are going to find out about it, anyway.

That's because Hautemont's view of the casual space is fundamentally different from that of almost anyone else in the industry. He sees multiplayer casual games as filling a gaping hole in the current market: Strategy games that are simpler than the current hardcore crop, yet elegant and engaging in a way more complicated games can't be. Sort of a throwback to the days when games like *Panzer General* could sell hundreds of thousands of copies in retail stores. Today, those games have little chance of showing up at your local Best Buy.

Publishers' willingness to take chances on such games has changed a lot since then. Hautemont found this out when he was pitching his game. "When we talked to the big PC publishers, we found that they had some very surprising attitudes. PC publishers basically either see their customers as two eyeballs they can derive money from through advertising, or they see them as casual gamers who have very specific desires that you don't want to stray from."

This kind of marketplace myopia has led one industry veteran, Greg Costikyan, to found his own publishing company. Manifesto Games plans to aggregate the marketing for overlooked and under-publicized games that have no chance of making it onto retail shelves. But as far as casual gamers go, he's skeptical. "The people who frequent Yahoo! Games are not going to play these games. That audience was built of Hearts and Backgammon players."

Jason Kapalka, whose company, PopCap Games, is one of the casual market's leaders with games such as *Bejeweled* and *Zuma*, agrees. It's not that he doesn't want to sell strategy games to

this market – PopCap is currently working on its own light strategy game – it's just that from his experience, casual gamers and old-school gamers who might be tired of current fare "don't seem to overlap very much."

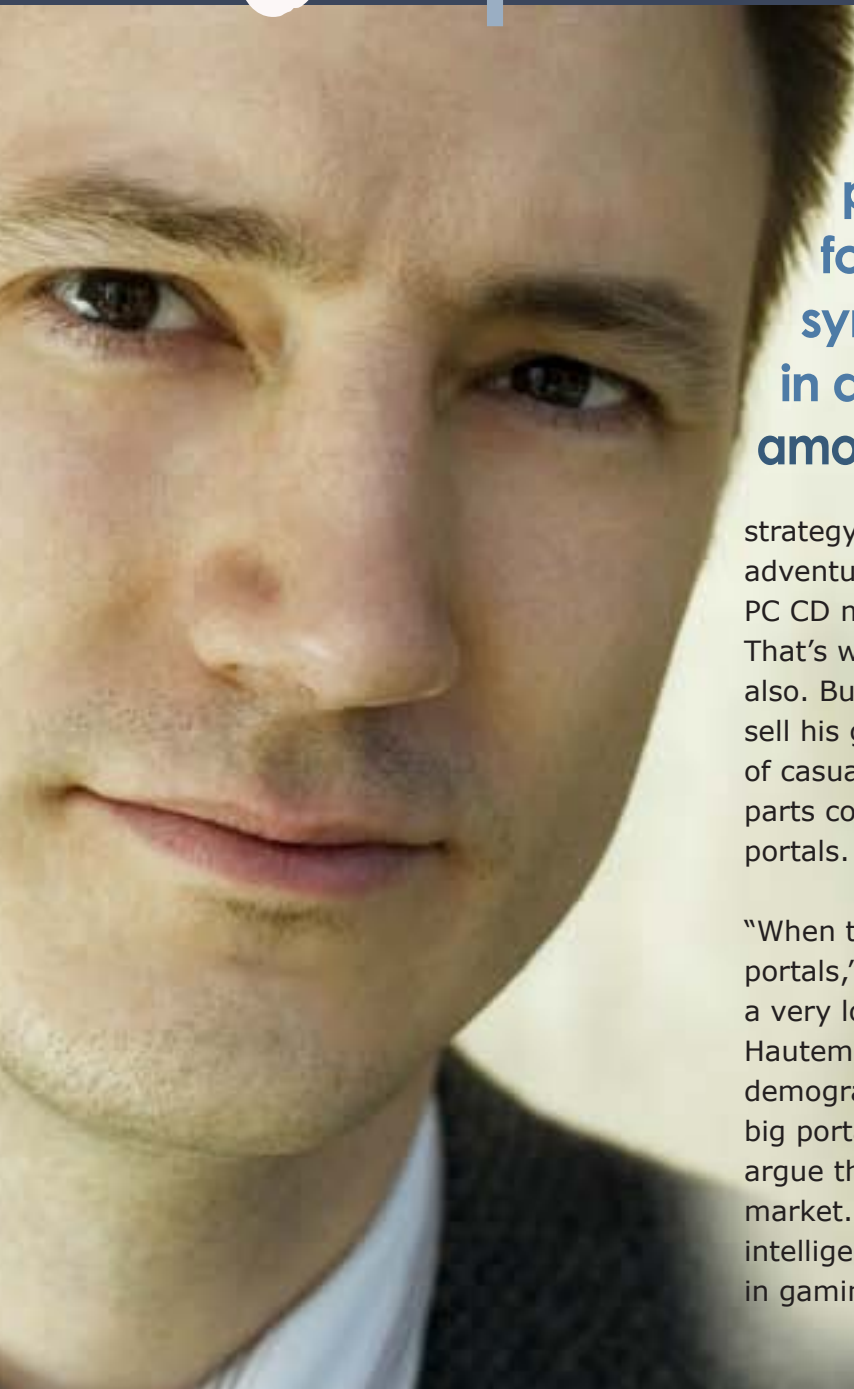
"It might be more appropriate to call them *non*-gamers than casual gamers in some ways," says Kapalka, "since for many of them their only game experience on the computer is perhaps Minesweeper or the equivalent."

Kapalka's company has had stunning success in this market, and this experience has guided PopCap's development efforts. "At PopCap," he explains, "we have an informal system we call the 'Mom test.' Can you get your mom to sit down and play your game? Does she understand it without you explaining it to her? Does she want to continue playing after you stop forcing her to? If so, those are good signs for the game's success in the casual games market."

For the time being, that's where PopCap's efforts are primarily focused. Kapalka is quite hopeful that traditional

Can you get your mom to sit down and play your game? Can she understand it without you explaining it to her?





After being rebuffed by PC publishers, he says he found attitudes most sympathetic to his own in an unlikely place: among console publishers.

strategy gamers “might become more adventurous in their buying habits if the PC CD market continues to constrict.” That’s what Hautemont is hoping for, also. But he’s also confident that he can sell his games to the current population of casual players, which is where he parts company with the big online portals.

“When talking with some of the big portals,” he says, “I found that they have a very low opinion of their customers.” Hautemont accepts the casual market demographic, but doesn’t agree with the big portals’ attitude towards it. “I don’t argue that those moms comprise the market. I just beg to differ on how intelligent that mom is or how engaged in gaming she might want to be.”

Another objection Hautemont has come up against is that multiplayer gaming and casual gaming are essentially mutually exclusive. Hautemont points to the fact that for a long time, one of the most popular games on the MSN Zone was *Reversi*, a multiplayer version of Othello that matched you up with anonymous online opponents. Interestingly, Microsoft is the one company he cites as having an approach similar to his, which is perhaps borne out by MSN Zone’s recent launch of *Settlers of Catan Online*, a computer version of the multi-million selling German boardgame. But Days of Wonder has an advantage in that they have a real synergy between their boardgame business and their online games.

“One of the most important factors in the success of an online game is critical mass,” says Hautemont. “We’re in a unique position because we have an existing—and growing—player base,” so if you buy the game in the store, you’re automatically part of a pool of players, and thus potential opponents. It’s a pretty big pool, too. At last count, *Ticket to Ride* and its sister game, *Ticket to Ride Europe*, sold over 400,000 copies of the boardgame. Recently, the average

wait to start an online two-player game at peak times averaged around two seconds.

Days of Wonder is releasing the standalone *Ticket to Ride* for the PC in December. The first printing of the game sold on the company’s website will include a DVD with ten-minute videos on each of the company’s boardgame titles. “Our goal is to have it so that if you watch the video, you can open the box and begin playing the game immediately,” says Hautemont. Because each physical boardgame has a code that buyers can redeem at the website for online gaming privileges, the company can track the “conversion rate” of free accounts. “So far, it has been spectacular,” Hautemont notes.

But Hautemont’s goal is still to develop the online games market his way, with games that play equally well online or in person. After being rebuffed by PC publishers, he says he found attitudes most sympathetic to his own in an unlikely place: among console publishers. “The console guys actually have a fundamentally different view of their consumers than PC publishers do,” says Hautemont, “and it’s much better.

They understood what we were trying to do almost immediately.”

PopCap’s Kapalka, has similar hopes for the console market, specifically Microsoft’s Xbox 360. “Their Live Arcade service will allow people to download and buy a variety of ‘budget’ games, including *Bejeweled 2* and *Zuma* from us initially. I’ll be very curious to see what the response to this is. It might be ignored or laughed at - ‘I didn’t spend \$400 to play *Bejeweled*’ - but I have a feeling that there might be some interesting responses from hardcore gamers when they get tired of the launch titles.”

Days of Wonder isn’t ruling out proceeding with *Ticket to Ride* for consoles, but development choices have to be carefully considered. “The opportunity cost for us would be that we would have to choose between that and *Memoir ‘44* online,” says Hautemont, referring to his company’s popular World War II boardgame that he feels has a chance to be the next *Panzer General*. Like *Ticket to Ride*, it’s simple

The disappointing part of this story is the degree to which traditional PC publishers seem to have abandoned the once staple genres like this.

and quick-playing, but has a theme (military conflict) that might be more appealing to traditional computer strategy gamers.

The disappointing part of this story is the degree to which traditional PC publishers seem to have abandoned once staple genres like this. Former SSI head honcho Joel Billings once remarked to Hautemont during a visit to his company that these gamers hadn’t gone away, but were being badly underserved by the current marketplace. How ironic would it be if the once-mighty turn-based strategy market ended up consolidating around console games and boardgame conversions? Wherever it ends up, Eric Hautemont and Days of Wonder hope to make the actual play experience as good as before. 🎮

Bruce Geryk battles his gaming nemesis, Tom Chick, every month in Computer Gaming World magazine. Also the magazine’s wargames columnist, you can find his blog at grognards.1up.com.



Games of a Fairer Sex

by Bonnie Ruberg



They prefer pink to camo. They prefer ponies to guns. The videogame community does its best to ignore them, but still, they continue to thrive. No, they're not girl gamers. They're girl games. You know the type, all princesses and sparkles. These are the titles that encourage us: Why go out and save the day, when you could just go out to the mall and save?

As much as we might like to believe otherwise, girl games are here to stay. They've become a staple of the games business, though you'll rarely hear about them on mainstream gaming sites. Walk into any videogame retailer, and you're bound to run across them - sometimes interspersed with other titles, sometimes dominating entire shelving units on their own. In the handheld and PC gaming worlds especially, their numbers are significant. Mattel's Barbie franchise alone has come out with at least 27 related titles, from *Barbie and the Magic of Pegasus* to *Barbie Secret Agent* to *Barbie Super Model*. And Barbie is hardly lonely; she has dozens of other licensed titles to keep her company, like *Cinderella*, *Mary Kate and Ashley*, and *That's So Raven*.

Of course, girl games stir up all the obvious contentions. As many critics have noted, they often reinforce gender stereotypes and present restrictive views of gender differences. Beyond that, though, girl games have something of a reputation for questionable craftsmanship. Perhaps we confuse "bad" for "simple," but some of these games just can't measure up. The majority of girl games are based on licensed creative property, and rarely seem to contain thoughtful or original content. Technological innovation is seen as less important in girl games - a fact that further alienates them from the hardcore gaming community. And though they cost the same as mainstream titles, girl games tend to offer relatively brief gameplay experiences, leaving some customers wondering whether 30 dollars is worth a game you can complete in little over an hour.

Developer Heather Kelley, once the Director of Online Development for Girl Games, Inc. and now a developer at Ubisoft, says the “shoddy” girl game reputation is well-deserved. “Games for girls could be so much better than our short-sighted business climate allows them to be. Nine times out of ten, a game that is labeled ‘for girls’ gets a minuscule budget, infinitesimal schedule, dumbed-down technology, and a host of extreme gender stereotypes to deal with.” Girl games face other problems, as well. Says Kelley, “It’s also harder hiring an emotionally-invested team, because, let’s be honest here, most adult men want to make games for themselves, not for their nieces or daughters, and the games industry is 90% male.” And, at the same time, licensing “definitely does limit what game designers can do in terms of content.”

Many publishers consider developing games specifically for girls a high investment risk. So, if this many girl games are making it onto the shelves, there must be an equivalent consumer base of people who are buying them. But who are they? The easy answer is young

girls looking for a fun time - more specifically, their parents. Yet, as a gaming community and a society, we have to ask ourselves: Do young girls pick these games because this is what they want - shallow plots, repetitive gameplay - or because it’s the only option we’ve left open for them?

After making sure I’d left my gaming merchandise at home, I set out for a little undercover work at the local mall.

The “shoddy” girl game reputation is well-deserved.

At Target - where girl games, glowing and cheerful next to the brooding colors of titles like *Quake* and *Doom*, take up half of the entire PC gaming section - I was the cousin of a 13-year-old girl who needed a holiday present. What could the sales associate recommend? He led me over to the oasis of pink and pointed out a Bratz game, ages six-plus. Bratz, with those giant eyes drowning in mascara, with noses the size of chocolate chips. I asked about the other

computer games, careful not to say anything too technical and blow my cover. “No, those are mostly for boys. In fact,” he admitted with a self-conscious laugh, “you’d be surprised. We actually get full-grown men in here buying these things.”

At FYE, I was the aunt of an eight-year-old girl. She had a Gameboy, but I didn’t know what she liked. Again, I was directed toward the kids’ games. *Hello Kitty: Bubblegum Girlfriends*, a very well-meaning salesperson assured me, would be best. When pushed, he did say a *Donkey Kong* or *Mario Brothers* title might be alright, if my niece was something of a tomboy. By the time I reached Electronics Boutique, I was wondering what would happen if I was shopping for an eight-year-old boy. Would I still get escorted to the children’s section? No, instead I was told about the latest big hits, like *From Russia with Love*. This time I tried pushing for something more girly. What about that pink game over there? What was wrong with that one? Eventually, the sales associate and I settled on *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. But there



Potter and the Goblet of Fire. But there was a moment when he thought I was actually going to buy my nephew *Lizzie McGuire III: Homecoming Havoc*. He was horrified.

None of which is to say that the pressure to play girl games comes exclusively from retailers. It's not a sell-more-games conspiracy, it's an attempt to give girls something they'll like; something that will be "fun." And if the idea of what's fun for girls is sexist, that's an issue of our culture at large, not just the video game community. Girls are taught to like girly things. Parents are taught to buy girly products for their daughters. The legacy continues.

"For me," says Kelley, "that's why games that play to really exaggerated gender stereotypes are especially dangerous. They have a superficial attraction, but they are teaching girls how to be female. They're normative."

Of course, plenty of girls really seem to enjoy these games, even some ones you wouldn't expect. In high school, I knew a

girl who ran home after school to prep Barbie for her PC modeling debut. She and her sister, only a few years younger, would fight over the computer, over who got to decide which purse best matched Barbie's strapless dress. Granted, her friends found her pastime a little weird, but I can't believe she was alone. Another friend, now in her early twenties, recently purchased a *My Little Pony* game. She loves it. She sits at her computer and giggles.

It's hard to imagine someone like that being welcome in the world of "serious" gamers. We disapprove of their choices of games, so we shut them out.

But maybe that's the way it should be. Maybe they really are different.

After all, why should we step in and label these girls as gamers when they don't even think of themselves that way? Every girl I know who loves girl games hates mainstream titles. My aforementioned twenty-something friend won't even pick up the controller for party games, though she has a gamer

boyfriend and a number of gamer friends. What she loves, honestly, are the ponies - in whatever form they decide to present themselves.

Perhaps that's why most girl games are merely regurgitated licenses, because

that's what young girls are looking for; not an arresting gameplay experience. These girls don't "mature" into liking quality games; they just stop playing. They grow up and grow out of whatever media franchise attracted them to games in the first place. It's a pessimistic thought, but one that seems more and more like a reality in the face of contemporary games for girls.




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If there is hope for successful girl games, it comes in defying expectations.

If there is hope for successful girl games - for creating quality products and gaining the respect of the mainstream industry - it comes in defying expectations. Innovation, usually passed over in the creation of girl games, is "absolutely necessary," says Kelley, "even more so than with stereotypical 'boys games,' because the innovation needs to go way beyond graphics. Girls sure don't need a more realistic alien invasion shooter (though arguably, neither do boys). Creating games that could be more interesting to girls will take some challenging and fascinating technology leaps that will make games more interesting for all kinds of people."

Here and there, developers are indeed successfully testing the boundaries of girl games. Her Interactive, for example, which has designed girl-oriented software since 1995, and has worked with Simon & Schuster since 1997 on the award-winning *Nancy Drew* series, is pushing to neutralize stereotypical gender representation. Sheri Hargus, Chief Technology Officer at Her Interactive, explains a mission parallel to that of a mainstream designer: "Girls like cool new features as much as boys... We are always looking for ways to innovate within the context of enhancing the

gameplay experience." The hard work seems to have paid off; says Hargus, "We receive enormous amounts of fan mail about the games." And fans aren't the only ones who recognize the importance of Her Interactive's mission. When asked about the response they've gotten from the rest of the video game community, Hargus says, "We are now seen as a major player in understanding how to make intelligent games that appeal to females." Even the *Nancy Drew* box art stands out in the crowd. It promises a genuine mystery, no pink necessary.

Her Interactive provides just one example of how game for girls can be both enjoyable and constructive. Will more girl games be successful in the future? As Kelley points out, success can be measured in a number of ways, but "for everyone, it's knowing that people are out there enjoying what you made, and having it touch their lives." 

Bonnie Ruberg is a video game journalist specializing in gender and sexuality in games and gaming communities. She also runs a blog, Heroine Sheik, dedicated to such issues. Most recently, her work has appeared at The A.V. Club, Gamasutra, and Slashdot Games.

"Girls like cool new features as much as boys."



Compared to most six-year-olds, who usually have the attention span of a golden retriever on amphetamines, I was a patient child. At least, under the right circumstances. After rifling through dozens of 5.25 inch (truly) floppy disks, I would find the one I wanted, slide it into the disk drive of my Commodore 64, put in my proper commands at the two-tone blue main screen, and wait. And wait some more. I cannot fathom the cumulative hours lost watching a monochrome game-company logo progress through all 16 available colors. The "ECA" of Electronic Arts, big block letters composed of rainbow horizontal lines, remains emblazoned in my subconscious to this day.

Loading...

Fortunately, the limited capabilities of the hardware compensated for this lost time by keeping learning curves low.

Though designing/programming legend Sid Meier was indeed at work back then, games like his *Alpha Centauri* or *Civilization* series would have a while to wait before becoming feasible.

Go back even earlier to the Intellivision and the Atari 2600. Their games, due to their relative simplicity, were essentially - and almost invariably - low time investments. There were exceptions, sure, but those exceptions stood out. Anyone who's played the Intellivision's *Triple Action* can attest to the clarity and directness of many of the era's titles. The world was a different place when you couldn't save your game.

With the lack of even the possibility for anything more, the simple games (which were the **only** games) were the money-makers. But things changed. The hardware advanced just enough, leaving a development gap that was promptly filled. The "bigger is better" ethos, loosely and liberally applied, took - and still takes - videogames on a long, uphill road. This road represents the doctrine of progress.

But the high-polygon flash of the explosion masked a subtle, often undetected truth. The road had actually split, and only one path truly began the climb. This marked a definitive philosophical bifurcation in attitudes toward gaming. As a gamer, you now had a choice. Take the low road, and you

can jump in whenever you like, without much of a commitment, guaranteed to meet (but rarely exceed) your expectations. Take the high road, and you force yourself into a sometimes trudging uphill climb into a potentially fuller, more robust gaming experience. You do end up higher; you just have to work for it. The developers face the same decision regarding what type of title to launch. The road metaphor is perhaps analogous to the distinction between the experience of MTV and feature films. You can get your flash, quick fix of buzz entertainment, or, lose

yourself in a grandiose, multi-million-dollar Gesamtkunstwerk. Each choice has its strengths, and each its fans.

As much as hardware develops, the envelope never stops being pushed. And why not? Given the growing market share of videogames in the entertainment industry, isn't this what people have been shown to want? Aren't the games actually better? Constructing a detailed, elaborate environment means for more involved gameplay, and a more immersive experience. Or does it?

I still remember that to play *Mechwarrior 2*, I had to set my resolution and terrain detail so low that the mountains had

jagged slopes, and the only way I could know for sure I had actually achieved anything was from that sultry, mechanized, computer voice narrating my clumsy piloting through choppy, staccato visuals. Further stifled by the need for the included sheet of commands that utilized most keys on my keyboard, I soon found myself hearing her say, "Gauss Rifle. Gauss Rifle. Gau-Gauss Rifle," over and over again as I repeatedly selected it as my weapon, since that became more fun than what I was actually supposed to be doing. Maybe I needed a new PC. But maybe I would have just rather played *Triple Action*, and faced my opponent in battle tanks, with a total of only four

I still remember that to play *Mechwarrior 2*, I had to set my resolution and terrain detail so low that the mountains had jagged slopes.



commands: turn left, turn right, move forward and shoot. Of course, not all high-profile titles leave those kinds of scars. But some do.

The split in the gaming road lends itself well as a clear instantiation of an important philosophical question. How valuable is progress? Most take the importance of being cutting edge as a self-evident truth. In the gaming industry, the headstrong march to push every envelope has sometimes been to the detriment of gameplay, a fact of which the committed low time (and low income) gamer is all too aware.

The fact is, technology will always be moving forward, keeping the cycle running fluidly, trapping high-road gamers into a never-ending struggle for more, ringing the familiar bells of the perennially dissatisfied middle-class American. Buy, consume, then buy some more.

The case is like that of the mythical Sisyphus, eternally pushing a stone up a mountain slope, whence the stone falls back under its own weight, and the climb begins anew. That high road can perhaps be likened to this slope, with the endless cycle of renewed and heightened expectations keeping any end inevitably unreachable. Perhaps, as with our look back at early games, there is indeed

wisdom in classics. (Sisyphus would have probably had better success with my Mechwarrior-mountains, since the slope was composed of diagonally-arranged horizontal lines, where he presumably could have taken a break.)

There is something to be said for the low-investment gamer and for low-investment gaming. There is a kind of minimalist purity in avoiding a Sisyphus gaming climb to the hardware and complexity summit, only to roll back down and climb again. Then again, once you do reach the top, the view can sure be spectacular. 📺

Simon Abramovitch is a philosophy graduate and freelance writer, and currently maintains a blog about the purpose of humankind at www.thehumanpurpose.com.

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Scrappy Kids Trying To Make It Big

by Shannon Drake

Casual gamers are a species the industry has trouble understanding, at least the gaming industry we know and love. "Trying to capture the casual gamer," means, in industry parlance, "we're probably going to dumb down the same game we made last time, or maybe just offer an easy mode." When sales suffer, developers and publishers are left scratching their collective heads. The model worked last time, why didn't it work this time?

Trying to figure out the answer to this question led me to Paul Jensen, president of SkillJam Technologies. Of course, I ask him about his industry experience, just to get a feel for who I'm dealing with. He sums it up rather neatly, "I've been in the casual games industry for five years now, which surprisingly, makes me an industry veteran considering how new the industry is. I've been fortunate to work at a leading games portal (MSN Games),

a leading game developer (Sony Pictures – properties include Wheel of Fortune/Jeopardy), and the leading Skill-based games provider (SkillJam)."

When an industry greybeard is jumping from Microsoft and Sony to join a casual gaming company, obviously something is afoot. SkillJam, by the way, dates back to 2000 and was acquired by FUN Technologies in July, 2004. According to Mr. Jensen, they currently enjoy a "\$280-plus million" market cap. This may be the biggest business you haven't heard of.

Clearly, I'm dealing with a big brain in the casual side of the industry. I put to him the question developers and marketing people worldwide would love to answer: "What's different about casual gamers? What are they looking for in a game that the existing industry isn't providing?"

This may be the biggest business you haven't heard of.



Reading reviews and hanging around hardcore gamers, one gets the impression that gaming should be pushing a giant rock up a hill, only to have it fall every time you near the top.

He knows this one off the top of his head. "Casual games appeal to a broader and older demographic. In fact, it stretches from 25 to 54-plus and is roughly 65% female. This user is looking for an entirely different experience than the 18-year-old college freshman. In fact, they are looking for a fun and entertaining experience that provides a break from their daily routine. The games need to be fun, easy to learn, and provide immediate reward." Skilljam players are "65% female, with an average age in their late 30s. They are educated, have a higher than average household income and are web savvy." No wonder 20-something guys making games to impress and intrigue their 20-something gaming friends have trouble appealing to the casual market. They live in two entirely different worlds.

With the "who" out of the way, I want to find out the why and how. Clearly, there's something fundamentally wrong with most attempts to appeal to the casual gamer, despite the best efforts of publishers and developers. I ask him why they play, and his response surprises me. "People play our games to have fun, escape from the daily grind and feel rewarded for their efforts." It

shouldn't surprise me, but it does. Reading reviews and hanging around hardcore gamers, one gets the impression that gaming should be pushing a giant rock up a hill, only to have it fall every time you near the top. He continues, "In some respects, the entertainment value to our users is similar to sitting down and watching their favorite TV show, as they play the games, on average, in 20 to 30 minute increments." Again, I am surprised, being used to 40 hour RPGs that are "too short," at least according to hardcore friends and colleagues.

The casual games army is bigger than you'd think, too, and even though they only play in 20 to 30 minute spurts, they play in a lot of 30 minute spurts. He quotes me a figure of "100 million casual gamers worldwide [are] playing these games at work, at home and on their cell phones," which shows you the power this unheralded branch of the gaming industry wields. *Bejeweled* doesn't get many magazine covers, but millions of people play it on a daily basis.

To appeal to those millions and draw them in even further, Skilljam is putting up millions of its own, sponsoring a Skill

Games World Championship with a \$1 million prize for the winner and a further \$1 million in prizes for the other contestants. And if you still think casual games shouldn't be taken seriously, check out the list of their partners: AOL, MSN, Virgin, GSN and Real Networks. What's slipped under the radar of the hardcore and the press, has caught the eyes of the guys who write the checks. While Fata1ity is feted in the gaming press for wins in the thousands, someone out there is going to win a million bucks for playing *Bejeweled 2*, *Solitaire* and *Zuma*. And it'll pass unnoticed because you can't sell *Solitaire*-branded motherboards or get taken on fancy trips to write features about *Zuma's* groundbreaking new 3-D engine.

Talking business leads to talking **about** the business. I get a glimpse into a cut-throat, competitive world of scrappy kids trying to make it big, when I ask him what kind of challenges the casual developer faces. "One of the biggest challenges in casual games is also one of its greatest benefits, that is, there is a low barrier to entry to create casual games," he says, continuing, "While it could take two years and \$20 million to

build a top notch console game, in the casual space, it could take three to six months and cost anywhere between \$50,000 to \$150,000 to develop [a casual game]. This, therefore, creates an accessible market for all game developers to potentially create the next big hit, but it also creates an overcrowded environment where a game developer must compete against many others for those few promotional spots on the game portals." While the big boys battle for shelf space in a retailer near you, scrappy developers worldwide duke it out to be on top of the Games page when you're looking to kill a few minutes at the office.

Mr. Jensen then allows me to crawl inside the head of a casual developer to explore what makes a casual game. He draws it all out, showing me the basic alchemical formulas. "There are tried and true gameplay methods that work in casual games such as: Match 3 (example: *Bejeweled*), Shoot 3 (example: *Zuma*), Card Games (example: *Solitaire*), and Word Games (example: *Bookworm*)." We proceed to Casual Gaming 102 when he tells me, "The successful games over the past few years have been based on the tried and true games and then




slightly alter the game play mechanics and introduce a new theme." Instead of, say, drastically altering the model of a successful game, they take something established and give it their own twist. See also: Blizzard Entertainment.

He reels off some examples for me, "Jewel Quest was a huge hit that took *Bejeweled's* main game design and added a unique twist. *Luxor* is another game that took *Zuma's* initial design and added a new twist to make it fresh," and as I nod along, I find I know what he's talking about because I've played every single one of those games. If you shouted "ZUMA" in an angry tribal tone, I would instantly flash back to a stone frog shooting brightly colored balls at other brightly colored balls.

Looking toward the future, mainstream publishers lament a coming dark age of sequels and series because they're engaged in Cold War-scale spending contests with their cohorts. By contrast, Mr. Jensen sees a bright future ahead for his industry when I ask him to indulge me with a little forecasting, "The market is still in its rapid growth phase. Even though there are 100 million people playing these games worldwide, it will

...Mr. Jensen sees a bright future ahead for his industry...

continue to grow at a rapid pace across international markets, distribution channels, and organic growth." I find myself nodding again, when he tells me what it's going to take to succeed. "Successful developers will be the ones that come up with the original idea, execute well on game design, and are effective in gaining broad scale distribution across the global market and on different platforms." After all, you don't need a \$10 million marketing budget when you go where the titans of industry aren't. You just need really good games. 

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



Hardcore Casual

The (De)Evolution of my Gaming Career

by Joe Blancato

Some kids went to college. I went to Britannia. Then, I went to Italy. Then, I went to Iraq. Then, I went to bed.

I was one of those kids who took a year off after high school, which is to say I spent a year working crappy retail jobs, drinking like a townie and playing videogames with a vengeance. I was **bad**. I woke up to *Team Fortress Classic*. I went to work at a videogame store and played demo units with the customers. I lived and breathed gamer. If that gross Zelda cereal were still around, I'd have eaten gamer, too. It was a wonderful time to sate my gamer appetite, and I gobbled up anything offered, a glutton for all things interactive.

But, like all ages of enlightenment, my year-long gaming marathon had to end.

School came calling, and what comes with school, but girls? My gaming budget took a back seat to gas, condoms and insurance. Even if I had the cash, my time was consumed by required reading, girls and chasing girls. I still kept up with the latest gaming news, however. I even wrote extensively about games between term papers, and occasionally incorporated my hobbies into essays for school.

Somewhere along the line, though, I missed a few computer upgrades. I didn't pick up an Xbox Live! subscription. I didn't buy into the GBA until months after the SP debuted. I started referring to my Xbox as a DVD player. I quit my job at the videogame store in favor of - gasp - regular retail.

What happened to me? Had I just run out of money? Chicks and school have caused many a gaming career to suffer. Was it burnout? Maybe I'd temporarily run out of steam; time to read a book, maybe get a degree. No, this was a deeper problem. I just outgrew gaming, or at least the gaming I knew.

That's not to say I got older, or gaming is childish, though. I just moved on. It's happened to me before - drifting, really. From friends, from different sports, from collections. I just can't stay still long enough to get hooked to much of anything. I get in, I get intense for a while, and I get out. What's most interesting is, I'm still around at all.

I'm still not plugged in directly to the culture; my days of arguing on message

the Escapist

boards are long over. But I can still appreciate good entertainment. The funny thing is, it usually doesn't come in the forms hardcore gamers pay attention to. I tend to skew a bit lighter; chocolate will do when fudge is too heavy. I'd rather dabble than delve, nowadays. I've become what I used to laugh at. That's right, I'm a casual gamer. But you won't find me playing Yahoo! Chess (at least not often).

I'm my own genre. I'm the hardcore casual gamer.

I think mobile games are cool. I think 10 hours is more than enough time to invest in a game. I laugh at your \$700 video card, because I'm playing a three-year-old game you've never heard of, while you wait for a driver update to be able to play *Half-Life 2*. I buy non-collector's edition versions of games, because that oh-so-pretty art book isn't worth the extra \$30 to me. I play - hold onto your hats - **browser games** that amount to parodies of my former lifestyle. And guess what. I'm not the only one.

Believe it or not, there's a whole generation of us waking up to the reality

that chasing hardware and existing entirely in the nether of cyberspace doesn't always jive with paying rent or leading a fulfilling life. No offense to my brethren who prefer the Hardcore Life, but your numbers are one fewer. Let's be fair: You guys lead an expensive, time consuming life. You're frontiersmen, living on the edge of cyber-civilization, battling the savage hordes of overclocking-related heat issues, 64-bit processor bugs, deadbeats on BitTorrent who throttle their uploads. It's a tough life, and many of us can't live it, no matter how much we wish we could. So, we back off, and the delay between the front and us gives us enough time to get a better idea of what it is we may be buying.

You dictate worthiness, but we're the bridge between you and everyone else. We come down from the mountain with a slightly edited stone tablet, and spread a less processor-intensive version of your word. Yeah, I've played *F.E.A.R.* - on my hardcore buddy's machine. Same with *Half-Life 2*. I even subscribed to *World of Warcraft* for a bit. But my gaming is more of the Royal Sampler variety than the main course. If a game doesn't grab



**I'm my own genre.
I'm the hardcore
casual gamer.**



me high-instantly, I move on. My filtering gives up after an hour or so. The next *Final Fantasy* game might be great, but if I'm not in love after 60 minutes, I'm returning the rental.

Does this preclude me from great games? Sure, but so does spending a week reading a book, or working late, or going out to dinner. I'm willing to forsake my hobby for other things, and my "hardcore casual" filter lets me do that. But my filter isn't all bad; it opens doors, too. Beyond the time limit, it also blurs together graphics, gameplay and story into an overarching experience, rather than focusing on just one element of a game. People in my old circles have scoffed at *Kingdom of Loathing* and *Stubbs the Zombie* for any number of very specific reasons. I took them both at face value, and had a blast.

Look out, this newfound demographic is quickly becoming comfortable. While I miss my days of hardcore gaming, the opportunity to withdraw for a good book or movie or TV show is just too much to pass up. I might head back to the digital frontier someday, but as the age to start a family is rapidly approaching, the chances of me making a second journey dwindle. How many of the Rough Riders brought their family of four in a wagon behind them?

Tastes across the board are changing; the rumbling can be heard in people a few years older than me, who just can't be gamers anymore. As the first generation of children brought up on videogames reaches the point where they **have** to choose between the frontier and the family room, the industry is going to have to react, and react quickly, before our choice closes the door on our high-speed career forever. 📺

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

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 guilty-pleasure ‘casual game’ of choice?”

**John Szczepaniak,
“Obscurity Below the Radar”**

Hmm, my guilty game of choice? I really should not admit this. It's *Jeopardy* on the CD-i. Yes, the FMV one with Alex Trebec. What can I say? It's easy to pick up, and I waste too many hours playing against my brother. A fun game, or just human competitiveness taken to the extreme?

**Bonnie Ruberg,
“Games of a Fairer Sex”**

Puyo Pop. I started playing it as *Dr. Robotnic's Mean Bean Machine*, thinking, “They're just beans; they wink. What a joke. I'll play for two minutes and walk away.” I've been an addict ever since.

**Simon Abramovitch,
“Sisyphus Gaming”**

Although *Subspace* has been a staple casual go-to, I do go through phases. This month, it's been Mark Rosten's recreation of the old Commodore classic, *Bruce Lee*. Much easier now than it was when I was ten years old.

**Shannon Drake,
“Scrappy Kids Trying To Make It Big”**

Life ... you know, the board game where you get married and stuff.

**Joe Blancato,
“Hardcore Casual: The (De)Evolution
of my Gaming Career,”
Contributing Editor**

Oh man, if it weren't for a few self help books, I'd still be playing *Bookworm*. Actually, I'd still be playing if the game would recognize four-letter words. F---ers.

**JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor**

I am not a casual gamer. I play games not to have fun, but to crush my enemies, see them driven before me and

to hear the lamentations of the women. And I'm a recovering Mahjong addict. OK, maybe not recovering.

**Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor**

The way I used to play *Minesweeper* in college was in no way casual. I used annoy my roommate in the dorm with the high-speed clicking.

