the *e*scapist

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

I **might** be a little obsessed.

It's something that happens to me every now and then. Whenever a new Harry Potter book comes out, I lose sleep reading "just one more chapter." Over New Year's weekend, after waking up late on the first, I watched season four of *24*, in its entirety – 18 hours of TV show in the approximately 30 left of the holiday. I watch *History of the World Part I* and *Office Space* in rotation whenever I'm sick or feeling stressed. And of course, it happens with videogames, too.

Which brings us back to the initial statement … I might be a little obsessed. You see, a new game in a beloved franchise has taken my little gamer heart by storm. *Dragon Quest 8* and its richly-colored, cell-shaded art and giggle-inducing fight animations has taken up residence in my PlayStation 2. I put in some solid time this past weekend, going to bed twice only because I had let one of my party-mates die after **I fell asleep during a battle** and somehow managed to **keep hitting "Attack."**

And when I'm not at home playing it, I'm thinking, reading or talking about *Dragon Quest*. Ah, talking about it. If you've done any reading on our blog, you might have noticed that Jon, too, is suffering from this malady of *Dragon Quest* Obsession. He and I share office space. Just a little while ago, he and I were exchanging recipes – for the Alchemy Pot, of course. I'm now looking forward to playing again this evening, with my new information.

Some might think this is too much or silly or a waste of time. Well, I feel badly for those who've not been so excited by anything that they find my own excitement silly. It's a good thing to let go and get completely wrapped up in something other than your everyday life. It helps us take a step out of our world and into another place for a while. It lends perspective.

So now, I'm feeling pretty good about life. Is this obsession all bad? Sure, if I were not here at work, writing this, helping get *The Escapist* out on time, we might have a problem. But, I am here, anticipating my next round with Yangus, Jessica and Angelo. Anticipation is an amazing state of being when it's for a positive event. It's **part of the fun**, not something to be overlooked or "gotten through."

So, my advice? Savor the anticipation and everything in moderation – including moderation.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: [In regard to Jason Smith's "The Cost of Gaming"] While I'm in agreement with the overall thesis, I have to take issue with the last two points. Ridding the industry of software obsolescence and creating a universal console would certainly bring down costs, but in converting the industry into a more typical media-media player paradigm, you're neglecting the unique relationship that this particular type of media has with its player.

Major cinematic innovation is only rarely defined by the technological progress that precedes it. DVD is relatively new, and while it adds some novel new features, the essential experience is the same as it was in 1930; you're still probably going to sit in front of a screen for one and a half to two hours, and watch whatever flickers by. Games have a more complex relationship to its media

technology – most games would have been inconceivable five years prior to their release date – and many innovations in game can take place only because the hardware only suddenly became available. Software obsolescence is then a necessary evil (though backward compatibility can mitigate this), and the idea of a universal console a la 3D0 becomes a notion that would put stranglehold on much innovation within the industry.
Jeremy Cohen

To the Editor: I Read the article in your latest issue "Mainstream Shopping Mainstream Gaming" and I completely agree with it. I feel that the original gamers are being pushed out of the way by the mall-rat, Abercrombie and Fitch generation.

But the author forgot one major problem in the gaming culture; that is the level of discrimination within the culture. I, myself, am a classic gamer. I love the old DOS adventures like *Monkey Island* and *King's Quest*, but the newer FPS-type gamers do not understand the true beauty that is a classic game. If we want the culture to be revived we must come together as a group and accept the fact that we are all gamers. Period.
John

To the Editor: I don't typically write to sites because I don't feel the mail actually gets read, but I had to tell you how pleased I was to read your magazine whether you read this email or not. Each article in the past two issues has focused on something I enjoyed reading and I read every word. I don't need to tell you how rare that is in the online world (I am sure you already know). "Trust Me" by Mark Wallace was a fantastic read and spoke about my favorite new/old game. I finally have a site I can forward friends to that reflects how I think about the gaming world without providing a disclaimer about stupid marketing based articles.
Mike

To the Editor: I feel inclined to agree with what Eva wrote in your letters section last issue. While I love anecdotes and editorials I found "Girlz don't exist on teh Interweb" equally trite, especially compared with "Confessions of a GameStop Girl" in the same issue. Both were editorial in nature, but while "Girlz" was a one sided opinion piece, "Confessions" was objectively reported

and introspective, and I'd love to read more of the same.

More annoying to a Life Sciences student like myself was Chris Crawford's title article in the same issue. I'd go as far as to say all Chris's assertions are either misleading or just plain false, and his irksome, demeaning writing style has hung on my mind for some time. In fact, I almost wrote a series of boring correctional letters no-one would ever read.

But should I really have to? You as editor are responsible for making sure that facts are backed up by research, and for a scientific piece that does not mean "Why is sex fun?" It means at the very least a book by someone with a PHD in biology, like Richard Dawkins, and preferably a scientific paper from a citation source like PubMed. As a final word of advice to make your life easier, remember this as a general rule; no-one did anything because our cavemen ancestors used to. Evolutionary behavior goes much farther back than that, and the cavemen you're thinking of weren't our ancestors anyway.
Doug Inman

To the Editor: This is in reference to the letter from Eva in issue 26, and although I'm new to *The Escapist* I wanted to comment on her take on the article by Whitney Butts "OMG Girlz Don't Exist on teh Intarweb!!!!1"

I'm a 33 year old female who has been gaming since I was 13. I got hooked on *D&D* about the same time as *Tetris* so I was thrilled when the MMOGs came out in force. I met a nice guy, proceeded to get him addicted to videogames so he wouldn't complain about my own addiction *evil grin* and then got married. My husband went to get my Christmas present last year - a 23" monitor. When he told the salesguy it was for his videogame addicted wife, the poor guy totally freaked. He then asked my somewhat amused husband what was the best way to find a gamer girl. My husband's response was to tell the guy to look for a girl who has multi-colored hair.

I'm currently addicted to *FFXI* and have been playing that game for two years and I can say it's finally getting good because a lot of the idiots (OK, a few of the good people too) have moved over to *WoW*.

First, Eva, sorry but I have had exactly the same experiences that Whitney has had, in fact just last night. Honestly I am extremely tired of explaining to the **young** guys on the game that girls do play games. Yes, I'm the tank and will save your 13 year old butt because I know how to hold hate. No, I won't send you a pic, or tell you where my picture is on *FFXI* players and really I don't care if you believe me because I don't need you to justify my existence or give me permission as a female to play.

But, I find the mature guys don't have an issue with me, so yes, I agree, Eva, it does totally depend on who you are hanging out with. The Linkshell (aka Clan, Guild) that I hang out with is mostly older people (above 18), a mix of males and a few females. Sure there is fun banter and even some flirting going back and forth, and the occasional "omg please don't log cuz we will all turn into barbarians when the girls leave."

The problem, though, with these MMOGs is you need to play with other people. My other gamer girlfriends have gone onto games that don't require as much time associating with the rabble, or they won't play online at all. When they do go online they play with their husbands/boyfriends, only, so they can be shielded from the aforementioned idiots.

What is the solution you may ask? Girls keep playing, keep telling the idiots that they are in fact idiots, keep kicking their butts, keep being beautiful, sexy and smart and most importantly, have fun!
Samantha Jane

Despite All Our Games

by Shannon Drake

Put a rat in a cage. Give him a food pellet every time he presses a lever. Soon, he will be pressing the lever more and more. Wire an electrode to a rat's pleasure center and give him a zap of happy every time he pushes the lever, he'll keep pressing the lever until he collapses. Even rats can OD. Despite thousands of years of evolution and hundreds of years of philosophical maunderings, B.F. Skinner's work says human beings are simple organisms that operate on the same basic principle: Administer a pleasurable stimulus as reinforcement for a behavior when it is performed, and that behavior will occur more and more often.

Games operate on the same way: Stimulate the pleasure center and reinforce the behavior. Though, in this case, it's more "keep playing" and less "here is a food pellet that may enable your survival." MMOGs are the icons of this school of design, relying on years of obsessive players pressing the lever to increase numbers in a database, while paying $14.95 a month for the honor. Give the rat a jolt of pure pleasure every 20 lever presses, and eventually he'll press the lever 20 more times for another jolt. It's called a reinforcement schedule. Rats might call it "grinding for the happy." Give a gamer a jolt of pure pleasure - be it "**ding**!" or a cool loot drop - at certain intervals and he'll spend three years chasing the big **six-oh** for that final shock of pleasure.

Operant conditioning works long after the pleasurable stimulus is removed, and though the behavior may decrease, it is devilishly hard to drive into extinction. Ever wonder why that masochistic friend is playing *Star Wars Galaxies* long after he stopped having fun? It's because science is more powerful than he is.

Despite all our games, we're still just rats in a cage, mashing levers and taking pellets or mashing the space bar and gaining levels. On its own, this isn't particularly harmful, but some grow to enjoy the pleasure surge of accomplishment more than they enjoy anything else. Studies have shown, if every press of the lever gives the rat a jolt of pleasure, he'll keep mashing the lever until he's completely exhausted. Some gamers get caught in a Skinner box of their own design, and keep leaping on the lever until their only friends have guild tags after their name and the whole house smells funny. Games are addictive for the same reason anything pleasurable is addictive: Our brains give us little pats of wonderful chemicals when we do enjoyable things. Sometimes the wiring wins.

Games also pack a more powerful punch: escapism, as in negative reinforcement, the removal of aversive or unpleasant stimuli. The outside world itself can be an aversive and unpleasant place, especially compared with the gaming world. Games offer a feeling of **power** that's just about unmatched in the entertainment world. I can command minions,

Sometimes the wiring wins.

dispatch gods, meet Sephiroth in his creepy evolved firm and pummel him into oblivion. In the real world, I get winded trying to run a mile. Gaming can be a tag-team superslam on the psyche, offering a wide-open world full of positive reinforcements with none of the pain of the real world. I might toil away in the game store under a guy who got promoted because he knows the boss, but by Grabthar's hammer, I have avenged Aeris and that's got to count for something.

The chemicals in your brain reward you for pleasurable activity. The thought processes you actually control whisper seductive siren songs about a world where you're judged entirely by your skills and the number over your head, rather than arbitrary distinctions of looks, race, class or creed. It's about a perfect world, one better than our own, where that pleasure-lever is mashed down all the time and your brain never comes down and never has to cope with a world of bills and physical aches and pains.

The quest for utopia, the search for that mystical Shambhala where life is perfect, has plagued mankind since the dawn of storytelling, and still plagues gamers. The next sequel will be ten times better.

The next expansion will solve all our current problems and finally make the game perfect. The next patch will fix all the bugs, pay all the bills and give me new reasons to mash the lever. Be it biopsychology or a lost city in the Himalayas, utopia is a powerful thing. It's no wonder some get pulled in too deep. ▄ COMMENTS

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.

...by Grabthar's hammer, I have avenged Aeris and that's got to count for something.

3days in Arcadia

by Tom Rhodes

I woke up with a jolt, my hand resting on an empty bag of generic cheese curls, my fingers still stained orange from eating them earlier. How long had I been out?

I turned my head and faced the red, glowing eyes of the digital clock sitting next to me, dutifully blinking away the hours. It was 3:00 a.m., time to wake up. As I turned my head the other direction, I found myself facing a lonely stretch of rainforest on a mysterious island, drifting in an ocean no one had ever seen before. And, oddly enough, I had breasts.

This was **The Longest Journey**, a game I had first come to know the year prior. It remains my favorite game, and I love to pop it back in the CD tray for another adventure in a futuristic land now and again. But, months ago, I made a decision to completely integrate myself into the game world; playing the entire thing through; sleeping when April, the heroine of the game, slept; eating when she ate; and living the adventure side-by-side, as I guided her through the cities, forests and landscapes of the surreal world I had been through many times before.

I rubbed at my eyes, slid off the couch and made my body erect ... sort of. I hobbled to the bathroom, my mind flashing back to the two-liter bottle of grape soda I downed prior to drifting off to sleep. As I switched on the light, my eyes shut and the world was filled with reddish-white tones passing through my eyelids. I closed the door, thinking to myself that being April Ryan was a lot of work.

***

This was new territory for me. I haven't been an avid gamer since I put my Super Nintendo in a cupboard back in the late '90s. Gaming progressively became more and more expensive and flashier, and lost something of the magic it had when I was guiding a pixelated Mario through a dark castle, carefully jumping, dodging and moving. (**Why can't that damn lava flow just move out of my way! Why? WHY?**)

I lost interest, which was kind of a shame, considering my childhood was littered with videogames and gaming systems and *Nintendo Power* and my obsession with Link and his adventures. As I grew, the flash-bang of next-gen systems started to wear at me, and it didn't seem worth the trouble (or expense).

Then, purely by happenstance, I heard of a new adventure game called *The Longest Journey*. Intrigued, and having been a big fan of the LucasArts adventure games, I ordered it. I started to bask myself in it before it even arrived stateside.

I was blown away. Never before had I so been immersed in an experience. Oh, sure, I cared about Guybrush Threepwood, Sam and Max, and Manny Calavera, but with April Ryan, it was more. She seemed real to me, as if one day I might shake her hand, begging her to regale me with her tales of excitement and adventure.

And, no, this is not something that makes me feel ashamed or embarrassed. After all, how many times have people said that they felt so connected to a character up on the big screen? Or, even more so, on the small one? One look at a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fan board reveals the true meaning of the word "obsession."

I suppose, then, this game I was playing is where one of my own fixations originated. As much as I'd like to step into the world of a film for a few days, I can't. The narrative is lockstep and never strays. With games, however, it's different. Linear or otherwise, they envelope you in them because you **are** them, and they are a part of you as well. They're true escapism.

Gaming progressively became more and more expensive and flashier, and lost something of the magic it had.

Obsession manifests itself in very strange ways.

After washing my hands and cracking my back, making a noise that can only mean bad things for me later, I decided to take a breather from the strenuous task of saving the world and see what was on television, and maybe fix myself a sandwich. A hero's gotta eat, right?

The first thing to flicker onto the dark glass was CNN. They were re-running a story from earlier in the day. It was about violence in gaming, and its effect on children. A stock interview clip appeared, revealing a gray-haired man, talking with Matt Lauer about the D.C.-area sniper, opining that the then-unidentified person was a videogamer, who trained videogames to learn how to kill.

I frowned.

"Sure," I commented to the empty house. "I mean, I grew up with *Super Mario Bros.*, and one day, out of the blue, I just started jumping up and down on people's heads, waiting for coins to pop out their ass."

I was probably being unfair. After all, the aging gentleman seemed to be dedicated to this idea: **If only** videogames with such content were placed under lock and key, the world would be all sunshine and rainbows. Problems with family, with school, with feeling isolated, with thoughts of revenge fantasies – none of it mattered. Videogames, they were the real culprits.

Yes, obsession manifests itself in very strange ways.

More recently, Hillary Clinton, no doubt gearing up to be the first party-nominated female presidential candidate, decided to attach herself to videogame violence as her latest *cause célèbre*.

She said she was drafting legislation that would impose a $5,000 penalty on retailers who sell adult-rated videogames to underage children. She also, skirting the idea that a non-governmental body rates videogames, asked the Federal Trade Commission to see whether the rating of the game that garnered her ire – *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* – should be changed from "M" (Mature 17+) to the mostly pornographic "AO" (Adults Only).

A few other states are gearing up to pass legislation like hers. Some already have,

though none has stood through federal courts.

There is a bit of a theory in regard to history, and how things progress. They seem to work like pendulums. An issue boils over – the pendulum swings down – and becomes center focus; and then, public interest wanes and it is forgotten – the pendulum swings up.

In the late 1940's, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (more famously known as the House Un-American Activities Committee, or HUAC) led a witch hunt to root out communists in the entertainment industry, eventually leading to the infamous blacklist of anywhere between 300 and 500 people.

Then the pendulum swung up, and there was no big entertainment industry controversy for a while. Then came the late '60s and '70s, arguably one of film's best eras in its short history. Violence was explicit and splashed across the screen in such master works as *Scarface*,

A Clockwork Orange and *Taxi Driver*. Would these films adversely affect the youth of America? Or the spirit and soul of the country as a whole? Shouldn't we do something?

But that hysteria, too, passed.

So here we are, 40 years later, and a new focus has emerged: videogames. No longer a fun, if distracting, form of entertainment, they are now violent trainers for future Columbine shooters and snipers and suicides. There's even discussions as to whether they deserve the full First Amendment protections we ascribe to books, films and music. The pendulum has again reached the nadir of its eternal rhythm.

I settled back in the black, wheeled desk chair in front of my computer and prepared myself to explore the mysterious island I had washed up on. I used a flute from my inventory to call for my friend, Crow, a talking bird that I had befriended the previous night.

Over the next several hours I met forest nymphs, helped reunite a giant with his crustaceous friends, and joined together two races that were separated by time, evolution and war.

It's a feeling of pride, having accomplished all that, and in record time. While, in my heart of hearts, I know this is all just a strange fantasy world, I feel comforted by it. I wished so much that I could step onto the mountaintop where the flying Alatien live, or troll around the future-city of Newport, or even just take a breather in the cozy confines of the Fringe Café.

Alas, sitting wearing a stained t-shirt and my boxers in front of a glowing monitor in the middle of the night making jokes about having breasts is about as close as I'm going to get.

I stretched and stood up, watching as April passed out on the floor of the ship belonging to the cryptic Dark People. Come to think of it, I hadn't really slept

all that long, and the couch looked so very comfortable, and I was trying to stay lockstep with April.

Suffice to say, my mind was swimming in the waters of the Arcadian coast within minutes.

Reflecting upon my excursion into the world of Stark, Arcadia, magic, the future, dragons and monsters, I can't help but think that videogames – the best videogames – combine some of the greatest elements from the plethora of art around us. They absorb an engaging visual storyline from the world of film, a feeling of connection with the main character as in a good book, and music that touches in all the right places.

So, it made me wonder how anyone couldn't consider these works of art. If Al Pacino can tell you to say hello to his "little friend," why can't you crash into pedestrians in a world of little to no consequence to our own? After all, art isn't all about beauty. Oftentimes, it's a reflection of us. I play *The Longest Journey* because I long for a sense of adventure. Others, teenagers perhaps, drop themselves into the world of *Grand Theft Auto* because they crave some of the old

ultraviolence. (I mean, have you actually ever worked at a fast-food restaurant? Trust me, you'd want to kill people, too.) And Mario? Well, he's just a fun guy.

A more important question to ask than, "Is this art?" is, "If art can accomplish all this, does it cease to be art, and become something greater than its component parts?"

It was the next day, and I was a champion. Truly, the hero of both worlds. Amazing what a good night's rest and a compulsive affection for 3-D 20-somethings will do for you.

As the game closed, an old woman, gently rocking back and forth in her chair, talked of days gone by. I couldn't help but think to myself that many would consider my brief experiment a waste of time. Let them think what they want. I got to affect the fate of two worlds, save countless billions and make friends with a bird, all in the space of a weekend.

How often does a person get to say that?
COMMENTS

Tom Rhodes is a writer and filmmaker currently living in Ohio. He can be reached through Tom.Rhod@gmail.com

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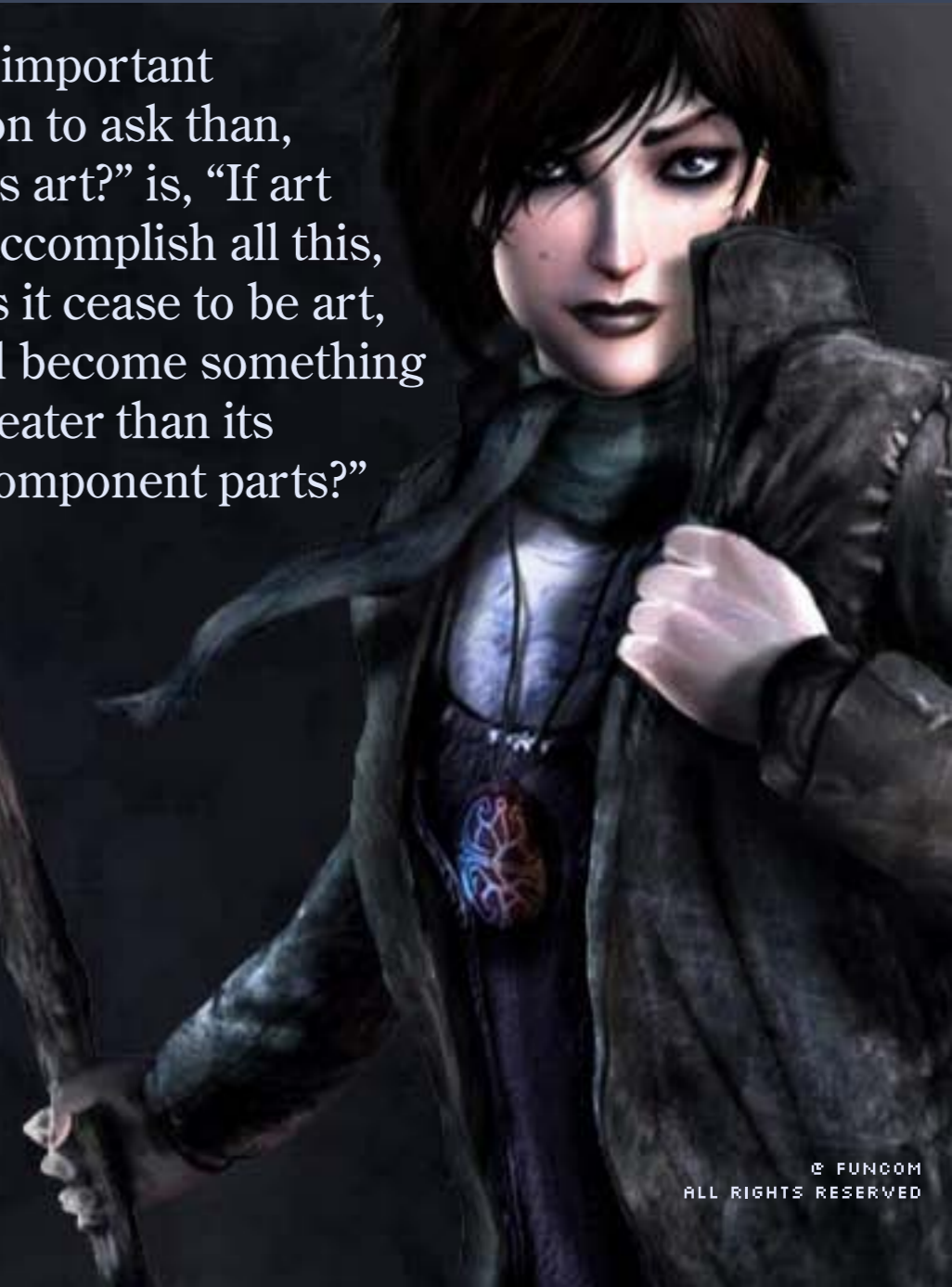
A Junkie in the Desert

by Laura Genender

Ladies and gentlemen, readers and fellow writers: I have an admission to make. I am a recovering *A Tale in the Desert* (*ATITD*) addict. My addiction took many weeks to break — weeks of cold night sweats and evenings of nail biting.

And you think I'm being dramatic.

I first realized my problem in the winter of 2004. My character was one of the leading researchers on botany and the crossbreeding of flowers. We were finally reaching some groundbreaking insights and new, well-bred flower bulbs were in greater demand than ever. I found myself setting an alarm to wake myself up every two hours, so I could get online to fertilize my prized garden.

This behavior went on for two or three weeks. In a blurry haze of disrupted sleep, I clicked hundreds of flowers, and during the day I would mass-produce fertilizer at the alchemy bench. My Excel chart of flowers grew to 363 lines of color-coded information, recording flower bloodlines and appearances, and plans for the future.

I stopped **playing** *ATITD*. I logged in only to tend my garden, and logged off as soon as I was finished. The game was no longer a game to me; it was a chore, like doing my laundry or washing dishes. I had a brief revival in the form of the Contest of Seven event, but in the end, my 48-hour quest for first place ended in more burnout (and a spiffy private island). My die had been cast; it was time to quit.

My story is not a strange one to Egypt. In *Tale 1*, 90% of players who quit did so because of burnout, while the other 10% either found the game too easy, or quit for other reasons.

Tale 1 ran for 18 months, during which about 2 million man-hours were played by between 1,150 and 2,100 accounts. *Tale 2* was supposed to last less than one year, but has been running for 16 months so far, with 1.78 million man-hours played over a range of 1,230 and 2,500 accounts, and is not yet near the end. The extension of the game is somewhat frustrating to a lot of players; they were expecting a faster-paced game, and were worried that they'd not have time to research every nook and cranny. Instead, they are suffering the opposite.

Developers Andrew Tepper and Josh M. Yelon have always played an unending balancing act between overwhelming the populace and underestimating it. Technologies that should have taken weeks to unlock have been researched within days. Part of this is also due to the amazingly cooperative community of *ATITD*; the game's secrets were attacked not by many separate, competing brains, but by a network of intelligent gamers working together. Players set up one of the most informative and helpful fansites on the web, a Wiki maintained in four languages to freely share research, maps and trade information.

Because players were so adept at working together, developers had to up the ante to face the collective public. New research and construction projects were aimed at guilds and communities, requiring large masses of time, resources and manpower. Of course, the stubborn solo community of *ATITD* would have nothing of it. Soloers conquered Tests made for 49 people, and conquered construction projects that would make guilds shudder. And then, they burned out.

The non-solo community didn't remain unscathed, either. Most players fell prey to one of two scenarios: They either thought they were required to produce everything they needed themselves, instead of trading for it or asking for help, or overzealously pursued one project until it became a chore.

Chichis, a pseudo-celebrity of the *ATITD* community who first got into the game in April of 2003, was a college student

> Technologies that should have taken weeks to unlock have been researched within days.

with plenty of time to blow, and immediately entered the hardcore mainstream. "I spent time socializing, brainstorming, and just plain, mindless making stuff." The majority of his time, however, was dedicated to either the Leadership discipline or research.

"I did a lot of research into alchemy in the first Telling, as well as flowers. In the second Telling, I did a lot of research into cooking, and I literally wrote the guide on mining." As Chichis outpaced technology and ran out of things to research, he turned to the pursuit of Leadership. "I realized a few things [about Leadership]. First, that I enjoyed

it a lot more than most other things, and second that I was able to succeed in the pursuit. Leadership isn't a discipline where success is guaranteed, unlike Worship or Architecture." In *Tale 2*, Chichis passed one of the most competitive tests in the game, the Test of the Demipharaoh.

Chichis was also the leader of the House of BES, a prestigious mid-sized guild. "Having a guild made the game more interesting and kept me playing in times I might have quit... Being part of a group that works together to succeed is fun. Being alone and aimless is much less fun. Being part of a guild helped [me] get through the times when the game was lacking." Chichis ended up quitting due to boredom, not burnout; he felt that the game was moving at too slow a

pace, and he was running out of things to do.

Lead developer Andrew Tepper agrees with Chichis that community makes all the difference. "In an MMO[G], you tend to intersperse playing with socializing. I even do this — I spend lots of time coding, and then take breaks [for] socializing, running events, chatting with players. Playing can be an intense activity, and socializing a relaxing one, so you can self-adjust the pace. This means it's possible to enjoy the game for longer individual sessions."

Tepper also points out there is increased activity during events, more so than when a new technology comes out. Player Dragyn, Oracle of Three in *Tale 1* (no small accomplishment) agrees with this.

Dragyn started *ATITD* about halfway through *Tale 1*, and immediately started playing as much as possible in an attempt to catch up with those who had been playing for months. Like Chichis and me, Dragyn spent a lot of time researching the open-ended technologies that weren't well understood, such as beer brewing and flower crossbreeding. Dragyn and his guildmates have bred over 1,500 flowers in *Tale 2*.

While Dragyn passed at least 29 tests in *Tale 1*, he is trying to hold himself back for *Tale 2*; "This Telling, I'm more focusing on the tests I think are fun or have good rewards, and letting other people get a chance to fill the Oracle roles." Even with this casual outlook, Dragyn was one of the first to pass the Test of the Singing Cicada!

Again, like Chichis, Dragyn did a lot of groundbreaking research for *ATITD*. He worked on Alchemy in *Tale 1*, and, in *Tale 2*, did research on mining, wood treatment, beer and gearboxes. Dragyn also writes helpful spreadsheets and 3rd party programs, which can be found on his Wiki page.

So far, Dragyn has kept himself occupied, but he's having trouble finding new things on which to focus. "It's not so much that I don't have stuff to do, but I'm running out of things I **want** to do."

He plays more when new techs come out, or during events.

Remember how I said I quit? Let me rephrase that: I took a break. Like any good addict, I eventually returned to my vice, saddling up my camel and heading back into the desert for *Tale 2.* This time around, I lasted only a few months before again moving on, though as the winter months roll around, I begin to feel homesick for the warm sands of Egypt. Maybe just one more go, for old time's sake … COMMENTS

Laura Genender is a Staff Writer for MMORPG.com, and is also an Editor for Prima Strategy Guides.

Like any good addict, I eventually returned to my vice.

the Escapist

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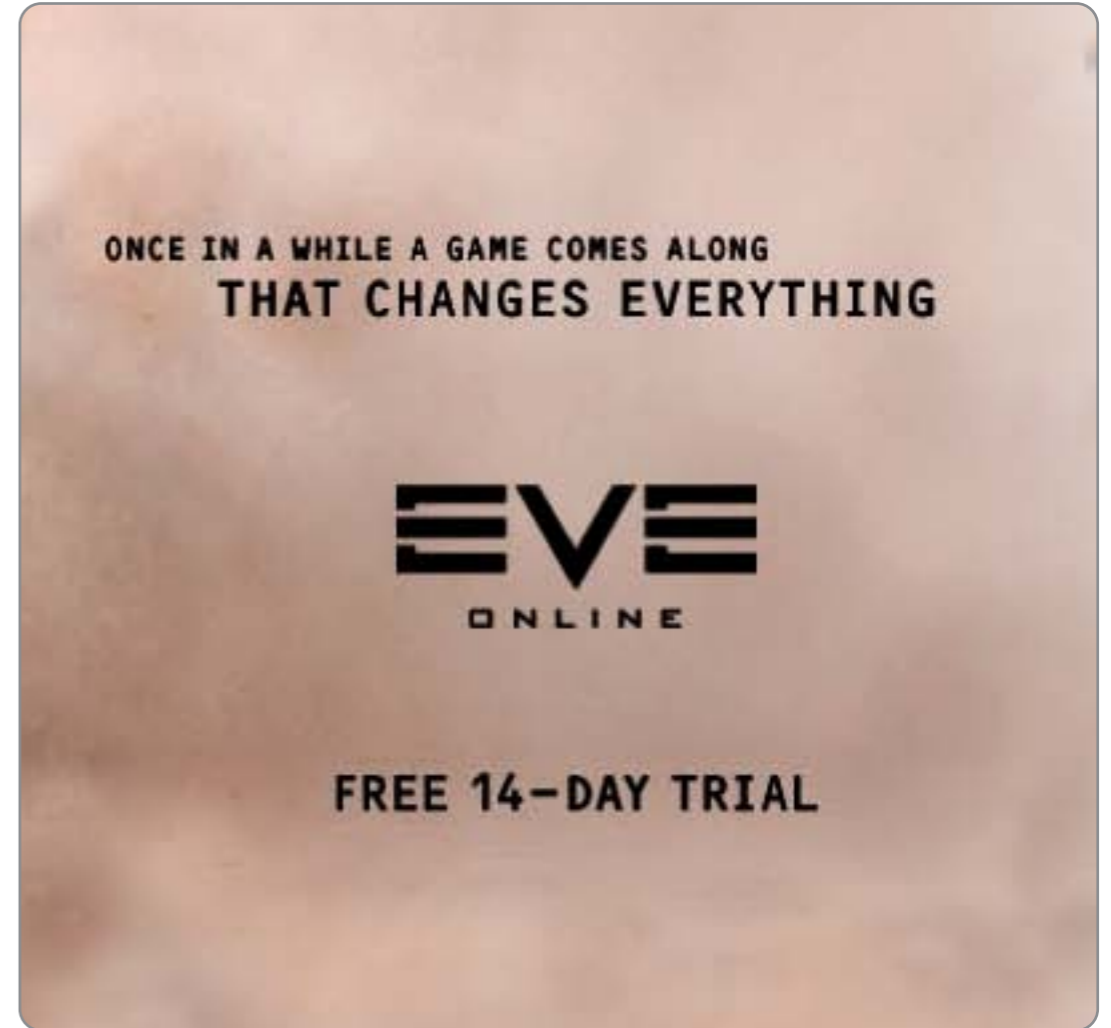
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ADDICTED TO PAIN

by Bonnie Ruberg

Bang! You've been shot in the arm, but it doesn't hurt. Bang! You've been shot in the head, but you're not really dead. You stare at your corpse. You wait to respawn. You say into your headset, "Ouch."

Videogames offer us a release for our violent urges we rarely get in day-to-day life . They let us vent by keeping the killing on the screen, and therefore out of society. Sure, some people are still uncomfortable with in-game gore, but where else can you safely, and legally, snipe innocent passers-by with a long range weapon, set off grenades that send bodies flying or simply attack your friends with an enormous sword?
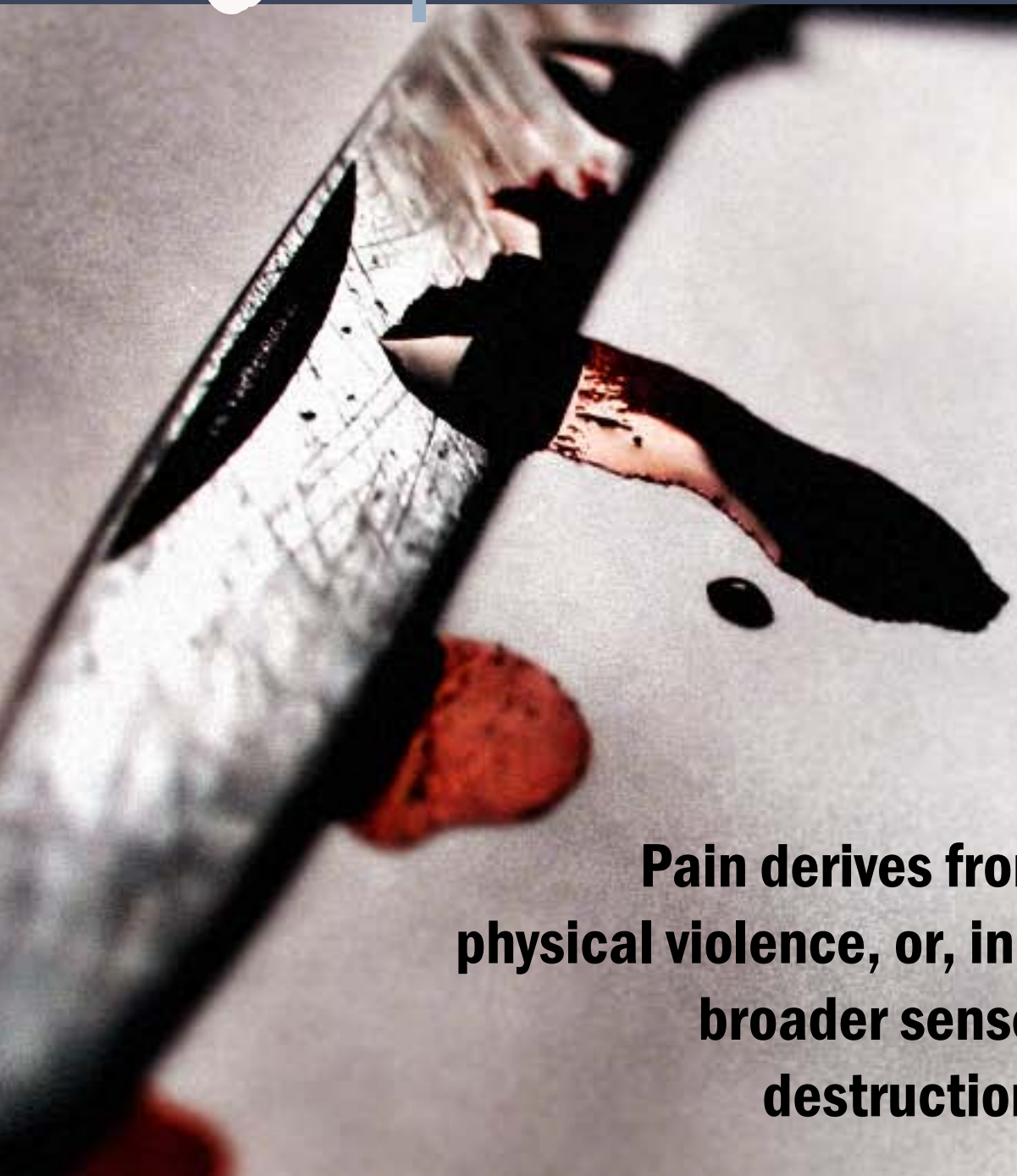
That's one of the things that makes videogames so addictive – our ability, our right even, to inflict pain. Whether videogames egg on our propensity for destruction, or just reveal our innate bloodlust, we keep coming back.

The confusing thing about in-game violence, though, is it isn't real. No one is actually being kicked, wounded, marred, or annihilated. Bullets pass through avatars, not people. Yet it satisfies our urges. We are sated by virtual blood.

But real-world violence isn't just about body counts, it's about pain. Whether you're dropping an atomic bomb or

pinching your little brother's arm, it's inevitable. Videogame characters, on the other hand, can't feel pain. A fireball to the chest, even if there's a real player behind that chest, will never hurt. So, what does it mean to inflict pain on someone who can't feel?

Some people say it's a good thing. Society keeps its acceptable violence release valve, and no one gets hurt. Where else can we turn for a (constructive) pain fix? Hunting kills animals; karate breaks bones. But, in games, all carnage is temporary, reversible with a few clicks of a button labeled "erase" or "reset."

Other people say destruction without suffering can cause harm. It encourages players to engorge their trigger-happy alter-egos, to learn about violence without ever learning about its consequences. A child, for example, picks up a videogame where shooting a hooker isn't a moral dilemma, it's a wise economic move. He doesn't have to watch her die, slowly, grotesquely. He's escaped both her pain and his own. Players lose their grasp of real-life

danger when they become accustomed to in-game immortality.

So the thinking goes. To whichever line of thought to you subscribe, the fact remains: Something's missing, here. As we translate more and more of our human experiences to virtual worlds, we are coming to see some things are universal. Games can inspire love, arousal, anger, remorse. At the same time though, we're realizing that some things are ultimately non-transferable. No game, no matter how interactive or enaging, can reach out and cause physical pain.

Yet there are many ways in which the addiction to pain persists in videogames and videogame culture. Pain derives from physical violence, or, in a broader sense, destruction. And destruction of some sort is a selling point in almost all genres – from war games to racers to simulators. Firing a bazooka is an obvious example of in-game violence, but so is smashing your vehicle into a water tower, or building a sim house with no windows or doors and lighting a fire. We love these things. They're what

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pushes a game from good to fun. They get our blood pumping.

Some people love destruction more than others, like griefers, the ultimate videogame sadists. They kill and they kill and they kill – just for a laugh, for the thrill. Of all the missionaries of in-game violence, griefers come the closest to causing actual pain. Though they may not inflict suffering the same way a bullet would, they do inflict serious inconvenience. Plus, they bring up the wholly-unexplored question of videogame masochists: people who take it, and come back again, and again, and again.

Really, though, there's no such thing as physical pain in videogames. Inflicting true pain requires two present subjects, someone to give and someone to receive . Whether or not all parties are consenting, this creates a dialectic. Physical body interacts with physical body. Pain is given; pain is felt. Without both of these elements, pain is not actually present, only its pornographic shell, the performance of pain.

In the case of videogames, though, it seems we've broken the dialectic. We

have plenty of painful intentions, plenty of real-life players casting virtual blows, but no one to receive them. We're throwing our sadistic energies out into the entropy of space.

In the real world, there's no lack of suffering. So, why do people still seek out the impossible – effectual in-game violence? Maybe they don't. Maybe they couldn't care less whether it hurts when characters bleed. Maybe videogame violence is about something different entirely. Because, when you remove physical pain from violence, you're left with one thing: power. Videogame violence is about being in control.

Research has closely linked griefing to bullying. Not that there isn't an element of simple sadism in bullying, but it more commonly symbolizes a reminder of power, an enforcement of schoolyard social class. The difference in videogame griefing is it empowers a whole new type of person, the skilled gamer. That's exactly the type of person who, previously, might have found himself the object of bully torment. So, griefing lets the underdog reclaim control.

Even the simple joy of destruction is a matter of power. Destruction is an extension of your power to influence the world around you. Whether you use that power for construction or carnage is up to you. Of course, destruction's adrenalin rush is more immediate. People, albeit game characters, can die because of you. Even the most famous case of virtual sadism was permeated not by the pleasure of physical pain, but by a love

...when you remove physical pain from violence, you're left with one thing: power.

of power. Mr. Bungle didn't force his body on others, he forced his will. He made other players do things, instead of doing things to them.

In a way, all videogames are about control, about our ability to shape life through interactivity. Perhaps that's what we love about them, what we become addicted to: our own power – our

position of unprecedented dominance. Where else can we hold such sway, can we affect the universe so profoundly? That's what makes destruction fun, our own self-importance.

Which brings us to the question of videogame masochism. Masochists, in giving up control or the right to bodily well being, don't lose power - they gain it. Often, tendencies that are considered masochistic - like cutting and anorexia – are closely tied to control, to the need to gain power over existence. Videogames allow us to do exactly that: gain power over existence, to micro-manage to the point of self-redemption. Are we, then, all videogame masochists, sacrificing our subjectivities, our personhoods as real-life people, for the power endowed to us through game? Here may be the truly addictive pain of gaming: our own.

In turning to the issue of control, however, we've forgotten physical pain. Physical pain, though it can be understood through power, can never be reduced to it; such pain necessitates a real physicality that will forever be missing from games, at least games as we know them. If there is, indeed, an unbridgeable divide between virtual and real-life existence, physical pain embodies it.

The thing we don't yet know is what we lose when we give up physical pain. Videogame violence has its place, its purposes, and its worth – and it's addictive qualities – but it can't replace actual human suffering, neither in our understanding or our own experience. Pain, on its own, is not a bad thing or a good thing, it is only a real thing, a thing ultimately unknowable beyond our bodies. Feeling it requires putting something truly destructible on the line. And as the saying goes, "No pain, no gain." ![COMMENTS](comments button)

Bonnie Ruberg is a videogame 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 Wired.com, The A. V. Club, and Gamasutra.

One Fateful Semester

by Brian Easton

If you're reading this, there is a good chance you call yourself a gamer. And if you call yourself a gamer, I think you will agree with me when I say you are an addict. Gamers are addicts. I know I am.

Why else would we routinely drop $50 on the latest iteration of games like *Madden*, *Final Fantasy* and *Unreal Tournament* - games that are, usually at their core, just like their predecessors? Why do we continue to spend upwards of $300 on the newest "next generation" console? Why is it that, like kids who shovel out the basketball court in the middle of the winter, we line up outside retailers hours, if not days, ahead of time for worldwide console releases?

Addiction is the most compelling answer to all these questions. By identifying ourselves as gamers, we espouse our addiction. It's not like we are alone in this; many other hobbies share a similar level of addiction. My father is a fly-fisherman, and if he's not outside on the stream, he's practicing his casting on the lawn or inside tying flies and building rods.

Nothing's wrong with that. Gaming can be a healthy addiction. I'm not talking about playing *Dance Dance Revolution* for a daily workout; I'm talking about playing games for a couple of hours a day, on average. We all know gaming can increase hand-eye coordination and critical thinking skills. And let's face it, gaming is an enjoyable and interactive way to relax and get away from the pressures of the everyday world.

But I'm not writing this to talk about healthy addictions; I'm here to talk about those addictions detrimental to gamers. It's the old chestnut of too much of a good thing. For a gaming addiction to be detrimental it doesn't have to result in some kind of death or disfigurement from too many long sessions of *EverQuest*; those are the obvious consequences of a serious addiction that may be the result of far greater psychological problems. The detriments of a more-than-casual gaming addiction are subtle.

When the television news van arrived, most of the crowd outside of a Target store in Monroeville, Pennsylvania scattered. Instead of waiting for an Xbox 360, they were supposed to be at work. This is a classic example of the kind of trouble that gaming, or any other minor addiction (like sports fanaticism) can get you into. When this only happens occasionally, it's usually not a problem, but when you skip work to attend the midnight launch of the PlayStation 3, Nintendo Revolution and *Halo 3*, you risk losing more than a few hours of sleep - you risk losing your job.

When I was a sophomore in college, I lived up to the classic definition of being wise and stupid at the same time. I moved into a university suite with five of my friends. We spent a large amount of our time playing everything from *Quake II* to *Street Figher* (*Alpha 3* in particular), to *Mario Party*, to the lesser known Playstation game *Poy Poy*. We even had plenty of other distractions. In particular, we spent a large amount of time with Blizzard's *Diablo* and *Starcraft: Broodwar*.

But, obviously, it wasn't all fun and games. I skipped many classes and shirked off much of my schoolwork in order to play games, or even to just watch people play them. Gaming was just more fun than *C++*, and without anyone to tell me to go to class, I didn't - at least, until my fall term grades arrived. By then, I was placed on academic probation, oaths were sworn and entry into the armed forces was considered. And I wasn't the only one with poor grades; at least two of my suitemates faired worse.

The results of my gaming addiction could have been worse. Out of the six of us who shared the suite, I was one of three

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...we all need to remember games are just that: games.

that graduated from the university. Instead of letting my gaming habit get the better of me, I took the opportunity to take stock of my situation. If I was prioritizing games above my other responsibilities, perhaps there was a reason: I was playing games instead of going to class because I had chosen the wrong major. So, I changed majors completely, dropped all but one of my computer science classes and began my studies in creative writing.

When gaming addiction starts to have a negative impact on your life, it can be an indication you are doing something you don't want to do in other areas of your life. I saw my gaming addiction as a sign that I didn't really want to write code for the rest of my life, and out of my three friends that failed to graduate, two of them have returned to school with different majors. In this way, a gaming addiction, although detrimental in the short term, can be helpful in the long term. With behavioral addictions, gaming or otherwise, it almost always seems the addiction is a symptom of a greater problem rather than the addiction itself.

I'm still a gamer. A year after that fateful semester, I purchased a Dreamcast and

have fond memories of marathon *Soul Calibur* sessions. Gaming will always be a part of me; it's who I am. In my day to day life, I don't think of it as an addiction. For the most part, it's no more of an addiction than my enthusiasm for good beer or good books. I game daily - I have an active *World of Warcraft* account - and absorb gaming news as fast as I can read it. In the back of my mind, I just remind myself there are more important things than gaming.

For most of us, we don't even notice our gaming as an addiction. There are some of us who have trouble putting the controller down. And, there are still more of us, myself included, for whom gaming is only a problem when we allow it to be. Regardless of your situation, we all need to remember games are just that: games. We need to remember there are more important things in life. So, before you start your next session, take a step back and ask yourself one question: Are you doing it for the pleasure of the game, or the distaste of something else?

COMMENTS

Brian Easton is a freelance writer currently working on his first novel and maintaining a healthy gaming addiction.

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 was your longest gaming bender?"

Brian Easton,
"One Fateful Semester"
I'm tempted to say sophomore year, but that's hardly a fair answer. Most recently, it was this past summer, when I played *World of Warcraft* for pretty much a whole weekend while visiting an old college buddy. It was almost like being in school again.

Shannon Drake,
"Despite All Our Games ... "
A 72-hour run alternating *EverQuest* and *Unreal Tournament* without sleeping, punctuated only to eat, get more caffeine, and watch *Army of Darkness* twice. I stopped when the hallucinations began.

Bonnie Ruberg,
"Addicted to Pain"
The first game I ever bought for the GameCube was *Smash Bros. Melee*. I was so determined to get my money's worth of fun, I played for three days straight, with occasional stops for life's necessary bores: eating, sleeping, blinking.

Tom Rhodes,
"Three Days in Arcadia"
Mine was the three days I spent living and breathing April Ryan in *The Longest Journey*. I slept when she slept, ate when she ate, etc. Granted, cheese balls and grape soda are not quite what she had. Even so, I've never felt so close to a fictional character before, nor so hopeful that such a place exists, even if only in my dreams.

Joe Blancato,
Contributing Editor
I burned through about 48 hours in *EverQuest*, camping the elusive Ancient Cyclops in the Ocean of Tears. I finally got my "j-boots."

JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor
I once played *Star Wars Galaxies* for 84 hours without sleep. I was grinding professions in late 2003 trying to unlock my Jedi Character Slot.

Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor
Well, I have two dogs that don't really allow for marathon sessions much beyond six or seven hours at a stretch. But, most recently, I'd say *WoW* tested their patience.