

the Escapist



Casual Friday

I Left My Heart in Rubacava
“A-A-B-A-A-A-CRAP!”

MEET THE TEAM!

Gaming at the **MARGINS**

by Warren Spector

A Thousand Heroes
with Just One Face

by Gearoid Reidy

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Last week, we discussed various theories of game design. We interviewed Trip Hawkins, who began the largest game company in the world, and delved into some of the prominent factors in game design, such as narrative, gameplay and graphics.

This week, we're looking at some of the less glamorous, but no less important, aspects of game development, the ones that often go unnoticed in our conscious thought about a game – the side dialogue, the architecture of the setting and the voice acting. This week, we explore "What's in a Game?"

Additionally, we have the first of a four part series of articles by uber-producer/gaming god/industry insider and generally all-around cool guy, Warren Spector. He's agreed to give his thoughts on the game industry, and the problems and potentialities it faces. Yeah, it's a departure from the topic of this issue,

but it's a fantastic read – all four parts of it over the next four weeks.

Enjoy!



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I don't normally do this but I just wanted to drop you a note and tell you what a great job you're doing with the Escapist. The articles are consistently well-written, researched and thoughtful. Your layouts are always great, and the subject matter provocative.

Please keep it up!

Thanks,
-Jon

To the Editor: With all due respect, I must disagree with your assertion that the protection of games under the First Amendment is due to their status as "art."

In fact, the landmark case you cite says nothing of the sort. The Court finds that games are protected speech based on a standard other than the highly subjective question of whether they are art.

The District Court's decision (which can be viewed here: <http://1stam.umn.edu/archive/fedctapp/interactive.pdf>) simply states: "In order to find speech, there must exist both an intent to convey a particularized message and a great likelihood that this message will be understood." That expression need not be political or ideological, but can take the form of entertainment.

Ico was released in September of 2001. *Baldur's Gate II* in September, 2000. Instead of those well-respected examples of the medium, the District Court's 2002 ruling based its judgement of expression on violent clips from *Resident Evil*, *Mortal Kombat*, and *Doom*. Perhaps wrongly, but not surprisingly, the Court found these examples did not

meet the aforementioned standard of expression.

The Appellate Court disagreed, and their comparison of video games with other media is meant to demonstrate that video games utilize some of those same media (music, pictures and writing) in their own construction and thus are capable of the same expression.



the Escapist

There is no description of artistry, and artistic merits are not considered by the Courts.

Sincerely,
-B. Daskocil

To the Editor: Just so there is a chance at correcting a vast overstatement by Trip or, more to the point, to give an appropriate amount of props to the "Real Creators" of the *Madden* Franchise we are still playing versions of today, the only people who should be claiming they created *Madden Football* are:

Jim Simmons
Scott Orr
Richard Hilleman
Kirk Toumanian (sorry if I spelled Kirk's last name incorrectly ... it has been a while since I needed it)

There are many others who came afterward, including myself, who have contributed to the *Madden* Franchise, but Trip's version of *Madden* existed on the Apple //e. It took almost six years to build, and was a commercial failure on the Apple // and IBM PCs of the day. The Sega Genesis version of *Madden*, completed primarily by the names

above, had very little connection with Trip.

Trip should get **huge** props for signing Madden when he did – at the time EA signed Madden, he wasn't the #1 Color Commentator as he would become later on. He was, at that time, more well-known for the Miller Lite Beer commercials that he was a part of where he would burst through scenery to talk some more as the commercial faded out. Lost in all of this is that John Madden was a great football coach ... most people today only know him as an announcer, and will probably think that is why he is being inducted in the Pro Football Hall of Fame later this year.

Love the mag,
-Happy Keller

To the Editor: I'm a bit late to respond to the threat of having no games. After all, I played games.

"The blood was crimson..." as Tom Rhodes started his piece. It is fitting that he should start with an ancient reenactment of spectator games that were eventually banned. And why were they banned? It was because they had a

coarsening, in other words destructive, influence on society.

There are some games that are better not to be played. Just as there are destructive books, TV shows, movies, etc. that should not be read nor watched. But we depend on a mature market to make wise choices. For wherever there is a market, there will be people ready to cater to it. Even if it is illegal.

Thus the existence of games like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Dungeons and Dragons* and other games that are recognized by





many as having a negative effect on the individuals who play them is less an indictment of the gaming industry, as it is of society as a whole. True, for most players that negative affect will be small, offset by other influences in the players' lives, but it is still there. Your magazine has given examples of such negativities in past issues. That is what animates the Cary Nations and the Prohibitionists of today, who want to get rid of the modern equivalent of "devil liquor" out of gaming. But just as Prohibition didn't work, nor is the "War against Drugs" having much success, so banning destructive games without drying up the market for those games will be ineffective.

The proper response to destructive games is not to ban games, rather it is to be creative and make good games that are at worst, fun ways to relax, and at best games that have a positive influence on our lives. Further, it is to show that games affect the people who play them and to show what the affects are, both positive and negative. Thankfully, the state sponsored blood sports of the ancient arena are no longer available, but there will always be

individuals who make unwise choices in the games they play.

A second response is to segregate negative games to the equivalent of the red light districts of yesteryear: a good, consistent rating system will help people recognize and avoid the red light district if they so wish. And no cheating, for though it may confer a temporary financial advantage to the cheater, it also brings on unwanted attention of those who would wish to ban them, which would hurt the industry as a whole.

Personally, before I play a game, I ask "What is this game's message?" "How will it influence me?" Games that deal with destructive themes such as occult or unnecessary violence don't even get opened. Our family had hours of fun years ago when we hooked up a group of Macintoshes over Appletalk (before ethernet became common) and played against each other. I used that as an opportunity to teach my children about what to look for in a game. Now that they are grown, I am pleased to see that for the most part, they make wise choices in the games they play.

-Karl W. Randolph.

In November of 2005, I gave a talk at the Montreal International Game Summit. To say the reaction to my talk was “incendiary” might be something of an overstatement, but not by as much as you might think. I thought I was providing a relatively straightforward counterpoint to what I saw as relatively foolish optimism on the part of many of my peers, the press and industry analysts. “Things will be great in the grand and glorious future,” everyone seemed to be saying. I saw a more precarious and unpredictable future for gaming, and the organizers of the Montreal conference gave me a marvelous international forum to talk about that. (If you want to check out the slides from that talk, they’re posted here - you can also check out talks by other conference participants, which I highly recommend.)

Recently, The Escapist offered me the opportunity to return to the topics I’d discussed and expand on them in a way I couldn’t in a 45 minute lecture. Those of you who attended the Montreal conference will find what follows familiar (though I hope there’s enough new material here to keep you reading). Those of you who didn’t attend the conference can judge for yourself if I’m completely off my rocker, instead of having to depend on press reports and forum posts for your facts.

So, without further ado...

Gaming at the MARGINS

by Warren Spector

We work in a medium of staggering potential. I believe with all my heart in that potential and in the creative capabilities of the people who create, critique and play games.

Our ability to take people places they’ve never been before and allow them to do things they couldn’t do in any other way is hugely powerful. The opportunity to allow players to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes makes us, at least potentially, the most remarkable medium of expression in the history of, well, expression.

And though I sometimes worry that players seem willing — even eager — to settle for the mediocre, the rehashed, the non-interactive experience masquerading as interactivity, I have hope that, as gamers grow up, they will begin to demand more than they did as children or adolescents.

Unfortunately, despite my hopes and our medium’s potential, I have to be honest with you: I often find myself despairing, these days. For all the good, positive signs I see, there are an equal number of problems and pitfalls before us.

Industry analysts project double digit growth in revenues.



We are in a “best of times, worst of times” situation.

It’s the best of times because...

We live in an era of powerful new hardware, sky high sales, \$25 billion in revenue world-wide, new business models and big media interest in what we do, and those big media types both promote our efforts in the press and, increasingly, seek to involve themselves in the creation of games.

But that’s not all. We also live in a time when older players, women and an increasingly international audience mean we’re no longer limited by an audience of adolescent males. As a result, industry analysts project double digit growth in revenues, and we enjoy unprecedented cultural credibility and interest in what we do.

Wow, things look great!

But, it’s also the worst of times

It doesn’t take a genius to see that powerful new hardware is threatening to drive development costs even higher than they already are. To drive sales to

levels that justify those development costs, marketing costs are skyrocketing, too. And, if you’re paying any attention at all, it’s hard not to notice a glut of “product,” not all of it original. We’re awash in licenses, sequels and “me too” games — vain attempts by publishers to increase the odds of breaking even or, dare I say it? Profiting...

Frighteningly, despite the increasing emphasis on the safe, the tried and the true, despite all that “pre-sold property” cluttering the shelves, despite big marketing spends, sales are **not** keeping pace with costs - gamers simply aren’t buying in numbers sufficient to justify what we’re spending. Check out the SEC filings of any publicly traded game developer or publisher — the numbers aren’t pretty.

And that’s not all we face in the way of problems. All that big media attention I mentioned earlier? Well, some of those big media types are stirring up a pot of trouble for us, focusing on the “dangers” of gaming and our ability to influence kids — which leads to legal action and government attention we’d be better off

avoiding. And when they're not stirring up fear, big media players, seeing the potential of the hardware and salivating over industry growth rates that TV and movies will probably never see again, want a piece of our action... again. Didn't we go through this 10 years ago? This time:

- Sumner Redstone buys a controlling interest in Midway.
- TimeWarner starts a game division.
- MTV starts a game division.
- CAA, ICM and other talent agencies hire dedicated game agents to snatch up developer talent and to hook their traditional media clients into this new, lucrative medium.
- Spielberg and **lots** of others at the individual level decide the time is right to try their hands at game development. (We kinda own their core 17-24-year-old male demographic.)

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. If we're not careful, we could end up just another part of the vast, old school entertainment machine.

Still think things look great? Wait — there's more trouble in paradise.

Developers are getting older all the time. Many of us are no longer part of our own target demographic! And just as some of us are looking to, oh, you know, have a life, publishers are looking for ways to keep costs down, asking developers to make quality of life cuts — work longer hours, do increasingly assembly-line-like work - for what amounts to lower pay. And more jobs are being sent overseas all the time.

Will the real future please stand up?

Depending on how you look at things, you can paint a picture of gaming's bright future of growing profits and importance, or one of doom and gloom — of irrelevance and stagnation. Either could be true. Which future is our **real** future? Will we go mainstream or marginal?

The answer to that question will be determined by how we address a series of critical decisions ahead:

How will we deal with the upcoming explosion of platforms? And not just Xbox 360, PS3 and Revolution but PSP, DS, Gizmondo, cell phones, PDAs and who knows what else?

What sort of content will we provide our changing audience? Will we address an excruciatingly audience-limiting lack of diversity in our content?

What will we learn from the business success of online multiplayer gaming? Will we apply those lessons to other game styles and find entirely new ways of funding development and reaching our audience, or will we just keep doing things the way we always have?

Will we even bother to address the myriad social issues facing us? What do we think about gender issues, legal issues and generational issues as they impact developers, publishers and players?



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Being Chased by Carl Edwards at 550 mph

Skydiving
Hang Gliding

White Water Rafting



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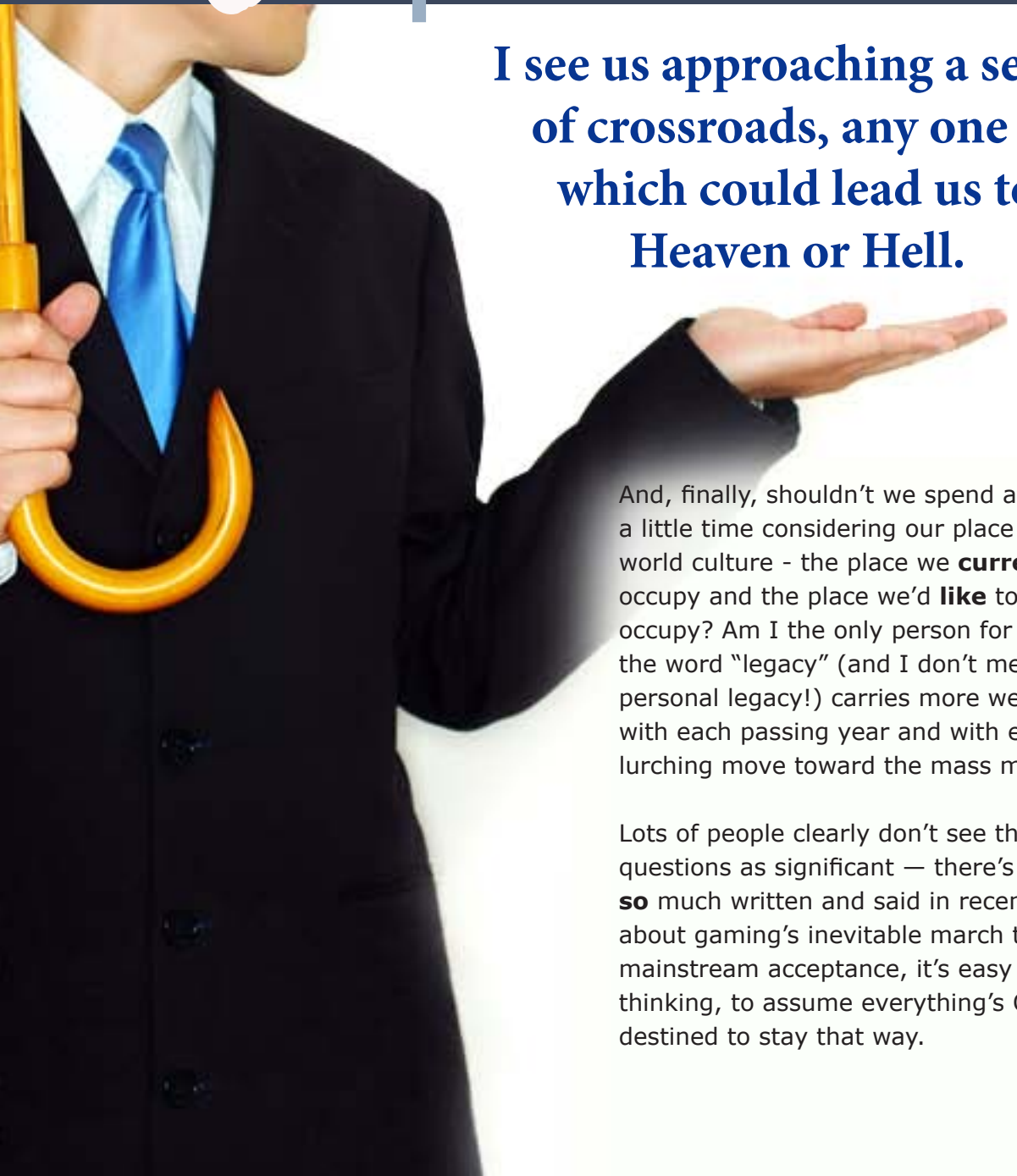
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I see us approaching a series of crossroads, any one of which could lead us to Heaven or Hell.

And, finally, shouldn't we spend at least a little time considering our place in world culture - the place we **currently** occupy and the place we'd **like** to occupy? Am I the only person for whom the word "legacy" (and I don't mean my personal legacy!) carries more weight with each passing year and with each lurching move toward the mass market?

Lots of people clearly don't see these questions as significant — there's been **so** much written and said in recent years about gaming's inevitable march to mainstream acceptance, it's easy to stop thinking, to assume everything's OK and destined to stay that way.

Such an outcome seems far less certain to me than to the true believers. I see us approaching a series of crossroads, any **one** of which could lead us to Heaven or Hell, toward a position as a mainstream medium or toward our traditional position as a marginal industry, a marginal activity for kids and a marginal contributor to world culture.

Racing toward all of these crossroads at once seems like a demand to pause and make conscious decisions about what we want our medium, our business, our lives to be.

Whether we succeed and soar to new heights or fail and return to our status as the marginal medium we used to be will be determined by a host of critical decisions we make over the next few years. (But no pressure...)

Chicken Little or Paul Revere?

Right now, you might be asking yourselves, "Is this guy serious?" Surely, we're not at any risk of losing the ground we've gained over the last 20 years! Surely, we're not headed back to the

margins of social awareness, profitability and creativity!

Well, that's **precisely** what I'm saying and, yes I'm serious as a heart attack. Whether I end up looking like a crazy doomsayer, walking the streets mumbling about the end of the world, or like a patriot who roused people from their slumber to confront and defeat a real threat will depend on which choices we make at the upcoming crossroads. **That** will determine whether gaming remains at or returns to marginal status — as a business, as an art form and as a medium of personal and cultural expression.

And for those of you who think I'm being an alarmist, that media don't rise and fall in the way I'm describing, let me assure you they do. Media move around in cultural significance and profitability all the time. We're not the first medium to face this.

- When was the last time you went to a vaudeville show or listened to a radio drama?



Gaming isn't a fad like the hula hoop or Nehru jackets.

- Have you visited an arcade recently? (OK, I guess there's still Dave & Buster's.)
- How many years has it been since Broadway was a vital part of American mass culture?
- And does anybody outside the world of comic books really think adults are going to embrace "graphic novels" as serious literature anymore? Maybe as fodder for movies, but I doubt the *Spider-man* movies have convinced many librarians to put funny books on their shelves.

Let me be clear. I don't believe we're going to go away — gaming isn't a fad like the hula hoop or Nehru jackets. It's hard to imagine a scenario where gaming just... fades away. We're gonna be OK. It's just that it's relatively easy for me to imagine scenarios where mainstream audiences get sick of us, sick of the **product** we offer them, sick of repetitive, seemingly-but-not-really interactive, emotion-free, slam-bang, U.

S.-centric, urban, hip hop action games and alien invasion scenarios.

In other words, I can see us limiting ourselves to the same subset of adolescent male players we've always reached. And if we do that, it's back to the margins for us.

I went down to the crossroads... Fell down on my knees

Let's get more specific. What "crossroads" are we approaching, and where do the roads branching from these crossroads lead us?

For starters, there's a **Cultural Crossroad**. Games have traditionally been a marginal or niche activity, but now we're moving into the mainstream, which leads to...

A **Generational and Gender Crossroad**. Games are beginning to appeal to a broader audience than ever, which frightens the older, non-gaming generation and places new demands on developers in terms of content. And

we're appealing to more women all the time (finally!). Both of which lead to...

An **Online Crossroad**. What impact will online distribution and social play have on our players, our games and our business? Is there a future for traditional single player games, or will we take the branch in the road that leads to a predominantly or exclusively online and/or multiplayer gaming future?

And just as we're having to deal with these Really Big Issues — as if they weren't enough to challenge us and threaten our future — we face other, more specific crossroad-like choice points, all worth thinking about before we reach them:

There's a **Regional** transition — the increasing importance of foreign markets and foreign developers (defined as "whichever country you're not from"). This has profound ramifications for developers and marketers. Will we pick the easy path of making games for ourselves, or will we adopt a more international attitude? And how will we

take advantage of, or compete with, an international resource pool that's often cheaper and no less gifted than homegrown talent?

There's the upcoming **Platform** transition, of course, but that's not all we face. In addition to the Xbox 360, PS3 and Revolution, there's the increasing importance of cell phones and PDAs (and PCs, of course) as gaming platforms. We're entering a world where players will have more and more ways to access games. Will we stick our head in the sand and assume PC games are separate from console games which are separate from mobile games, and so on?

And when it comes to **Business** issues, there's no shortage of questions and potential transitions:

- Will games continue to be a "blockbuster" business, with every title the equivalent of a big budget summer action movie?
- Will we be dominated by the Big Media players, enviously eyeing our revenue numbers?
- Will we continue to churn out licenses and sequels, or will we find ways to broaden the range of development funding schemes, development budgets and development processes,

thus opening ourselves up to more (and more original) game styles?

- Will we stick to the traditional path to market of Publisher Funding/Big Studio Development/Big Box Retailing, or will we find new ways to reach consumers? Will we create a development culture and a business model that supports the two-guys (or **gals**)-in-a-garage model? Or, should we all plan on lucrative and fulfilling careers as workers bees in a game development hive? Just as the gap between rich and poor is widening in most Western nations (and certainly the United States), the game of game development increasingly

favors the well-off, publisher-funded developer.

And finally, perhaps most importantly, we face a **Content Crossroad**. Gaming, as a medium, has traditionally limited its subject matter to adolescent male fantasies — sports and power fantasies — but now, we have to appeal to a more diverse audience.

In the next installment of this article, we'll look at each of these issues in a bit more detail. [COMMENTS](#)

Warren Spector is the founder of Junction Point Studios. He worked previously with Origin Systems, Looking Glass Studios, TSR and Steve Jackson Games.

Now, we have to appeal to a more diverse audience.



A Thousand Heroes with just one face

by Gearoid Reidy

Film theorists talk about *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* – the idea that every story from the *Bible* to *Star Wars* is the same myth, retold in infinite ways.

The gaming world has its own version. Call it “A Thousand Heroes with Just One Face.”

We meet this hero everywhere. His emotionless delivery is that of a hundred identical anime heroes; his lines are a confusing mix of action movie cliché and plot exposition that would make George Lucas blush.

Take *Resident Evil 4* – a big-name game, a million-seller. When our hero, Leon, goes up against his traitorous former partner, Krauser, in a stunning cut-scene, we’re expecting a good line – something to match the game’s beauty, in which everything from Leon’s hair to Ada Wong’s dress ripples just right. Hell, we’d probably just settle for an old-fashioned Arnie-style one-liner.

Instead, we get, “You’ve lost it completely, Krauser!” “Enough talk. Die, comrade!” and, “Prepare for your death, Leon!”

In an industry that spends ever-increasing amounts of money on ever-diminishing improvements in graphics and sound, *Resident Evil 4* is symptomatic of a very large problem. Despite how far gaming has come, dialog, plot and character, the very essence of storytelling, are still treated as amateur add-ons.

A game like *Resident Evil 4* shouts its plot at us in letters 10 feet high because it doesn’t know any other way. Meanwhile, many gamers just reach for the start button, unable to care.

Games Say the Funniest Things

While no expense is spared in hiring the best professionals to create visuals and audio, the amateurish nature of this industry’s writing is plain to see. Game plots still read like fan fiction. Characters come straight from the Big Book o’ Action Movie Stereotypes. The dialog and voice-acting in the majority of games are so poor that, like in B-movies, bad dialog is starting to become a tolerated, even expected, element.

If you don’t think dialog is important, consider *Shenmue*. Sega spent over \$20

It's time gaming found different ways to tell its stories.

million recreating, in painstaking detail, the feel of Japanese back streets, right down to the vending machines.

Think about that. \$20 million, and the only thing the majority of players took away was the most famous bad line in gaming: "Do you know where I can find some sailors?"

\$20 million, and all we got was writing that was, at best, functional, at worst, downright embarrassing. \$20 million, and the best option was an actor last seen playing the Cookie Monster on a *Sesame Street* tour.

The gamers who stuck with *Shenmue* were rewarded with an incredible, immersive experience. But how many people did the game's hammy delivery put off right from the start?

Dragon's Quest

In Japan, at least, Sega's latest multi-million project gets things right. *Ryu ga Gotoku*, meaning "Like a Dragon," may yet end up with anime characters spitting poor one-liners when it arrives in the West, as the prosaic *Yakuza*. But, in

Japanese, the game is remarkable, creating that most unusual of feelings - that these are real people, with real lives on the line.

To do this, Sega hired Seishu Hase, a writer with a rich collection of crime novels under his belt, to turn director Toshihiro Nagoshi's vision into an engrossing story with characters that ring true.

Hase is someone non-gamers in Japan have actually heard of. He's won prizes for this. And it shows.

In a story of love, death and betrayal, we play Kazuma Kiryu, a loyal and violent former yakuza. Professional actors deliver the characters' lines with emotion and panache, from the respected Tetsuya Watari, who plays Kiryu's mentor, down to the voices of street hoods. The lines of the arrogant upstart who betrays Kiryu drip with menace; he makes us hate. Compare this to *Resident Evil 4*, where, at best, we feel ambivalence, and at worst, boredom.

Ryu ga Gotoku is not perfect, but it's a step in the right direction. This is where games must look - to the professionals.

We Control the Horizontal

Imagine the possibilities. Bungie is one of the few companies that seem to realize story is serious, but *Halo 2* was a letdown, with a derivative, rambling narrative, poor macho dialog and oh-so-witty banter. (We'll be kind and assume time constraints were responsible for the wretched "cliffhanger" ending.)

But what if Bungie were to hire, say, someone like Joss Whedon to put some real punch and character into the space marines' dialog in *Halo 3*?

It's time gaming found different ways to tell its stories. It would be a start to make a serious attempt to hire experienced professionals or look for new, creative writing talent to add to the many wonderful programmers, artists and musicians who make such convincing worlds.

But beyond just improving the quality of its current plots and characters, there is

so much more gaming can do. All it needs to do is broaden its horizons.

Gaming is good at adventure but poor at other types of stories. Has there ever been a gaming Tragedy? The closest we may have come is *Shadow of the Colossus*, a game remarkable mostly for its total lack of story until five minutes before the ending. What of Comedy? Mystery?

Unlike budget-restrained movies, gaming is a format with limitless capabilities, where the creators can shape our vision to anything their imaginations can conceive. Instead of another RPG based on Arthurian myth or a shooter that rips off *Aliens'* marines, think of the Gamecube's *Eternal Darkness* (its Lovecraft derivation aside) as just the tip of the iceberg – a game which spans 2,000 years, a dozen characters, multiple different points in time and space.

There are no longer any borders. We are constrained only by our own creativity.

Gaming can look beyond the mood-ruining cut-scene device to hammer out

plot. Gaming is interactive; why, then, is the cut-scene still holding us still, shouting, "Here comes the story bit, concentrate!" It's time to look for other ways to tell the story, in-game. Maybe, then, we could even try some character development beyond getting the +10 Dwarven Armor.

We've long known that a mediocre game is one that just gives us the gold coin or the big gun. A good game doesn't put them in our hands; it encourages us to explore, makes it fun and forces us to find them for ourselves.

Someday, a game will come along that doesn't shove the story down our throat, but encourages us to discover it for ourselves.

Then, we can make our new, different heroes. [COMMENTS](#)

Gearoid Reidy is a journalist working in Japan covering everything from politics to gaming. He prefers the latter. You can find him at www.gearoidreidy.com.

**There
are no
longer any
borders.
We are
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only by
our own
creativity.**



MAGIC WORDS

by Will Hindmarch

One moment, you're neutralizing a pawn to complete a mission objective and capture points. The next, you're a vile murderer ambushing a penniless grunt to get your hands on the castle's loot. What happened?

The guard opened his mouth, that's what happened. You're playing the first of level of the "immersive sim," *Thief: The Dark Project*, in 1998, when the polygonal soldier whose gullet you were about to lance with an arrow mumbles to himself on his patrol.

GUARD: Everyone above me gets all the favors and I haven't had a thing to eat in days.

Words change everything. Like dousing or lighting a torch changes the nature of the environment in *Thief*, hearing, reading or missing a line of text changes the intellectual landscape for the player. Consider how this note, pinned to the kitchen wall in that castle, changes the way you render the environment in your imagination:

"Cedric—
Please speak to Cook about last night's dinner. While, technically, the menu conformed to my instructions, I suspect that the lamb was somewhat older than this spring's, and I am in no way fooled by his practice of warming the salad to disguise wilting. If Cook is incapable of finding adequate ingredients, he can be replaced."
—Lord Bafford"

By itself, it's just a simple tool to evoke an opinion about the absent lord whose stuff you're stealing. (Probably, you get more satisfaction out of robbing a whining schmuck.) But, if you happened to overhear that first guard's mumbling, the words amplify each other. Now, Lord Bafford is complaining about the technical conformity of his meals while his soldiers are going hungry.

Are you going to try harder to boost every scrap of his loot, 'cause that'll show him? Or will that just get his hungry guards punished for

incompetence? What's going to happen in the castle after you're gone?


It doesn't matter. Nothing happens after you leave the castle — when you're finished, it ceases to exist. What matters is you bought into it implicitly for a moment or a minute or 10 minutes, while you played. You enjoyed the illusion. So, it does matter.

GUARD: What is that smell? Smells like... old meat.

The devil's in the details. One line of dialogue makes a room smell like rot. One note conjures a person out of nothing. In Bafford's castle, his journals show he suspects someone called Ginny is stealing from him, and he's trying to dig up dirt on "Viktoria." In your imaginarily rendered game world, these people exist out in the city somewhere now, but you don't know who's just background or who might step into play. Anyone could be Orson Welles' Harry Lime.

This background isn't just color, it's vital for creating a living environment, and that's vital for stealth games. For the player to feel like an intruder or a sneak, the environment can't seem to be waiting on him. Guards must seem oblivious to the player's presence (even though they exist solely for him). So, overheard conversations and peeked-at notes may be unconnected to the game's story and inconsequential to the successful completion of the level, but they're essential to the voyeuristic atmosphere that defines stealth gameplay. For a stealth-minded player, each uninterrupted conversation is a reward for quality quiet — proof that she's a masterful sneak.

A living background creates an illusion of **agency** for both the player and the environment. When Doug Church, a designer on the original *Thief*, talked about agency at Gamasutra, he was speaking mostly about how players need to feel their actions have meaningful effects on the game world. "Agency is



**What's
going to
happen in
the castle
after you're
gone?**

more important for playfulness than entertainment,” said Church.

In *Thief*, the illusions of agency enable play. It’s possible to complete the Bafford castle level without stealth, killing every bloke in the joint and running like a maniac through the halls. It’s undeniably entertaining, but what makes stealth play exciting is the expectation that consequences exist for such behavior, even though no one **can** actually step out of the background to punish you. The next level begins how it begins, regardless. Words making you think the background environment is more powerful than it is fool you into thinking you’re susceptible to forces that have no actual agency over you. The sim has immersed you.

The illusion has a real voice. When words change the choices you make, they have genuine impact on gameplay. In the first level of *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*, as NSA ninja Sam Fisher, you’ll overhear a pair of guerillas talking during a heavy thunderstorm. One of them describes

how he witnessed his father’s army unit get killed by American commandos during another thunderstorm decades ago, in Guatemala. The Americans spared the women and children.

GUERRILLA: The Americans are not butchers. Their weapon is fear, and fear does not spread among the dead.

If you grab and interrogate the guerilla, he says:

GUERRILLA: I knew you would come to finish what you started. Kill me. I long to see my family again.

This creates a context for the action you take next. If you kill him unnecessarily (butchering him), you’re un-American. Plus, Sam Fisher’s greatest weapon is fear — is it smart to throw that weapon away, or let the guerilla live to spread fear? Kill him and you bring a poetic symmetry to his story. Leave him unconscious and you change his life, maybe for the better.

Except none of that's true. Nothing happens to that guerilla after this level. Outside the game environment, you're just picking a shoulder button to pull. But if you grabbed the guerilla instead of shooting him because you wanted to hear more of his story, the words affected you. Whether you chose to knock him out or kill him, your choice was informed by his words. If they changed the way you played, the conundrum was real.

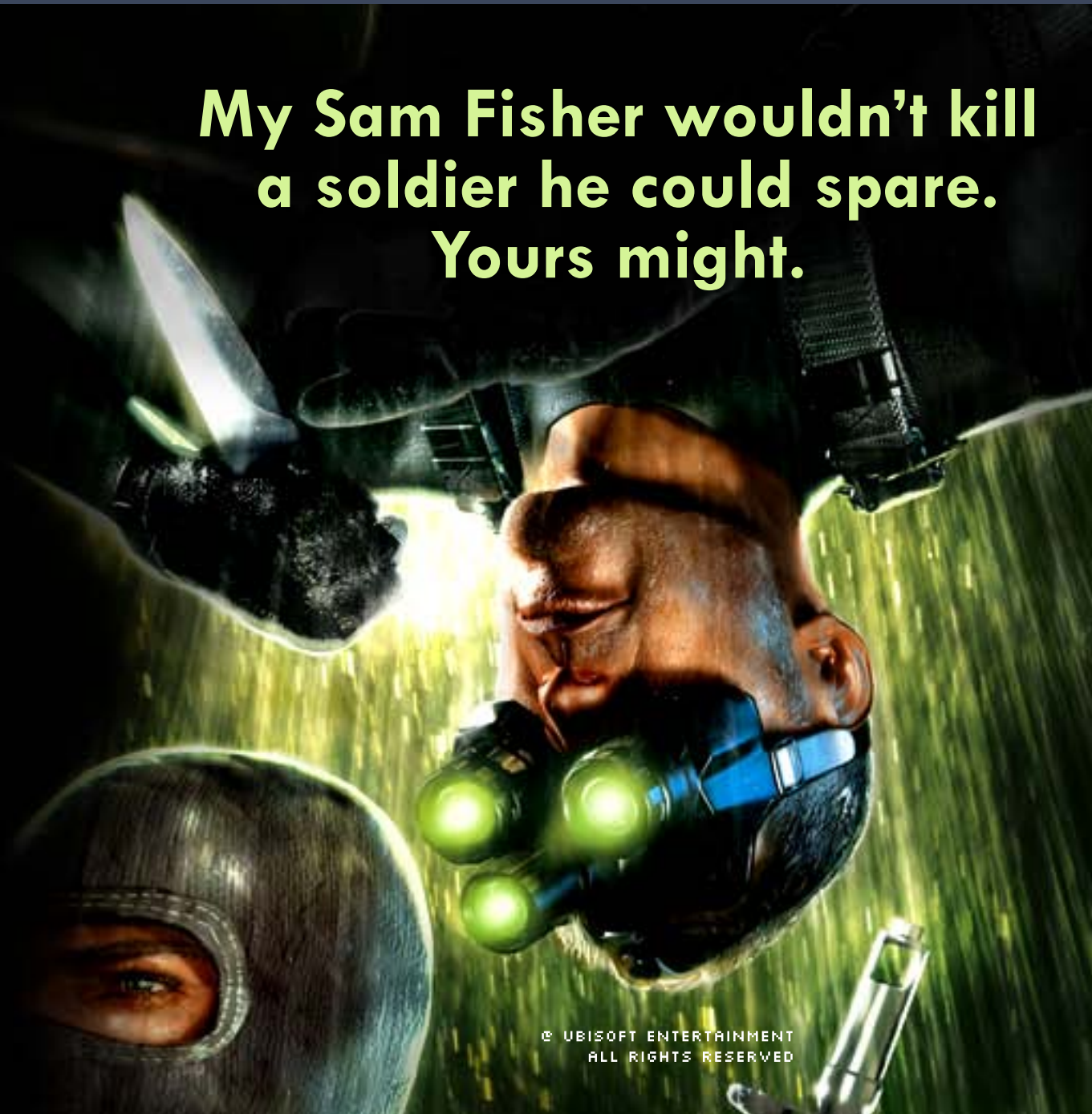
In an interview with 1Up.com, *Chaos Theory* writer Clint Hocking said, "I think those kinds of conundrums make Sam's character more engaging. You're kind of playing Sam the way you think Sam is." Thus, if we react to the guerilla's dialogue differently, you and I end up with different Sam Fishers. My Sam Fisher wouldn't kill a soldier he could spare. Yours might. We come away with different agents in the game. It makes your play experience that little bit different from mine.

The illusion is fertile enough for imaginations to take root in, to grow fan missions like the dozens at The Circle of Stone and *Shadow*, the *Thief* fan hub. Players are invested enough in the background to catalog and keep it in compendiums. Kieron Gillen's feature-length article about the terrifying Shalebridge Cradle level of *Thief: Deadly Shadows* shows how fear conjured into the game through journals and ghostly voiceovers — from words — lives on after the console is off.

For these players, the words have created a world. Like magic.

[COMMENTS](#)

Will Hindmarch is new at this. He is also the developer for Vampire: The Requiem at White Wolf Game Studio.



**My Sam Fisher wouldn't kill
a soldier he could spare.
Yours might.**

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I left my *heart* in RUBACAVA

by N. Evan Van Zelfden

Game of the Year

In 1998, GameSpot selected *Grim Fandango* to be their game of the year. It marked the end of an era for adventure games, and though they are still produced, this was the high-water mark for the genre.

No other game has come close to its perfection. Once, I told a videogame magazine editor I considered *Grim Fandango* the finest game ever made. "Yes," she replied, "But I enjoyed playing *Half-Life* more."

If the game had any flaw, it was inherent to its genre: Adventure games are completely lacking in actual **gameplay**. "But," I said, "*Half-Life* is just one thing, just sci-fi. *Grim Fandango* contains all of the human experience."

And that's the thing about *Grim Fandango*. The story, fiction and writing contain the whole human experience, but the game elements themselves: art, music, sound, design, location - they encompass the whole of great art.

Grim Fandango thrusts you into the story. It's impossible to describe well,

because it's the most bizarre story ever told. But it all begins to make sense, as you follow the lives of people living in the Land of the Dead, a world not unlike our own.

To wit, you start as a travel agent selling after-life travel packages to lost souls. After learning something is horribly wrong, you join the underground, later becoming a busboy, a casino owner, a sailor, a middle-manager and in the end, just a soul heading for the ninth underworld, for your eternal rest.

The writing is exceptional, with a depth of humor, wit and elegance rarely found in games. Tim Schafer provides over 7,000 lines of sparkling and memorable dialogue. The characters are unforgettable. And the fiction makes excellent use of an excellent setting. The story makes you believe such a world could exist.

Ivory Tower

If you were to enter a university to study architecture, you might be required to describe "an aesthetic experience you have had that was brought about by an architectural space or sequence of

spaces, either interior or exterior. Try to link the nature of the experience to the nature of the space.”

If you were an average student, you would write about how the Eiffel Tower makes you feel, perhaps your tour of the Hoover Dam or the feeling of pathos summoned by the Vietnam Memorial. If you were particularly bright, you would write about finding yourself in a little piazza with a fountain at its center. Amid young shade trees, you sat on a brick wall and watched the stream of water for six or eight hours. And then, you might reflect that time is malleable.

Whatever example you would describe, you wouldn't write about a videogame. A mere videogame, even if it contains architectural elements isn't enough to cause an aesthetic experience, is it? Can the power of architecture – architecture that doesn't exist in the physical world – still cause the reaction of people existing in that physical world?

The answer, without shame, without question, yes, a videogame can.

Perfection Solidified

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe said, “Architecture is frozen music,” a quote which is brought out and dusted off for every single discussion of (either) craft. Steven Poole took it a step further: “If architecture is frozen music, then a videogame is liquid architecture.”

Two things are clear. First, Goethe would have loved videogames. And second, there is some connection between this idea of architecture and music. Games provide a powerful combination of the two, and other elements, too. There is play between the fact that game elements are fixed and rigid, yet non-existent and malleable. Games form a kind of **lucid architecture**. Real cities are built in real time. But a virtual space can be constructed with buildings springing up at will. Those who build worlds exercise this lucid architecture.

Hyper Reality

Some people spend their whole lives planning dream vacations. They will travel to a far off land, see its sights, and return home once more.

Somewhere between one-third and half of *Grim Fandango* takes place in a city called Rubacava. You spend the night running through darkened streets, past glowing street lamps, up elevators, down stairways, under silent dirigibles, across bridges and causeways... The compelling moments are those when you're exploring, walking from one location to the next. What might have been loading screens are, instead, a series of aesthetic experiences.

Rubacava is a city of calm beauty, languor even. Spending one last night there leaves an impression on the player. That is why, if I could visit any place in the world, it would be one that doesn't exist. It compels me more than Vienna, or London, or Peking. I want to walk the streets of Rubacava, though I can't, for I exist and it doesn't. It has captured my imagination and my heart. Because all the details in *Grim Fandango* are so well executed, Rubacava lives on in my imagination, and I find it far more vivid, more beautiful than any real city I have ever seen.

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Goethe would have loved videogames.

Rhythm and Blues

The game's architecture is a mixture of any American city from the '30s and '40s, the style of the Art Deco period and the unmistakable lines of the Aztec empire. The music is also remarkable. Composed by Peter McConnell, it features performances by real musicians playing in small combinations. The freely available soundtrack was positioned as "Big Band, BeBop and Bones."

While it sounds ambient upon first listen, the music accounts for a great deal of the game's immersion. As you play the game, the music is an always present, always welcome element. If you turn the music off, the experience suffers. As you alternate between playing the game and listening to the soundtrack, you begin to fully appreciate the complexity and synchronization of the game with its soundtrack.

Invisible Hand

In the free market, art equals capital. It can be manipulated, but good art has staying power and will retain value, simply because it is good art.

Grim Fandango had been in print since its release, selling for \$10 in jewel cases from publisher LucasArts. Just recently, the game is no longer available, even on Amazon. Retail supplies have dried up, and now used copies of the game are selling on eBay, with a marked increase in final bid price.

The reason this game is still sought by people so many years after it first came out is because it's a true work of art made up of ineffable elements. It's a game about music, ambience, characters, dialogue, moving clouds.

I will return to Rubacava, to walk the streets, knowing it will be just as I imagined it. The music will play, the water will ripple, the moon will shine. I will have an aesthetic experience brought about by an architectural space. And, perhaps, you will, too. [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.

I will return to Rubacava,
to walk the streets,
knowing it will be just
as I imagined it.





A-A-B-A-A-CRAP!

by Chris Dahlen

If you can walk, you can dance. Or at least you can pogo. Dance enthusiasts tell every novice they can learn it if they try, and yet swaying to the rhythm isn't the endgame of dancing. If you take a ballroom class, say, for six quick weeks before your wedding, you just get a glimpse of what it leads to: You spent a few hours practicing a foxtrot. But go to a ballroom dancing championship and you'll see years of mastery in every move. Real dancers know the steps cold, combine them in creative ways, and change plans on the spur of a moment. And they're having more fun than you.

On *The Escapist* blog, Joe Blancato recently asked, "Is dancing more fun when you don't know the steps?" Sometimes, yes - and sometimes, no. Just as dancers have their learning curve, in gaming, skillful players study combo moves. If you learn how to hit the buttons on the right-hand side of the controller in complicated sequences and at exactly the right time, your on-screen character will do something exceptional. In fighting games like *Dead or Alive Ultimate*, you might trigger a special move, like teabagging your opponent. And many action and RPG games reward you for mixing up the A's and the B's to finish off the enemy. But in those cases, the combos usually feel like "bonus" moves: They help you beat the game, but you don't absolutely need them.

On the Xbox, *Ninja Gaiden* stands as one of the console's most difficult and intricate action titles. It's unforgiving from the first boss fight to the last – and it's practically un-winnable unless you learn and use every special move available, from the basic combos like the Izuna Drop or the Windmill Slash, to running up and along walls to fly down and rain blows on your enemies. Just getting to level five of that game ranks as my greatest gaming achievement, and I'm playing on "Normal" difficulty; I'll bet the only people who can beat it on Master Ninja level probably **are** ninjas.

Unfortunately, challenging games aren't in fashion right now. The story-driven, "cinematic" games of today assume the customer won't get any value from a game if they can't finish it, and they make it easy for any player to muddle through. Compare *Ninja Gaiden* to a newer martial arts adventure, *Jade Empire*. In that game, you can mash a single button through almost any fight, and you only set up a "harmonic combo" if you want to see more blood. Your grandmother could beat *Jade Empire* in a

weekend. And even *Ninja Gaiden* relented when its 2005 update, *Ninja Gaiden Black*, added a simpler "Ninja Dog" mode to help struggling players get to the end.

But who gave us the right to finish a game? The makers of story-driven titles think watching the final scene is the reason you play. But not every dancer gets to enjoy the Viennese waltz, and not every gamer gets to beat *Ninja Gaiden*. Mastering the controls, and especially those game-specific combo moves, is the goal; winning the game means you've learned them well enough to get confounded, frustrated, then satisfied and finally rewarded by the pleasure of doing something well. Anyone can play a game – but challenging games encourage us to play well. [COMMENTS](#)

Chris Dahlen is a freelance writer for Pitchforkmedia.com, the Boston Phoenix, Signal to Noise, Paste, and The Wire (New Hampshire). His website is Save The Robot.



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Who gave us the right to finish a game?

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 the most revolutionary game you've played, in that it broke the most conventional game design molds?"

Gearoid Reidy, "A Thousand Heroes with Just One Face"

There are plenty of mold-breaking games out there - the problem is that most of them just aren't very good as games. *Super Mario 64* is my pick - it may not have torn up the rule book entirely, but it did rewrite it and added a dozen brilliant sequels.

Jason Smith, IT Director

Without a doubt, *Ultima IV*. Sure, there was a plot in there, but you could easily get lost in exploring the world and discovering its secrets instead. It was

the first game I had ever played that was that open-ended, up to that point everything had been very linear.

Whitney Butts, Lead Web Developer

To me, revolutionary is what drew me in and made me stick to playing games more than any other game I had previously played and that game was *Half-Life*.

Shannon Drake, Contributor

Baten Kaitos. You mean RPGs can have an awesome card battle system, a protagonist who's kind of a dick (and not

whiny emo hero, but a real jerk), a storyline that's more interesting than 10,000 Tolkien rip-offs, AND be fun to play, all on God's Own Platform, the Gamecube? Sign me up! It's a shame the voice acting made me consider taking an ice pick to my eardrums.

Greg Lincoln, Associate Publisher

I'm a bit of a sheep, so I don't play a ton of games. I play what I can then talk about with others. If I had to say something that stands out, I'd say *F.E.A.R.* I really liked how much they took advantage of as much of the senses as possible and truly felt like an interactive cinematic. Oh, and it scared the freakin' poo out of me on multiple occasions.

Jon Hayter, Producer

I know it's early, but *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. I haven't been into any game this much in years. I'm a huge fan of "Sandbox" games, where the purpose is to discover your own gameplay and content, and this title is definitive of that style. Go out, buy it, enjoy it.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

Darwinia, without a doubt. From its graphic style to the game play, it had me at hello. The fact that it came from the same guys who did *Uplink* was just a bonus. Honorable mention goes to *Relentless: Twinsen's Adventure*.

Joe Blancato, Content Editor

Katamari Damacy, at least recently. That's not to say I liked it, though. I made it about six minutes before running back to my comfortable nest of sports games and MMOGs.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor

This question is almost impossible to answer, as there have been many over the years: *Tetris*, *The Incredible Machine*, *The Legend of Zelda*, and so on. Most recently? *Indigo Prophecy* - though it was a return to the adventure style of game, the story was involving and really, a bit of a head trip; the gameplay was unique, but not overwhelmingly difficult; and the game was the perfect play-length for my busy life at about 12-13 hours.