the escapist

GAME CLIENT

EDITOR'S NOTE
by Julianne Greer

"It only took us 26 minutes to break it!" I said, laughing. Everyone else was laughing, too. Well, everyone except Alex.

You see, Alex had been tinkering and planning for weeks on a new idea for a tabletop game and this was its big debut to our Friday Night Gaming Group. We didn't even get past the character descriptions before we had taken something in game and made it farce.

But can you blame us? The character description included his fighting style, the Path of the Lone Serpent. Further, the description: "This martial art initially teaches beginners the "Offensive Slither Strike" and builds up to the "Standing Attack." And to make matters worse, that same character's talisman (or source of magical power) was The Hand of Glory, based upon an idea stolen from old witchcraft. But, of course, while thinking about the Lone Serpent Standing Attack, you might see where we went with it.

In talking further with Alex, I realize he didn't see it coming. He was in design mode when he made the characters. He thought serpents were powerful and quick-striking animals and they made sense as a model for a fighting style. He didn't expect us to take the martial art in any other way than just that. We expected a Friday night of fun, relaxation and laughter. That's what we made it, seeing humor in places it was not intended.

Expectation is a funny thing. It's a lens through which we view the world around us, highlighting the parts that fit our expectations, downplaying those that do not. This is ultimately at the root of the trouble between those who make games and those who play games. Expectations of developers to make the best game possible, expectations of publishers to make a profit on a game, and expectations of players to play the greatest game ever don't always match up. When expectations aren't met, people get angry and enemies are created.

This issue, "In the Hands of the Enemy," a line taken from Raph Koster's rules for creating an online world, is about just that instance when expectations aren't met, when bitterness ensues. Raph suggests that the client is in the hands of the enemy, and that developers should not trust the players. Cory Ondrejka of Linden Lab, the developers of *Second Life* has a slightly different take on this idea, as we discovered when Pat Miller spoke with him. Also in this issue, Bruce Nielson discusses different companies' policies regarding modders. And Joe Blancato speaks with Brian Green, lead developer of *Meridian 59*, who not only designed the game, but plays it. Find all these articles and more in this week's *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: Like most people, I'd like to start off by saying that I love *The Escapist*.

It's the best online mag I've ever had the pleasure of reading, and that's not just because it's the only one I've read. Well, actually it is … but it's still the best! (So cliche). What I love most about the mag is what a lot of others seem to enjoy … the perspective presented by your writers and their grasp on the gaming world as a whole. I would have to say that my favorite read thus far would be "A Fine Fantasy" by Patrick Dugan. I was able to completely relate as *Final Fantasy's II & III* (SNES) conjure up comforting holiday memories for me as well.

Reading "In Celebration of the Inner Rogue" by Mark Wallace brought back a memory of an experience I thought was worth sharing. I'm an RP'er at heart, though not a very good one at times. Actually, when I first started out I was downright awful. At one point a friend and I were discussing the issue, as we were both facing the same dilemma, and eventually came to the conclusion that our problem was one of immersion. We just weren't good at becoming someone else. The intent was there, but in the end we were just being ourselves and acting as guides to a character, rather

than adopting their personalities as our own.

That's when we came up with the idea of using an avatar as a tool to overcome. The idea was to visit forums and chat rooms centered around topics we knew nothing about and play a role based on a chosen avatar. We would start out small and play out parts of the opposite gender, different ethnicities, etc. Then, once we had made some noticeable progress, we would add another character trait unrepresentative of our true selves to the next role we would play.

I have to say that the process paid off for both of us. Because of the diversity of topics, roles, and the people w/ whom we would interact, we were for the most part able to overcome our obstacle. To be honest, even if this project hadn't been a success, I would have at the very least come out knowing that I thoroughly enjoy hazing unknowns. *grin*
-**Guy**

To the Editor: I've noticed that your articles have been getting increasingly shorter and less to the point, and some often have none, like that piece; "I like playing as a girl." The guy rambles on for about three pages about how girls are more sophisticated and they'll attract males. There is no point to this.

I think that a lot of your earlier articles have been more well-thought out. At about Issue 26, nearly one month ago, the articles began to get shorter. Before, articles might have spanned 10+ pages, such as Greg Costikyan's "Death to The Games Industry" and, more importantly, they presented concise and insightful points. Today, articles like "The Celebration of the Inner Rogue" spanned only about three pages, with very blurred points and non-important points.

The article, "The Celebration of the Inner Rogue", is outlined as follows (with a little objectivity, of course):

• It begins, tells us about how the guy congratulates himself with every character victory

• It ends, telling us about how the guy realizes the character is controlled by the guy and that he is the character and that the character is not him and how the guy adapts his character's behaviour slowly.

• Concluded with the obvious statement that he was the same character on/off line.

That's about it. Of course, without any of the **entertaining** and notably unnecessary filler.

Maybe it's since you guys let writers in on writing capabilities rather than on what personal experience they have or what type of person they are. Of course, this isn't anything that's unexpected.

Of course, with everything, except wine, the magazine's quality deteriorating over time.
-**mofomojo**

From The Lounge: [Re: "Masks in the Woods," by John Tynes] I agree wholeheartedly with the article - the problem game designers need to face is removing themselves from the formulaic frame of mind and thinking, "OK, how can I relate as the player?"

Many games **do** give you an awkward disconnect from your avatar. But when it's executed masterfully, or even if it's just well-done, the game instantly feels a thousand times better. Even games like *Animal Crossing*; it feels like **your** village, **your** house, that **you** are building up and decorating. You don't say, "he got a royal couch," you say **I** got a royal couch, and it looks good in **my** house.'

I think even the most "typical" of the

high-end MMORPGs, like *Everquest*, have room for this. I disagree that the game mechanics make the players unable to fully roleplay, though. Did *The Escapist* not have several articles about manufactured gameplay in *EVE Online*?

Indeed, one could argue that so-called "manufactured gameplay" is the **only** way to let players do what they want. That is, to create a game with a ruleset, but a - here it comes - paidia so effectively set-up that it **is** a sandbox. I mean, think about it - why can't you really roleplay in *Super Mario Brothers 3*? You can barely even move two directions. Now think about real life, where physical games are created all the time. Most of the time, these can be done "without restrictions," without adhering to some, "oh, we can't trade items," or "yeah, Earth doesn't have pencils" rule.

EVE Online had a bunch of people deciding they wanted to do something, and even though everyone else "could" theoretically do "anything" to **them** (ie, the neutral outpost in space), they didn't. Why? People underestimate trust and cooperation. These are the fundamentals of Wikipedia. Hell, these are the fundamentals of Anarchism!

Anyway - if the game isn't **too** linear, I think players can always think of something. Sometimes, it is disheartening, sitting there, all looking at each other with your 3-D models, not doing much of anything, but it gets better as time goes on. At least I think. **-Parkbench**

From The Lounge: [Re: "Quest for Glory," by John Walker] That was a brilliant experience Wizard-wise.

If I may note on an RPG convention that not many people pay attention to is that of complete strangers armed to the teeth entering a settlement. I mean, historically if a band of four warriors in full plate armor and carrying longswords and whatnot was spotted anywhere near a meek village on the countryside, the village would be evacuated way before these guys reached the village rather than the local townspeople approach them and entrust them with important quests.

This would be the modern equivalent of people wearing camouflaged uniforms and kevlar while walking into a town holding assault rifles; it would be no time before the local law enforcement approached the party to inquire as to the reason for all these equipment.

If you are anywhere near Southampton, let me know :-)
-Felipe

Balancing YOUR SECOND LIFE

by Pat Miller

Gamers aren't particularly nice people.

Don't get me wrong. In my experience, most of us tend to be reasonably well-adjusted individuals, perfectly capable of maintaining an engaging conversation or doing each other favors. Some of us are even somewhat pleasant.

Give us a game of some sort - from chess to basketball to *Pong* - and we will do whatever it takes to win. We will push ourselves harder so we can get better, of course, and this is a good thing. If we really want to win, however, we aren't afraid to do it by any means necessary, whether this means running some particularly aggressive screens on the courts or spawn camping the local newbies. I'm used to it, by now. Most seasoned gamers are. Give us gamers an inch and we'll take a mile.

But to hear Cory Ondrejka, Vice President of Product Development at Linden Lab, tell it, *Second Life* residents are nothing of the sort. Far from the immature hijinks of text-based online social spaces or the mindless level grinding of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), *Second Life* provides a virtual, communal creative space for people to play. Or work. Or relax, socialize and have an online martini mixer. Which, you know, doesn't sound so bad right now.

Unfortunately, it's time for work, not play, and so I force myself to concentrate on Mr. Ondrejka, who is in fact sitting right in front of me in a meeting room inside Linden Lab's San Francisco headquarters, and very confidently answering every question I have about their world. I never had the chance to see the notorious excesses of the dot-com offices in person, but I imagine Linden Lab's strikes a healthy compromise between creative excess and corporate austerity. The nice man who showed me around made sure to point out that there were no cubicle walls dividing one employee's desk from another - creativity flows like good feng shui around their office, I suppose. It's reassuring that some people can stay professional with an original *Street Fighter II* arcade cabinet sitting in the office rec room.

The environment suits Cory, I think, who himself looks like he came of working age in the dot-com era. He stands at just under six feet or so, and he conducts himself in a manner that belies an unabashed enthusiasm tempered by the confidence of experience. Three ear piercings (two in the left ear and one in the right) contrast sharply with ever-so-subtle hints of graying hair. It's rather fitting, somehow.

"*Second Life* is clearly not a game," Cory tells me. "There's plenty of game-like behavior and plenty of play within it, but really, just about any definition of game you find there's usually some goal component. I think it comes down to the more individual level, whether you consider real life a game." This is true. The word "**game**" evokes, at the very least, a set of formal rewards and penalties corresponding to each player's actions, whether it's getting $200 for passing go or hearing that infamous **ding** in *World of WarCraft*. *Second Life*, by all accounts, has no such structure. The average player will log on, buy some land, hang out with some friends, maybe build something neat ... and that's it. No mob camping or gold farming here.

Rather, the appeal of *Second Life* is laid out in the name; it's a second life in cyberspace. *Second Life* constantly endures comparison to the Metaverse of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash,* and with good reason; instead of providing a goal-oriented space for people who play a game *a la EverQuest*, *Second Life* is simply a place for people to do what they do in their flesh and blood lives. Some people will work, and some people will play.

But if *Second Life* is not a traditional online role-playing game, neither is it simply a glorified chat room. The real allure of *Second Life* is the design philosophy that allows users to manipulate and create objects at the level of in-game physics, with, as Cory puts it, "Smart Legos." He is quick to point out that this is no repackaged crafting system found in the average MMOG, where players can moonlight as blacksmiths and the like. "'Atomistic creation' is why *Second Life* is so flexible, and it's important to differentiate it from crafting, another signal characteristic of MMOGs. A lot of them have this idea that you earn various points and find stuff and can

combine stuff in different ways, it's sort of the tech tree approach that MMOGs and RTS [real time strategy games] have converged upon, and generally speaking, those paths are mostly pre-defined," Cory explains excitedly, "In the real world, building tends to be kind of hard, you have to work with atoms and chemistry and physics before we get anything interesting. In a virtual world, you actually *can* work with atoms. We can basically give you smart Legos to make anything. And that's why you can use the same tools to build a chair, or your house, to games, to guns - anything."

The comparison to LEGO is remarkably appropriate. Like LEGO, *Second Life*'s content creation engine allows its residents to wield incredible power over their environment, but without the trappings of a formal game to accompany it. "By [making content] well, you can create really good-looking things with really interesting behaviors, and that, in fact, have great value to other residents, which is an angle that if you want to take, you can, you don't have to. If we said, 'Okay, the game is, you must get rich,' that would be a

game. But you don't have to, and some people choose to and some people choose not to," he tells me. "A lot of people, even if they don't want to make and sell stuff, they arrive and say, 'Gee, I want a better-looking avatar,' and they buy something to make themselves look better. And what's so great about it from a user-creativity standpoint, is that you can first buy something, because you don't yet know how to make your avatar better, and then you can ask the question, which is the completely logical follow-up - 'How did you make this?'"

It doesn't stop there. "It turns out that, well, all the tools are sitting right there, and you can go to classes, and talk to the people who are good creators. It's the ultimate learning environment; people can just show you how to make things right then and there. Compared to MMORPGs, this is profoundly different than traditional crafting because you can't really go outside the lines, you know, outside the box."

By now, I get the picture. *Second Life* is different from the run-of-the-mill online game. Giving users such incredible control over the sheer physics of any

other persistent online world would result in utter chaos; I imagine Horde and Alliance conflicts not being fought by noble heroes, but instead by bored engineers who compete with each other over how many level 2,000 invincible dragons they can catapult at each other. Maybe even *self-replicating* invincible dragons. Certainly, Linden Lab can afford to give their *Second Life* residents this kind of power because there is no game to balance in the traditional sense - no Necromancers to balance against Shamans and Warriors and Warlocks and Jedi and all that.

Instead, they are taking up the task of balancing *life*, and despite the virtual nature of the world they tend, their work has very real consequences. The in-game currency, called the Linden Dollar (L$ for short) was worth about 0.0037 U.S. cents on IGE.com, at the time of this writing. "One of the things we're seeing now, in the in-world economy in the trailing 30 days, is something like eight million U.S. dollars, and the Linden contribution to that is tiny, tiny, tiny. The original need for us to prime the pump is gone," Cory tells me.

These aren't merely shiny swords dropped by big bad monsters, either; virtually every transaction that occurs in *Second Life* is related to a completely user-created object, and in 2003, Linden Lab announced that *SL* residents would have very real intellectual property rights to any of their in-game creations (with the notable exception that Linden Lab retained the rights to use any creation for testing and advertising purposes). By creating a fairly popular (*Second Life* hit over 100,000 residents in January 2005) online world with a virtual currency traded most commonly against the very real US dollar, Linden Lab has put themselves in a position closer to that of a modern state than that of merely a conventional videogame company.

Of course, the most revealing things of any state are the things that make them break down. People don't need a game as an excuse to piss off their fellow man, and even *Second Life*, with its comparatively laid-back virtual space, is not immune to this kind of behavior. I ask Cory about Linden Lab's response to the GriefSpawn (covered in an earlier issue of *The Escapist*) incident, where a

Linden Lab has put themselves in a position closer to that of a modern state than that of merely a conventional videogame company.

Unlike most real-world liberal states, Linden Lab has a higher authority to appeal to.

notorious group of individuals brought down the entire server grid by abusing a particular feature in the in-game item scripting system. "We temporarily broke something in the scripting language, and decided it was a bad idea and put it back in. It's funny, when I talk about this I have this pair of slides, where I have a cute little baby seal, and I say, 'This is the shiny new feature the griefers abused,' and the next slide is the baby seal getting clubbed, and that's, you know, nerfing the feature. You just have to make decisions as to where you're going to come down on this," Cory explains. "At Linden Lab, we decided very early on that it's more important for people to have the ability to do very interesting things, and that we will deal with the griefing however we need to, through a combination of social pressure, giving land-owners the means to protect themselves, and ultimately if we need to, law enforcement. These are the same ways you do these things in the real world."

That's right - **law enforcement.** Unlike most real-world liberal states, Linden Lab has a higher authority to appeal to - namely, the FBI. While the GriefSpawn incident was handled mostly by in-game

methods - bannings and the like - Linden Lab's response to a recent "attack" staged at the in-game holiday party of Philip Rosedale, Linden Lab's CEO, was not so forgiving, and instead of mere banning and relying on "social pressure," they simply released the names - actual names from actual credit cards, that is - of those responsible for the disturbance to the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. Here, Cory pauses for a bit - he isn't familiar with this particular happening - and says to me, "In most cases, laws come down to either damage to property or person, right, and so when we're dealing with an attack, we're spending developer time that could otherwise be used to make the product better. And then there's both the fun and measurable economic loss to the residents," he continues. "The way we deal with it is, if it looks like what people are doing would be breaking the law under any other context, there's no reason why it shouldn't be in *Second Life*."

But not every case of social breakdown stems from mischievous behavior. We begin to discuss a fairly high-profile *Second Life* event from a few years ago, where a group of concerned *SL* residents

banded together to protest Linden Lab's in-game taxation system by going to the island where new residents enter the world and setting their avatars on fire. Cory elaborates for me on some of the nuances of Linden's unique position as both company and governing body: "What's interesting is actually differentiating things like tax protests from an attack on the grid. There was tremendous pushback from the resident community about [the taxation system], panic, everybody saying they were going to leave. We spent hours and days in-world just having ad-hoc meetings with residents and talking about what this meant and where it was going. If you look historically at Linden Lab's involvement with protests, we've always gone in and talked to protesters and really tried to understand what their point is, because it would be bad business not to. These are our customers, of course we want to understand their issues." Eventually, Cory tells me, the goal is to devolve the actual governing issues of *Second Life* to the in-game landowners.

Before I know it, we're nearing close to the end of the interview, and our discussion has meandered from individual marketing in *Second Life* to the structure of the economy to in-game dispute resolution to Cory's upcoming vacation cruise (courtesy of Microsoft, amusingly enough, despite the fact Linden Lab apparently doesn't really use their products). "The profound difference between *Second Life* and anywhere else is that we put all this power and control in the hands of the residents. There are plenty of game designers who have gone out and said, 'Oh, that's stupid, you gotta be crazy to do that.' Which is fine, they have the rights to their own opinions. I think that SL isn't a game, and so we get to play by a very different set of rules in [our residents'] design than [most developers] do," Cory says to me. "I certainly don't regard our residents as adversarial - if anything, they're a part of Linden Lab. Remember, this is a world that the residents are building. For the vast majority of the residents, they're building this place - why would they burn it down?" Finally,

It seems like good game designers are the ones who make the games that their players can't break.

as I stand up to stretch my legs, he spells out that perfect quote for me, that sentence or two that encapsulates the entire theme running behind our discussion, and, I suspect, the theme that keeps him so zealously employed with Linden Lab.

"When you hear other world designers talk about the confrontational enemy-relationship with their residents, it just isn't the same thing. In *Second Life*, the kind of creative energy we see out there is *Second Life*'s strength. When you look at why *Second Life* has such incredible momentum moving forward, it's because of our residents. To start with this foolish 'Well, they're the enemy' - that's just silly. I'll be the first to say that no game survives first contact with the users. But that doesn't mean it's adversarial -

games are better once players start playing them, and *Second Life* is better because of its residents."

It seems like good game designers are the ones who make the games that their players can't break. The Linden Lab team, however, don't seem to be making any games at all. Instead, they simply gave their residents the tools to control their world and let them improve it as they see fit. And somehow, amid *Second Life*'s social spaces and free-market economy and devolved governmental functions, Linden Lab and the residents of *Second Life* came up with a game where everybody wins. COMMENTS

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.

Reimagining CHALLENGE

by Patrick Dugan

I am a gamer, my brothers are gamers, some of my best friends are gamers, but no matter how much it hurts, I must speak the truth: Gamers are what's wrong with the game industry. It's gamers who are reserving the Xbox 360 months before they could hope to secure one of the pricey units, even though the game library contains nothing but graphically souped-up Xbox games (*Perfect Dark Zero* notwithstanding). It was gamers who allowed *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* to wallow in lackluster sales, despite its brilliance in ludic design, simply because its 2-D graphics were out of fashion in 1997. It's gamers who fuel EA's tyrannical grip on the industry, fattened by a stream of franchise sequels.

Any industry's business model will evolve according to market conditions, not the other way around. The game industry is the way it is because its audience has voiced its particular demands in a powerful way, keeping the status quo. Smashing that status quo, even marching on EA headquarters, isn't going to change the nature of the market's pulpy waters. If games are

going to grow up, game designers are going to have to grow the market radically, not incrementally, or abandon the "gamer" market altogether in favor of a much wider demographic. Making this market transition may require game designers to question the fundamental aspects of their craft, to the point where the term "game designer" may not be the ideal.

What do gamers want? What have game designers typically hinged upon in making their games fun? In a word: challenge.

There are many definitions of "game": Some focused on competition, others on puzzle solving, and others still on incremental progression toward an explicit goal. What all of these definitions have in common is games are structured by rules and focused on a goal. The pleasure derived from accomplishing the goal comes from the neural connections made when a player learns the game's patterns. In order to be fun, though, the process itself has to be challenging. Otherwise, a gamer might ask, "What's the point?"

the escapist

The Escapist has already observed that gamers are willing to put up with a lot of crap in order to appreciate their entertainment media. Learning curves and re-loads, hamster-wheel leveling and quick-save racketeering, no amount of suffering will stand in the way of that glorious dopamine pay-off when the challenge is finally bested. Challenge is a persnickety beast - its victory conditions have no patience for ambivalence, hesitations, shades of gray. In a game, almost winning is just as good as losing.

Watching your gaming efforts tumble to oblivion when the boss has only a sliver of health left is a jarring, frustrating experience that detracts from the flow of an otherwise artistic experience. Even *Shadow of the Colossus* and *Psychonauts*, two recent low profile favorites described as "art games," suffer from the morays of challenge. Ever take on the 8th Colossus, that gas spitting salamander thing, and get killed two stabs away from victory, just because the damn thing rolled over on you? See how much the impressionistic visuals move you, then.

In contrast to the traditionally challenging interactive fare, thoroughly *paidic* titles can be found, which eschew challenge altogether. If interactive works were living beings, these specimens would hang out in the Mos Eisley Cantina: hypertexts, "art games," non-games, political activism games – an intriguingly perverse menagerie roaming free on the internet.

Staurt Moulthrop's seminal hypertext, *Hegirascope*, is simply a set of over 200 web pages with clever, satirical text written on them, with each page being linked to four others. *Hegirascope* has no explicit goal, other than the pleasure of reading. An imposition of challenge would obfuscate the craft and quality of the work as a whole.

Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* is a hacked version of the original NES classic. It removes all sprites and bit-maps, even Mario, leaving behind serenely similar clouds which float on without obstacle.

Electroplankton, the only commercial title in this list, allows players to

Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12th* is an anomaly of anomalies.

experiment with various types of plankton to generate a musical effect; its functional value lies in making it easy for people to spin good tunes. In all these examples, challenge is absent or minimized; the emphasis is on play for play's sake.

If the abovementioned examples are anomalies in the typically challenge-oriented taxonomy of games, Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12th* is an anomaly of anomalies. As the introductory text puts it, "This is not a game. You can't win and you can't lose. This is a simulation." The simulation presents a Middle-Eastern city, complete with innocents going about their daily business, but the occasional terrorist lurks about. The player is offered one verb, one recurring choice: to shoot, or not.

While there is no explicit goal, there is an implied one: Use the only verb to eliminate all terrorists. It's not so easy. The simulation is tuned to provide a challenge against this implied goal, and the insurmountable nature of this challenge implies a political message. Every time a terrorist is assassinated, an

innocent bystander will inevitably get in the way, leading mourners to become terrorists themselves. A positive-feedback loop kicks in, increasing the number of terrorists in direct relation to the player's active involvement. Though *September 12th* is a work of very low interactivity (one verb is about as low as you can go), it provides a very significant precedent.

Frasca has used challenge to make a statement outside of the system in which that challenge originated. In other words, challenge can be an artistic statement about the world at large, not just the game system.

Clearly, Frasca differs on at least one point with noted ludologist Espen Aarseth, who claimed games are, by nature, closed systems; culturally distinct entities with their own self-consistent logic. Aarseth's view is consistent with traditionally challenging games and the process of closed numerical tuning designers utilize to create and refine challenge. The result has been a sea of often entertaining, sometimes inspiring play experiences

that, when the final boss finally crumbles, leave no lasting impression other than, "Hey, it's only a game."

Maybe we can do better. Maybe challenge can be used with social mechanics, not just abstract or physical ones. Maybe challenge can extend out of the flickering electronic box from which it's born and frame the player in ways never before considered. Maybe challenge can instigate cultural dialogues, inspire young people to better themselves, reflect light on unjust mechanisms within our society; maybe challenge can teach us something about ourselves.

But how? I'm not proposing we re-invent the wheel, it's likely the same principles which allow challenge to be created in closed, ludic systems can be effective in open, *paidic* systems, and anywhere between. In his paper, "A Preliminary Poetics for Interactive Drama and Games," Michael Mateas ascribes two features to interactive experiences in general: material and formal constraints.

Material constraints form the tools of play, what's given to the player within the closed, formal system, the "how" of accomplishing anything within the simulation. In *Tetris*, the falling blocks comprise the material constraints.

Formal constraints represent the ends of play, the rules which dictate or imply what the player should be doing, the "why" of play. In *Tetris*, the formal constraints include the torrential falling of blocks, the rule that a filled-in row removes all blocks from that row, as well as the scoring system and the speed-progression.

Mateas' paper lays out *Quake*'s formal constraints: Everything that moves will try to kill you; you should try to kill everything; you should try to move through as many levels as possible.

Based on these formal rules, the player is given an arena with crystal clear intention. Creating challenge in this arena is simply a matter of providing just enough materials to keep the player alive, but on his toes. When the formal elements, the monsters and maze-like level designs, are pitted against a player running low on plasma ammo and resorting to a final cache of shotgun
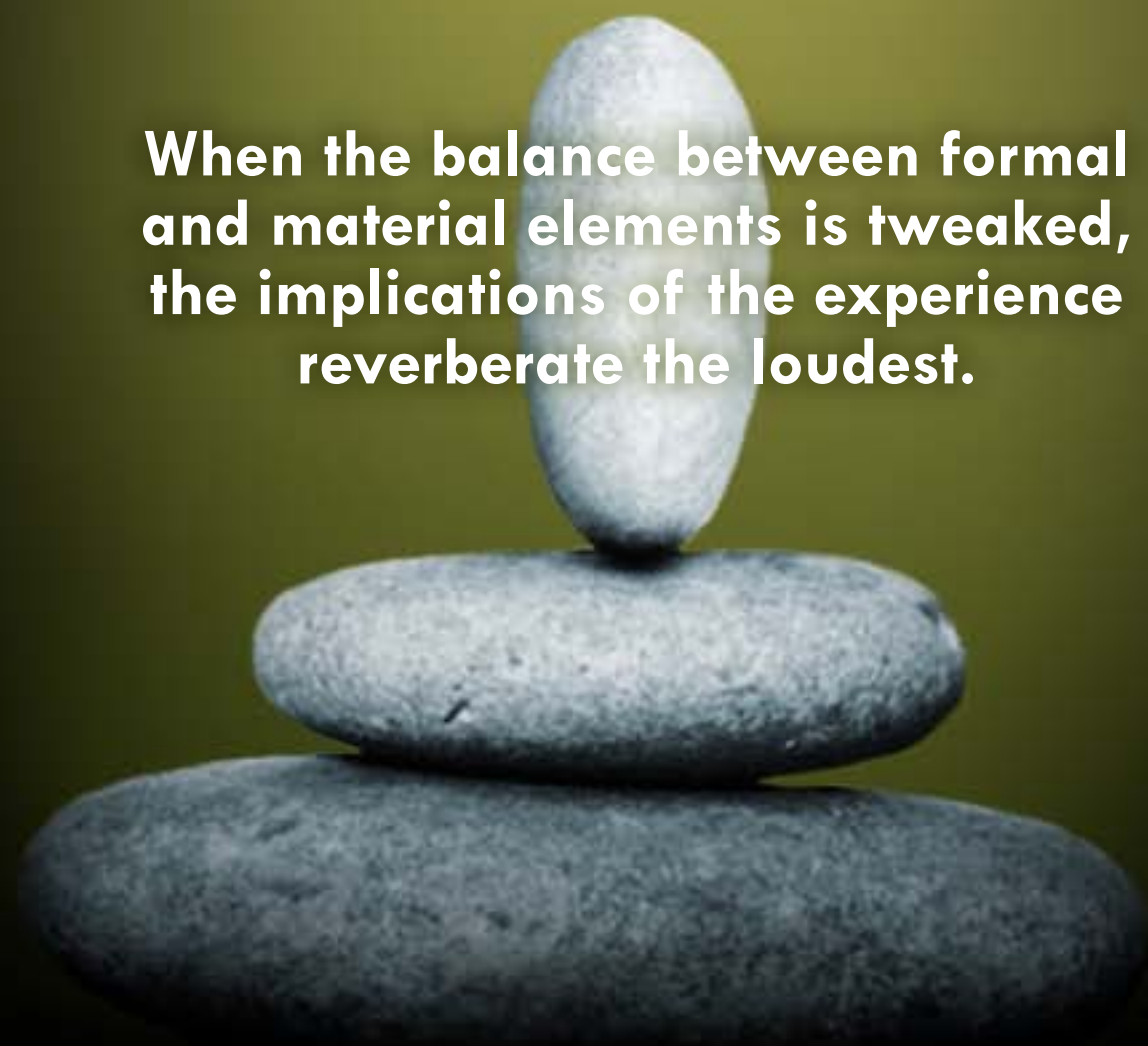
Maybe we can do better. Maybe challenge can be used with social mechanics, not just abstract or physical ones.

shells, this is when challenge is felt most palpably, when the opposing constraints put on the squeeze.

This principle of challenge, the squeeze effect, holds true for any sort of interactive experience. When the balance between formal and material elements is tweaked, the implications of the experience reverberate the loudest. People don't look back on their *Quake* play sessions and think in wonder of that time they jogged through a level, picking up the odd med-pack, thoughtlessly blasting monsters until the exit presented itself. People look back on that one deathmatch when their best friend had them pinned between an alcove and a chaingun spray, their armor quickly dwindling, and their teammate rushed in with explosive poise and gibbed the shooter with a rocket.

People remember the play sessions where confluence of supply (material constraints) and demand (formal constraints) forced them into a state of sweet, sweet flow, where they hauled their ass in gear and pulled through,

When the balance between formal and material elements is tweaked, the implications of the experience reverberate the loudest.

where their course of action seemed like it couldn't have been any other way. People remember their experiences of challenge as … stories. The best examples of this tend to occur when the player feels some sort of social alignment with the parties involved, whether they're other players or well-constructed NPCs. I didn't just solve some esoteric puzzle, I helped Manny Calavera find final peace. I didn't just micromanage the hell out of a couple dozen military buildings and five score units, I helped them destroy the Zerg Overmind once and for all. I didn't just spend 100 precious hours of my life repeatedly clicking to build higher and higher stats, I teamed up with my fellow Horde and participated in a glorious raid. I haven't just spent my entire life as a lump of grey meat churning more complex electrical patterns in an endless requiem of learning and adaptation, I interacted with **people**.

We need to stop thinking of challenges as obstacles to be mastered, and start thinking of challenges as realities to negotiate. Social dynamics are the toys

to charm society. Social challenge is what we'll call the feeling when we push through the climax of an interactive storyworld and look back on the very personal effect we had on our respective stories. The excluding factor in other forms of challenge is they force people to adapt to the system on its own terms, something many can't do, even if they had interest. But social maneuvering and choosing between socially created values and bonds are what people have been adapting to their entire lives. Release a socially challenging game and you've got a potential audience of hundreds of millions of people. You can't say the same thing for an RTS.

Social challenge seems difficult to imagine, much less implement, due to the finely granulated and fuzzy nature of social interaction. The raw tools are available: Context-specific pattern recognition AI, personality models, probability theory – there are many technical approaches to social challenge. Designing social challenges will typically involve importing or modeling a social mechanism from real life, whether it's a particular complex relationship, a family

feud, a political revolution, the alienating halls of modern middle-schools – translating a culture to rules is essential to support the core *paidia*. Material constraints will consist of how characters express their personalities; formal constraints will consist of their motivations.

Since most people are able to handle social challenge well before they ever sit down to play, the pacing architecture can change from building up to higher and higher levels of difficulty, and toward building up major thematic choices. The public wants these sorts of choices presented to them, even if they don't know it. There is a buzzing transparent need beneath the surface of our culture, a desire to play with vital issues film and literature cannot bend to approach. Society needs to be challenged if the culture at large, perhaps humanity, is going to adapt and prosper in this insane world of accelerating change. If game designers take advantage of this brave new territory, in 20 years, pundits might just look at videogames as the cultural

force that kept us all sane. Gamers aren't going to convert the mainstream to gaming – the needs of the wider market will convert gaming to the mainstream. **COMMENTS**

Patrick Dugan is a ludosophist. He runs King Lud IC, a blog regarding game design theory, memetics and interactive storytelling. He looks foward to prototyping with Chris Crawford's Storytron, and to pioneering socially-oriented narrative challenge.
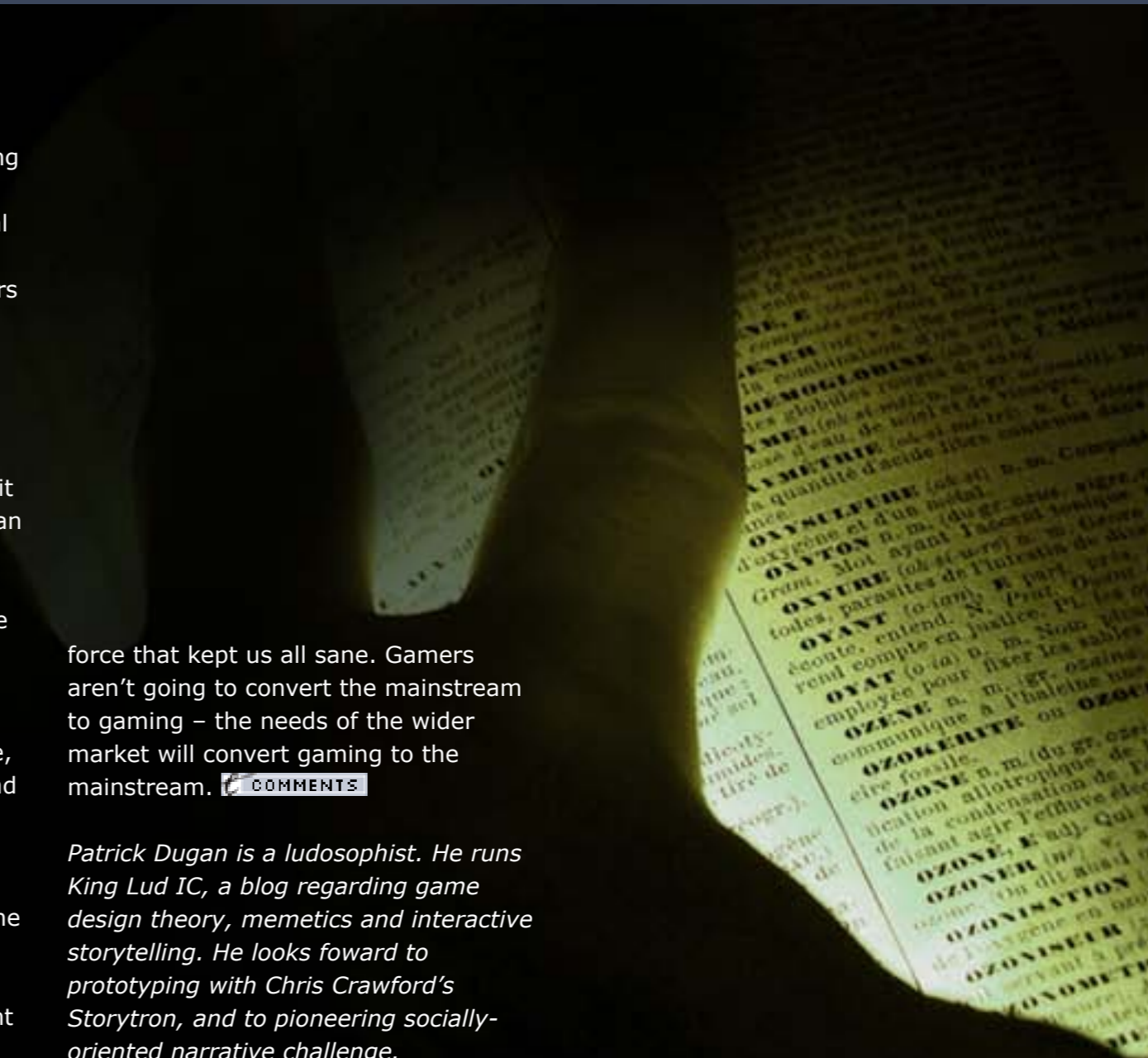
show me the MONEY

by Bruce Nielson

Are your avid fans your best fans? In the world of movies, your best fans are the ones that watch your movie 15 times and bring in loads of cash. And to the best of my knowledge, avid movie fans rarely ask for ongoing changes to the movie.

One avid *Neverwinter Nights* (*NWN*) player posted a request on the BioWare board. He was concerned because when a player logs out of NWN then logs back in again, their hit points reset. This feature has become a cheat on fan-created persistent worlds. Some BioWare employees that frequent the board happened to see the post and explained it's designed that way. After all, it's not a MMOG, it's a traditional RPG.

Soon, a minor feeding frenzy began, as several other persistent world makers complained that BioWare was ignoring them. They demanded better support! One poster claimed to have sold 10 copies of the game to his friends, and he felt this entitled him to some attention.

Now, as I do the math, even if we assume this poster sold *NWN* and both of its expansion packs to all of his friends – all

at their maximum prices – it's unlikely BioWare received more than $200-400 of that money. I suspect the – count 'em – 19 patches (so far) BioWare has released for *NWN* (most of which were full of goodies that will never be used in the single player campaign) have already been more than a fair exchange for that money.

Admittedly, it is generally considered reasonable for users of development tools – and that's what *NWN* is to these avid fans – to want ongoing support, so long as they are still using the software and the company is still selling it. But let's face it; the business model of an off-the-shelf game can't handle supporting its users to the same level that Microsoft would support Visual Studio users. What we have, here, is a business model that doesn't quite fit.

For that matter, why would a company like BioWare want to make a game like *NWN*, which still requires continuous support three years later for its avid community, when they can make *Knights of the Old Republic* and sell more copies without having to worry about investing additional time and money? And don't free user-

created mods actually compete with BioWare's own expansion packs?

Jay Watamaniuk, BioWare's community manager, told me the primary reason they support their community was because BioWare was "passionate about RPGs," and they "wanted to support … fans with a [toolset as] many had asked for … "

I got a similar story from Ian "Tiberius" Frazier, the leader of Team Lazarus, who developed a remake of *Ultima 5* for *Dungeon Siege* (*DS*) by Gas Powered Games (GPG). He found GPG "spectacularly helpful," and said they were "always trying their best to provide

tech support." When asked why he thought they were supportive, Tiberius said he didn't feel it was primarily to help sales, because he doubted the popular Lazarus mod had sold more than a few hundred additional copies of *DS*. He felt GPG was altruistically motivated because he could see how excited GPG was about the mod.

Still, companies exist to make profit. There **is** something to be said about keeping around a core group of players that continue to keep your game

relevant by building mods for it three years after release. Team Lazarus' *Ultima 5* got an estimated 10,000 downloads within the first month of its release. That's 10,000 players dusting off an old game and getting excited again. Not bad for a three-year-old game. Those expensive hardcore fans have a use after all!

Watamaniuk added that giving ongoing support to the *NWN* community makes sense because it "demonstrates that when [BioWare develops] a game, [they]

also support it after it is in the hands of the gamers." He pointed to the fact that GameSpy ranks *NWN* in the top 10 games played online three years after its release. No doubt *NWN*'s ability to sell a gold, platinum and diamond edition of their game is also due in part to its long-lived community. But there must be a better way to get that community to pay for itself, and at the same time give them more of what they want.

One possible way of getting your fan community to pay for itself is to have one of them produce the next *Counter Strike* for your game. A mod so popular, it sells additional units of your game, is every developer's dream. But this is a long shot, at best, and is a gamble, not a

There is something to be said about keeping around a core group of players that continue to keep your game relevant by building mods for it three years after release.

the escapist

business plan. BioWare has addressed this issue by selling premium modules to their community. BioWare is essentially selling more to their most avid fans.

But let's go back to Microsoft and Visual Studio. Why can Microsoft afford to charge big bucks for Visual Studio and its accompanying technical support? It's because Microsoft's users can make money using their tools. Perhaps the answer to funding avid game fans starts with allowing them to make money.

Maybe we should look to Garage Games. Currently, most mod communities have an EULA that basically says making money off the mod is illegal. By comparison, Garage Games sells the Torque engine, which was originally built for *Tribes 2*, and they offer to publish the games running on the engine. By encouraging their developer and mod community to actually try to make money, they make money as well.

Admittedly, this business model has its perils. Dealing with sticky copyright, licensing and joint-ownership issues presents a problem. And frankly, most

game companies are just not interested joining the "indie publishing" business. A wise man once told me, "You can make money selling shoes, but that doesn't mean all companies should sell shoes." Perhaps the best economic model is still yet to be discovered.

There is no doubt that longer shelf-life is a need for the industry. Having three-year-old games that still sell is definitely a start. I'm not the only one who thinks user-created content may be the solution, but only a solid business/economic model will carry that trend. If it's true that "money makes the world go 'round," the company with the best economic model will win the day, both by making the most money and by having the happiest community by giving them the best possible support. **COMMENTS**

Bruce Nielson is the designer of The Light Reborn, a critically acclaimed and popular module series for Neverwinter Nights, and runs The Online Roleplayer, a fan site. He was also the producer for the Great Battles of History series created by Erudite Software and Interactive Magic.

Most game companies are just not interested joining the "indie publishing" business.

Fraternizing
with the
Enemy

by Joe Blancato
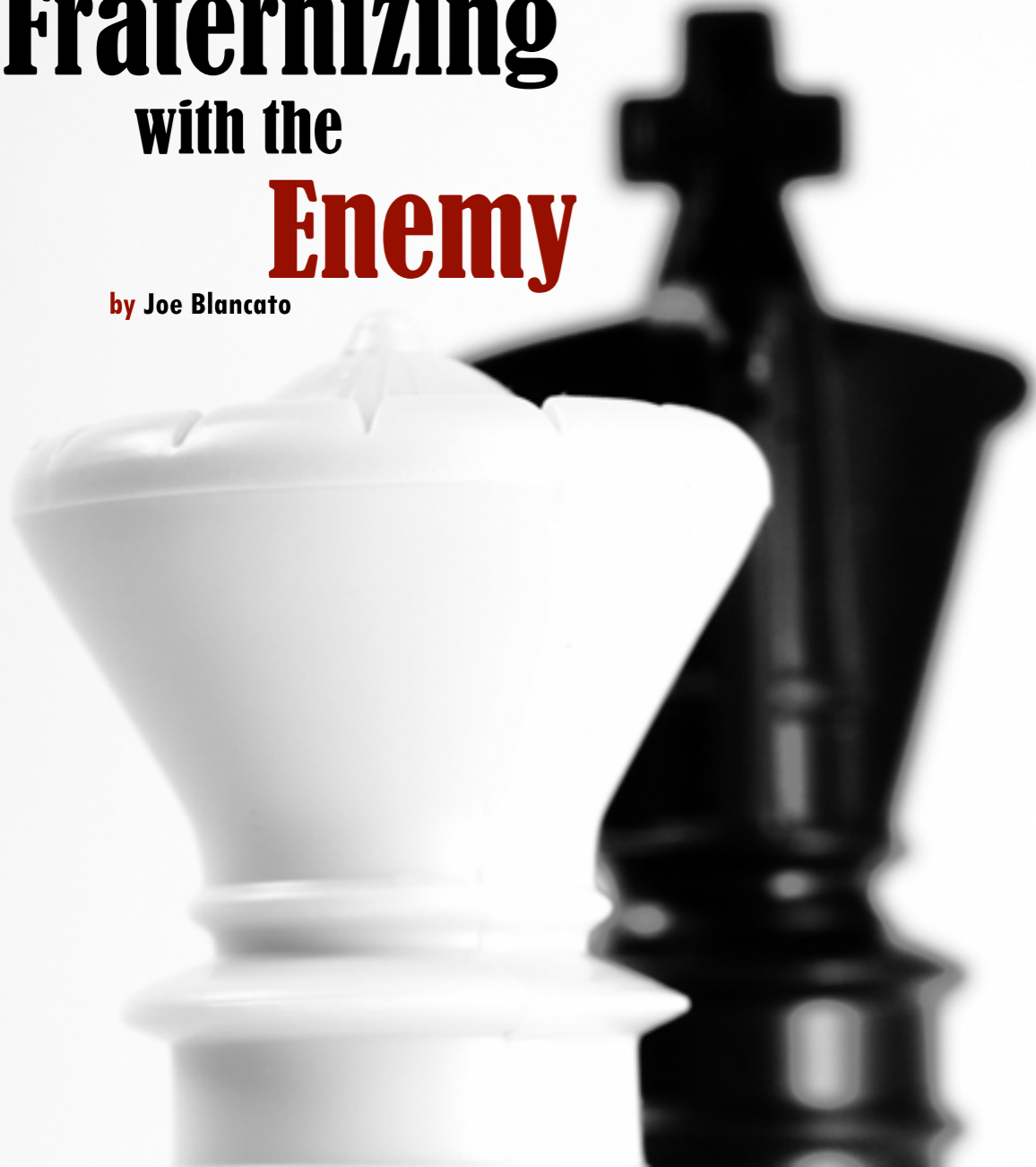
Developers and players traditionally clash over what's best for a game. It's a fundamental difference in opinion; the battle between The Vision™'s progenitors and their primitive, pragmatic followers. Take a look at any message board, get deep into any game, and you can see the lines in the sand. Players are Us, devs are Them - common ground doesn't exist in the land of internet anonymity. Any of Us who crosses the line is either regarded with deep suspicion or appealed to, like an Uncle Tom with a million owed favors.

It's really not uncommon to hear about players becoming developers, joining with the "enemy" in order to make things better, or provide unique insight into a studio's next title. But go the other way; what about developers as gamers? Every troll in the world swears devs don't touch their own game; they're too out of touch with what players want to have actually logged in since beta. But I didn't believe that, and decided to seek out a developer who not only plays his own game, but does it with one finger over the gaming equivalent of The Big Red Button.

Brian Green is the Co-Founder of Near Death Studios and Lead Developer of *Meridian 59*, a MUD-like forefather of modern MMOGs. The game, released in 1995 by Archetype Interactive, existed as quiet, overlooked sibling to more successful MMOGs like *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest*, ultimately taken offline in summer of 2000. In 2001, Green - who previously worked as a developer - founded NDS and purchased the rights to the game, re-releasing it under the name *Meridian 59: Resurrection*. Over the past five years, Green has poured blood, sweat and copious amounts of cash into the game to give it a graphical update and client upgrade, as well as market it around the web. He also spends time on several message boards, preaching the virtues of the game's PvP system to jaded gamers burned out on meaningless struggles. He also logs countless spare hours inside *Meridian*, for bug hunting and straight up gaming.

A guy in his 30s with long brown hair and beard, Green looks every bit the modern day mad scientist. He's also a gamer, through and through; when he and I talk, we end up swapping tabletop stories rather than talking shop. This time, though, we stick to brass tacks and focus on his habits within *M59*.

"I'm a developer, first and foremost," he tells me. "I have mortal characters I play and enjoy, but I always look at things from a developer's perspective to find ways to make the play experience more fun and engaging. I also know most of the secrets 'behind the curtain,' so there's not much to surprise me in the game." Without ever being able to enjoy discovery, he's cut off to one of Bartle's four main archetypes - Brian just can't explore his own game. And really, how much achieving can someone who's worked on the same game for years really do? That leaves killing and socializing, both of which could easily get him noticed in *M59*'s small community.

"Once I join a guild, the bonds of friendship eventually cause people to learn more about me and to realize who I really am," he says. "Once that happens, people fall over themselves to

either kill me to claim bragging rights, or be nice to me in order to curry favor. I have a number of retired characters on the servers because someone figured out who my characters were." And each time he rolls a new character, that's time spent rebuilding his skills, rebuilding bonds with people. Imagine having to

make new friends because some internet detective realized you leave out your apostrophes in the word "don't." And when you fix that quirk, someone else figures out you "hehe" at a bad joke and "hahaha" at a good one - time to start over. Green is a fugitive in his own game, a slave to his godhood.

Green is a fugitive in his own game, a slave to his godhood.

Since he has to lay low, he doesn't even have the luxury of killing people who piss him off. *M59*'s PvP system is similar to *UO*'s: You can kill anyone you like in most areas, but you're branded a murderer. Since Green's characters are already on the downlow, drop kicking a message board troll would only bring up more blips on the radar. "If I started killing every person that upset me as a developer, people would be able to pick out my characters too easily," he says. Some people just **have** to be worth the reroll, though. "Some of the best times I've had as a mortal character were when I defeated a notorious asshole in PvP combat," he finishes with a grin. I guess, even if it means losing your digital self, righteous anger always grips firm.

But really, how does he keep going? Sure, developing the game pays the bills, but getting in game just to get an idea of what players want can't be worth having to repeatedly create new identities every time someone figures out who you are. "It's still fun, but it's like any other game you've played for a long time. Eventually it doesn't hold the same spark of interest it did when you started," he says. "*Meridian 59* is based

upon discovering information, so when you're the one developing and implementing the secrets a large part of the mystery goes away."

The fact he manages to keep logging in after eight years of living the dual life of a developer and player is amazing in itself. He's brought on Mike "FattyMoo" Emmons to study under him and ultimately take over as Lead Designer, and since then, he's been able to discover things someone else created again. But still, Green continually flirts with burnout. He finds keeping his plate full is the best way to counteract boredom. "I've been doing consulting work for other games in development and have been doing expert work at a law firm, helping to overturn a patent that threatens literally the entire online game industry," he tells me.

But it's not all bad. Playing the game - despite the dangers of losing a character to his own fame and burning out on your monthly income - offers Green special insight into his player base. Unlike forums, where "the fear of being ostracized for having a contrary opinion, or worse, being labeled an ass-kisser for supporting the developers" paints a giant

target on your back, "talking to people in real-time through in-game conversations is much more meaningful," he says.

And that speaks volumes for the type of dedication developers like Brian exhibit. The guy logs into his game, risking exposure and flak from those industrious enough to root him out, not just to blow off of steam, but to figure out what it is the teeming mass of humanity that plays his game wants. And he still finds a way

...he and his ilk still make it into the game every day, despite the fact no one on the receiving end of a nerf will ever believe it.

to piss off half of his players, because according to him, "I have at least half again as many opinions as I have players!" But he and his ilk still make it into the game every day, despite the fact no one on the receiving end of a nerf will ever believe it.

We say our goodbyes and go through the usual rituals of kids playing at being grownups. We talk about future conferences we'll be attending, poke some fun at a few mutual acquaintances

and bitch about E3. And, as always, I leave Brian by regaling him with a story from *Meridian* and a promise to return someday, if only to say I'm buddies with the guy who holds the world in the palm of his hand. `COMMENTS`

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

the Escapist

STAFF

EDITORIAL

Executive Editor
Julianne Greer

Content Editor
Joseph Blancato

Research Manager
Nova Barlow

Contributors
Patrick Dugan
Pat Miller
Bruce Nielson
Shawn Williams

PRODUCTION

Producer
Jonathan Hayter

Layout Artist
Jessica Fielhauer

Lead Web Developer
Whitney Butts

Web Developer
Erik Jacobson

IT Director
Jason Smith

BUSINESS

Publisher
Alexander Macris

Associate Publishers
Jerry Godwin
Gregory Lincoln

Director of Advertising
Susan Briglia

Industry Relations Managers
Laura Rotondo
Shannon Drake

Chairman of Themis Group
Thomas S. Kurz

Casual Friday

CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!

available **NOW!**

It's All Their Fault

by Shawn Williams

I think it's high time we stop all this hippy nonsense of trying to live happily together and solving our differences peacefully. There's obviously a huge problem in the gaming community, and it's the sort of problem that can only be solved by the judicious application of overwhelming force.

Everyone is arguing about where the blame lies for the flood of bad games to the market. Desensitized reviewers, jaded designers, corporate whoring, stupid players, hackers, script-kiddies, the media, money-hungry lawyers – take your pick. But really, it boils down to two sides: Game Developers vs. Gamers.

Every message board, mailing list, chat room – heck, even a few prayer circles – is full of bitter debates laying the blame for lousy games on one side or the other. We need to stop trying so hard to find compromises and just lay the blame solidly with one of them so we know who **not** to receive our guidance from when choosing future games.

We've got two very different sides here, and if my years of being a faithful Tina Turner fan have taught me anything, it's that two men enter, one man leaves. I give you: the blame!

Obviously, This Is Gamers' Fault
Gamers, by and large, are idiots. They represent the basest of human desires. All they really want is a game that consists of one button. When you push it, someone gets kicked in the crotch while a large-breasted woman jumps on a trampoline in the background.

They constantly lament the quality of games in modern times while extolling the virtues of the "old games" – remember those games? Humanity was destined for greatness and we were set to solve all the world's problems, but then some jerk had to eat the forbidden fruit of the 3-D Graphics Processor Tree, and we were all marched out of Eden to the dark wasteland beyond, with nothing but a copy of *Postal* to keep us company.

Gamers want great games utilizing technology that still hasn't been created – technology so fantastic it's going to make them take out a second mortgage just to afford the mainframe computer

it'll require to run the games. And they want monthly updates and expansions added to the game, with entirely new continents, races and quests. But they want to pay no more than $10 – and no subscription fee, of course!

Then, of course, no matter how great a game you invent – a game with dynamic dialogue, a brilliant and unique questing system, a completely balanced PvP combat system, amazing abilities for the player to create their own content – Gamers are going to ignore it and instead buy millions of copies of a buggy game that lets you decapitate someone and then urinate on their corpse. And **then** they'll have the audacity to complain about their lack of choices.

Who needs them?

Anyone Can See The Developers Are At Fault

If Game Developers could take time out from their rock-n-roll parties full of illicit drugs and prostitutes, we could open up some honest dialogue about all the things they're screwing up in their games. Unfortunately, they're too busy yelling at their valets for revving the

engine too high in their limited edition gold-trimmed Ferraris to have much time for the likes of us.

Developers have forgotten their **roots**. They don't even play the games they work on anymore – everyone knows they outsource all their play-testing to child sweatshops in China. And they don't even bother reading the feedback, they just hire a bunch of web goons to troll their forums and delete any posts from anyone criticizing their game.

They design the same game over and over again, repackaging it with only the most modest of graphics improvements and a new main character that was a supporting character in the **last** version of the game. They consider the game "improved" when they've fixed a bug that was present in the previous version – even if this "fix" creates three entirely **new** bugs.

Developers plan their games in the most ridiculous fashion. They'll create a gun with laser scopes, hair trigger, explosive-tipped-armor-piercing bullets and full-auto switch – and then, when you go into the game and use it to mow down

They don't even play the games they work on anymore - everyone knows they outsource all their play-testing to child sweatshops in China.

It's easier for everyone if we just start over.

everything in your path, they'll blame you for turning their game into a violence-fest, when all they intended was for the rifle to be used to open stuck doors. You're not playing the game **how they designed it**.

We try to make it easier for them. We post exactly what is wrong with their game and how they can improve it on every forum we can find. Instead of listening to their customers, though, Developers instead choose to ignore us and continue blithely on their way, designing games no one is going to want to play.

A Solution?

There's only one thing we can do here: Games have to be outlawed. We have to dismantle the machine, yank out every cog. The only **good** games – games that spawned this whole industry – were games that were created when there was no industry and no Gamers out there to play them. Once being a Game Developer became a legitimate occupation and being a Gamer became socially acceptable, the entire thing was ruined.

It's too big, now. We have to turn back the developmental clock, lower our expectations and go back to simpler times. Clearly, the blame rests on **both** parties, and there's nothing that can be done about it. Let's be honest here: Gamers buying games that **don't** suck? Developers listening to their player base? That's just not going to happen, and a bit unrealistic to expect it to do so. It's easier for everyone if we just start over.

Just think of all the really interesting books you can read if you give up gaming and start reading! Of course, there's a bit of a debate raging about readers and writers – each side saying the other is making publishers release garbage.

But I think I have a solution for that …
[COMMENTS]

Shawn "Kwip" Williams is the founder of N3 NeenerNeener.Net, where he toils away documenting his adventures as the worst MMOG and pen-and-paper RPG player in recorded history.

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:

"You stumble upon someone cheating in your favorite online game. How do you handle it?"

Joe Blancato,
"Fraternizing with the Enemy,"
Content Editor
I saunter up to him, trying to look as hip as possible, and say in my DeNiro-from-*Taxi-Driver* voice, "How'd you do **that**?" You know, so I can report the specifics of what he's doing. Yeah ...

JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor
Ask them how to do the cheat. If they refuse to divulge the method, report them.

Jon Hayter,
Producer
These people ruin the game for everyone else. They're the lowest of the low, exploiting coding errors for their own gain, no matter the universal consequences. I dutifully report them!

Then, I research what they were doing fully ... Just so I can spot it easily in the future of course. I'm a good person ...

Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor
People cheat?

Shawn Williams,
"It's All Their Fault"
I prefer to start with a throat punch, followed by several kicks to the groin. Sometimes, I work the body a bit - kidneys, stomach and solar plexus - for a change of pace. And never underestimate the fun of a good arch stomp!

Bruce Nielson,
"Show Me the Money"
I berate him for cheating ... after I have him show me how to do it ... you know

... so that I can, um, be sure it's really a problem ...

Patrick Dugan,
"Reimagining Challenge"
I randomly mash emoticon hot-keys and shout, "Do what thou wilt is the whole of the law!" Then, if my level is higher, I trap-out my glyphs and go camping.