

the Escapist

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by Mark Wallace

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Games' true specialty as an entertainment medium is interactivity. Books are a solitary activity. Movies and TV are passive processes of being entertained. Games, however, bring the player into the action, physically, mentally and emotionally. The player must act, must become involved in order for the entertainment to proceed.

It is this necessity of outward action that places games at the top of my list of Best Entertainment for Groups. Many couples read in bed, side by side, before turning off the lights, but they are having completely different experiences. Rooms full of people can enjoy TV or a movie, but ultimately because of the passivity of the activity, they are not embarking on an activity together. Whether it's for a common goal or contest in which we are pitted against one another, the active nature of playing games together is what makes them special.

Multiplayer games, online with thousands, or in the living room with

your spouse, are a special segment of the gaming world, pushing the limits of entertainment as we know it. That is why, on this day of celebrating love and togetherness, St. Valentine's Day, we are focusing on playing games together. Mark Wallace shares a love story from his favorite online world. Pat Miller discusses *Animal Crossing*, and how the multiplayer aspect of *Wild World* on the DS took the gameplay to new heights. And Spanner returns, telling about a brief encounter, one summer, years ago, where a multiplayer game brought two people together. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Happy Valentine's Day!



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: This is in response to "It's All Their Fault" by Shawn Williams. I highly resent his opinion on what gamers

really want ... We don't want a lone button which causes a sound crotch kicking with a big breasted, trampoline jumping woman in the background. Please. If Shawn had any real knowledge of what gamers want, he would know that we would much rather press that button and have someone get kicked in the crotch in the background while seeing an "in yo' face" close up of the well endowed woman bouncing gleefully. It's called research man! Try it!

-Guy Karpensky

To the Editor: Are you sure you aren't paid lots of money by *Second Life* because most of yours issues basically advertise how fine this game is. Your magazine is very, very good. Consistent weekly updates, Professional photography, well written articles and clever navigation which because of the last two factors makes people read it in a magazine like style which is so hard to create on the internet.

I've read maybe five issues now and *Second Life* keeps getting high mentions in the articles, not the advertising.

I respect this online magazine for its professional production and excellent articles. Stay impartial.

-Rob

From the Blog: [Re: "Balancing Your *Second Life*" by Pat Miller] I'm sitting here wondering why I didn't subscribe to *Second Life* after your first article. It's probably the same reason that keeps me in finance instead of going back to school to study game design - instead of my previous bachelors degree in philosophy. Perhaps I am simply daunted by the task of learning to design and feel safer simply going through the motions of creation in a game like *WoW* or *SWG*. Yet I still have an itch to implement my own ideas and creations in one of the virtual worlds I inhabit, be that *Battlefield 2*, *WoW*, or *CivIV*. It's that very same itch that makes me want to leave my job and try to learn game design. I suppose what I'm saying is I hope SL will scratch it for me.

At the same time it amazes me that so many gamers believe creation of content should be on the shoulders of the initial

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designers. I was reading a forum on gamespot regarding Will Wright's *Spore* and a whole bunch of people kept posting that it was lazy and unfair for a greedy corporation to rely on the people who paid them for content. I honestly never believed that anyone could be so ill informed. Its a love of such things that brings about some of the greatest content games have ever had - a love evident in those people who choose to take the time to develop content without ever being paid; artists.

Thanks to all of you out there. Hope to join your ranks one day,

-Nick

From the Blog: [Re: "Reimagining Challenge," by Patrick Dugan] Do I agree or don't I?

I am not really sure. Are gamers the problem? Maybe, but I am not exactly who gamers are any more or at least which gamers you are referring to. I do know one thing, though. While I didn't pre-order a 360 (mainly due to lack of funds) I would have simply because of the promise held in games such as *Lost Odyssey*, *Mass Effect*, *Too Human*, etc.

and not because of those oh-so-dazzling Xbox ports. Secondly, the reason I have not purchased 2-D games such as *Castlevania* in years is simply because I do not have fun with or get any other kind of enjoyable stimulus from those sorts of games anymore. Still, I am intensely irritated by people buying an endless amount of sequels, unimaginative movie games and all the imitator titles in between.

As for all this paedic vs. ludic... stuff (:p), I have heard a wide variety of arguments supporting either side. On the one hand paidea can be extremely liberating while aslo being frustratingly aimless. On the other hand overly ludic games can very limiting even if they feel more focused.

I do, however, intensely love the idea of socially challenging games. They are something I look for constantly and almost never find. I am tired of plowing through endless seas of baddies just for the heck of it. I need something much more compelling. It is that I don't like a good sports game or other because I really do. The problem is that I am being more than satisfied as far as those sort of games are concerned and being

completely starved of the sort of games that make me say, "Damn, I didn't think of it that way before," or even make any kind of social or artistic statement at all. I am not sure if that is the key to widening games' appeal, seeing as such fare in other mediums is limited to their various independent industries in favor of pretty `splotions or their equivalents. I could be wrong there though.

-Olumide Edu



Love in the Time of Pixels

by Mark Wallace

This is a love story of a particular kind. It's a story of love in an online world, and of the ways it can bleed into the real world around it. It's a story of flesh and it's a story of pixels, and it's a story of how the two may interact, depending on context and how the romantic leads play out their roles.

It's the story of Diamond Hope, a beautiful avatar I met one night in *Second Life*, standing near a tent in a grassy field on the eastern edge of the Grid. *Second Life* is a virtual world of individuals more than anything else; its character creation and modification screens and the raft of user-created clothes, hair and accessories available to be purchased or made mean no two avatars look alike. And though I'd been around that world for a while, I'd rarely met an avatar who looked as fetching as Di, standing in a campfire's glow in her white boots, short shorts and halter top, a pistol strapped to her nicely curved thigh.

The nice thing about my job as a virtual journalist is it's a good excuse to be nosy. And the nice thing about working for a tabloidesque rag like the *Second Life Herald* is we run our "Post Six Grrrls" on a regular basis, featuring a few tastefully shot "art photos" of the most attractive avatars on the Grid. So, when I bumped into Di and started wondering, quite naturally, what was beneath her skimpy pixilated uniform, it was a quick task to line up a photo shoot with the publisher of *Players*, *Second Life's* premier in-world skin mag, and document the work of *Players* publisher Marilyn Murphy for an article in the *Herald*. When I proposed the idea to Diamond, she was delighted.

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While Di may have been brave enough to bare all in *Second Life*, her offline existence was a bit different. In *Second Life*, she worked as part of the security team at a popular nightclub. In her “real” life, she was a midwestern single mother of two who would never think of taking her clothes off for the cameras. But, Di felt insulated by the virtual world. Not everyone likes the fact that the *Herald* publishes nudie pictures, but Di knew taking off her toon’s clothes was not the same as shedding her own. Her existence in *Second Life* allowed her to try on (pun intended) a new persona, one just a bit brasher than the woman she had become in the midwest.

Not that that woman wasn’t affected. In fact, her (real) life was radically changed. My article caught the eye of a male resident of *Second Life* named Unmitigated Gall, who, besides admiring Di’s form, was taken by the things she said and the way she said them.

Unmitigated is a man who knows how to navigate cyberspace. He was wise enough to know a hot toon bod is one thing, but far more revealing than naked pictures are the words that provide insight into the person behind the avatar.

So, when he found himself wanting to know more about Di, he sent her an instant message.

Apparently, what Di and Un learned about each other was enough to convince them they wanted to know even more. And as they explored their online relationship further, they only liked what they found.

Soon enough, I got a notice in my *Second Life* mailbox that the couple would be holding a virtual wedding within the world. Such events are not uncommon in *Second Life*, which even provides a way for residents to formalize their virtual unions through the world’s user interface.

But the best was yet to come.

Shortly after Di and Un tied the virtual knot, they donned their real-life Sunday best, stood together before a real live person of appropriate authority, and said the actual words that would transform them from a couple of pixilated people who happened to meet in an online game into a couple bound together in the eyes of God and the law. In other

words, they met in the real world, moved in together and got married.

The *Herald* was, of course, delighted to have made the introduction - not only because we’d had the chance to bring two people together, but because their story illustrated the true power of online worlds.

We think of these places most often as games, but there is much more going on in them than simply play. What we often forget is that any place in which two or more people can interact, whatever else it is, is a communications medium of a certain sort. Connecting via an online world - whether it’s *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*, *EverQuest* or any other - is not different from connecting via a chat room, via Friendster, via telephone or even in the time-honored way people sometimes connect at a party: Spotting a stranger across the room and knowing, in those first seconds of contact, that here is a person you need to know more about. The things you need to know in that party conversation are the same things you need to know in a virtual world: Who is this person? What are they like? What do they do? Are they smart and funny? Can they be trusted?




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the *Escapist lounge*

Kick back, share your thoughts and
experience even more of what you love
at the official blog for the magazine!

blog.escapistmagazine.com



Is this - the fact you get along in an online game - a good basis on which to form a relationship?

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And, perhaps most importantly, are they interested in me?

All these questions present potential obstacles. A wrong answer to any one of them could easily turn your fantasies of wild romance into a nightmare vision of hell on earth. But they are the same questions, whether the context is online or off. The only difference is the order in which they're answered. At a party, the question of physical attraction is answered first. In a virtual world, it is often the last thing to be revealed.

In fact, it can be argued that interactions in virtual worlds and online games give us more important information at an earlier moment than we could get while standing around at a party. One gamer I spoke to recently, whom I'll call Jake, is now married to a woman he first met while playing *Ultima Online*. They started out by working together, by cooperating on quests and finding that they complemented each other well, they got along and yes, they maybe even "liked" each other. Is this - the fact you get along in an online game - a good basis on which to form a relationship? I'd argue it's at least as good a basis as the hormonal one that leads to far more

unions, and perhaps a better one. How well you chat someone up at a party is not a very good indicator of long-term mutual compatibility, after all. How well you work together to accomplish shared goals, on the other hand, can shed more light on the prospects for a lasting relationship.

Does that mean we should all be looking for love in online places? Of course not; don't be silly. But it does mean the love we sometimes discover there is no less real, and no more an oddity, than that which we encounter for the first time in the physical world.

When it's right, they both end up in exactly the same place. Keep that in mind the next time a hot night elf is looking for help with a quest. Happy Valentine's Day. [COMMENTS](#)

*Mark Wallace can be found on the web at Walkering.com. His book with Peter Ludlow, *Only A Game: Online Worlds and the Virtual Journalist Who Knew Too Much*, will be published by O'Reilly in 2006.*

Playing with Strangers

by Pat Miller

Seeing a *Street Fighter* tournament in action is a decidedly surreal experience. To a casual observer, it usually seems ludicrous that a group of 20 grown men would watch a videogame with the same intensity that most others would watch a boxing match or the Super Bowl, cheering on the competitors with roars of approval when a flashy combo or a perfectly timed reversal attack is landed, just like they were watching an actual street fight. To a first time competitor, the same scene is surreal for a wholly different reason: They are awash with the heady, nervous tension that comes from simultaneously enjoying the company of other like-minded gamers, and sizing each one up as they step up to the joystick and show off their best.

But I am neither of those. It was for a wholly different reason I found the environment at a weekly *Street Fighter III: Third Strike* tournament at San Francisco State University completely bizarre. It wasn't the familiar clashing sounds of the games that did it, nor was it the intoxicating feel of competitive adrenaline slowly seeping out of my system. Rather, it was the sight of three grown men sitting around an open table with their Nintendo DSes, chatting between tournament matches about fishing and interior decorating and independent musicians.

Hmm. Something tells me they're not talking about *Street Fighter* any more.

I sat down with them and peered at one of their screens for a second to confirm my suspicions. Satisfied, I fished out my own Nintendo DS from my backpack, still warm from idling in sleep mode, and announced to the table:

"Anyone here need peaches?"



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The others just groaned. “**All** of us started with peaches,” one of them said to me, “but open your gates and I’ll give you some apples and oranges.

“I’ve got a spare coconut you can have!” said another.

“What’s your store selling?” asked the third. We proceeded to spend the next hour visiting each other’s towns, chatting with the locals, exchanging tips and showing off furniture. One of the guys had **every kind of fruit**. Another had **finished** paying off his mortgage. All I had to brag about was, well, a giant arcade cabinet sitting in my living room. They oohed and aahed and took it in for a while. It does make a nice centerpiece. It’s quite a conversation-starter.

Welcome to *Animal Crossing*, the game about, well, **nothing**, really.

The original *Animal Crossing* found its way into my girlfriend’s GameCube about a year and a half ago as an anniversary gift and ended up stealing that anniversary evening from us as we ran errands to make the down payment on our house. One evening would gradually become a week, then a month of fishing, two months of fossil collecting, three months of planting trees, until she left for a semester in Scotland and her Cube fell into the possession of my freshman year roommate, who promised to tend to it once a week. His painstaking care of our town was clearly apparent; our house had swarms of roaches, our fields were choked by huge plots of hideous weeds, our mailbox was overflowing and our neighbors had mostly deserted us. (Thanks, Vince.) After about an hour of futile weeding and cockroach-chasing, we decided we might need to move on.

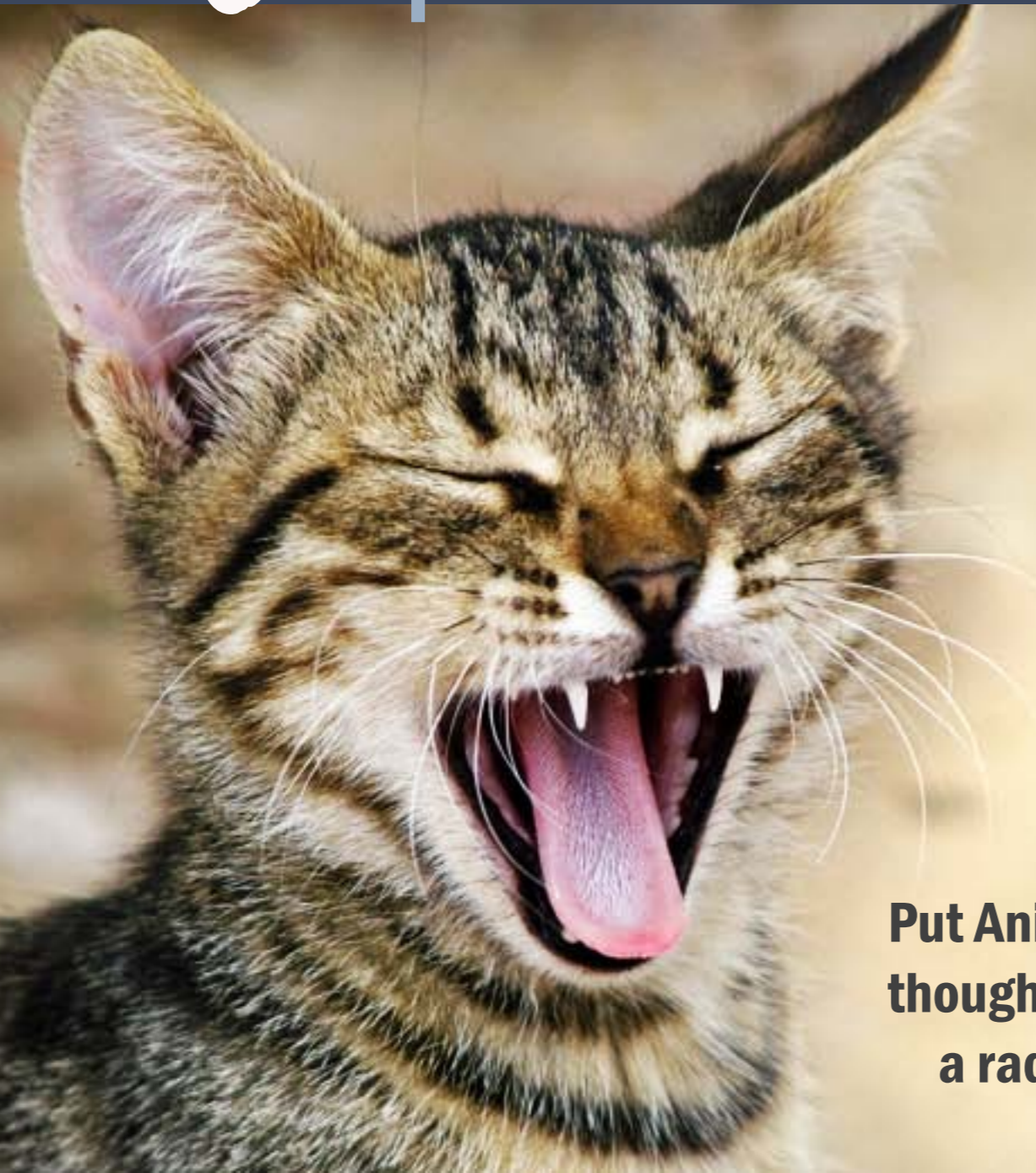
Goodbye, GameCube, say hello to *Wild World*.

Once you’ve gotten used to the Nintendo DS version, it feels like the perfect home for *Animal Crossing*. On the GameCube, it felt restricted in its confinement to the home setup; if you don’t know anyone else who has a GameCube - as was my problem - you’re just going to be wasting away in Margaritaville (or whatever you call your town), and it’s pretty hard to get your friends hooked on the game when they see just how much fun you have fishing and catching bugs all by yourself. The DS version, by contrast, literally sells itself. After the *Street Fighter* tournament, all the *Mario Kart DS*-toting chumps who came expecting some Time Trial action instead found us running around each other’s towns trading furniture. They were so jealous, they scoured the San Francisco East Bay

Area for a store with remaining *AC:WW* copies. Up to four players can run amok in a town at once, and with the Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection, you can party up via the internet from any available wireless access point.

The sheer accessibility and ease with which *Animal Crossing* allows you to play with your buddies has allowed Nintendo to add all kinds of special multiplayer content. Profit motivates some of the socializing, of course; there’s money to be had in buying turnips low and selling them high (the “stalk market”), or exchanging fruits with your buddies to grow your own orchards of non-native fruits that sell for five times the going rate. But mere commerce only scratches the surface of networked multiplayer *Animal Crossing*. The animal residents of your fair town are free to live where they wish, meaning an internet rendezvous





with a friend will often yield a new neighbor or two. What's more, they come not only with their material possessions - including letters you wrote to them - but fairly detailed memories of their previous residence, including the town theme (which you compose) and whatever catch-phrases you may have taught them.

All of this, at first, tends to elicit the same reaction in the non-believers that the original *Animal Crossing* did: " ... so?" It's not easy to communicate the appeal of a game like either of the AC titles; though the goal apparent is to have a complete town with a full museum and a complete furniture catalog and the highest graded house possible (yes, people grade your taste in decor), all these goals are ultimately self-imposed. *Animal Crossing* demands nothing of you; it would prefer that you keep your town clean and pay off your

Put Animal Crossing on the DS, though, and all of a sudden it's a radically different game.

mortgage, it encourages you to get out there and meet people and relax by the beach with the sound of the waves muffling the background music, but there is no magical endgame that will result in a final roll of the credits and a drawn curtain - that happens every Friday night at the Roost, if you catch the K.K. Slider performance.

Before, this was a problem. Playing *Animal Crossing* on the GameCube was a novelty - or as retailers put it, **your girlfriend would love it** - because, ultimately, it was a game about nothing, and nothing is an awfully boring thing to do by yourself. Once the novelty of having your own little world contained in your GameCube wears off, it's basically gaming busywork - catch fish, pick fruit, pay large sums of money to the wage-slaver raccoon, and so on. It feels like running the level treadmill of *World of Warcraft* or *Diablo II*, but at the end of the day, instead of an account worth \$300 on eBay, all you've got is a memory card full of Classic Furniture, and that means precious little to most people.

Put *Animal Crossing* on the DS, though, and all of a sudden it's a radically

different game. No longer is your world contained to your living room TV; instead, it is in your backpack or your pants pocket or your glove compartment, where you can access it wherever and whenever you like, free to show it off to whoever may come by. Despite *Animal Crossing's* technical similarity to *Animal Crossing: Wild World* - and make no mistake, they are very similar games - the **context** in which you play one is so wholly dissimilar from that of the other, it manages to make the two feel like completely different games. *Animal Crossing* becomes a much more open, public space on the DS, where you are free to show off your fish collection to random passers-by if you so choose. People nearby can **watch** you play with

the same bemused interest as one would watch a *Street Fighter* tournament, and, if they have their DSes handy, like one particular fellow at the Berkeley BART station whose name I never caught (I remember he has apples, though), they can feel free to join in.

Common wisdom was wrong about the original *Animal Crossing*. It wasn't perfect for your girlfriend because girls love decorating houses and nurturing homes and towns and such. *Animal Crossing* was always about doing nothing, and it just so happened by accident that some gamers figured out their girlfriends might like using the GameCube to test out different wallpaper/carpet combinations or design

their own T-shirts with a 64x64 pixel grid. It suffered for this, because no one wants to do nothing for too long when they could be playing *Super Smash Brothers: Melee*.

But doing nothing with **other people**; now, **that** is a game people can get behind. This is because, once we grow out of making play dates with our fellow fourth-graders, spending leisure time with our friends and family and loved ones often boils down to having a decent conversation and maybe finding something to nibble on or keep our hands busy or provoke more conversation - that is, doing **nothing**. *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, with its wi-fi and all its mindless little activities and

secrets and characters and holidays and collectibles, is a social space that facilitates doing nothing quite wonderfully in a way that online environments like *World of Warcraft* can't. For all the highly acclaimed social space massive online games provide, they just haven't constructed one that allows me to do on my gaming platforms with my friends what I do with them in real life.

Because, honestly, nothing makes for some quality time with the homies or the ladies quite like, well, **nothing**.

[COMMENTS](#)

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.

Because, honestly, nothing makes for some quality time with the homies or the ladies quite like, well, nothing.

the Digital WHOREHOUSE

by Spanner

Blackpool, the most insalubrious working-class retreat in Britain, is probably best known for its sheer unabashed dedication to gratuitous pleasure seeking. There is no lust that cannot be slaked at England's North-West capital, and I'm not talking about drugs, crime or deviancy (although these temptations can all be found in a certain measure). It is wholesome, family based debauchery that beats the heart of The Front. Let me walk you down the promenade and show you a place of unique exquisiteness, a sprawling temple to the malevolent God of the Lost Consumer.

Located just north of Liverpool (famous for its beetles), Blackpool's own tourist board describes it as "*a Mecca for family fun.*" A careful choice of words, I feel, since Mecca is synonymous with devout, fanatical worship - and the last western resort is a harsh, unforgiving divinity who accepts nothing short of complete and unabridged veneration. Choose (or be chosen by) your god from the powerful Blackpool Pantheon; be it the mighty Tower that connects heaven and earth by audaciously skewering the sky

with its vicious, dominating spike; the cruel Sea that has grown three legs and beckons its congregation out into the bitter murkiness of its violent realm; the surreal dominion of the Pleasure Beach, tempting the lost, the weary and the deviant to kneel at the alter of fear and fast thrills; or the affluent Golden Mile who grows swollen and fat by ravenously devouring all who wander onto the desolate tract of the promenade. It is here where we, the Penitent Gamer, shall take our unholy communion.

A straight line drawn along the sea wall from south pier to north, the Golden Mile is swarming with Blackpool's repository of gambling dens and amusement arcades - vast, powerful, magnificent and overwhelming to stand in the presence of. They are places where solitary worship is forbidden - impossible, in fact - and a cycle of forged, broken and renewed companionship is in perpetual, dizzying motion. Just as many towns and cities across the world have developed red light districts, the Golden Mile is Blackpool's answer to digital love-on-demand.

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The front of the Mile's arcades put on an enticing façade of light-hearted and dynamic recreation, but once inside, it is impossible not to bow to the seedy temptation of the manufactured beauty on offer; the obligatory liaisons no longer such a distasteful notion.

Perhaps you recall the original *Street Fighter* arcade machine, which employed large, pressure sensitive rubber buttons? The harder the button was beaten, the more devastating Ryu's on-screen attacks flew at his enemies. It was a sensational game cabinet, which, due to the nature of its existence, suffered from a tragically short lifespan. But, during its fleeting time on the arcade floor, this game more than served its purpose as platonic matchmaker, and I saw just such a brief, yet intense, digital coupling over a game of *Street Fighter* during a childhood holiday.

Pounding on the controls was a happy player, though he carried an air of innocence that suggested he was new to the concept of paying for pleasure. He poured coins into the machine with as

much fury as he thrashed the button, until a similarly aged, yet indubitably more experienced arcade creeper inserted a single credit of his own without saying a word, bringing Ken out to challenge Ryu. Player One's carefree visage dropped immediately into one of serious contest, staring intensely ahead as if his challenger had stood too close for respectability in the men's room. The fight was short and ineffectual, Ryu easily bested. Then, something happened that Player One did not expect; Player Two, who had effectively ousted him from the game to have the machine for himself, put a whole \$0.50 in the coin box - enough for five credits.

Still not a single word had passed between them, yet as Player One turned to leave after his initial defeat, Player Two's look of mildly insulted surprise brought him back to the control board, and Ryu was given another opportunity to win back the machine. Silently, the two players fought, laughed, shared, despaired and ultimately parted, as Player Two won each time. He never pulled his punches or took particular

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mercy on the man whose game he had taken from him, but he shared an ephemeral, vital experience with someone he never even spoke to and probably never saw again. A lifetime's worth of emotional encounters - that many a married couple have never known - compacted into the space of 15 street fighting minutes at one of the thousands of alters on the Golden Mile. Both acted as lover and leaver, pimp and prostitute, saint and sinner; until the inevitable time came to part company and find another companion.

And this type of videogame-induced unity isn't an unusual occurrence. Take a look around any arcade and this brand of digital promiscuity is rampant among game playing strangers - dancers plug into the music and unite in rhythm, drivers face-off against each other from either end of long rows of racing machines, and sharp shooters race to the draw and fill a criminal or an alien with imaginary lead. It also goes beyond videogames and touches every compulsion a gambler or player is looking to sate in the arcade's red, green

and blue light district; the donkey derby, the penny roulette, the Hillbilly shooting range, miniature horse racing. These are all games that suffer greatly for want of likeminded companionship.

Visitors to England who only get the chance to hang around London (which is as alien to 95% of the British as it is to the Japanese tourists) have missed out on that most intrinsic, liberated, fun-loving aspect of the British psyche by not sampling Blackpool. It is impossible to be alone in Blackpool, and even the most

solitary gamer would quickly find themselves craving this simple, intense, financially acquired (and yes, perhaps a little seedy) union when walking the Golden Mile.

Will you find love on The Front? No. But visit the arcades and you will find lust at its finest. [COMMENTS](#)

Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.



It is impossible to be alone in Blackpool.

Tom Hall Makes His Move

by N. Evan Van Zelfden

A legendary game designer, a master at chess, and a skilled photographer, Tom Hall is also a microcosm of the game industry at large. When 2005 started, he was making single-player games for Midway.

By mid-April, his bags were packed and he'd moved to the MMOG capital of the world, Austin, Texas. By August, it was announced that he was hard at work as Creative Director for the new MMOG start-up, KingsIsle Entertainment.

Not much else has been said about KingsIsle or the game they're developing, except in the game you "... can do fun things," and that KingsIsle is well funded and lead by J. Todd Coleman, of Wolfpack Studios fame.

What was it that made Hall want to forge virtual worlds? Understanding his motivations give insight into the industry as a whole. Here, then, are several questions with Tom Hall ...

Will you ever do a single player game again, or have MMOGs captured your heart and mind?

"I'm sure I will. Especially if I ever get the rights to *Anachronox* or *Commander*

Keen back! But I have quite a few cool game ideas just waiting for the right time or technology."

What is the main difference between a single-player game and an MMOG?

"The social experience. You can talk to folks, you can aid them, you can hinder them. Just the experience of seeing people going on their own agenda makes the world feel amazingly alive. And it provides gaming war stories on a much more epic scale than other games can. Also, it's one of the longest types of games to play to the end. Pretty much running for the long-distance gold are MMOGs and *Baldur's Gate*. Who has that much time to play one game? I wish our industry would get funded to stop for a year, so I could catch up. But I still go in *WoW* ... even though I don't have that much time to play it ... Dang it."

How is an MMOG different from Deathmatch?

"Well, you have more opportunity to be cooperative. Sure, there's Capture the Flag and so on, but you can specifically help each other out with personal agendas, like friends do. The bonding over 20 hours is greater than the

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bonding over 20 minutes. Deathmatch is the one-night stand of gaming.”

What was your first exposure to an MMOG?

“*Ultima Online*. It was really fun, but I was leery of getting sucked in. A friend of mine did that, and played it 16 hours a day straight through the entire Christmas break.”

Which MMOGs have you played?

“*World of Warcraft*, *Ultima Online*, *Star Wars: Galaxies*, *Lineage II*, *Project Entropia*, *There*, *Runescape*, *Puzzle Pirates* ...”

What chain of events prompted you branch out into MMOGs?

“I’d always wanted to do *Anachronox Online* ... Then, I recently got a really interesting idea for an MMOG, and had to do it. So, here I am. Not really a chain, more link one, shiny link.”

What’s surprised you most about working on an MMOG?

“How many there are in development! It’s hard to believe that there are this many people as dumb as I am for attempting this. Okay, okay, there

haven’t been really huge surprises, it’s more the different set of needs.”

What hurdles need to be jumped?

“Well, it’s simply the biggest thing you can make. I thought we were insane for doing a Square-sized game with *Anachronox*. Now I go try to make the only kind of game that’s bigger! Woo hoo!”

What did you think of *World of Warcraft*?

“I love it, though, of course, sometimes I hate it. I love the beautifully polished world they have. And many of the quests are really fun. It’s one of the prettiest games ever. I just wish some of the interactions were more than right-clicking, there weren’t so many FedEx quests, and that the auction house wasn’t in one place. But man, they really, really did a lot of things right. They single-handedly validated the genre for a lot of people.” [COMMENTS](#)

N. Evan Van Zelfden expects great things for the future of games. Games are the greatest art form to date, he asserts. This is why he plays games, writes about them, and continues to work in the industry of games.



Together Time

by Hitchhiker

Deep breath. Restart. One more go. I'm gentler on the trigger this time, carefully gunning the engine and nudging the left stick of the controller to put us into a power slide. We're taking the graceful curves of the Pillar of Autumn at a chaotic speed, yet we manage to catch all of the shortcuts almost perfectly. We should, really; the number of attempts we've made at this final section of *Halo* is in the double figures. Desperation is creeping into our game plan now, as we both have hectic schedules at work and are already well past our bedtime. Real life burnout is becoming a possibility, thanks to this sublime piece of interactive wonder.

We get to the final sprint. She goes right, I go left. It's just natural, now – split the Covenant forces in half, try to reach the sanctuary of the ship. The clock is down to the last few seconds, and yet, in a final moment of confusion, one of us hits the ramp of the ship and

triggers the final cut scene. We stand up, cheering, elated at our success, at our victory. We quickly try to figure out whether or not we both made it out alive, or if the solitary Master Chief on the screen is representative of a solitary survivor. It seems as though we were both there and the glory is shared between us.

And that's it; this first foray into true, addictive multiplayer gaming with my wife is over. Apart from an unsuccessful stint in *GoldenEye* and a brief foray into the world of *Super Mario Kart*, nothing's ever gripped Danielle before. Even now, with some level of skill in *Halo*, she hates deathmatch. I put it down to the fact that a small difference in skill and knowledge of a game area will result in decimation of the lesser player time and time again. It's no fun for her. Perhaps, I wondered at the time of our success, this is the beginning of something wonderful?

Time dictated that it wasn't, though. Her visits to the worlds I inhabit remain sporadic at best, yet all of them share a common element: multiplayer.



Super Monkey Ball is a household favorite now. It gets rolled out at the end of most get-togethers, the last few people who hang around taking it in turns to land a gliding monkey in a ball on a target in the middle of an ocean. Even the least experienced game players enjoy it; in fact, I'd go so far as to say that a lack of skill is required to get the most fun out of it. Laughing as someone desperately tries to dive, then pull back and dive again, then pull back before splash-landing is where the fun lies. My wife is good enough to not do this every time, which means that pairing up Danielle and her friends in grudge

matches results in hilarity all-round. Multiplayer games are a bit like karaoke in that way – the worse you are at it, the more fun it is. Watching professional singers have a crack at it is no fun at all. Watching her and the in-laws attempt to keep up with *Karaoke Revolution Party* is.

If bad gamers can make multiplayer games good, good multiplayer modes can lift a bad title from the gutters of quality. *Flat Out*, a great physics engine wrapped in a far below par racing game, has one of the most ridiculous party modes I've witnessed. Yes, you can race round the tracks and ram each other into the copious amounts of debris that have been left all over them. Yes, you can imagine your friend's avatar is the real thing as it flies through the windshield and crumples against a tree somewhere. Yes, you can defend such a horrific implementation of rag doll physics when

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Multiplayer games are a bit like karaoke in that way – the worse you are at it, the more fun it is.

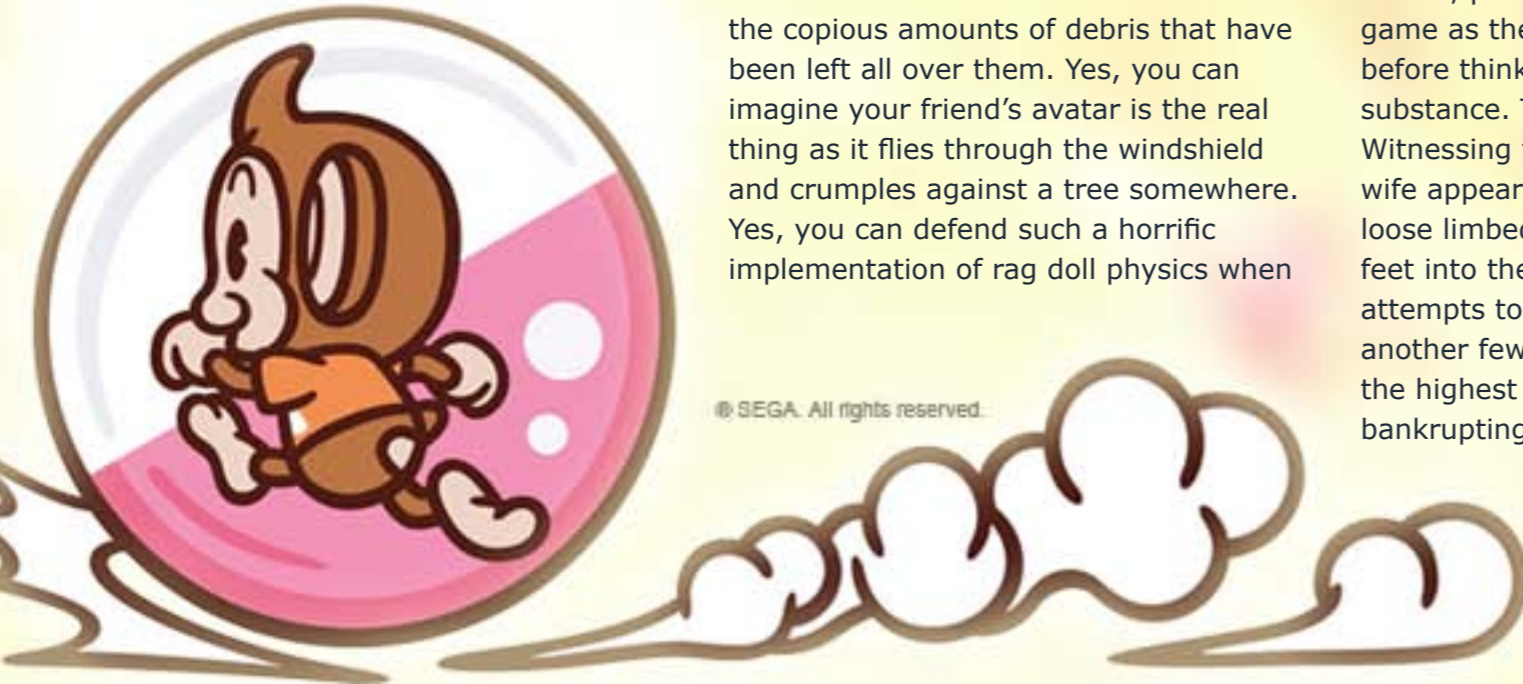
your spouse tells you it's in bad taste. But none of that is worth doing.

Instead, just sit her down with the controller and load up the long jump. Or the high jump, skittles, darts or one of the other displays of developer imagination (which, unfortunately, ask that you take part in the main game to unlock). You can almost imagine the development team, holed up in their offices, putting together this little sub-game as the focus of their fledgling title before thinking it needed more substance. They needn't have bothered. Witnessing the sheer, visceral joy my wife appears to get from seeing the loose limbed driver flung hundreds of feet into the air as everyone involved attempts to break his head open for another few inches was an eye opener of the highest level. The next step in bankrupting her morality has got to be a

Grand Theft Auto party mode. That'd be awesome!

With *Flat Out*, though, it's brilliant as everyone enjoys the carnage, and it's extremely competitive in an almost entirely non-competitive way. Sure, you're going for a high score, but the real entertainment comes from throwing the driver. You just shout and egg each other on, suggesting alternative methods of ejection, just to see the results. The multiplayer component is alive, it latches into the very heart of everyone involved and, strangely, Danielle loves it.

By far the most popular game with her since *Halo*, though, has been *Animal Crossing*. Although the multiplayer was non-consecutive, the very fact we cooperated when maintaining the village made it seem as if we were working toward a shared goal. With the characters that inhabited our village commenting to me about my wife's activities, everything she did had a clear impact on my experiences. We both



spent time running around, collecting items for our houses, unearthing fossils for the museum, keeping an eye out for special in-game events while sending special collectables to each other.

It became an almost sickening mirror image of our real lives, and eventually became a source of ridicule at the hands of our friends. Looking back, this was almost certainly justified. We'd get all the chores finished in our real life house and then jump into *Animal Crossing* to dig up the weeds and plant trees. We'd spend time fishing, seeing if we could catch the big fish, and more often than not, we couldn't and didn't. It didn't matter, we just enjoyed playing the game together, one of us watching and suggesting, the other playing and acting.

Boy, does that sound weird.

It's only with the strong emergence of multiplayer games focused on the casual player that this has become possible. *Halo* was a one off, and I never expect to be able to get Danielle playing a hardcore title like it again. Games like *Dance, Dance Whatever*, *Donkey Konga* and perhaps even *Guitar Hero* remove the traditional barriers of moving

through a 3-D landscape on a 2-D display, complex and unintuitive controls and dark, dingy unwelcoming game worlds. It's titles like these that will drive the medium forward, both in terms of accessibility and also interest from the traditionally non-gaming audience.

Turning what has been traditionally a solitary activity – and online multiplayer really doesn't count when you're talking about non-gamers – into an open and welcoming social activity is doing wonderful things. I'm looking forward to the multiplayer innovations of the future, and I think my wife may be doing exactly the same.

On the new generation of consoles, it's difficult to get excited about multiplayer games. But I, for one, am looking forward to them. You see, to non-gamers, graphics aren't everything, sound isn't everything, realistic representations of physics aren't everything. Fun is the be all and end all, regardless of how sophisticated it is or isn't, and that has to be tied into social interaction. That's why multiplayer games work so well. I'll have just as much fun on throwaway social games like *Buzz* as I will on any of the

Fun is the be all and end all, regardless of how sophisticated it is or isn't, and that has to be tied into social interaction.

hardcore-oriented games that have been announced. I know for a fact that Danielle, and our friends, will have even more. [COMMENTS](#)

Hitchhiker is a freelance gaming journalist who wants videogames to try harder, but recognises that videogamers need to as well. He hangs out at www.alwaysblack.com, in between winning wars and missing his Granddad.



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My gamer lady

by Bruce Nielson

I admit it. I'm a nerd and I like it that way. If women like big muscled men because evolution adapted them to be attracted to the strongest hunters during our hunter/gather phase, a thousand years from now, women will be attracted to guys with taped eyeglasses and fetishes for *Lord of the Rings*, because – let's face it - nerds now rule the world!

So why, you might ask, did I carefully hide my nerdism from the women I tried to get dates with? You see, I didn't look like a nerd. As long as I didn't open my big mouth and start talking about computer games, girls thought I was a reasonably normal guy. I'm pretty sure quite a few women secretly never went out with me again when they discovered my dark secret. I quickly learned that potential dates would stay "potential" unless I learned to obscure that part of me.

Like Henry Higgins of *My Fair Lady*, I realized I would have to make my own "gamer" woman. I would find some unsuspecting girl and convince her I was not a nerd, until she married me. **Then**, I would slowly but surely corrupt her

until she, too, found computer games fun. Now, some of you might wonder why I didn't use online dating as a way of finding a woman with similar interests. Bear in mind that back in 1995, when I got married, the internet was novel enough that computer games still didn't normally include internet multiplayer support. Besides, we all know girls don't exist on the internet.

I based my simple plan on an old saying about putting a frog in boiling water. The saying goes that the frog will jump out if you throw it directly in boiling water, but if you turn the temperature up slowly, it will never realize you're boiling it alive. Actually, I'm pretty sure the frog will actually die upon hitting the boiling water, and frankly, only a sicko would boil a frog alive. But that's beside the point.

Following this sage advice, I planned to introduce my girlfriend - soon to be wife – slowly to computer games, until she came to realize what compelling fun she missed all these years. That, or until the computer games numbed her brain and she became a mindless addict. Either would work for my purposes.

Now, the first sign of trouble popped up when my wife attempted to convert me to chick flicks. You see, she made me watch *Steel Magnolias*. Oh, **please**, never let that happen again! I'm still perplexed at how so many famous people could get together and still bore the audience silly! Where was the action? Where was the carnage? Not a single bad guy died! By that point, I could no longer follow the plot due to a case of extreme boredom.

Undaunted by this failed exchange of cultures, I started my wife on simple multiplayer games, like *Warcraft* and *Warcraft II*. She enjoyed these if we played them cooperatively. Did I mention that my wife is really, really competitive? Losing is not an option for her! I still groan every time she breaks out *Scrabble*. I'll never win. Could we at least let me lose in a game that doesn't take 12 hours to play?

Later on, I rather smoothly (well, in my own mind, it was smooth) introduced her to the pseudo-RPG *Gauntlet*. Her Valkyrie and my Conan-like warrior made a good team as we fought, sword and axe in hand, across worlds.

After softening my wife up for years, I decided to introduce her to the Real Thing: A full-fledged roleplaying game. I still remember the day I brought home *Icewind Dale*. It was the year 2000. I held the game in my hands as I rambled excitedly to my wife about it. She had learned to nod and pretend to listen by this point in our marriage. "*Icewind Dale: A Baldur's Gate Engine Adventure*" the box said. A thrill shot through my body. I played *Baldur's Gate* entirely online with my brother the previous year, but I wanted my dear wife – the mother of my children – to experience this intense pleasure this time. Well, actually, I just wanted a more convenient playing partner ...

So, I asked my wife if she'd play with me. Now, I'm not sure what possessed her to agree. Maybe our *Gauntlet* games really softened her up. Maybe she still felt bad over the *Steel Magnolias* incident. Maybe the "good wife" in her felt a willingness to try out something she knew her dear husband loved! My personal theory is she just nodded and said yes while not paying attention. Whatever possessed her that fateful day, my rather lovely, very un-nerdy wife



Maybe she still felt bad over the *Steel Magnolias* incident.

decided to play multiplayer *Icewind Dale* with me. I was thrilled.

Being new to RPGs, I helped her make two characters: a Paladin and Fighter/Thief. Soon, we found ourselves watching each other's back in the Spine of the World while desperately trying to stop a dark plot. Time and again, her Paladin and Thief proved they could kick tail and take names. Playing networked, I was physically sitting near her. I kept an eye on how she responded to the game - she was enjoying herself! *Icewind Dale's* simple but addictive combat mixed with a strong storyline made it the perfect RPG to introduce to a non-Gamer. I patted myself on the back for my choice of game.

Eventually, we learned from a lich that the evil we sought was a demon that escaped from one of *D&D's* numerous hells. We worked together to hunt it down and confront it in its lair. A fight ensued. It took a few tries, but we prevailed and forced the demon back to his proper home. As the ending cut

scene rolled, a sense of accomplishment rolled over me. My dear wife had played an entire RPG with me and had fun doing it!

As the narrator at the end of the game told of what happened to our party after the adventure, his voice began to change. The narrator's voice grew deep and cold. It became the voice of the demon. It swore vengeance on us. It would hunt us down when it returned. It would have its revenge! What an awesome ending to a fantastic game!

"That was an awful ending!" my wife shrieked in protest. "I can't believe I just wasted all that time for **that** ending! That was horrible! Where's the happy ending? Where's the happily ever after? Nobody even fell in love! I'm never playing another one of these games again!"

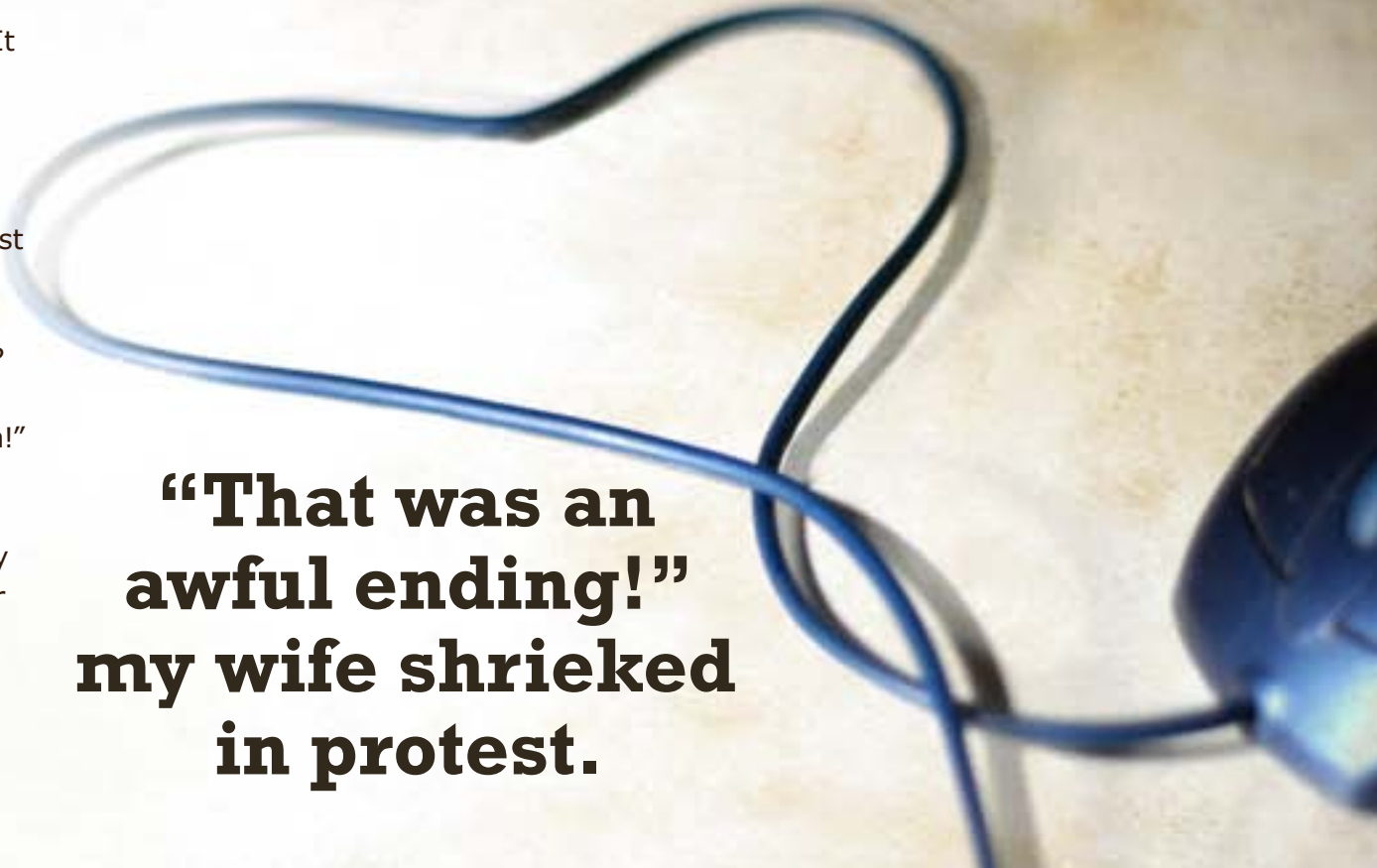
And thus my master plan went down in flames. True to her word, since that day she has never played another computer game. Today, when asked about my greatest memory with my wife, I say,

"When my wife played *Icewind Dale* with me." If you ask her about it you'll get an eye roll and a "hmmph" out of her. Well, at least now I have an excuse never to watch *Steel Magnolias* again.

[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.



**“That was an awful ending!”
my wife shrieked
in protest.**

INFINITE

Princesses

by Kyle Orland

A lot is made these days about the new social revolution in videogames. The conventional wisdom goes something like this: Games used to mainly be a solitary experience for socially reclusive, nerdy kids who preferred sitting in a dark basement to interacting with the outside world, but today's online first-person shooters and massively multiplayer RPGs allow gamers to come out of the basement and forge relationships in the warm cathode light of LAN parties and dungeon raids.

Anyone who actually grew up with games knows this is a bunch of hooey. Social interaction has always been a part of gaming. From drunken frat boys betting on Pong tournaments to school kids fighting side by side as *Ninja Turtles* to crowds of eager teens placing their coins on a weathered *Street Fighter 2* cabinet, the socializing influence of multiplayer games predates recent telecommunications advances by decades.

But discussions of the deep, personal connections that can be made through multiplayer gaming usually gloss over

the deep, personal connections that can also be made through single player gaming. In fact, one single player game in particular helped me connect to two of the most important people in my life - and I didn't even realize it until I played *Super Mario 64 DS*.

Let me preface this by saying I'm a fan of *Super Mario 64* the same way that Picasso was a fan of painting. This was a game I had happily spent hundreds of hours playing, watching, talking about and even writing at length about. So, the idea of a portable Nintendo DS remake of the game was exciting, to say the least. But, once I actually got my hands on the game, the initial thrill of a portable, 3-D Mario experience quickly gave way to boredom.

I tried to blame my sudden disinterest on any number of mitigating factors - the portable version's difficult controls, the crushing weight of my own high expectations, the numbing passage of time and experience. But when I really analyzed it, one thing made playing

Super Mario 64 on the small screen so much less fun for me than playing it on the big one:

The lack of other people.

When my sister was five, she would find nearly any excuse to spend time with her big brother. For a few months after I got *Super Mario 64*, this usually meant sitting and watching me work toward 120 stars while she tried in vain to get me to play with her instead. Sure, she would watch with mild interest as I played through Tick Tock Clock for what probably seemed like the millionth time, but the way she saw it, she was battling for attention with the little plumber on the screen.

But the tables turned once she saw the game's ending. Anyone who has seen it can probably imagine the delight it can give a five year old girl. The soaring music; the beautiful princess descending from the heavens; the rising flock of birds; the chaste kiss and the swooning

hero; the giant cake; the ending sequence amazed and delighted my sister like nothing before (or possibly since).

Thus, for the next three years of my life, the words "Save the princess, Kyle" became a common refrain in my house. This one goal usurped all others in the game, from my sister's perspective. She had no interest in seeing Mario run through the desert, or fly through the air, or swim underwater. Who had time to waste time on such things? There were princesses to be saved!

And I was the one to save them. Again. And again. And again. Until the vagaries of the level were seared into my subconscious. Sure, I had other games to play, and other things to do, but the smile on my sister's face as she watched that ending sequence seemed like a good enough reason to put them off. After all, there were princesses to be saved! And I was the one to save them. Again. And again ...



For the next three years of my life, the words "Save the princess, Kyle" became a common refrain in my house.



There was no look of joy on the subway rider next to me when I beat Bowser.

When I met the love of my life in the fall of 2000, she had barely touched a controller in a decade. Like every kid in America in the '80s, she had owned an NES, but somewhere in the intervening years she had let the gaming world pass her by. I was determined to bring her back into this world, as much out of a desire to be with her as a desire to validate the last 10 years of my life. So, after an initial courtship (in which I downplayed my videogame obsession to an absurd degree), I made a case for her to try out my favorite game, *Super Mario 64*.

To say she took to it would be an understatement. Every chance we had some time together would be another chance for her to suggest we break out the good old Nintendo 64. At first, I was overjoyed that this wonderful woman took so easily to my favorite game, but the joy quickly turned to frustration for me, usually because it turned into frustration for her.

The years of videogame atrophy had taken their toll, and her desire to explore

ran up against her inability to complete the next objective. I would try to give helpful advice at first, but that only seemed to add to the frustration. I would try to turn my attention elsewhere when I couldn't bear to silently watch her struggle any longer, but she'd insist I stay and watch while she played. "It's no fun if you're not here," she'd tell me. What could I say to that?

But what love doesn't go through a rough patch? Despite the problems, watching the woman I loved play the game I loved made me feel like I was playing for the first time, even though I never touched the controller. Mario's trials became hers, and her trials became my own, and we connected through shared digital struggle.

It may seem counter-intuitive to say a single player game helped me connect with the people close to me more than any multiplayer game did, but it's true. And as I wrapped up my time with the newer, jazzed up portable version of

Super Mario 64, I realized it was this connection that was missing this time around. There was no look of joy on the subway rider next to me when I beat Bowser. There were no shared shouts of triumph after a hard-earned star. It was just me and my favorite game, alone in the crowd.

I often worry that, as I get older, my ability to play and enjoy games will diminish as my reflexes slow, my fingers stiffen, and my body generally gives way to the ravages of age. But then, I picture an old man sitting on a couch as a new, hungry generation of gamers tears into some new digital world or other. The old man laughs and screams and winces and throws tantrums right along with the children on his floor, living vicariously through the vicarious lives of a new generation. And I smile. [COMMENTS](#)

Kyle Orland is a video game freelancer. He writes about the world of video game journalism on his weblog, Video Game Media Watch.

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 game has captured your heart, causing you to forsake all others?

Kyle Orland,
"Infinite Princesses"

Currently, *Advance Wars Dual Strike* has not only captured Kyle Orland's heart, but also two of his cities and the airport.

Bruce Nielson,
"My Gamer Lady"

The first time, it was *Ultima 7*. This game really got me thinking about "games" as a new art form. More recently, *Neverwinter Nights* for its DM-client and content creation tools. We had true "roleplaying" at last.

Mark Wallace,
"Love in the Time of Pixels"

There is more wrenching human drama at work in *EVE Online* than in any dozen other MMOGs put together. Why? Because you're free to do as you please there. As a result, you get to experience more loyalty, heartbreak and passion than in any other virtual world I know.

N. Evan Van Zelfden,
"Tom Hall Makes His Move"

Without shame, without question, without equivocation: *Grim Fandango*. I may weep openly.

Hitchhiker,
"Together Time"

I keep leaving it, only to return with my tail between my legs begging forgiveness, so I guess it has to be *Battlefield 2*. After almost a year of playing, the sheer variation that occurs in each war zone keeps it fresh and I never grow tired of trying to achieve another badge.

JR Sutich,
Contributing Editor

Star Wars: Empire at War. And it will probably remain there until *DOA Extreme Volleyball 2* goes gold.

Joe Blancato,
Content Editor

Ultima Online. My high school GPA never recovered, but love conquers all.

Jon Hayter,
Producer

UO, as well. Wasn't my first game by far, nor my first online game - but man, it was the first one that had me forgetting to eat. *In Mani Ylem baby, In Mani Ylem*.

Julianne Greer,
Executive Editor

I seem to have a fear of commitment. I don't really stick with one game for more than a month or two.

