the Escapist

EDITOR'S NOTE
by Julianne Greer

Many of us have just returned from the Game Developers Conference in San Jose, California. Along those lines, we've discussed several aspects of game design and production over the last few weeks. Now we turn to one of the outside forces most strongly influencing game development: the government.

Governments around the world affect delivery mechanisms and even threaten the very content of games. In this issue, Dana Massey returns with a look at the international development scene from and how the United States government affects his experiences in Canada. Bonnie Ruberg discusses the seemingly different treatment of porn and in-game sex in the United States. And while not within the realm of government, Warren Spector's continuation of "Gaming at the Margins" discusses some outside forces affecting the development of games. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

(**Editor's note:** In response to a letter to the editor last week, *The Escapist* contributor Tom Rhodes responds.)

Dear Karl,

When I first read your letter, it seemed fair and reasonable enough to me. But as I read and re-read, I started to find that, although you were supporting such games' right to exist, you were also condemning the people who played them.

You said "there will always be individuals who make unwise choices in the games they play." At that I took deep offense. Perhaps for the same reason that you chose to include *Dungeons and Dragons* in with *Grand Theft Auto*, something of which I was stupefied to read. Almost as much as reading "...there are destructive books, TV shows, movies, etc. that should not be read nor watched."

You further state that, "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." But to relegate games, or other "destructive" types of media, to a world of demons and ghosts, we are really placing ourselves in this happy bubble, ignoring that the so-called destructive games, television shows, movies, and books can illuminate something about our world, or perhaps ourselves. Does Hamlet have a positive influence on people's lives? I'd say, from the strict perspective of the narrative, it doesn't. But does it **enrich** our lives? Most certainly. While *Grand Theft Auto* is no Shakespearean drama, I don't think any piece of media in the past year has caused more reflection on ourselves and society than it has. Random, senseless violence managed to get us all talking, and how about that?

As for the bloodsports, surely anyone who associates pixelated violence with true loss of human life possesses neither the clarity, nor the opportunity, to look down on others.

My advice? Find a shorter horse to ride on.

Regards,
Tom Rhodes

To the Editor: I was refreshed and inspired by this article by Gearoid Reidy's article in last week's *Escapist*. Thanks!!

I'm an artist at Irrational Games in Boston. We're working on *Bioshock* which, by all appearances, is shaping up to be a decent sci-fi shooter with some RPG elements. It's my first developer side job and I **love** it. *Bioshock* is a cool project with some innovative design features and a relatively sophisticated story, however, at its core, it's a fairly conventional game from a genre and execution standpoint. The real reason I got into this industry is because I'm hoping that games will graduate to an artistically legitimate art form over the next decade. I feel like currently we are in the infant stages of exploring the interactive medium. It took awhile for filmmakers to come up with anything beyond novelty when it was first invented 100+ years ago...and now it is arguably the most affecting and

definitely the most widely appreciated and socially significant artistic medium we have (at least in the west) . I have such high hopes and ambitions about "gaming" that I think it could theoretically disrupt the monarchy of film and bring artistic expression and commentary to a new level of immersion and emotional significance.

I want to make a dramatic game, or a tragic game, or a comedy....is it even possible? Is it possible to make a game that's like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, or Or Terrence Malick's *Badlands*? Would it even be called a 'game' at that point?

I thought I was the only one with these thoughts out there ... thanks for keeping me optimistic.

-Hoagy de la Plante

To the Editor: As a game developer, I found Warren Spector's despairing diatribe on the woeful lack of innovation in the industry offensive and hypocritical. Two words: Ion Storm. I don't recall hearing about stagnant creativity, rising development costs, or gloom and doom

speeches. Yet right up there with the piles of Atari *ET* cartridges in land fills, we have Ion Storm, a developer of adolescent power fantasy, hard core titles, who wasted an obscene amount of money, and became a huge embarrassment to game developers and the industry as a whole. And who was a partner at Ion Storm? Mr. Spector, of course.

If the industry is as stagnant creatively as Mr. Spector believes, he himself is part of the reason why. The man credited with some of the most beloved, hard core games of all time, like *Deus Ex* and *Ultima Underworld*, has the nerve to lecture the rest of the industry that we're not trying hard enough to reach outside the 18-25 male adolescent power fantasy? His last titles were *Deux Ex: Invisible War* and *Thief III* -- both examples of, as Mr. Spector writes, "licenses, sequels and 'me too' games - vain attempts by publishers to increase the odds of breaking even or...Profiting."

What game has Mr. Spector created that **hasn't** fit into the mold of the adolescent power fantasy?

I'm a hard core gamer and proud of it. But we're the very audience he insults by implying they cannot to be trusted with the future of the gaming, the ones "willing - even eager - to settle for the mediocre, the rehashed, the non-interactive experience masquerading as interactivity." You mean the very titles you yourself offered up?

Please, I beg you. Just shut up and work on your game like the rest of us. Let your game speak for itself. Don't lecture us with your grand plans when all you've given us are sequels to glory days FPS franchises.

-Anonymous

To the Editor: First off, great job; I really take my hat off to this sort of thing, we need so much more of it in the industry. For a long time it seems Edge has been the lone voice when it came to intelligent writing on games. I've only just found you at issue #37, but I'll be reading every one from here on in.

Warren Spector's piece really struck a chord with me, as did the subsequent articles. I'm a big believer in narrative

driving the player experience and not shoe-horning stories into pre-made levels, having quality writers create our content and leaving the fan-fiction writers to do it on weekends and in their role-playing groups. After 5 years in the industry as a Designer and Producer, I left it late last year, tired of the general direction we as an industry were heading

with the seeming lack of real initiative amongst Publishers to take games to the places people like Spector seem capable of taking them to. I say Publishers because to lay the blame at Developer's feet is, I think, unfair. Right now it is just too hard to do something truly unique without the backing of someone with deep pockets who believes in what you're doing.

I come from a more traditional creative background, by that I mean theatre, writing and music, yet I've played games since I could crawl. In the medium, as Warren says, we have an unmatched potential for communication, for conveying messages, to inspire the people we reach in ways that movies, literature and music can only dream of.

I'm tired of story-telling that amounts to at best, somebody's Friday night role playing group, and at worst, well, *Resident Evil* was mentioned, and for good reason. Where are our stories based on Shakespeare, Fitzgerald, Steinbeck? Narratives that are more than adolescent fantasy, ideas that give way to the gaming equivalent of *Four*

Weddings and a Funeral, *Lost in Translation*, even *Brokeback Mountain*? There will always be a place for action adventure, what I'm interested in is more subtle story-telling, better writing, and starting from a story and deciding from there what the best way to tell it is.

The self-imposed exile from the industry won't last I'm sure, gaming gets in your blood like few other things. What I hope is not too long from now, a new surge of creativity will have begun where developers craft experiences out of stories they want to tell and messages they want to convey. Everyone has a story to tell but not nearly every story is worth telling; it's time for the industry to stop taking so much pride in being marginal, male-fantasy driven and clichéd. That's not to say people aren't taking steps toward it yet, but it remains a severely minor group within the greater development community. Warren Spector, Doug Church, the guys at Valve; these are the people leading the way. When a few more people start to follow, I'll come running back. Until then I'm looking for a means of creative expression that doesn't confine itself to

stereotypes, technologies used to enhance the player experience rather than limit it, and a few more stories I think somebody wants to hear.

Like a favoured child throwing away an obvious gift, the industry I adore is just too frustrating to watch right now.

-David Gillespie
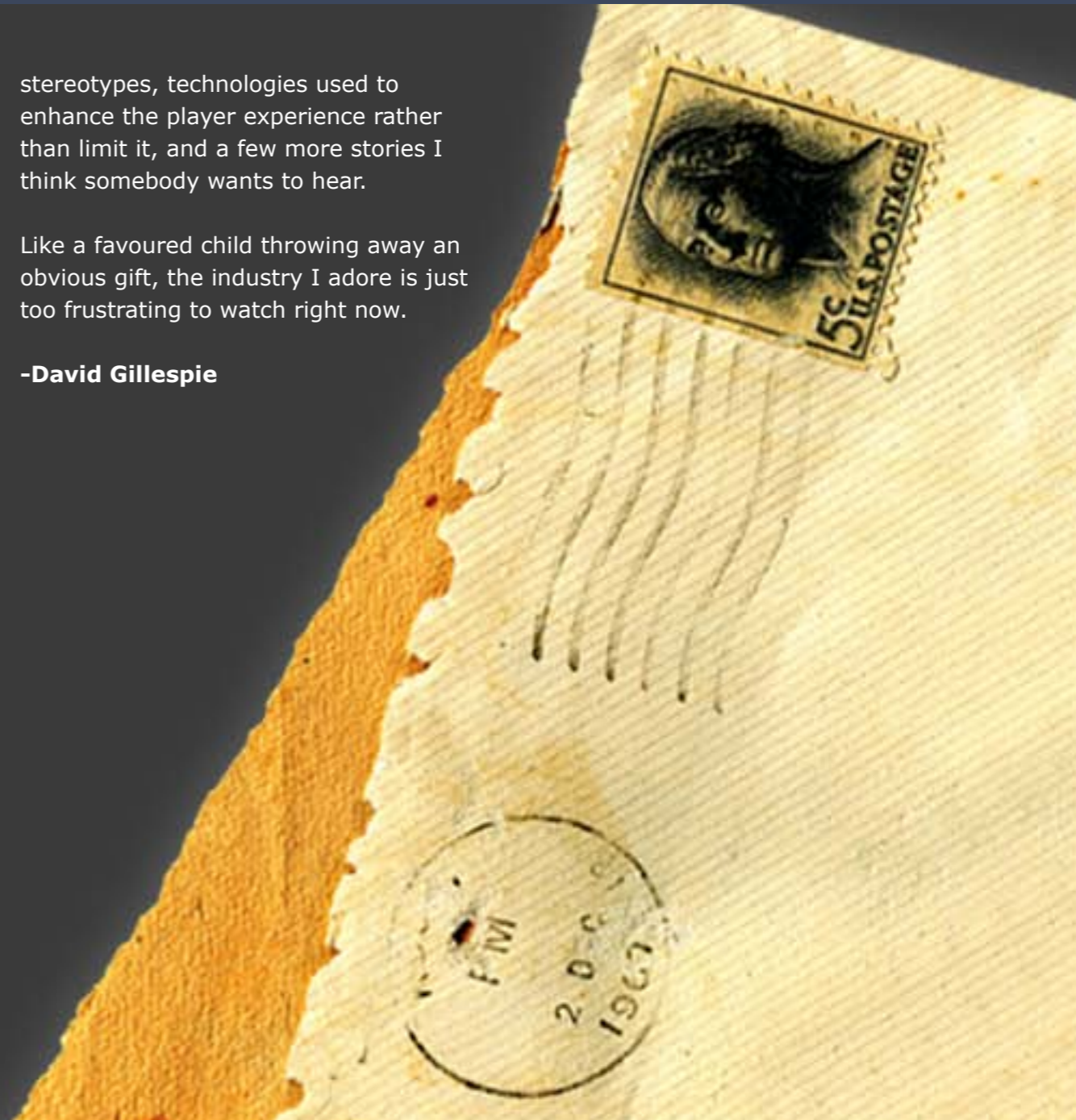
Gaming at the Margins, Part 2:

WHO ARE WE
WHO DO WE
WANT TO BE?

by Warren Spector

The Cultural Crossroad

The Situation
I don't know about you, but I feel like there's a target painted on my chest. Gaming is dead square in the cultural crosshairs, these days. Kids, teens and 20-somethings love us, which means parents and politicians are keeping an eye on us — and blaming us for all the ills of the modern age. It's kind of cool that people are paying that much attention to us after years of ignoring us, but why now, and what can or should we do about it?

The why is pretty straightforward:

The last few years have seen an explosion in the popularity and cultural credibility of games.

- Obviously, they love us for our money. The kind of revenue numbers we post ensures that we get some attention.

- We're written up in *Newsweek* and reviewed in *Playboy*, *Entertainment Weekly* and local newspapers.

- Will Wright is named one of *Esquire* magazine's most influential people and EA's Larry Probst makes *Entertainment Weekly*'s Power List.

- Hollywood's all over game IP — and, on the flip side, looking to turn just about every movie idea into a game, now that we're stealing their core audience.

We've reached the point where, as MIT professor Henry Jenkins said after Columbine, "If you want to find the weird kid, look for the one who doesn't play videogames, not the one who does…"

That all sounds great, right? Our audience is growing and people are paying attention — nothing wrong with that. Well, maybe not, but there's no denying that the larger our audience grows, the more kids turn to games as a way of passing time, as well as entertaining and educating themselves, the more parents and cultural gate-keepers will pay attention and, in all likelihood, feel threatened.

There's a whole generation of baby boomers out there who, for the most

Is it any wonder non-gaming adults in positions of power fear us and our influence?

part, grew up without computers and don't get games. They got their parent-bugging, rebellious kicks in other ways (notably by growing their hair long, listening to rock 'n' roll and protesting an unjust war — OK, so maybe things aren't so very different). A lot of boomers don't understand why their son barricades himself in his room every afternoon killing demons… why their daughter, instead of playing with Barbies, spends every waking moment raising a family of little electronic people. People fear and blame what they don't understand. It's always been that way.

And thanks to hardware advances, what gamers experience these days is clearly more compelling, at least on the surface, than what we used to offer, which further increases the gate-keepers' fear level — escaping to a 16-color virtual world populated by stick figure villains was one thing; escaping to a world where the cop you kill or the car you steal looks, sounds and behaves like the real thing is an entirely different matter. Is it any

wonder non-gaming adults in positions of power fear us and our influence?

The Choice
So, what do we do about this?

- Should we worry about parents who don't get it?

- Should we fear government or judicial intervention?

- Should we do things differently to mollify the worry-warts of the world?

- Or should we just hunker down, revel in the fact that we kinda own the teens and 20's scene right now and keep doing what we're doing?

On the one hand, it's a truism in the industry and among most cultural critics and financial analysts that, as gamers age, they'll continue to play, on their own and with their kids. And as those playing parents move into positions of authority — political, educational and cultural — gaming will inevitably be

accorded the respect it deserves, moving from marginal activity to become the dominant medium of the 21st century.

So, maybe there really **isn't** a choice to be made here, other than doing what we do and waiting things out. Eventually, guys like Joe Lieberman and Dave Grossman, and organizations like Mothers Against Videogame Addiction and Violence will be replaced by a generation of gaming Congressmen and parents and we'll be fine.

To be honest, I pretty much believe that to be the case. Eventually, some other medium will come along that we don't understand, and the cultural crosshairs will move, leaving us to do our thing while someone else takes all the heat.

However, there's a fine line between waiting things out and ignoring a problem in the hope that it will go away. Things could get ugly before they get better. In addition (and here I'm about to speak a bit of heresy — perhaps because I'm kind of an old fart myself!), I'm

starting to think there might be something positive we can take from what these folks are telling us about our medium.

In other words, perhaps we can do something to reduce the fear factor among non-gamers, minimize the risk of outside intervention (i.e., regulation and censorship) while expanding our audience even further and contributing more positively to our culture.

To my mind, the best answer to the "problem" of the place of games in our culture is to expand the range of content we make available.

The Outcome(s)
The cultural crossroad can take us in a variety of directions:

We can continue as we are — making mindless, pathetic killfests or sports games that revel in blood spurts, bling and bad attitude. (And, no, I don't believe the industry statistics about how few games are actually like that.) That leads, I think, to a coarsening of our culture and to government and judicial intervention. And that means eventual cultural irrelevance.

Or, we can knuckle under to the pressure from external groups, clean up our games and offer players nothing but pablum. That's what comics did following congressional investigations and in the face of pressure from folks like Frederic Wertham. We see what that got them: A medium that almost achieved some credibility among adults was reduced to trivial entertainment for kids for 40-odd years.

Or, we can seek a third way, offering players a wider variety of game types:

• We have to make games with a consciousness of our social obligations as creators of mediated entertainment and with a consciousness of the dialogue between designers and players.

• We have to tackle design and technical problems at least as difficult as, and possibly more profound than, a new rendering model or better physics simulation,

so we **can** do more than simulate the pulling of a virtual trigger.

- We have to figure out how to create human antagonists and allies who can do more than offer a combat challenge.

- We need to find ways to free players up to explore a variety of behavioral choices as they solve game problems, rather than killing everything that moves.

- We can show players the consequences of their choices, rather than just patting them on the back for solving meaningless puzzles.

- We can help players explore a broad range of emotions, instead of just offering them a cheap adrenaline rush.

I'm convinced if we do all this — if we ask players to consider **why** they're doing things in-game, rather than just rewarding action for action's sake — we'll have a compelling case to take to the would-be regulators and we'll appeal to folks who wouldn't now be caught dead

playing games. And we'll contribute to the culture in positive ways apparent to all.

Diversified Development Community and Audience

The Situation
I see yet another best of times/worst of times situation in the aging of the game development and game player communities, as well as in an increasing number of female gamers.

Age
From the player side, young players are sticking with us as they grow up, rather than moving on to other forms of entertainment. Anecdotally, men and women I started playing boardgames and videogames with when we were in our 20's are still playing today, now that we're in our, well, let's just say our second childhoods and move on. And one of the coolest things to me is that many of us in this… older …demographic are playing with our kids.

The received wisdom in industry circles is our core demographic has expanded from early-teens and 20's to upper 20's.

Thirteen to 17 used to be the heart of the market; now, it seems like 17-24. Assuming that trend continues, it has profound implications. Older players, with different life experiences will, inevitably, demand different kinds of content.

On the development side, the implications are equally profound. Crunch time is on the rise at a time when many developers are, by virtue of age and family factors, less able and willing to work crazy hours. And we have older people generating content and creating games aimed at teenagers and early-20 somethings. How's **that** supposed to work?

As one of the older guys still actively involved in game development, the age question really hits home for me. Personally, I want something more, something different from games now than I did when I started playing years ago. And, in the spirit of total honesty, I want to spend time with my family, have a life and not have to work 16 hours a day, seven days a week. And I know I'm not alone.

Older players, with different life experiences will, inevitably, demand different kinds of content.

Another aspect of the aging issue hit home for me in a very specific way a couple of years ago when I realized I had two designers from different generations, working on the same game, sitting next to each other: One 18, single, never lived away from his mom, never went to college, working on his first game; the other, late 30's, college grad, married, on his sixth full-scale project. They shared almost no life experiences, barely spoke the same language, but somehow, they had to find a way to collaborate in the creation of something coherent and compelling. I, for one, don't know how we're going to deal with it.

Gender
For all the talk, all the white papers, all the conferences, I really haven't seen much progress in attracting women as either developers or players.

On the development side, there were a couple of women at Origin when I started and about the same percentage when I left. We still have very few women in development, and those who are have rarely risen to positions where they play the driving creative role that pushes game design in new directions. By and large, women work on "guy games" and their work is indistinguishable from that of their male counterparts.

The handful of companies founded by women and/or with the express purpose of making games for girls (never women, note) are either out of business or making games that don't make much of a dent in the male-dominated press, at the trade shows or, near as I can tell, on the sales charts.

I don't know if the lack of progress in attracting more women to development is lack of desire, interest or opportunity (perhaps a result of conscious or unconscious discrimination by the guys in charge). Whatever it is, it might as well be 1989, for all the progress we've made.

From the player side, it seems pretty much the same to me — except in the world of online gaming, where I really do see more women playing. That's a huge plus and maybe the most positive thing to be said about MMOGs.

Ethnicity
Sadly, there's been literally no progress, here, that I can see. The number of blacks, Hispanics, Asians and others among developers is pitifully low. Given the lack of role models among developers and characters to relate to among our heroes and heroines, it's no surprise we're doing such a poor job of encouraging ethnic diversity.

The Choice
We can just accept that we make games for kids and kids alone (or fool ourselves into thinking that older players will continue to want the same kinds of games they played as kids). In other words, we can allow adolescent male fantasies to dominate as they always have, focusing on skateboarding, urban thuggery, extreme sports, alien invasions, demon-killing and so on. And we can continue to make those adolescent games the way we always have — and just not worry when we burn out people. We can continue to assume women and non-Caucasians just don't count.

Or, we can engage in active outreach to a broader range of developers. We can engage in equally active outreach by making games that are about things older, non-male gamers might actually care about.

The Outcome(s)

Current growth projections and expanding demographics be damned — we're doomed if we continue to focus on our younger male players and on simplistic representations of more adult conflicts (see the deluge of so-called "realistic" wargames in recent years). OK, perhaps not "doomed," literally, but doomed to continued (young) male domination of our industry and of the sales charts.

But we **can** make a different choice: If we have all these old fart developers lurking about, and we believe the

gaming audience is getting older, maybe we could try trusting ourselves and make games we actually want to play.

Maybe we can try listening to the women we work with for a change. If women are playing MMOGs, maybe those of us in the non-MMOG space should be looking a little harder at **why** they're playing those games and apply those lessons in our work.

Maybe we can ponder the possibilities for new game concepts and styles, and the sales potential in trying to reach the non-Anglo, non-North American audience.

As a guy who **isn't** in the MMOG space, I have to tell you, it's awfully tempting to try to find a way to tap into that kind of revenue stream.

Social/Solitary Activity
The Situation

Unless you've been sleeping under a rock the last decade you know MMOGs have burst on the scene. They no longer **loom** as a real financial force in our business, they **are** a financial force.

Just do the math. *WoW* has something like 6 million subscribers, most of whom are shelling out $15 a month for the privilege of engaging in some moderately interesting social interaction and some relatively simple gameplay.

That's a nice bit of revenue generation.

Even less successful MMOGs represent great business — I mean, we're talking about $180 of revenue per player, per year. Get even 100,000 players, and you're talking $18 million per annum. A lot of people in the single player game space would be pretty happy about that. In fact, I know several people who made the leap from single player to "boutique" MMOGs and they're doing quite well — by **not** competing either with the big, boxed single player games or with the big MMOG players. Their "narrowcast" MMOGs attract 10,000 people or so, generating enough subscription revenue

to keep a team of five people nicely employed.

As a guy who **isn't** in the MMOG space, I have to tell you, it's awfully tempting to try to find a way to tap into that kind of revenue stream.

The Choice

Well, for starters, I wish more people in this business would recognize that there **is** a choice. With each passing year, I hear more and more people saying, "Online is **the** future of gaming" or, "MMOGs are it — single player gaming is dead."

First, that seems silly to me; second, it seems sad. Look, I love stories — in any medium. And there's a reason why most stories have a single hero. Stories just work better that way. So, single player gaming is important to me because it seems important to give players the experience of being The Hero of their own, compelling story, rather than bit players in a story of random events told by thousands, even millions of people.

So, the obvious question that arises from the ascendance of MMOGs and other online games is this: What can those of

us in the single player (or small group multiplayer) space learn from MMOGs?

If we **don't** learn from them, we might go the way of the dodo. If boxed game guys just keep on selling their boxed games at retail, it's hard to see much of a future. Can we find a way to tap into the delivery systems and business models pioneered by the MMOGs? Can we non-MMOG guys get players' credit card numbers?

We have to find ways to go direct to consumers. We have to tap into that $10 or $15 a month MMOG players get charged and forget about long after they've lost interest in the game. I mean, NCsoft got about $60 off of me after I stopped playing *City of Heroes* and before I remembered to cancel my subscription. My wife's *WoW* habit has gone down to once or twice a week now, but Blizzard is still collecting her $15, like clockwork, and she can't bring herself to stop playing completely.

I want a piece of that action!

We need to extend MMOG-style billing and distribution to non-MMOGs. We're

already seeing the beginnings of this sort of effort in Valve's Steam, Comcast's Games on Demand, Gametap, Shockwave.com and BioWare's online store. Greg Costikyan and Johnny Wilson recently announced their new online distribution venture, Manifesto Games. We need more of this.

And we need to take the idea further, delivering games in episodic form, adopting a television model, and more specifically, a cable model, rather than emulating the film industry's standalone blockbuster mindset. Come on, HBO, get in the game!

The Outcome(s)
I think if we continue to think of MMOGs and single player games as two completely separate businesses the single player/retail side of things really **could** get destroyed. Heck, even EA execs are beginning to talk about the importance of going direct to consumers, and they **own** traditional retail distribution!

The convenience of direct distribution combined with the no-effort, low cost credit card purchase is just too powerful,

from a consumer's point of view, **not** to carry the day. As iTunes and other online businesses wean consumers from the need for a physical object that represents their purchase to a psychological place where intangible bits and bytes are worth spending money on, the two sides of gaming have to come together. I don't think we can stop this, even if we want to.

Next time
Next installment, we'll talk about some of the hardware and business challenges ahead. COMMENTS

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

Can we non-MMOG guys get players' credit card numbers?

Won't *Someone* Think of the Children?

by Bonnie Ruberg

Sex in videogames: Is it corrupting our youth? Politicians and parents across the country have certainly voiced their resounding "Yes." After all, what's the world coming to when teens, lured in by the simple promise of a cup of coffee, can find themselves simulating intercourse? These games are almost - dare we even say the word - pornographic. We have to regulate them, otherwise smut could flourish somewhere it has never been found before: in the hands of our young people.

Which, of course, is nonsense; our youth are just as corrupted as the rest of us. And videogames are hardly the only culprit.

Anyone who's ever accidentally typed a poorly-chosen phrase into Google ("tasty Asian," for example, instead of "good Chinese restaurant") knows the sheer abundance, diversity and accessibility of porn on the internet. Surely, any child who can hack *Grand Theft Auto* can effectively use a search bar. Add to that the fact that everyone knows "the internet is for porn." So, why is it that videogame sex and hardcore pornography - the former reviled, the latter often ignored - receive such very different reactions?

Porn, it seems, enjoys a limbo status. It's frowned upon, but at the same time, it's considered something of a necessary evil, or at least an unavoidable one. People, we feel, will always like pornography, so other people will always make it. Not that porn is without its legal restrictions: Like M-rated games, it's 18 to buy, and, like M-rated games in tomorrow's Utah, a felony to sell it to underage consumers.

Still, thanks to the internet, porn is so easy to acquire as to render over-18 laws almost negligible. Many sites make it clear they're for adults only, and parental controls are always an option, but these, too, do little to stop determined teens. Especially since, if all else fails, there's always text-based cybering. Does this ruffle the feathers of concerned parents? Certainly, but on a larger scale - both cultural and governmental - we seem to have let it go. We recognize that only extremists would try to illegalize porn completely. More importantly, we acknowledge that

pornography is not the root of evil. Young people seek it out. It doesn't seek out them.

Yet, when it comes to sex in videogames (which, by comparison, could rarely be considered graphic), we're still running around with our hands in the air, shouting, "Won't someone please think of the children!"

Why? In part, it has to do with interactivity. The biggest difference between a pornographic movie and a sexy videogame is, whereas the movie viewer only watches, the videogame player is directly involved – and implicated – in the on-screen action. It's the same argument anti-game campaigners use about videogame violence. Not only do you witness someone die, you kill them. Not only do you see someone having sex, you perform the penetration.

It's this immersiveness, many argue, that gives videogames their unique ability to corrupt, to enter the minds of young, impressionable players who are

unable to distinguish between the moral systems of the game and that of reality.

Then, there's the trouble that videogames are widely considered toys for kids. Gamers know that game enthusiasm isn't limited by age and that many titles are complex and hardly childish, but the general populace associates gaming with Mario and Luigi, with children glued to their GameBoys. Thanks to the popularity of the Xbox, this image is changing, but those who have their panties in a twist over videogame sex are, by nature, more conservative and reluctant to see the shift. They think they are defending kids. And kids and sex - so our social taboos tell us - should never mix

The truth is, even if videogames were once the realm of children, they've grown up. They've become art. As art, they're entitled to incorporate whatever material, sexual or otherwise, they choose. In claiming the need for legislation to regulate games, parents and government officials are attempting to knock videogames down from their art status. They're saying, "No, we still have

![the escapist]

Maybe what drives these concerned citizens is not just rigid morals, but fear of change.

power over what you show the world." Moreover, they're refusing to acknowledge games as art in the first place.

Maybe what drives these concerned citizens is not just rigid morals, but fear of change. On the surface, videogames seem so easy: So easy to stereotype as an anti-social subculture, so easy to peg as a worthless pursuit, so easy to fit into the large scheme of "corruption." But the medium Americans thought they knew is changing, pulling the rug out from under assumption.

Videogames have become something that can't be controlled, and, as such, swarms of people have taken up the challenge of controlling them – like children told they cannot, and so they must.

Beyond even this, though, these activists seem to fear a change in themselves. Videogame sex brings us face to face with the uneasiness of our technological age. Whereas before, we were turned on by real human bodies (granted, bodies mitigated by a screen), we are now

faced with the attractiveness of digital forms: naked avatars, rendered breasts, button-mapped seduction. The fact that this intrigues us is, in an understandable way, frightening.

In order to protect ourselves, are we displacing our fear onto our kids? Or, maybe, this evolved attraction is all the more eerie when we view it in our children.

Perhaps this answers, too, why we allow normal pornography its place, while attempting to legislate videogame sex into oblivion. We're trying to legislate away our own unease and confusion; we're looking for a way to regulate ourselves. But no bounds, legal or otherwise, can stop the evolution of attraction, or of games. [COMMENTS]

Bonnie Ruberg is a videogame journalist specializing in gender and sexuality in games and gaming communities. She also runs a blog, Heroine Sheik, dedicated to such issues. Most recently, her work has appeared at Wired.com, The A. V. Club, and Gamasutra.

Local goldmines

by Dana Massey

The Americans dominate the videogame industry, and last year, I looked at how this spread their moral values around the world. This year, I want to flip things around and look at the reasons why foreigners should not only accept, but secretly be happy about the increased political pressure to spread American morals in videogames.

When *Wish* was cancelled in January of 2005, I saw a talented group of developers and artists left in a sticky situation. They had videogame experience, they had portfolios to die for, but they all had a huge problem finding jobs. Why was this? They're Canadian. The videogame industry is not just morally fixated on the United States, it seems to think you cannot produce a game anywhere besides California. Sure, there are satellite studios around the world, but for a Canadian, unless you work for Ubisoft, Electronic Arts, BioWare or one of a handful of smaller studios, you're out of luck. Since September 11th, this has become even harder as our friendly neighbors to the south tightened

security. The entire situation is tragic for talented people around the world.

Yet, every time American developers are pressured by their government to make games that promote their values, it may be a victory for those unemployed Canadians and others like them. The more pressure applied and the further games move into the mainstream, the more likely we are to develop regionally diverse videogames. To date, the Western world has been content making games that appeal to the broadest possible market – the U.S.A. – and playing by their rules. Yet, as it becomes increasingly popular to play games, it becomes easier for a clever company to produce a more targeted product and still make a tidy profit. To me, it is only a matter of time before people around the world see their nation's interests are not being represented by mainstream game production companies. When this day arrives, gamers will be better served by products that actually represent them, their country, their ethnic group, their age group and their language.

It has already begun. While recently in Atlanta, I was talking to Rapid Reality about their upcoming projects, and they explained how *Africa* - their upcoming MMOG – was being partly financed by Africans living in the United States who wanted to explore the history of their continent in a new medium. This is a history too often glossed over in school books. The success of *Africa* is uncertain, but it is a crucial first step in the regionalization of the videogame industry. For the first time, Africans – no matter where they live – and people interested in the history of this continent will see their interests manifest themselves in a videogame. Hopefully, people in the industry will stand up and take notice that interesting stories are interesting stories, regardless of who they're about. I don't expect EA to develop extreme niche games anytime soon – that is not their role – but if Rapid Reality does succeed, they might show that highly focused topics can be commercially viable enterprises.

Now, it's time to fess up to a mistake. In last year's issue, I dismissed the idea of intensely regional topics being explored. I simply did not see it as commercially viable. This remains true; it isn't. Yet, dismissing it wholesale was closed-minded of me. This is precisely the type of way we've seen every other entertainment media develop and a brilliant way to keep the big boys honest. Think about the area in which you live – especially if it is not the United States – and consider the local celebrities, the local films and music. Every so often, they go on to mass appeal and fame, but quite often, they remain as small hits in a single part of the world.

The key to this kind of direction in gaming is for the industry to further expand its reach. In order for regionally focused games to happen, there needs to be ways to create them at a cost more conducive to a limited audience. What

What I'm looking for are, in essence, art-house videogames.

I'm looking for are, in essence, art-house videogames. It is also likely that the creation of that type of game would actually benefit the whole. There are scores of people out there who probably do not see anything personally interesting in games. With smaller, focused games, we can grab them and funnel them into the greater world of gaming; just as someone who isn't a fan of movies may get their curiosity piqued by a small art-house film about their corner of the world. The entire concept feeds the benefit of the whole.

In the short term, there are plenty of ethnic groups inside the United States who have the numbers and the buying power to justify targeted games. North of the border, I'd even wager a game aimed at Canadians could not only survive, but thrive. This doesn't even touch on the various European countries. It also makes sense for the people for whom these games are intended to actually produce them. Suddenly, non-Americans in the industry do not need to find a visa and move to California. This spreads the appeal of games and moves their creation into new markets. What's more, the spread of these jobs around the world further legitimizes the gaming industry as just another normal thing people can do with their lives.

It's going to take guts and a gamble, but whoever is willing to put up the money and run the first test balloon may have a goldmine on their hands. The profit margins will be lower and the production standards less glorious, but people accept that in film and I firmly believe they'd do the same in gaming. Personally, I'm tired of games about America for Americans and want to see something that represents me and my interests. I'm willing to bet I'm not alone. Now, all we need is someone to take up the cause. We'll all be better served for it. `COMMENTS`

Dana "Lepidus" Massey is the Lead Content Editor for MMORPG.com and former Co-Lead Game Designer for Wish.

the Escapist

STAFF

EDITORIAL

Executive Editor
Julianne Greer

Content Editor
Joseph Blancato

Contributing Editor
JR Sutich

Research Manager
Nova Barlow

Contributors
Shannon Drake
Dana Massey
Bonnie Ruberg
Warren Spector
Mark Wallace

PRODUCTION

Producer
Jonathan Hayter

Layout Artist
Jessica Fielhauer

Lead Web Developer
Whitney Butts

Web Developer
Erik Jacobson

IT Director
Jason Smith

BUSINESS

Publisher
Alexander Macris

Associate Publishers
Jerry Godwin
Gregory Lincoln

Director of Advertising
Susan Briglia

Media Sales Associate
Laura Rotondo

Chairman of Themis Group
Thomas S. Kurz

the Escapist lounge
the official blog for the magazine

**even more of
what you love**

blog.escapistmagazine.com

Casual Friday

CHECK BACK EVERY WEEKEND FOR ADDITIONAL CONTENT!

available NOW!

a HUGE DISCONNECT

by Shannon Drake

Game politicians discovered the gaming industry in 2005. A small bit of forgotten code buried deep in the bowels of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* turned out to be an interactive sex game, confirming the worst fears of parents fed a daily media diet of terror. First came the media, pushing out tut-tutting reports about sex and violence in games. The parents came next and, following in their wake, so did the politicians, promising a governmental solution to all things parental. An industry still in its growing pains found itself staring down the barrel of a legislative gun. The noise machine turned on us.

Concerned fans in search of information on this new threat faced a real lack of sources. Politics just isn't as cool as flaunting the latest exclusives, at least to most of the gaming press. If you want to know whether the Oklahoma legislature is considering a measure to make selling violent games that are "harmful to minors" a crime (hint: it passed), there's very few places to turn. One of them is GamePolitics.com, a blog and news site chronicling the doings of politicians and legislatures, with a focus on items of

interest to the gaming crowd. Dennis McCauley, editor of GamePolitics.com, is one of the few gaming journalists on this particular beat, and I was fortunate enough to corral him for a chat about legislation, politics and their effects on the industry.

"Prior to launching GamePolitics in March 2005," he says, "I wrote about games, mostly from a product review standpoint for a number of publications. I did the sports column for *Computer Gaming World* in 1996 and 1997 and I've written a weekly game column for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* since 1998." GamePolitics stems from an interest "in ways in which games exist within the larger culture. There is a huge disconnect between gamers and non-gamers, and this is nowhere more evident than in the political arena, where the debate is largely driven by non-gamers among the ranks of parents, activists, politicians and the media."

Naturally, I ask about his political background. "I'm a registered Democrat and consider myself somewhere between moderate and liberal," he responds,

The problem is the sheer volume of legislation.
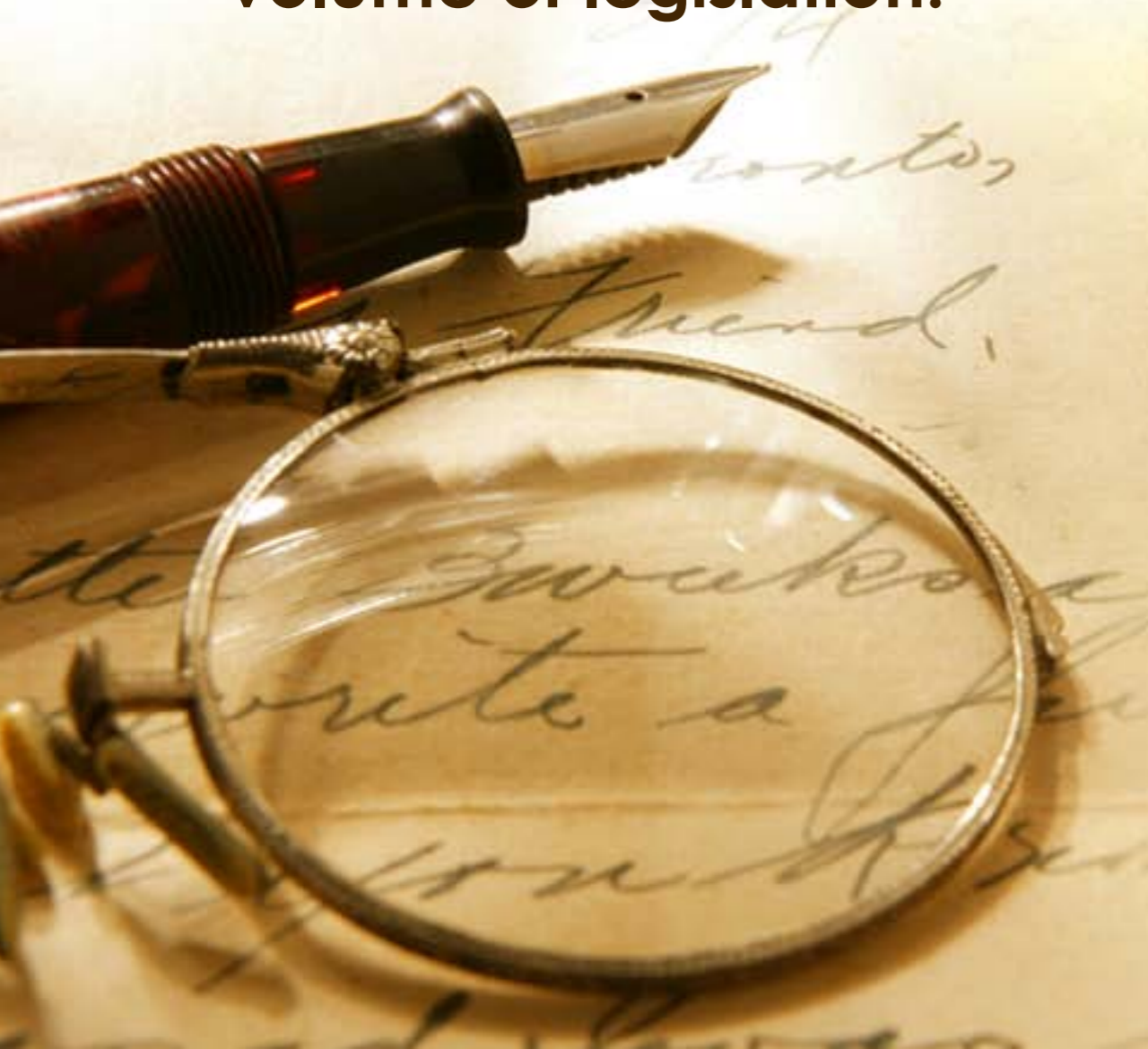
adding, "I think George W. Bush and his crew are an unmitigated disaster. But I wasn't too impressed with John Kerry, either. If the Democrats had their act together and presented a solid candidate, they could have spared the country four more years of the worst presidency in modern history."

With the political cards on the table, I turn the conversation to the industry itself. "How are things going for Our Side?" I ask, looking for a brief rundown. Anyone checking the Legislation Tracker on GamePolitics would be concerned. The number of red pins (legislation going through the process or passed) and green pins (legislation in effect) are quite alarming. "Things are not going well for the gaming business," he says. I ask if there's any legislation we should be particularly concerned about and he responds, "It's not that any one piece of legislation needs [to] be more feared than any other. The problem is that the sheer volume of legislation shows just how much concern and mistrust mainstream America has for videogames. That's largely a result of the industry's failure to be proactive in

managing its image and failing to do enough to assure parents that it has children's best interests at heart."

"Certain segments of the industry have worked very hard at demonstrating they don't care what the mainstream thinks," he says. Indeed, 2005 was the year the mainstream turned on the gaming industry, with an army of bills marching through legislatures, flanked by politicians and talking heads decrying this new threat to America. He continues, "However, the business must now pull together to prove that it does care. Violent and/or sexist marketing hurts gaming's image, sure, but the business has really shot itself in the foot over content issues. Hot Coffee and the corporate lying that accompanied it was the obvious cause of 2005's unprecedented string of successful state-level legislation – three laws passed in one year. Games like *Manhunt* resonate with the public for years after the fact. *Bully* may not be as naughty as some critics expect it to be, but releasing a game with a bullying theme is incredibly tone-deaf marketing. Who's the genius at RockStar that decided, 'Let's take an

issue that child psychologists, guidance counselors, teachers and parents are all going to hate and try to market that'?"

While he's critical of the industry, he's no fan of censorship. "I'm not saying that game design needs to hew to some type of mainstream or censorious agenda, but if you want to make the *Manhunt*s and *Bully*s, be prepared to take the fallout. And the fallout hurts the entire industry, not just the individual publisher." For solutions to these problems, he looks to the industry as a whole, saying, "The ESA has to think about innovative solutions. Allowing some parental representation on the ESRB would be a good place to begin. As it stands now, the ratings board is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the videogame business. Opening it up a little would make parents feel like they had a voice." Interestingly, this is the system the MPAA uses - movies are rated by a board of parents — and though there are certainly quibbles and controversy, the film industry is under much less legislative fire than the gaming industry.

Mr. McCauley has some suggestions of his own, saying, "Some – myself included – have suggested changing how we refer to M- and AO-rated titles from 'games' to 'adult interactive' or some other term that clearly indicates those titles are not meant for younger players. These are just ideas, but the industry needs to clean up its image."

Talking about the industry's image brings us to our political opponents. Although "they're politicians" is the default answer, I ask him what motivates them, looking for insight beyond the standard answer. "There are many motivations," he responds and, though the cynical among us may smirk, McCauley feels "some politicians really approach this from an altruistic viewpoint. Love them or hate them, Joe Lieberman, Leland Yee and Hillary Clinton all believe very strongly that violent game content can negatively affect children. Naturally, there are also some elected officials who are using the issue to score points with voters. Police are very influential with politicians, and the law enforcement lobby has contributed in large part to the *25 to Life* public relations disaster."

A list of gaming's opponents wouldn't be complete without mentioning Miami

Jack certainly understands the value of staying on message.

attorney Jack Thompson, who's sparred with industry figureheads, detractors including webcomic *Penny Arcade*, and anybody else who has gotten in his way. Gamers may demonize him, but McCauley believes Thompson is a genuine problem for an industry already under siege.

"He **is** a threat to the gaming industry, in the sense that some elected officials who don't take the time to know any better allow him into the legislative process," Mr. McCauley says when I mention Thompson's activities, "[and] Jack certainly understands the value of staying on message. He spouts the same propaganda over and over; for example, calling *Bully* a 'Columbine simulator' or saying young killers 'trained obsessively' on *Grand Theft Auto*. What's scary is that you hear some politicians, like Rep. David Hogue, author of Utah's ludicrous 'games as porn' bill, parroting Jack, word for word.

"In all honesty, it's not hard to see how a politician might get hooked up with Jack." The scenario he sketches out is an entirely plausible one. "Imagine you are a legislator trying to push a videogame content bill. You don't really follow the game industry. Out of the blue, a lawyer with a national profile on the topic calls you up and offers his services, *gratis*. Even offers to help write your bill for you. A lot of politicians would jump on that." If I may make a minor comment here, a lot of **people** would jump on the opportunity to let someone do their job for them for free.

Coming back around to my original question, he says, "As far as motivation, Jack seems driven by an ultra-conservative cultural and religious agenda. Countering his message should be a simple matter of addressing it on a factual basis, where he's quite weak. But the industry chooses to ignore him – big mistake. He's not going to go away. Also, the industry really should address some of the outrageous things Jack has said, like comparing Doug Lowenstein to Saddam Hussein, or declaring Sony's videogame marketing strategy a second Pearl Harbor attack. If Jack wants to say these things, he should have to take responsibility for such comments. Why doesn't the ESA address this? It was

encouraging to see the National Institute on Media and the Family publicly distance itself from Jack last year, based primarily on such comments."

The name came up, and we keep coming back to the ESA. One thing I did want to ask him about was the Videogame Voters Network, the ESA's attempt to marshal masses of gamers into a political force. I noticed the VGVN was being promoted on GamePolitics, and asked Mr. McCauley about it. "The VGVN is a good start. I'm actively promoting it because gamers need to get a political voice. Is there something better gamers could do? An independent organization (i.e., not controlled by the ESA) would be nice, but until that comes along, I'll back the VGVN."

Earlier, he'd described the biggest problems facing the masses of gamers who want to fight back as "apathy" and "lack of awareness." I ask him for his advice for readers who are frustrated and want to do something, especially those who've overcome the "I'm just one person and no one will listen to me" phenomenon so common in our demographic.

"I counsel frustrated GamePolitics readers to contact their elected officials and make their voice heard," he says, adding, "It's important to do this in a civil, mature fashion, of course. Angry responses not only don't send the right message, they reinforce negative gamer stereotypes. If you're old enough, certainly register and vote."

Those scurrying to join the legions of single-issue voters should pause, though, as he feels "it's important to keep things in perspective. Gamers are only one issue. Would you vote against an otherwise appealing candidate based simply on his/her position on games? This will be an interesting dilemma for many gamers if Hillary runs next year. Here's something to consider: We ran a poll on GamePolitics; 45% who responded said they would decide their vote based solely on a candidate's views on videogame legislation. With issues like Iraq, Iran, globalization, energy policy and abortion on the table, that's actually a little scary." COMMENTS

Millionaire playboy Shannon Drake lives a life on the run surrounded by Japanese schoolgirls and videogames. He also writes about anime and games for WarCry.

It's important to keep things in perspective.

GRIEFING IS GOOD:
Freedom of Choice and the Politics of Gameplay

by Mark Wallace

If you ask me, there are two kinds of players in the videogames of life: There are passengers, and there are drivers. The passengers can be found riding the rails of most single player games; the drivers play MMOGs.

What it comes down to is a question of choice: How much of it do you really have? While open-world games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Gun* have begun to give the unconnected PC- or console-bound player more and more choice as to how they'll make their way through the environments unfolding on their screens, the single player experience is still mostly one of being guided through a series of missions that unfold, as the popular phrase has it, "on rails" - i.e., in a linear series of events that funnel the player down a relatively narrow path of gameplay encounters. In general, the player has only one choice to make: Go on to the next boss fight, or switch the damn thing off.

The experience of MMOGs and other virtual worlds, by contrast, can be fundamentally different (though it isn't always). In virtual worlds, players are free to follow any number of different paths through the content that's provided by the developer. Here, the player has a far wider range of choices as to what comes next. Or, at least, that's what it looks like at first glance.

Though the software that underpins a game can do much to guide a player, in most cases, the player himself has far more control over just how he makes his way through the world than the designer does. There's no one path to level 60 in *World of Warcraft*, after all, and theoretically, you could get there without ever doing any of the quests Blizzard spent so much time and money to seed throughout its game. In MMOGs, players rule. What may be surprising, though, is the fact that, quite often, it's neither you nor the game that determines your path through the world.

A lesson from French existentialism may be helpful here. The play *No Exit*, first performed in May 1944, is Jean Paul Sartre's drawing-room meditation on (among other things) how we create our

Hell is other players.

identities. Sartre asks a question that should be important to anyone who spends time in MMOGs, where our identities are more malleable than anywhere else: How does one bring oneself into existence?

Sartre answers with a negative example. Perhaps the most important chestnut to be found between the opening and closing curtains is a line uttered by Garcin, the only man in the three-person play. Garcin sums up what all gamers already know: Hell is other players.

Well, actually, it's other people, according to Sartre. But the epigram is easily tweaked to suit our current purposes. For Sartre, the most important element of who we are is neatly encapsulated by the choices we make in the world. But other people sometimes perceive us differently. Woe betide the man who lets himself be defined by the perceptions of others. Do that, and you enter a kind of hell in which you fail to exist.

Any *WoW* player who's ever tried to chat with the NPC Hemet Nesingwary in Stranglethorn Vale on a PvP server knows this is true. More often than not -

especially if it's early on a Saturday evening, Eastern Time, when Californians are just logging on and Europeans are done questing for the night but not yet ready for bed - Nessie, as he's known, is nowhere to be seen. Why? Because he's been killed by the high-level Alliance players (or Horde, depending on your server profile) who are hanging around Nessie's camp site, waiting to kill you, too.

Stranglethorn is rightly called Ganklethorn by players frustrated by being "ganked" over and over again (i.e., killed by high-level characters for whom the battle is hardly a challenge). But on

WoW's PvP servers, other zones can be just as bad.

Alliance players often find it impossible to make their way through the quests available to them in the eastern portions of the Ashenvale zone, and Horde players who'd like to take a run at the instanced dungeon known as Uldaman often find themselves so impossibly outmatched by Alliance players, they can hardly reach the entrance.

To many players on the receiving end of such seemingly needless virtual violence, this kind of gameplay amounts to little

the escapist

Players have found ways to compete over the most important resource of all: choice and control.

more than griefing - one player making life hard for another, for no other reason than it's possible. Clearly, Hell is other players.

But is there more to what's going on here? Were you ganked last night just because someone decided to be mean? Are those insufferable Alliance players a bit too deep in their roleplaying, too focused on keeping the little orc down? They don't get any honor or experience points for killing you. So, why do it at all?

In fact, what they're doing is much more than just griefing, and has less to do with some perceived battle between one faction and the other, and much more to do with the very real tension that exists between designers and players of almost any game. What the gankers are doing is attempting to define themselves by

exercising their freedom of choice in one of the few ways *WoW* allows its players.

Seen in that light (and to misquote yet another source), griefing is good, it "clarifies, cuts through and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit," as Gordon Gecko might say.

Most of us, myself included, wish it would just go away. But I'm willing to grant that griefing is good because it's evidence that an MMOG is more than the sum of its software, and players are trying to use the platform to do more than just play a game. Designers flatter themselves when they claim to have shipped a complete game on the day an MMOG goes live. The truth is, that game will never be complete - not because most MMOG companies release patch after patch of new and/or updated content, but because it's the players who add the most important content to the game.

They do so in the process of defining themselves through the choices they make. It's when MMOG players exercise their freedom of choice in the gray areas that exist between coded gameplay

mechanics that the most interesting results come about. They are choices that often take the form of almost overtly political conflicts between factions, or similarly political alliances among groups within the same cohort. At its best, this kind of emergent gameplay transforms the collective power of players' individual choices into a meta-game that has less to do with competition over the resources provided in the software and more to do with questions of control.

There are more constructive examples than can be found in Ganklethorn Vale, of course. The raiding alliances that form between guilds in *WoW*, for instance - which allow small guilds to band together in order to experience the endgame content that wouldn't normally be open to them - are a simple solution created by players themselves with no recourse whatsoever to coded gameplay mechanics.

It wouldn't be a game without competition, though, and in MMOGs, which only tangentially support direct competition between players, players have found ways to compete over the

most important resource of all: choice and control. By going outside the virtual physics of a gaming universe, they can attempt to define not only themselves, but the world.

Depriving Horde players of the opportunity to complete the Green Hills of Stranglethorn quest is only a simple example of how players can compete for control over each other's actions and identities in an MMOG. In *EVE Online*, player pirates often station themselves in dangerous star systems and attempt to extort a ransom from weaker players in return for granting them safe passage. Ambitious virtual merchants have often attempted to corner the market in various raw materials in any number of MMOGs; they are earning money, yes, but they are doing so by depriving their fellow players of the important choice of who to buy their swiftthistle and raw fowl from.

At its most complex and sophisticated, this kind of "choiceplay" can come down to questions of who controls the world itself. The gameplay mechanics of *EVE* allow player corporations to band together into alliances that can claim sovereignty over star systems and space stations. But *EVE*'s alliances have built a layer beyond that, claiming control over vast tracts of space by virtue of their military ability rather than any flags set by the software.

One new MMOG, set to launch on May 2nd, has expanded its gameplay to give players explicit control over the future of the world itself. *Seed*, a new MMOG from European developers Runestone, puts its players in the roles of new "seedlings" meant to colonize the distant planet of Da Vinci, but find something has gone terribly wrong. It is up to them to repair their underground environment and develop the tools that will allow the colony to survive.

Seed's comic-book graphics are compelling, and one of the game's most interesting conceits is to do away with combat and health gauges almost completely. More interesting still is the fact that the society developing on Da Vinci gets to make its own decisions about which of several strategies for survival is best. Should Da Vinci be terraformed? Should an attempt be made to contact distant Earth and send an interstellar S.O.S.?

Should resources be diverted toward implementing an enhanced evolutionary process so the colonists can survive the harsh conditions on the planet's surface? Or should a ship be built that might allow the Da Vincians to escape?

Most of the gameplay at the early stages of the game differs little from other MMOGs, except for the lack of combat. Instead, players gather resources by repairing The Tower, in which the colonists live, taking biomedical samples from other players or performing various types of research. It's all in the service of one of the long-range goals that will hopefully save the colony. But how the Da Vincians decide which of those goals to pursue is the interesting thing about *Seed*. The Access Points earned in the course of gameplay can be used to vote for player Administrators who control which types of research and manufacture can be performed on The Tower's equipment. In essence, the entire colony makes a collective choice as to which course forward is the best to pursue.

It's exciting to see a game give players so much control over their environment,

but the real excitement in *Seed* will come when players begin to build on top of the software's gameplay mechanics, as they inevitably will. The Administrators who control The Tower's equipment can make their choices based on any criteria, after all. A creative group of Administrators could potentially use their power to control the Da Vinci society itself at a level beyond gameplay. Administrators will inevitably be lobbied to devote resources to terraforming, to genetic experimentation on seedlings, or on other pursuits.

But imagine a group of Administrators who made their choices based not on which technology they preferred, but on social criteria instead, granting access only to those players who followed an emergent set of rules put in place by the Administrators themselves. Administrators might grant access only to players who did not use profanity, to players who logged on every day, to players who paid a certain amount in "taxes" to the Administrators or to some other arbitrarily selected group. Through a bit of creative gameplay, a game designed to bring the greatest number of

players into the decision-making process could become one that puts control in the hands of a select few.

Would this be griefing, or would it be gameplay? Would it be player governance, or would it be an exploit of gameplay mechanics? Would it be Heaven, or would it be Hell? 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.

Disclaimer: Runestone, *Seed*'s developer, is a client of TAP Interactive, a division of Themis Group.

Would this be griefing, or would it be gameplay?

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:

"If you had to, what's the one game you'd regulate out of existence?"

Joe Blancato, Content Editor
Pretty much anything where play time takes precedence over actual human merit. Any game that rewards people who spend 90 hours a week in front of a computer is seriously a drain on society.

Jon Hayter, Producer
I'd regulate anything with StarForce out of existence. It's one thing to try and prevent piracy, it's another entirely to cripple the systems of your customer base For Great Justice.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor
I guess I'm supposed to name the worst game I've ever played, but really, I wouldn't want to regulate anything out of existence. I just don't have to play it.

Dana Massey, "Local Goldmines"
Any low quality, big license video game built solely to grab those few impulse buys from people who love the TV show/ movie, etc.

Shannon Drake, "A Huge Disconnect"
World of Warcraft, because I'm sick of hearing about it. Just because they put a goofy, pop culture reference-filled candy shell around the classic "Grind Your Ass Off" MMOG doesn't make it revolutionary.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor
World of Warcraft. I'd like to be able to spend time with friends and family without having to work around their raid schedules.