

the Escapist



SECRET AGENT CANDY MAN

by David Thomas

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The Escapist is an odd beast. There are the fine words of our writers, the fancy art, the sleek back-end. But which is it that brings people back?

Is it the content? Is it the presentation? Is it the feeling of looking at a print magazine, without the clutter? I suspect it's some combination of all these factors, plus some. And I further suspect that combination is completely different for each person.

This is the same for games. The debate over the importance of various aspects of game creation is hot. The quest for the perfect balance of story, gameplay, beautiful graphics, new themes, old favorites is, in essence, one without end. Or perhaps, no **one** end.

So, what do we do in this case? How do you entice people to return?

The thing(s) which bring people back to *The Escapist*, I think, are our strong choices. We didn't go middle of the road on much. We went way different on user

interface; we went way different on art style; we went way different on editorial, at least from the rest of the gaming media.

As such, we're quite polarizing. I get letters each week saying, "I love the look of your magazine – why don't all sites look like this?" Those are sitting right next to letters asking, "Why is your site broken? This is the web, not print!"

Yes, it's risky. But so was making a game in which the object is to roll everything up into a ball to make a star. So was making a game where we all got the chance to rock out on a guitar on our guitar-shaped controller. So was spending four years creating the most beautifully rendered colossi as foes.

Is taking risks the be all, end all method for success? Eh, that's just my opinion. But, in order for you to help form your own, this week's issue of *The Escapist*, "Ludo, Ergo Sum," focuses on the philosophy of game design. Dave Thomas returns this week with an interview with one of the brightest stars in interactive entertainment, Trip Hawkins, discussing everything from

Trip's total fascination with game stores to Digital Chocolate. Mark Wallace talks to luminaries of the ludology v. narratology debate about their recent gameplaying habits, and returned with interesting results. And Allen Varney discusses roleplay theory – tabletop style. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: Regarding your most recent Editor's Note: whether or not games are art is immaterial to their status as speech protected under the First Amendment.

Sincerely,
B. Dorskocil

Dear Mr. Dorskocil: I respectfully disagree. In fact, the question of whether games are, or are not art is

critical to their status as protected speech. In the landmark case *Interactive Digital Software Association v. St. Louis County, Missouri*, the decision at the Court of Appeals turned on whether or not games contained expressive value similar to that possessed by painting, music and literature. The Court ruled that "If the first amendment is versatile enough to shield the painting of Jackson Pollock, music of Arnold Schoenberg, or Jabberwocky verse of Lewis Carroll, we see no reason why the pictures, graphic design, concept art, sounds, music, stories, and narrative present in video games are not entitled to a similar protection," and upheld First Amendment protections for games.

Had the Court of Appeals not found that games could stack up next to Pollock, Schoenberg or Carroll, it's highly likely they **wouldn't** be protected - which was exactly what the district court had decided, before it was overturned. It was for this reason that the reversal led to headlines such as "Video games get 'art' status in the US".

Cheers,
Julianne

From the Lounge: [Re: "Unremembering William" by Tom Rhodes] I took the time to click on your Roger Ebert link, and was dismayed but unsurprised to read the following:

"...I did indeed consider video games inherently inferior to film and literature. There is a structural reason for that: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control.

I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of

those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic."

Wow! Didn't he write the screenplay for a Russ Meyer movie? *Beyond the Valley of the Ultra-vixens*? That's two precious culture-grubbing hours that many people are never going to get back. Unless that was the other guy, the late Gene Siskel.

I would have to say that based on most of the **popular** movies this year — and Ebert has been a tireless champion of the popular movie — most filmgoers aren't lapping up any more of the milk of human kindness or the cream of intellectual civilization than any given gamer. And I have to say I honestly feel my precious cultural time is better spent on *Diablo 2* than on reading *The DaVinci Code*.

Seriously, though. If you are trying to make an apples-to-apples comparison of conventional narrative vehicles vs. computer/video games, what is the basis of comparison? The experiences they provide? Learning? Empathic bonding?

Emotional turmoil? How can you rule out the idea that a game couldn't provide all that? Maybe gaming doesn't have its Shakespeare yet, but that doesn't mean there can't be one.

And don't get me started on the idea of authorial control--far better minds than mine have argued that the idea of the author itself is moot.

Anyhoo. Phew! Had to vent. I enjoyed your article very much. And it's nice to see that you understand that the urge to play is so essential to humanity that no matter the platform, whether it's tic-tac-toe drawn in the sand or Halo 3, games will always be played.

-Dave Allen

From the Lounge: [Re: "A Question of Manners" by Spanner] Your article makes a good point. Especially in these days of the internets, people have lost touch with good manners and often resort to shouting and name-calling right out of the gate.

Fortunately, the people who mind their own business are the norm, but there is a vocal minority that wishes others to conform to their own views of how they should behave or parent or worship. This "Terror of the Few" is what causes most of the problems. So, immediately, the other side springs up, usually much more coherent, but not usually arguing from a position of overwhelming passions (in all but rare instances). Thus, conflict.

As long as there are good intentions, the road to hell will be paved with them.

-Tom Rhodes





SECRET AGENT CANDY MAN

by David Thomas

Trip Hawkins is deep in a secure underground vault, standing in a telephone booth, talking into his shoe.

This is probably not true. But it's how I image the man on the other end of the phone - the guy who started Electronic Arts and 3DO, launched the *Madden* NFL game franchise, and now runs the mobile entertainment outfit Digital Chocolate. Because Trip (yes, even the people that don't know William Hawkins III just feel compelled to call him Trip) inspires a kind of crazy imagination in the people around him and because he really does have a secret formula so valuable, writing about its existence must make him a target for international rings of corporate spies.

So, maybe Trip's not pulling a Maxwell Smart when he answers the phone to do this interview. Maybe he's more a James Bond, wearing a white tux, sipping a martini and playing baccarat in Morocco as he answers my questions. And maybe that secret formula he tells me is locked safely in his computer is actually microscopically etched on a titanium plate, tucked inside a lambskin attaché, secured to his hand with molybdenum handcuffs. Really, he's probably just sitting in his office in San Mateo talking on a speakerphone.

All I know for sure is Trip wants to explain what's wrong with *Madden*, why companies shouldn't follow EA just because it's successful and provide a little insight into what happened to society between the time people moved out of mud huts and started telecommuting on the internet.

Most of all, Trip wants to talk about games.

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**His real love
was games.**

First Cinematic: Trip Dreams Big

If you wanted to be one of the people who would shape the personal computer revolution, being born in 1953 would be a good start. You'd be old enough to experience things like the launch of the Apple II, and young and foolish enough to believe these clunky new hobby gadgets would change everything.

Of course, it would also help if you were a little different than the other baby boomers. In fact, it would help if you were a lot like Trip.

"Basically, I grew up in the golden age of television and didn't really find television to be all that great."

Sure, he'd sit down for an episode of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* or catch a Bond flick. But his real love was games.

"I'm just such a complete and total game nut - I'm the kind of guy that likes to go to a board game store and spend hours in there looking at every single game that they have in inventory. I'll buy three, four, five games. I've got huge piles of board games my house. I play a lot of videogames and I play internet

games and mobile games and games, games, games, games! It just really doesn't matter what form it's in. I just enjoy every sort of game there is."

A card-carrying game nerd, Hawkins played *D&D* and enjoyed the Avalon Hill war games. He'd even crack open a business simulation game if it promised a little fun.

"And then the really big love for me was sports simulation."

In a time when computers were thought of as code-breaking machines or science fiction information processors that ate paper punch cards and produced teletype reports, Trip's idea of sports simulation was firmly rooted in a pencil and paper card game called *Strat-O-Matic*.

Although he enjoyed the tax accountant-like tabulating and ledgering required to simulate a pro sport game on paper, it wasn't long before a piece of technology with a *Star Wars*-sounding name showed up with a picture of a better gaming through computing. In 1971, Trip encountered a PDP-8, the early

computer hobby kit that was not much more than a box with some toggle switches. No mouse, no monitor and you programmed it by changing the wiring. If the young Hawkins had been Newton, this would have been the part of the story where the apple hit him in the head.

"So, when I first saw a computer I had this 'ah ha!' moment where I said, 'Hey, this is a calculating device and we can bury all the gaming machinery inside the box and we can make real life in a box and just paint pretty pictures on a TV screen.'

"This was within an hour of seeing my first computer in 1971."

By the time he'd reached college at Harvard, Trip had convinced the administration to let him make up his own major in strategy and applied game theory and was preparing to start a little game company. He even set a date - by 1982, the world would get the business that would become known as Electronic Arts.

"So, it was actually in 1975 that I decided that I would start the game company in 1982. I literally pegged it seven years in advance."

In the era of dot com billionaires and equity rich programming whiz kids, it's hard to image just how provocative this idea was. At that time, if you told people computers were going to make everything from typewriters to travel agents obsolete, they would have looked at you like you were crazy. Crazy like a game developer these days saying he's going to build a moon ship. Some people are just ahead of the curve.

"Everyone has always looked at me like I'm crazy. They're still looking at me like I'm crazy. And, of course, I've always felt like I've been doing things that other people think are pretty nerdy and geeky. So, I just guarantee you, back then, it seemed really nerdy and really geeky."

Cinematic 2: Trip Makes a Football Game

"Here's what I totally believe..."

It's 20 minutes into the interview and Trip is getting wound up. Recalling the electric fire of certainty he felt when he launched EA puts him into the entrepreneur's zone. He's ready to play.

"I believe that I was much more alive and engaged as a human being because of the interactivity of gaming compared to the passivity of television. And I was absolutely convinced if we made it easier for people to understand it audio/visually, I absolutely believed that would cause it to replace television."

An MBA at Stanford and four years at nascent Apple Computer gave Hawkins the chops and the connections he needed to squeeze out the venture capital necessary to start Electronic Arts. In 1982, right on schedule, he opened the doors to the tiny software publisher that would one day dominate the retail landscape.

It would take another seven years, but Trip would finally get his computerized football game. EA would provide the platform that would sell 50 million games over 16 years, spanning pretty much any

machine that ever claimed to run a videogame. Rarely in the history of gaming has anything approached *Madden* in longevity, mass appeal or good old-fashioned financial success.

"*Madden*, without any question, was my biggest success as a creative contributor. And of course, *Madden* is just driven by this sort of childhood interest in football and football games that were stimulated by discovering *Stat-O-Matic*. You can look at *Madden* as *Stat-O-Matic* taken to that next level. The machinery is in the box and there're TV-like visuals on the screen."

You can only image the smug smile Hawkins earned when John Madden declared over a video link to a room full of E3 journalists several years ago that, "When we started out, we tried to make the game like the real thing. These days we try to make real thing like the videogame."

Cinematic 3: Trip Trips on 3DO

If you wanted to write a biography about Trip, the EA and *Madden* stories would provide more than enough drama to fill



**By 1991,
Trip got to
dreaming
again.**

the pages. Neil Armstrong only went to the moon once, after all, and plenty of books have been written about that.

But, by 1991, Trip got to dreaming again, and this time cooked up an idea for a new kind of gaming console company. If games were going to provide the new TV, someone was going to need to build the new TV. And as far as Trip the visionary was concerned, those interactive eyeballs would be glued to a 3DO box.

Packed with all the right ideas - 3-D graphics, CD media and lots of horsepower - it was considered too expensive and was battered by the cheaper, slicker and much better funded PlayStation. After only a few years, the man who launched one of videogaming's biggest commercial successes also oversaw one of its biggest disappointments. 3DO got out the hardware business in '96 and ceased to exist altogether in 2003.

"For me, and this will be the last thing I say about 3DO because it's kind of a waste of our time, there were elements

of failure from 3DO that were very humbling, that were extremely valuable lessons to learn. And without question, I'm applying that experience to what I'm doing with Digital Chocolate."

Cinematic 4: Trip Develops a Taste for Chocolate, Wonka Style

Trip Hawkins could retire. Or, at the very least, he could certainly earn a decent living just talking about the past. But clearly, Trip's not the retiring type. Especially not once he's sat back, reflected on the gaming industry and figured out exactly what it's doing wrong and what it needs to succeed in the future. If Trip has a favorite game, it must be the game of business. And he's back at the table aiming to win again with a decisive pincer-like movement of casual mobile gaming and the best of social networks.

While Trip's vision for EA was to bust up that full-time, live-in relationship we have with our televisions, Digital Chocolate wants a media one-night stand, just a little time to give you a little love.

the Escapist

"The company's named for the concept of instant gratification. And, the slogan is 'Seize the minute.'"

Like that other tortured genius running a chocolate outfit, Willy Wonka, Trip just wants people to be happy.

From years watching the industry develop, Trip has come to the conclusion that hardcore gamers have pretty much screwed up the industry. While trying to cater to the most vocal game buyers, game makers have missed the obvious. Most people don't play the games that top the charts each year.

"For every hardcore gamer, that represents 5 percent of the population," he explained, "there are another 19 consumers that don't want to play anything that is more than casual.

"Taking football, since obviously I've followed football for quite a long time, there are 140 million people who watched the Super Bowl last year. Only 5 million of them bought *Madden Football*."

By comparison, 15 million people play fantasy football and countless others participate in office football polls. This

time, I can only imagine Trip doffing his purple top hat and pointing his cane menacingly toward the obvious: People want to play. But learning something as complicated as *Madden* just isn't going to happen for most people. People want causal entertainment and they want things that let them connect with other people. If they wanted the rigor of playing pro ball, they wouldn't sit around eating chicken wings with their pals and complaining that the half-time commercials weren't funny enough. And they don't want to spend the time of learning or risk the embarrassment of playing *Madden*.

Casual and social means only one thing. And when it comes to mobile, Trip's creative fire goes blue flame.

"I'm looking at what's on the internet and looking at instant messaging and looking at Neopets and looking at fantasy sports and thinking, 'OK, what does that say about what we can do in mobile?' And realizing that with mobile, it quickly went beyond just being a phone. And we now have a \$35 billion global market for text messaging. Why the heck would people do that when it's so much easier to just talk? Why would

they do text messaging? And why did they all want to change their ring tone? And why did they want to share crummy pictures taken with a crummy camera? What's that about?

"What it's about is that we're in the era of social computing, which was preceded by videogaming as a major dimension of computing and preceded by desktop computing and personal computing and mainframe computing. We're now in the era of social computing. In which, for the first time, what's happening with computers, and it started on the internet, is mainstream everyday consumers are using a computing platform on a network, purely for social benefit, not because it is helping them with their work. And not because they are trying to kill time with entertainment. They're using it purely for social contact.

"You saw that with instant messaging and some of the social communities on the internet. And see it with, say, soccer moms doing free Yahoo! email. And again, none of that stuff was going on 10 years ago. So, you saw the first inklings of it on the internet. But the internet with the PC is not truly mass market. Guys like us have them. But there are 6



When it comes to mobile, Trip's creative fire goes blue flame.



Trip wants to put people and personality back into the game.

billion people in the world. And the number of people that use a PC, its in the 100s of millions. It's not even in the billions. And we've already got 2 billion people with mobile phones."

What's happening, he thinks, is people are desperately trying to use technology to reweave the fabric of social life that was ripped apart as people moved from tight knit tribal communities to the sprawling disconnected life of modern dystopia. Call it Mayberry versus the The Sprawl. Ever the businessman, Trip just wants to put a little Floyd back in the barbershop, Barney in the sheriff's office and Gomer at the pump. Trip wants to put people and personality back into gaming.

"We have all these advancements from the industrial revolutions, the transportation revolution, the media revolution. And, in fact, what has happened is that people have traded that built in intimacy for a car, a television, maybe a prescription to Prozac. So, the mobile phone has just turned into this lifeline.

"You see this, for example, with guys and their buddies. Guys that have been

in a fantasy league on the internet for a while will admit, 'Yeah, if wasn't for that league, we'd never talk to each other. And they'll even say, 'Wow, we've gotten to be good friends because we are in this league together.' But it's kind of like they to have this excuse because it's not as likely that a guy is just going to call up another guy and say, 'Hey, I'm feeling really lonely, can we have an intimate chat?'"

When Trip talks about social computing, you get that itchy feeling that he's just splicing the same well-worn speech he used to win venture capital.

But if you take a minute to look at, say, the personals on Yahoo!, you start to see that in fine Trip fashion, his precision of perception is so focused, it just comes off like marketing copy. Hundreds and thousands of men and women in your area can't get dates. And they've resorted to posting pictures of themselves and databasing their vitals for convenient searching.

In a way, it's sad to view the parade of lonely people who just want to reach out and touch someone. Then again, it's heartening to see the people who file



internet personals are not shut-ins with bad teeth and unfortunate taste in '80s hair styles. Nope. They're people just like you. And they just want someone to have dinner with them, take them skiing, check out London theater or maybe spend some time playing a game.

If things work out the way Trip wants, all those lonely people will play a game produced by Digital Chocolate. And in the hyperbole of a company named after a legally addictive substance, it looks like DC might have unlocked the formula for the Everlasting Gobstopper.

Cinematic 5: Trip Sees the Light

"I spent, as you know, 30 years on the Holy Grail of fidelity," Trip explains, setting up his conversion to the new faith. "It was always about, 'By God, we're gonna make this look and feel like television!' So, I spent 30 years doing that.

"It was only through Digital Chocolate that I realized the truth. When I was a kid, it was really the social contact of gameplay that was the most important thing to me."

Getting game content onto the billions of mobile handsets in the world isn't exactly business genius. Loads of companies have realized that selling videogames to even a small percentage of the horde of mobile phones users would lead to Scrooge McDuck piles of cash. What Hawkins figured out was trying to stuff the EA graphics-matter-most model onto the crummy little screen of the average cell phone was about as sensible as hoping to sell haute French cuisine through McDonald's. What people want on their cell phones isn't ESPN shrunk down to business card size.

No, what people need is something like the Mobile League Sports Network.

Digital Chocolate's MLSN approaches sports as a social network, like guys talking in a bar rather than as a profession, along the lines of *Madden*. Instead of mastering juke sticks and quarterback vision, players use their cell phones to do things like pick who will win an upcoming game and brag about the results. Instead of trying to put players in the game, Digital Chocolate just wants to skip to the part where you talk about who won.

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Of course, getting guys to interact with a game about sports sounds like an easy bet, sort of like the early internet entrepreneurs figuring a global computer network would be the perfect medium for selling and distributing porn. But what about all those non-sports-loving mobile phone customers? What about all the women?

Not being the kind of guy to leave a huge market segment untapped, Trip has Digital Chocolate working another killer app - welcome to *AvaFlirting*.

Combining *The Sims* with IM, *AvaFlirting* hopes to provide modern men and women with a whole new way of giggling and casting a sultry glance. Players simply create a tiny avatar on their phone. This avatar can carry animated messages to other players, showing up on someone's phone with a little jig or blowing a kiss. But enhanced buddy icons are only the beginning.

"Suppose I set up my avatar and I close the application because my plane has to leave. And I get off the plane at the other end and I open up the app and there's my avatar and he's in a really grumpy mood. And it turns out he's been

on a date with another avatar. And it gives me this little blow-by-blow about what happened on the date, what the other avatar looks like. And apparently, it didn't go very well. Or, maybe my avatar is jumping up and down with glee. He has this really hot date with another avatar and the other avatar has invited him to go to Las Vegas and he's checking in with you to find out if you think it's OK for the avatar to go to Las Vegas. And you say yes, and you can check back later to see what happened in Vegas."

Horny avatars and men learning to open up over online chat about box scores don't exactly ring bells for gamers weaned on frame rates and epic storylines. But Trip, always in fine fashion and always the sports fan, points like Babe Ruth to the outfield bleachers and all but promises a home run.

"Social games for mobile will end up being a bigger industry than conventional games as we know them today. And this is about as radical a statement as if it was 1977 and I was saying that personal computing would be bigger than mainframe computing. It is

going to happen, for a lot of the same reasons."

At this point, he laughs.

Cinematic 6: The Big Finale - Trip Reveals His Secret

So what's the big secret? What's the unknown ingredient in Trip's chocolate? Oompah loompahs?

We already know that people want to reach out and touch someone in bite-sized chunks. A smile from a pretty girl or a wink from a cute guy still gets your blood going more than watching King Kong tear a T-Rex in two. The way Trip pitches, you wish you had a couple of million dollars to venture in his vision.

But it turns out there's more to it than the psych 101 theory on human loneliness and alienation. Just having the right idea or the right product at the



Trip thinks he's unlocked the alchemical recipe for transforming common business ingredients into market gold.



right time isn't enough. And Trip thinks he's unlocked the alchemical recipe for transforming common business ingredients into market gold. Call it his golden egg, his golden goose or his golden whatever; if Trip is right, this one is priceless.

"Basically, I realized that there was a formula that needed to be followed, almost like a recipe, in order to assure long term business success. And it's very complicated. And I've started codifying this formula

"And after I had it up to about a dozen critical rules, I realized, wow this is actually a really valuable trade secret. So I started documenting it, but I didn't tell anybody. And I basically told the board of directors and I told the management team, 'Look this is going to turn out to be a valuable trade secret. I'm gonna talk freely about some of the things we have to do as a business, but I'm not going to give anyone a copy of the rule book, the recipe. But if I get hit by a bus, you'll just have to break into my computer, you'll find it there.'

"That little recipe now has 58 rules in it. And, like I said, it's the only time my career I've come up with something that I feel like is a relevant trade secret. So, we'll see how it turns out!

"But if Digital Chocolate becomes a success, it will have almost everything to do with that trade secret."

Sound familiar? Trip is finally developing his biggest game of all - the successful business simulation, the *Madden* of making money. And as he works on polishing the rules, all he needs is a good story to wrap around the rulebook - a secret stored on his computer, we can only imagine, down deep the in vault, next to the phone booth sitting on the banks of a swirling river of pure chocolate. [COMMENTS](#)

David Thomas is the founder of the International Game Journalists Association. He also provides commentary and criticism at buzzcut.com.

the Play's Thing the

by Mark Wallace



What's in a game? For those of us who are game buffs - in much the same way the cool kids were movie buffs in the latter part of the 20th century - it's a fascinating question. What makes a great game such a compelling experience? Is it that you're in the "flow" described by unpronounceable psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, that state of play (or work, for that matter) in which you're absorbed so completely, you enter a Zen-like state of oneness with your task? Or is it that you're caught up in the story, in the moral choices forced on your character, the moments of vulnerability and triumph, of uncertainty and resolution, the tale that keeps you glued to your console long enough to beat the next boss, reach the next level and find out what the next chapter holds?

Though you might not weigh these issues each time you log into *World of Warcraft* or pop that *Halo* CD into your Xbox, a number of game designers, researchers and other academics have

been quietly debating such ideas for last five or 10 years. They fall roughly into two camps: Ludologists, who feel that only perfectly balanced gameplay can create the kind of "flow" that makes a game truly great, and narratologists, who feel that story is king and even the most balanced game mechanics can't make up for an empty main character and mindless hordes of enemies.

Of course, those reductive descriptions don't begin to get at the subtleties of the debate. And for those of us who judge our games more by experience than by two-dollar words, reading a stack of academic papers doesn't necessarily help. So, to shed some more light on some of these ideas, I contacted four prominent game theorists and designers to ask them not whether they thought the key to the puzzle lay in either gameplay or story, but a much more important question: What games are you playing lately, and why? Of course, I couldn't resist following up with a query on theory. I leave it to you, dear reader,

to determine which set of answers do more to settle these kinds of questions - or whether they need to be settled at all.

Gonzalo Frasca is the guy who started it all, at least formally - though, these days, he wishes he hadn't. A researcher at the Center for Computer Games Research at the IT University in Copenhagen and co-founder and Senior Producer at Powerful Robot Games, it was Frasca's 1999 paper, "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative," that more or less kicked off the debate. Frasca's newest take on things is refreshingly all-encompassing: "As the reluctant father of the term 'ludology,' all I can say is that there are really not two camps at all," he told me. "People can favor different approaches."

True to his roots in the gameplay camp, though, Frasca's choice of games in recent months has leaned toward the kind of story-less action found in *Katamari Damacy*. Why? "I love when the katamari rolls over people," Frasca says. "It's the closest it gets to when I tortured ants as a kid." *Animal Crossing*

and *The Rub Rabbits* are also in Frasca's DS. *Rabbits*, also known as *Where Do Babies Come From?*, is basically a dating puzzle game. "When well done, minigames are the equivalent of poetry," Frasca says. "The essence of the mechanics and the aesthetics, in a small package."

As to ludology and narratology, Frasca sees dangers in leaning too heavily on either. "We can learn from storytelling, but the main danger is trying to mimic too much," he says. "I admire people like Chris Crawford, Greg Costikyan, Ian Bogost and Eric Zimmerman. Their camp [- people pushing the boundaries of innovative gameplay

and storytelling -] is much cooler than arguing if games are stories or not."

Espen Aarseth is unabashed in calling himself a narratologist. Building on the theories of French literary theorist Gerard Genette and narrative theorist Seymour Chatman, Aarseth's work is really about how literature may be generated by gameplay mechanics in contexts from the I Ching to the FPS. For



**As to
ludology and
narratology,
Frasca sees
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leaning too
heavily on
either.**



Aarseth, gameplay is part and parcel of what makes the story; in some senses, it **is** the story.

Though Aarseth's thinking may sound like it's miles above the surface of the world we gamers occupy, he's recently played his way through both *F.E.A.R.* and *Age of Empires III* (which, he goes out of the way to note, can be beat even on its hardest level, if you just keep some water between you and the AI). He's been revisiting *Half-Life: Opposing Force* in recent months, and has dipped his toe in *The Movies* and *Sid Meier's Civilization IV*. With his class at the IT University of Copenhagen, he plays *Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory*. Does this game give special insights into narrative as it relates to gameplay? Not necessarily. "It is a good introduction to team-based FPS, and is more forgiving than *Counter-Strike*," Aarseth says.

Jesper Juul is a game designer and author of the book *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Though he's asserted in the past

that "computer games do not tell good stories," nowadays he's more likely to tell you the battle between story and mechanics doesn't really matter - or never really existed in the first place. *Fahrenheit*, which he's been playing recently, certainly tries, though Juul notes, "I want to like it, but I'm not quite sure." Also in rotation are *Donkey Konga* ("Still the greatest little social game in good company"), and *Advance Wars 2: Black Hole Rising*, which has surprised him. "I believe that a turn-based strategy game shouldn't work today, but [*Black Hole Rising*] really does," he says.

"I [have] real trouble identifying with this discussion anymore," Juul says of the ludology/narratology debate. "At the end of the day, it consists of two parts: Real issues such as, 'When and how does the fiction of a game matter for players?' and a plain battle of words that tells us nothing about games, but is mostly about how to define narrative. The games I play always come before the theory. I don't want to become a game snob."

Mark Barrett is a writer and designer who's worked on the story design and other aspects of games, like the *Settlers* series, *The Nations*, and adventure title *Dark Side of the Moon*. Like the other people I talked to for this article, Barrett seemingly plays against type: The game that's keeping his GameCube hot these days is snowboarding title *SSX On Tour*. I mean, how much **story** can a game like that offer?

And like everyone else, Barrett takes issue with the straw man I set up at the beginning of this piece. "My take on the ludology/narratology debate has always been that it's a clever and completely false dichotomy," he says. "If what you're into is talking about interactive entertainment, then it's endlessly fertile ground.


"If what you're into is making interactive entertainment, it's literarily meaningless."

Barrett compares the argument to an aircraft manufacturer debating whether to make cargo-only jets or passenger-only jets, but not variants. "You can

imagine how the cargo-loading union or the travel industry would vote if forced to choose, but the choice would obviously be a false one. And that's exactly what's happened in interactive with the ludology/narratology debate. People with vested interests have succeeded in putting forward a masturbatory, ego-driven, politically-motivated debate that is never going to help anyone make a better interactive product."

So, the next time someone asks you whether storyline or gameplay is more important to creating a great game, tell them they're barking up the wrong debate. One doesn't exist without the other. If it did, you'd either be watching a TV show or just flipping a coin. But with games, all the answers lie right at your fingertips. All you have to do is play. [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.*



People with vested interests have succeeded in putting forward a masturbatory, ego-driven, politically-motivated debate that is never going to help anyone make a better interactive product.

MY EYES GLAZE OVER

Roleplaying theory for
short attention spans

by Allen Varney

Are you a Gamist, a Narrativist or a Simulationist? Do you generally favor Actor, Author or Director stance? Do your chosen reward system, your IIEE (Intent, Initiation, Execution and Effect) and other Techniques support your Creative Agenda?

These are terms used by paper-and-dice roleplaying theorists. When you say, "I swing my sword at the biggest orc," these people analyze, with Jesuit rigor, what you really mean and why.

Tabletop roleplaying games (RPGs) are currently enjoying a Golden Age of design and theory, prompted by the stagnation of commercial RPG publishing. Over the last decade, hundreds of retail game stores have shut down; the surviving stores are rebounding, but they're carrying fewer RPGs, and, in fact, they could make more money selling knitting needles. Print runs for new RPG books are low, if no longer declining. Attendance at the leading convention is flat. A deceptively upbeat *Sacramento Bee* article estimates the market in 2004 at \$36 million, down perhaps \$100 million from the mid-

1980s. Tabletop RPGs aren't dying, but they're hardly thriving.

Except online, where dozens of passionate designers are revolutionizing the field. These low-profile independents create small, brilliantly original little games, nurture them like hothouse orchids, and post them free or sell them cheap in PDF format. And in online forums as highflown as a philosophe's salon, they're collectively refining a critical apparatus, a theoretical framework to classify game systems and diagnose "dysfunctional roleplaying."

Understand: These indie theorists and their games reach a bare fraction of the roleplaying audience. They're the nichiest of niche players. Gamers sharply distinguish indie games from so-called mainstream RPGs, where "mainstream" connotes an audience of a few thousand instead of a few hundred. If mainstream designers live a threadbare existence, indies are positively monastic. A few earn hobby-level incomes - about what you might earn, say, selling collectibles on eBay part-time. The rest are devoted hobbyists, "amateurs" in the best sense.

But they're doing work that may turn out to be quite valuable, both for paper and online games. In the same way RPGs use rules to forestall childish cowboy-and-Indian arguments - "I hit you!" "Nuh-uh!" - theorists develop terminology to describe whether a given game helps players achieve their goals. This discourages vacuous Usenet-style arguments - "Your game sucks!" "My game rules!" - or at least replaces those arguments with "Your game is Gamist!" "My game is Narrativist!" The theorists' overall goals are to enhance communication between gamers, inspire new designs and relate RPGs to other media. Obviously their findings could help a thoughtful MMORPG designer.

Still, though the theory is useful, reading it can be a slog. For sheer cussed opacity, the articles don't rank with Derrida or Baudrillard, but.... Try this: Start a stopwatch, then browse a theory article - for example, "GNS and Other Matters of Roleplaying Theory" by Ron Edwards. Count the seconds until you mutter, "Sheesh, get a job." If you never say that - if you enjoy ideas like this -

In many cases, a given genre label will convey to a close group of people a fairly tight combination of values for these variables [of setting, plot, situation and character]. However, the same genre label loses its power to inform as you add more people to the mix, especially since most labels have switched meanings radically more than once. And even more importantly, new combinations of values for the key variables may be perfectly functional, even when they do not correspond to any recognized genre label.

- you'll enjoy your new friends in the salon. For the rest of us, here is a brief, relatively painless overview, although if your Time to Sheesh was less than 20 seconds, skip it.

Threefold Model, GNS, The Big Model
Roleplaying theory springs from the commonsense observation that gamers roleplay for different reasons.

Many online gamers know about UK professor Richard Bartle's 1990 classification of MUD players as



Gamers roleplay for different reasons.

achievers, explorers, socializers or killers. Many analysts have followed Bartle, notably Stanford doctoral student Nicholas Yee and his Daedalus Project. In paper games, the idea of classifying players dates to 1980, when Glenn Blacow suggested four basic motives of RPG players: roleplaying, storytelling, powergaming and wargaming.

As developed in the Usenet newsgroup **rec.games.frp.advocacy** in the late 1990s, these four approaches shrank to a Threefold Model, which christened them Simulationist, Dramatist and Gamist. Avid roleplayers on The Forge forums revised the model. Game designer Ron Edwards renamed the Dramatist approach "Narrativist," and the theory gained prominence as GNS (Gamist-Narrativist-Simulationist). Lately, Edwards and the Forge-ites have been pounding out "the Big Model," a comprehensive GNS replacement.

The Big Model characterizes roleplaying as a social contract among players to explore a shared imagining composed of five elements: Character, Setting, Situation, System (the actual game rules) and Color (atmospheric nuances).

The group's "demonstrated goals and desired feedback during play" constitute the all-important **Creative Agenda**, which encompasses the GNS framework mentioned above. GNS and the Creative Agenda describe the kinds of fun that players want from a particular game.

GNS postulates three basic outlooks that shape any given action in an RPG, and to a lesser extent characterize players' overall styles:

- **Gamist** players like to overcome obstacles, gain power or increased options, and "win."
- **Narrativists** like to shape their roleplaying sessions to create a good story or examine a dramatic theme.
- **Simulationists** want their character's behavior and circumstances to follow a believable, consistent, or "realistic" logic.

All three outlooks are equally valid. Edwards asserts a given set of game rules cannot satisfy all three outlooks at once. The system's **Techniques** should be "coherent," focused to support a

single outlook. "Techniques include IIEE, Drama/Karma/Fortune, search time and handling time, narration apportioning, reward system, points of contact, character components, scene framing, currency among the character components and much more." (GNS glossary.) If the players in the group have incompatible outlooks, or an outlook incompatible with the game's Techniques, the game won't satisfy them.

Players may also clash if they commonly employ **Stances** that conflict with one another's expectations. "Stance" describes the way you decide what your character does at a given moment:

- In **Actor** Stance, you determine your character's decisions and actions using only knowledge and perceptions the character would have.
- In **Author** Stance, you choose what you personally want to happen, then retrofit your character's motivations to explain the choice. (If you don't care about an explanation, this is called "Pawn" stance.)





Roleplayers are casualties.

- In **Director** Stance, you determine not only the character's actions but also their context, perhaps including timing or aspects of the environment.

Again, all Stances are valid. Players shift Stances frequently moment by moment, but specific stances are suited to particular games or play styles. For instance, a game that stresses "immersion" (a feeling of being "possessed" by your character) usually calls for Actor Stance. Stances are one tool for achieving GNS goals. If you make decisions in a way contrary to another player's expectations, that could mean trouble for the group.

Stances belong to the **Ephemera** that support the group's Creative Agenda. Other Ephemera include "in-character vs. out-of-character diction and dialogue, referring to texts, sound effects, taking or referring to notes, kibitzing, laughing, praise or disapproval, showing pictures, and anything similar."

There's quite a lot more, but maybe your Time to Sheesh is dropping rapidly. Still, if you've ever been in a roleplaying game

that feels more like a chore than a delight, such analysis can be a lifeline to sanity. The Big Model recognizes and prizes diversity of viewpoints. By understanding and appreciating other players' outlooks, you can more easily adjust your expectations in a game based on those outlooks.

Edwards concludes his seminal essay "GNS and Other Matters of Roleplaying Theory" with a heartfelt discussion of "dysfunctional roleplaying"; his words will resonate with many, many gamers:

I have met dozens, perhaps over a hundred, very experienced roleplayers with this profile: a limited repertoire of games behind him and extremely defensive and turtle-like play tactics. [...] He hunkers down and does nothing unless there's a totally unambiguous lead to follow or a foe to fight. His universal responses include, "My guy doesn't want to," and, "I say nothing."

I have not, in over 20 years of roleplaying, ever seen such a person have a good time roleplaying. I have

seen a lot of groups founder due to the presence of one such participant. Yet they really want to play....

These roleplayers are GNS casualties. [...] They are the victims of incoherent game designs and groups that have not focused their intentions enough. [...] They are simultaneously devoted to and miserable in their hobby.

My goal in developing RPG theory and writing this document is to help people avoid this fate.

The Fruits of Their Effort

Though I'm a professional game designer, GNS theory hasn't directly helped me improve my craft. Partly this is because for two years I've been concerned exclusively with a new edition of the classic RPG *PARANOIA*, an offbeat game that fits awkwardly in the GNS framework. (Forge articles seldom mention *PARANOIA*.)

But many other designers have somehow soldiered on without me. Some, taking strongly to GNS and the Big Model, have

produced amazing work, and I've gleefully stolen many ideas. Don't look for their games in your local store; they're almost all small press, print-on-demand or PDF-only, sold exclusively through e-tailers like Indie Press Revolution, RPGMall and e23. A few highlights from this teeming field:

- *Sorcerer* (Ron Edwards, Adept Press): You have no magic yourself, but you can bind demons to your bidding. How far are you willing to go?
- *Dogs in the Vineyard* (Vincent Baker, Lumpley Games): Mormon(ish) missionaries, "God's Watchdogs," on the 19th-Century frontier, cleansing possessed townsfolk. (Review by Frank Sronce.)
- *My Life With Master* (Paul Czege, Half Meme Press): Stupendously atmospheric and intensely innovative, MLWM casts you as Igor, in service to a harsh nonplayer Master; your characteristics are Weariness, Self-Loathing and Unrequited Love. (Review by Steve Darlington.)

- *Primetime Adventures* (Matt Wilson, Dog-eared Designs): Create your own episodic TV melodrama. (Review by Aaron Stone.)
- *The Shadow of Yesterday* (Clinton Nixon, Anvilwerks): Post-apocalyptic sword-and-sorcery fantasy meets *Wuthering Heights* in this highly original "open source" paper RPG released under a Creative Commons license. (Review by Jeremy Reaban.)
- *Burning Wheel* (Luke Crane, Burning Wheel): Generic fantasy rules system that eats your rules for lunch. (Review by Chris Gunning.)

Find more good indie RPGs, with links, on the RPG.net Wiki.

For major fun, check the contest entries by stunt-flying indie designers who create entire RPGs in one day or one week, or based on two out of four random words suggested by Ron Edwards. All these entries are hosted on 1000 Monkeys 1000 Typewriters.

Want to learn more? Hit The Forge forums. Also check out the RPG.net Roleplaying Open forum and blogs such as *The 20' By 20' Room*, *Attacks of Opportunity*, and *RPG Theory Review*.

[COMMENTS](#)

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





Abandoning the past?

by John Szczepaniak

Game design is a vast subject, especially when considering three decades' worth of trends. Sadly, current trends are often far removed from what went before, prompting the cliché, "they don't make them like they used to." I'm a sincere fan of older "retro" videogames, from Atari to the ZX81. But it's not because of any dislike for modern games or design concepts; I'm eagerly looking forward to *Okami* and *Oblivion*, for example. It's because modern gaming, with a few exceptions, has a tendency to discard everything that went before once something new arrives. I advocate and praise classical games, because within them are wonderful genres, ideas and methods (not to mention aesthetic splendor) that have been left behind as the industry progresses.

It's infamously known that Sony dictates what you can play, and they have a deplorable anti-2-D policy. *Symphony of the Night* nearly went unreleased in America; SCEA allowed it, only because of Konami's arm twisting. Recently, they forced companies like Working Designs and SNK, who traditionally work with 2-D graphics, to release double packs of visually simple games and release single titles at budget prices. The former is now tragically bankrupt, while the latter has found a better friend in Microsoft. This is why *Metal Slug 3* made it stateside on the Xbox but not the PS2.

Microsoft isn't innocent, though. Keith Robinson disapproved of Microsoft putting disclaimers on the Xbox Intellivision *Lives!* compilation, which stated the title was not an indication of "normal Xbox graphics." Are hand drawn sprites really the abhorrent evil the industry believes? I say there is a unique beauty to hand drawn visuals, one which can never be replicated with polygons.

With these shifts in accepted visual standards also comes a change in gameplay mechanics. Where are the flick-screen cell-based adventures of yore, like *Below the Root* or the original *Zelda*? Go and play these oldies for an hour; I defy anyone to claim he didn't have fun. Yet, those in control of the money still feel that investing in simpler ideas is market suicide, which is why we have the plethora of identikit titles currently available. Sometimes, I just want to be restricted to only two axes when I play. Why is a fun game like *Alien Hominid*, which harkens back to *Contra*, greeted with surprise and seen as unusual? I wish people would again be able to regard such games as the norm, not relegated to being curiosities or on handhelds.

There have also been many genre casualties over the years. Text adventures are ignored, FMV was cut short before anyone tapped its full potential, and graphic adventures like *Sam & Max* used to be a staple of PC gaming.

Games, too, are abandoning the notion of "short and sweet," artificially giving the impression of value. I miss the days

of practicing games like *Quackshot* to the point of completing it within an hour; it was no less perfect once mastered. My friends, some of whom are becoming parents with less recreational time, also bemoan increasing game length. Why can't shorter titles be sold alongside the lengthy epics like *GTA*?

Do modern RPGs need to be over 60 hours long? The original *Suikoden* on PS1, an RPG that broke new ground, boasting hundreds of well narrated characters weaved into a complex political story, took me only a weekend to complete! But that didn't stop me from regarding it more highly than SquareEnix's bloated projects. Meanwhile, the extortionately priced *Panzer Dragoon Saga* has an exquisite length of around 20 hours. Its price results from being rightfully regarded as one of the finest examples in the genre, regardless of brevity.

Publishers claim they force changes to suit "market demand." And the result? Longer development times, overworked staff and skyrocketing budgets, which says nothing about the fact I can no longer spend my money on the types of games I want. To quell my

There have also been many genre casualties over the years.





What if companies started making older games again?

disenchantment, I turn to retro games and enjoy previously missed classics. I also contemplate: What if companies started making older games again? I want to frolic blithely in a world where the industry doesn't try to suppress history or old ideas that are no longer mainstream.

But could things be changing? The Revolution will play downloaded NES games. I wonder if Nintendo will release NES development software, creating a Net Yaroze situation where civilians develop homebrew games. Imagine for a moment - the glory days of bedroom coding returning, along with simple, yet fun, games. Microsoft, too, is taking action. Cynics joke that Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved was the best 360 launch title, but Xbox Live Arcade and its simpler games may just be Microsoft's winning coup, this generation. The PC market also looks bright, thanks to Manifesto Games. We might see old fashioned games distributed, thereby

generating focus for older, forgotten styles of play.

I only wish that as a technological plateau is reached and the industry matures, corporations will realize that they can still profit while giving niche players, like myself, the classically styled games we enjoy. Older abandoned genres, shorter play lengths, and 2-D sprite-based games are all still economically viable. This has been proven by the commercial success of retro, and things like Live Arcade. Hopefully, companies are paying attention, and will someday begin developing new games that are a little old fashioned. [COMMENTS](#)

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

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and it's looking increasingly unlikely that we'll ever manage to untangle ourselves from it.

This isn't denial. The opening levels of *Far Cry* were a thing of wonder, as my PC was suddenly generating pictures that were, as daft as this sounds, prettier than real life. I called friends over to my house to see it. We stared in awe. It was **beautiful**. Of course, once the game shifted to indoor locations and the wonderful island vistas became rarer, my interest wandered. *Far Cry* didn't have anything to say.

Christopher Booker, in his seminal tome, *The Seven Basic Plots*, dedicated 30 years to studying the structure of Story, its key proponents and, ultimately, its power.

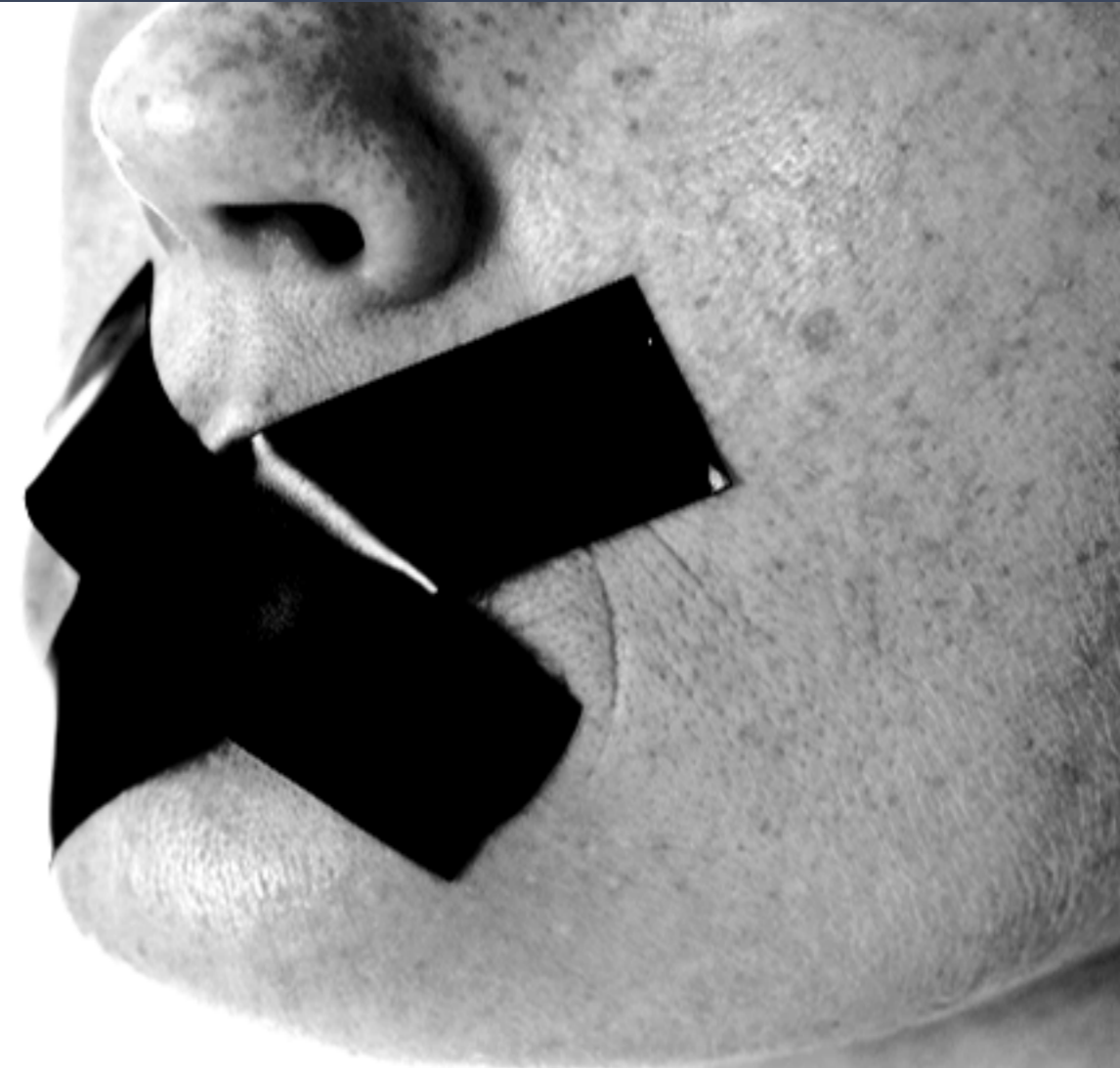
"The more familiar we become with the nature of [the] shaping forms and forces lying beneath the surface of stories, pushing them into patterns and directions which are beyond the storyteller's conscious control, the more we find that we are entering a realm to which recognition of the plots

themselves proves only to have been the gateway. We are in fact uncovering nothing less than a kind of hidden, universal language."

Our visual fixations deny this truth, and prevent our recognition of the significance of games that pass through this gateway.

Irregular *The Escapist* columnist Jim Rossignol (who, incidentally, contends with much of this piece's argument) wrote, describing the philosopher Rorty's interpretation of this consciousness: "He argues that human beings deal with the world through a 'final vocabulary.' This, like a box of tools, is the set of methods we have appropriated for interpreting and reinterpreting the world around us. Our public final vocabulary is the set of ideas and sentences that we use to deal with people and their own ideas."

I contend that the power of a vocabulary, in the context of a game's narrative, is so great, it overwhelms graphics. We connect by hearing others' "final vocabularies" and incorporating them into our own – increasing and



***Far Cry* didn't have
anything to say.**

developing our perceptions, building upon our interpretive vocabulary. Graphics provide spectacle, they can draw us in and they can certainly be the means by which a narrative is delivered. But they are only the messenger. There has to be a message.

The question I have is whether the messenger is ultimately all that important. To demonstrate, an anecdote:

I was recently reviewing the new point and click adventure game, *Ankh*, for a U. K. magazine. In many ways, it was traditional, clearly inspired by the adventure's heyday in the 1990s. While playing, I began to notice a number of similarities with the classic LucasArts adventure, *The Secret of Monkey Island*, and decided to go back and play to see if my 15-year-old memories were accurate. Running through SCUMMVM, I was able to whirr up an ancient copy of the game on my super-fly modern PC, capable of all those mapped bumps and blooming lights, and it blinked into bleeping, chunky existence.

The tiniest palette and the fewest pixels painted crude backdrops and even

cruder characters, barely animated as they slid sideways about the 2-D world. Compare and contrast with *Ankh*, a sweet game of no great import, that managed to keep the common sense of point and click in line with the modernity of a third dimension, animated in tens of thousands of shades and polygons into convincing, cartoon existence. There was no contest.

And so it was, until I spent the better part of an hour trying to find the jail cell in *Ankh's* ancient Egyptian streets.

I knew what it looked like, the shape of the room – I would go down the stairs at the right, give the object I'd just found to the prisoner and he'd help me. I just couldn't find it, no matter how hard I searched.

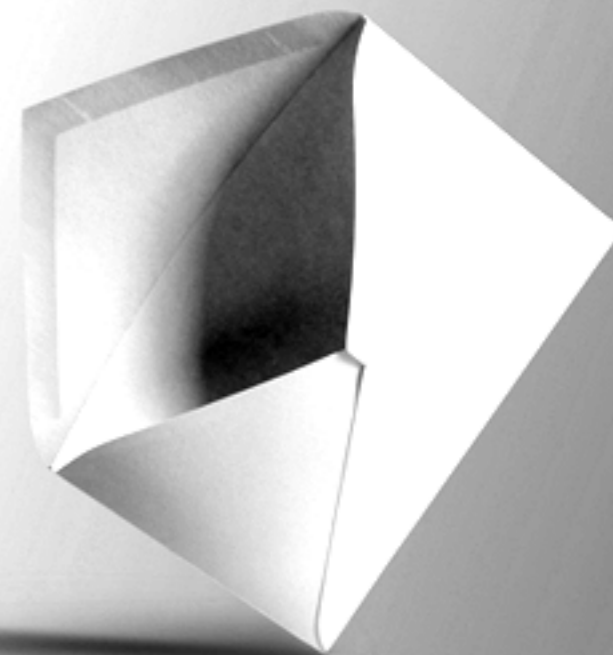
The moment of realization was first embarrassing, but then apocalyptic. The truth was revealed. I saw the light. And it wasn't bump mapped. My mental image of *Monkey Island's* jail was every bit as sophisticated as the textured surfaces before me. In fact, it had to be about 10 minutes into playing *Monkey Island* that I'd stopped noticing the

graphics at all. Even now, two months later, I still picture the cell in the same way. I went back there in *Monkey Island* and saw its reality, but it wasn't enough to replace the elaborated version my own engine developed.

Imagine the person who sits and reads a book, looks up in horror and shouts, "This word 'tree' looks **nothing** like a tree! It looks like some letters on a piece of paper!" and throws the book at the wall, disgusted. He's either a fool or reading a Dan Brown novel. We simply don't work that way. The semiotic power of a word is enough for our beautiful minds to conjure the very best tree imaginable. Literally. We have excellent brains that will always be capable of better graphics than the most exceptional technology (until The Future, obviously, when we'll plug our brains into the machines and then just spend the whole time playing *Space Minesweeper* in Extra-Realism Graphics 5.6). What powers these mental chips is narrative.

Graphics are hugely significant to many people - that can't be ignored. Find the review of a crappy game that doesn't give it a good kick in the pixels. Bad

**The question I
have is whether
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important.**





graphics do tend to be a sign of a lack of care in production. But I challenge you to find the review that says, "This game would be excellent and worth your time, if only the graphics were better. But since they're so poor, don't bother." It doesn't happen. If every other factor of a "good" game is present, the poverty of the pictures will be forgiven. We don't need them – we've already got them fixed upstairs.

But don't believe my witterings. What about games as mindless action? Why would narrative be of any importance if all I wanted to do was run into a room filled with monsters and pummel them with bullets? To this I say, take on the Old Graphics Challenge.

Dig out a favorite single player shooter of five or so years ago that specifically didn't use a strong narrative. So no, you can't have *Half-Life*. And indeed, you're a thousand miles from being allowed to reinstall *Deus Ex*. Put it on, and see how long you stay playing.

Now, find yourself a favorite five-year-old RPG. Heck, go mad, go back eight

years and play *Baldur's Gate*. You'll wander around Candlekeep for a bit, frustrated by the 640x480 resolution and your inability to zoom in and out. But you'll chat with everyone, you'll complete those first few tasks and then it will be time to be off with Gorion. But oh no! He's been killed by those bastards! What's this? Imoen wants to join you. It's just the two of you, now, and the world to explore, villages to visit, people to talk to, quests to complete... And you stopped noticing the graphics somewhere back in Candlekeep.

Oh, come on, eight years is nothing. Go for 13! Install *Sam & Max, Day of the Tentacle*, 15 to boot up *Monkey Island*. Wait, I'll raise you: Eighteen years! *Zak McKracken and the Alien Mindbenders*. Sixteen colors and one of them's magenta. Start a timer to see how long you care – it won't do any good, because you'll forget to look at it as much as you'll forget you're not dressed from head to foot in a virtual reality outfit, walking among the space aliens.

And now, do the same with an 18-year-old, story-less shooter.

There's a mistake above, and I'll recognize it. This is an argument riddled with holes, and I'm happy with that – I believe there's a core truth that needs to be heard. I rather pathetically put in "single player shooter." Multiplayer defeats me. If you want a five-plus-year-old game entirely free from narrative, you've got *Quake III: Arena* and others beside. They are every bit as joyful to play today. Curse them, because my point remains important – despite these exceptions, the key aspect is still missing from the majority of our games.

Perhaps it is all our fault. Perhaps we, en masse, really are so addled, our attention spans are genuinely transitory, only interested in that adrenal high for so long as it lasts, then ready to chase the next fix. Perhaps the three hours of interest *Far Cry* offers is all we desire and all we deserve.

But this cannot be true. Look at the MMOG, a peculiar pile-up of meta- and micro-narrative, sewn together by no narrative at all. You have to spend hundreds of hours to get anywhere, and millions of people are doing so

worldwide. There's a hunger out there for more than graphics – people are looking for that narrative, looking for a shared, cooperative vocabulary.

A game that understands powerful action requires powerful motivation and powerful storytelling. Yes, *Need for Speed* may tirelessly dominate the charts, but look what knocked it from the top spot last month in the U.K.: *Shadow of the Colossus*.

Story has always focused on the Hero, from *Beowulf* onward. Gaming taps into this understanding, and lets us **be** that Hero. But, once you remove the Story, the Hero withers and fades. Booker's weighty work concludes in a similar mind.

"The hero or heroine is he or she who is born to inherit; who is worthy to succeed; who must grow up as fit to take on the torch of life from those who went before. Such is the essence of the task laid on each of us as we come into this world. That is what stories are trying to tell us."

We're willing to code images of the furthest reaches of the galaxy, or delve into the most delicate mysteries of the atom (thank goodness for Will Wright, allowing this bit to work with *Spore*), but I fear the greatest and most important mystery, the power of the narrative, is being grossly ignored. [COMMENTS](#)

John Walker is a games journalist who stalks through the night, telling stories to the innocent and unsuspecting. He also draws a cartoon rabbit here.

There's a hunger out there for more than graphics.



Graphics Matter

by Tim Stevens

Is it wrong, one wonders, to covet someone for their toned abs more so than their mental acuity? Some moralistic person will likely tell you so; the same way holier-than-thou gamers have historically chastened any who would openly show interest in a game, thanks only to its polygonal beauty. Those who don't appreciate beautiful games are wrong; fancy graphics are terrifically important, if only because they inspire people to argue about their merit.

The success of a game relies on many things, not the least of which is brand awareness. Great brand awareness won't save a game from being perceived as miserably bad (see: *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial*) nor will it stop it from being an utter flop (see: *E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial*), but it can go a long way toward giving a game an extra chance of staying out of the bargain bin. Game producers have been acquiring brand awareness by purchasing expensive movie, sports or toy licenses for decades now. But licensing has dubious potential,

at best. Yes, a football game with real teams has a leg up on an unlicensed game with fake ones, but a bad football game is a bad football game, regardless of the players' uniforms.

Then, there are the big-budget advertising campaigns to get the word out, which everybody loves because they result in cool catch phrases. Remember those "UR Not E" advertisements for the original Playstation way back in 1995? They were cool, and surely expensive, yet couldn't stop *Battle Arena Toshinden* from sliding into obscurity. Meanwhile, *Virtua Fighter*, a visually impressive yet virtually unadvertised game, lives on as one of the most popular fighting series of all time.

More recently, companies have turned to the disturbing trend of paying professional celebrities like Paris Hilton to pose for photo ops at launch parties. Anyone who thinks pictures of Paris holding her free Xbox 360 in any way made the console's launch a success is woefully misguided.

So, we have three main techniques at getting the word out. While each can be effective, each has problems. Specifically, these techniques are very expensive and don't do a thing to improve the quality of the game itself. Great graphics, while they may not come cheap, not only help a game generate buzz, but can help to improve its overall quality, as well.

A beautiful game constantly rewards you, the gamer, with new sights and visual experiences, encouraging you to continue your journey and get your money's worth. Gaming is an adventure filled with obstacles and rewards. If a new visual reward, like an overwhelmingly massive boss or a gorgeous looking racecar, makes your eyes widen and your jaw slacken with awe, you'll stick with the game to see what comes next.

Strong graphics help a game deliver a better sense of immersion, sucking you into the adventure. The ubiquitous "health bar" has been the bane of fighting games practically since their inception - an unrealistic on-screen

indicator showing whether your character is 98% healthy or one pixel away from a KO. Great graphics, like in EA's *Fight Night*, let a game ditch the health bar, instead rendering healthy fighters who look strong and weak ones who look ready to pass out.

Effects like this catch peoples' attentions and make them want to know more, even non-gamers. Gaming can get complicated, but everyone can appreciate something that looks good, sounds good and delivers a compelling sensory experience. If you boast to your non-gamer friends about completing the Molten Core dungeon in *World of Warcraft* after an eight-hour marathon session, they'll nod, put on their best fake smiles and start planning an intervention. If you sit them down and show them the sprawling landscapes and gorgeous designs in the game, they might just subscribe.

Great graphics grab your attention, and while other games will always raise the bar and make what's beautiful today look ugly tomorrow, fleeting stardom is about all a game can hope for these days. Of

course, truly great games require more than great graphics, and to put it rather crudely, a polished turd still smells pretty bad, but looking good never hurts. Don't be ashamed of your aesthetic tastes; those who don't marvel over great graphics are missing out. [COMMENTS](#)

Tim Stevens is a freelance gaming journalist. His work can be seen online at Yahoo! Videogames and the Global Gaming League, in print in metro.pop and Co-Ed magazines, and on TV on G4's X-Play.

A beautiful
game
constantly
rewards you.



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's more important to you, story or gameplay?"

Allen Varney, "My Eyes Glaze Over"

What's more important, oxygen or water? Uhh... If we are confining ourselves to games, then hey, surprise, gameplay is more important. The experiences of interacting with a game and of passively experiencing a story are cosmetically similar but fundamentally different; they're different brain-states. Trying to integrate story with gameplay is (as William Gibson remarked in another context) like grafting mosquitoes to wheat plants.

Dave Thomas, "Secret Agent Candy Man"

What I look for in games are nudity and explosions. Is that story or gameplay?

Tim Stevens, "Graphics Matter"

It's gotta be gameplay. They're called "videogames" not "videostories" for a reason, and while a brilliant story can make an otherwise mediocre game good, nothing in my eyes can overcome lame gameplay. While I'd love to see more games deliver stronger storylines, gameplay is king.

John Szczepaniak, "Abandoning the Past?"

When a title combines great gameplay with an amazing story, it's utterly sublime. But when playing games which only excel in one of these areas, I find they cannot function on story alone. For me, they need a solid framework of fun gameplay, from which everything else can flow.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

Neither. It's all about "cloth physics."

Joe Blancato, Content Editor

Story, story, story. A thousand times story. But only if the story's good. If it's not at least on par with a good book, give me some cool mechanics to suffer through bad voice acting.

Jonathan Hayter, Producer

Gameplay, definitely. If I want great stories, I'll read books. I play games for great gameplay.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor

Story - I'm a writer. I need something that will capture my attention and keep me involved, otherwise I'm too easily distracted by other games

