

the Escapist

THE KING AND THE Donkey

by Spanner

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

I sat down to write this editor's note about Nintendo and mentally ran through a variety of ways to approach the topic – the importance of Nintendo to games, the upcoming console release, some of the huge titles released by Nintendo over the years – but I couldn't quite do it. Part of this is because our writers this week have done an amazing job of covering most of these areas. The other part is because I cannot talk about this topic without letting my Nintendo Fangirl tendencies show through.

Nintendo is the one who really brought me into the fold. I had played Atari and Intellivision and various arcade games, but it was the NES that did it. Maybe it was the full screen of stuff happening and color (hadn't seen it before, perhaps I wasn't playing the right games), maybe it was the intuitive controller, maybe it was the loveable little Mario guy, but something pulled me in. (See what I mean about the Fangirl?)

And now, I still have my old NES and a collection of enviable, though not

extravagant size, including some of the old faves, *Dragon Warrior*, *Final Fantasy*, **Mike Tyson's Punch Out** and the golden goodness of *The Legend of Zelda*. I have, because I'm a packrat, *Nintendo Power* copies dating back to issue 1. And most importantly, I have a string of happy memories that trail behind me related to Nintendo.

The NES was a bonding tool for my older brother and me, giving us some common ground and a common goal toward which we could work. The NES was an ice breaker in the college dorm, where it was a little on the old school side, next to the shinier consoles du jour. And since then, the NES has been a lonely weeknight pal, a rainy Sunday afternoon diversion and a funny Friday night get-together activity.

So, for anyone like me, who's found even a little bit of joy in a Nintendo product, be it a game, a handheld or a console, we have a whole issue of *The Escapist* for you. And for those of you who are not so sure about that crazy company who's doing their own thing out in left field, maybe you can find some appreciation for their methods herein.

Spanner returns with an interesting look at the rise of Nintendo America and reveals who Mario really is. Allen Varney takes us inside Retro Studios during the making of *Metroid Prime*. Newcomer John Schnaars discusses the role of *Nintendo Power* in Nintendo's rise to fame. And of course, this week we have part three of Warren Spector's Gaming at the Margins.

Enjoy!

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: Just wanted to let you know how much I enjoy reading *The Escapist*. I consider myself someone who takes gaming very seriously. As a recent college graduate, I feel surrounded by adolescent idiots when it comes to this topic. Your magazine is a breath of fresh air in this regard and it's nice to see that

there are, in fact, people out there who wouldn't think I'm a big dweeb for keeping up with the entire gaming industry as I do. Keep up the good work!

- **Scott Hamilton**

To the Editor: You know, if I don't work or play or do anything totally else, I want to read. But those are the moments where I don't want to sit in front of a computer monitor. Could you print your sweet magazine? I'd subscribe.

Thanks for reading,
Leon Grapenthin

To the Editor: I've been subscribing to *The Escapist* for a while now, got caught on issue #17 by the article "OMG Girlz Don't Exist on the Intarweb!!!", and I've been enjoying it, but there is still one thing. Is it meant to be read only by Americans and only by videogame-gamers? Because that's the feeling I get, and I'm kind of starting to think I should go and read somewhere else, or that I got it all wrong from the start. It just seems to me that these two attributes are very dominant in the articles. What about other games, what about other

nationalities, other countries and their legislature?

Regards,
tota

From the Blog: [Re: "A Huge Disconnect" by Shannon Drake] "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."

Think about it this way.

Any politician devoting time on such an important issue as video game censorship during the time when there're much more pressing issues to concentrate on is not fit to represent us.

Furthermore, a large percentage of these bills are based on such shoddy, incomplete or downright dishonest research that anyone basing legislative efforts on them should be kicked out of office immediately. Just imagine what

sort of other laws they're drafting based on equally bad research.

Not only that, but many of these bills are known to be unconstitutional even before they're formally introduced. Some of the people sponsoring them have even admitted to it while still pressing on. These legislators are wasting **my** money introducing bills that they know are going to get shut down by an expensive legal process. Why should I ever vote for these people? In fact, I should be suing them to recoup some of the tax payers' money wasted by them.

Finally, as Dennis even mentioned, some of the bills are so clearly motivated by baby-kissing type of election campaigning that there's no question as to where that person's priorities are: getting re-elected no matter what. These sort of people should not get a single vote either.

So in essence, I don't think it's such a bad idea to base your decisions on who to (not) vote on the candidates' views on video game legislation.

-Pixelante Anonymous

From the Blog: [Re: "Local Goldmines" by Dana Massey] You hit the nail on the head. Conventional wisdom suggests that the tremendous bloat of video game budgets makes it impossible to develop a competitive game that cannot sell half a million copies. Now, the indie gaming scene provides at least one counterexample, but who plays (or even knows about) indie games except people who have video games in their blood like a nicotine patch?



Unfortunately, before art-house games become really viable and common, the mainstream must be expanded. In addition, games need to find new ways of expressing themselves. People talk about games as art, but games more profound than an action flick are extraordinarily rare, and those few that say more aren't entirely clear on what they're saying. What's more, the few politically themed games there are floating around either base it around a painfully heavy-handed partisan message, or are so afraid of getting bad press from one side of the aisle or the other that they very carefully refrain from saying anything at all. Granted, a part of that comes from the hyperpolarized political climate that exists worldwide... and political games are **still** pretty heavily US-centric.... It's a very tricky puzzle indeed, and I think in the long run no amount of concentrated effort from developers will be half as significant as the market forces that are making Flash game portals and MMOGs into a huge market.

-Mark

THE KING AND THE Donkey

by Spanner



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Nintendo wasn't born with a silver joystick in its mouth. It fought, clawed and clamored its way into a world that didn't want it, and despite making mistakes over the years (there is yet to be a success within the industry who **hasn't**), the Japanese pioneer deserves recognition for forging a path of its own design; a company built on the passion of people who knew they had something unique to give the customers they just couldn't reach. A driving vision, steely determination and a refusal to be intimidated ultimately led to Nintendo being established as the world videogame power it is today – an inspiring lesson to us all. No matter how powerful your rivals may appear to be, the future is shaped solely by your own desire to achieve, and can only be subverted if your resolve allows it to be.

Even during the golden age of gaming, Nintendo was not a young name. Reaching back as far as the late 1800s, it began life producing Japanese playing cards made from bark known as *hanafuda*. For almost a century thereafter, Nintendo kept itself happily ticking along by dabbling in any number

of niche markets, one of which was the blossoming American videogame trend. As with all its endeavors, this product line was approached with Nintendo's trademark innovation, and as the Japanese public's interest increased, so did the company's investment. Despite making an early start on the gaming scene, Nintendo's domination of the industry was a long way down the line, and would actually be kick started by the recklessness of its competition.

Not that the Western industry actively blocked any Japanese attempts to find a finger hold in the Trans-Pacific market, but gaming trends across the basin were so radically different that finding a title with universal appeal was an immensely difficult task. It's not at all unlikely that attempts at transcending the ostensibly impenetrable cultural barrier, in either direction, would have been viewed as impossible if not for the few anomalies that had produced the same impact on both shores, such as *Pac Man*, *Space Invaders* and *Gun Fight*. But no matter how much the gameplay of these success stories was dissected, analyzed and put back together, recreating their

Times were looking good, and Nintendo had finally found its way to the Promised Land.



quintessential, global appeal was becoming the Holy Grail of videogame development.

While most coin-op manufacturers of the late '70s and early '80s concentrated on the more attainable goal of localized success, Nintendo set itself the prodigious task of breaching that trade barrier once and for all. To this end, the Japanese management decided a radical approach to game development was required, and sought an alternative path to designing the Eastern title that would enthrall the Western arcade. A greenhorn artist and designer from Nintendo's toy manufacturing division was drafted in and given the ambiguous assignment of realizing this much coveted, and previously unattainable, goal. Young Shigeru Miyamoto was a complete newcomer to videogames, but together with veteran engineer Gunpei Yokoi, the dynamic duo soon created a game that would open the door to the American dream. Unable to speak English, Miyamoto-san took up a translation dictionary to fathom the title "*Stubborn Gorilla*," and mistakenly christened his magnificent machine as "*Donkey Kong*."

The game quickly established Shigeru Miyamoto as the right dude for the gig when *Donkey Kong* single-handedly rescued the failing Nintendo of America, which had already defaulted on its warehouse payments and whose three employees were preparing to file for bankruptcy. In apology, president of Nintendo of America, Minoru Arakawa, renamed the hero of *Donkey Kong* (known simply as "Jumpman") after Mario Segale, the landlord of the warehouse he had previously been unable to pay.

It was 1981. Times were looking good, and Nintendo had finally found its way to the Promised Land.

Ever since Atari first had the notion of licensing arcade games for conversion to home systems (with *Space Invaders*), the arcades had become vast, neon-coated advertisements and intense, expensive testing grounds for the real profit behind the industry, the home games market. It was clear that *Donkey Kong* was just such a license waiting to explode in a ball of green flame. Nintendo was unprepared for the rigors of the home console wars, and, although

every major player on the scene wanted the rights to the monkey, it was eventually bagged by Coleco, who had previously known some success with a home system (a dedicated *Pong* clone known as the Telstar), though ultimately won the contract via its intention to take Nintendo's obstinate anthropoid to multiple formats, initially accompanying their new console, the ColecoVision, as its flagship title. Third-party ports were to follow for other home machines, as well as the handheld games market in which the Connecticut Leather Company was already immersed. Taking Nintendo from strength to strength, *Donkey Kong* licensing went into full throttle.

It was 1982, and Coleco was celebrating its 50th anniversary. The launch of the ColecoVision was to be a precision operation. The home videogame market was already well established (and practically owned) by the two major players who already had a substantial back catalogue of games before Coleco's contender was even released: the Atari VCS and the Mattel Intellivision. The new deal with Nintendo to deliver the hottest game of the year into people's houses was more than just a potential goldmine,

the *Escapist*



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it was the title that could make or break the ColecoVision. In order to capitalize on their investment, Coleco wanted to approach the deal with Nintendo as cautiously as the tight time scale would allow, but were unprepared for dealing with the no nonsense Japanese.

Nintendo of America was a very small operation, and made regular use of a lawyer it had established a good working relationship with, Howard Lincoln. Lincoln, like Shigeru Miyamoto before him, was a complete novice to the videogame industry (as well as much of the manufacturing know how required for videogames), which ultimately granted him a fresh perspective on how proceedings would best be handled. In general, licensing contracts were written so the licensor remained responsible for any legal action arising from licensed products. Seeing no benefit in this for Nintendo should any difficulties crop up, Lincoln wrote a clause into the agreement **absolving** Nintendo of any responsibilities from legal difficulties brought on by Coleco's license. Naturally, had Coleco's attorneys been given the opportunity to see this clause, they

would undoubtedly have disputed, but when suddenly faced with a "sign now or lose the license" order from high within the Nintendo ranks, Coleco was over a barrel and would have signed anything to get the deal. It would prove to be astute foresight on Lincoln's part.

When Randy Rissman, President of Tiger Electronics (manufacturers of dedicated handheld games), saw *Donkey Kong*, he immediately realized the potential this game had for one of his company's handheld systems. What he did next set a chain of events in motion that would ultimately establish Nintendo as a major player in the videogame ranks, though not before potentially casting it adrift.

Rissman mistakenly assumed the game to be based on the movie *King Kong*, and rather than approach Nintendo to arrange a license for *Donkey Kong*, he went to Universal Studios and asked for the rights to develop a game of the movie! Universal's trademark search revealed no reason why such a license could not be granted, and in 1981, sold Tiger the rights it had requested quite out of the blue.

Six months later, the president of Universal Studios, Sid Sheinberg, heard about *Donkey Kong* and was advised by one of the Studio's lawyers there were strong similarities between the game and *King Kong*, the movie. Sheinberg arranged a meeting with Arnold Greenberg, CEO of Coleco, insinuating that Universal was interested in investing in his company.

At the meeting, instead of discussing the joint venture he thought he was there to negotiate, Greenberg was threatened with immediate legal action if he didn't pay royalties on the *King Kong* likeness. Panicked that a massive corporation like Universal Studios, with unlimited legal resources, was bearing down on him just as the Coleco was about to launch, packaged with the *Donkey Kong* game that was the key to establishing their machine, Greenberg rashly agreed to Sheinberg's demands. It was an unusual agreement that wasn't so much a copyright license as a "covenant not to sue." So long as Coleco paid Universal some *Donkey Kong* royalties, Universal would refrain from suing them! Once

Coleco was over a barrel and would have signed anything to get the deal.



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Arakawa and Lincoln came face to face with Sheinberg and told him they were not prepared to pay Universal a penny.



again, Coleco was backed into a corner by hastily signing paperwork.

Now that *Donkey Kong* was on their radar, Universal traced the game all the way back to Nintendo. The same demands made to Coleco were issued to the Japanese company. They were ordered to cease all marketing of *Donkey Kong* products, destroy all *Donkey Kong* inventory and produce a full statement of profits made from the franchise within 48 hours. Nintendo were as baffled as they were irate.

Another meeting was arranged, and this time Nintendo were also invited. Still incredibly anxious about the impending launch of their new console, Coleco played Devil's advocate to Universal Studios, pushing their licensor to sign an agreement promising royalties to the movie makers. Present for Nintendo were Minoru Arakawa (president of Nintendo of America) and his outside legal council, Howard Lincoln. Lincoln did not feel quite so threatened, mainly due to the clause he had shrewdly written into the agreement with Coleco, but also because his own copyright searches had not thrown up any evidence that *Donkey*

Kong actually did breach any Universal owned rights, despite the people at the table insisting they did.

Lincoln asked Universal for a legal document called a "chain of title," used to demonstrate the legal avenue by which Universal could prove their ownership of the name, story and character of *King Kong*. When the document failed to appear, Howard Lincoln advised Nintendo to challenge Universal in court; a difficult battle, but one which Lincoln felt was within Nintendo's scope to win. Being a quietly analytical man, Lincoln's own research suggested that Universal's claim was so tenuous, no amount of lawyers could sway a courtroom into agreeing with the unfair demands, and the legal skirmish would merely be a formality.

In a similar move to Sheinberg's meeting with Arnold Greenberg, Nintendo of America arranged to meet with the Universal president, insinuating they were ready to make a deal. When Arakawa and Lincoln came face to face with Sheinberg and told him they were not prepared to pay Universal a penny, his temper apparently got the better of

him. He warned them to start saving for their lawyer's fees, as his legal department "even turned a profit!" There was no turning back now. The bridges were burned and a court case was inevitable.

Tensions within Nintendo began to rise, as any rocking of their newly acquired American boat by the massive legal weight of a powerful company like Universal Studios could easily wind up sinking it. Arakawa was warned and kept under close scrutiny by his Japanese superiors during this tenuous time, understanding it was his head on the block if matters took a turn for the worse. Despite this, Arakawa stuck with Lincoln, and refused to bow to the Studios.

On June 29, 1982, Universal prosecuted Nintendo for copyright infringement of their rights to *King Kong*, by virtue of agreement with RKO Pictures (who made the original film). On top of this, Universal Studios' legal department approached the dozens of licensees of the *Donkey Kong* franchise (from toys to chocolate bars and cartoons), threatening them with similar action if

they did not immediately desist from using the *Donkey Kong* image. While some of them were reassured by Nintendo's refusal to kowtow, most backed down, cautious of the legal powers at Universal's disposal.

Before the court battle got going, Universal also went back to Tiger Electronics, who they had first granted the *King Kong* game license to, and told them to change certain details of their game to ensure it was sufficiently different from *Donkey Kong*. This involved altering the platform environment, changing the barrels to bombs and crowning the hero with a fireman's hat.

The case was heard at the United States District Court for the Southern State of New York before Judge Robert Sweet, lasting for seven days. By this time, Arakawa had made Lincoln the Senior Vice President of Nintendo of America for his sterling work as its outside legal council; a position he held until 1994, when he succeeded Minoru Arakawa as President of Nintendo of America.



Judge Sweet ruled in favor of the Japanese.

Lincoln hired John Kirby to represent Nintendo during the court case. Kirby proved himself to be equally adept, and once Universal Studios had presented their claims, he stunned the room with a fatal blow to Universal's already weakening case.

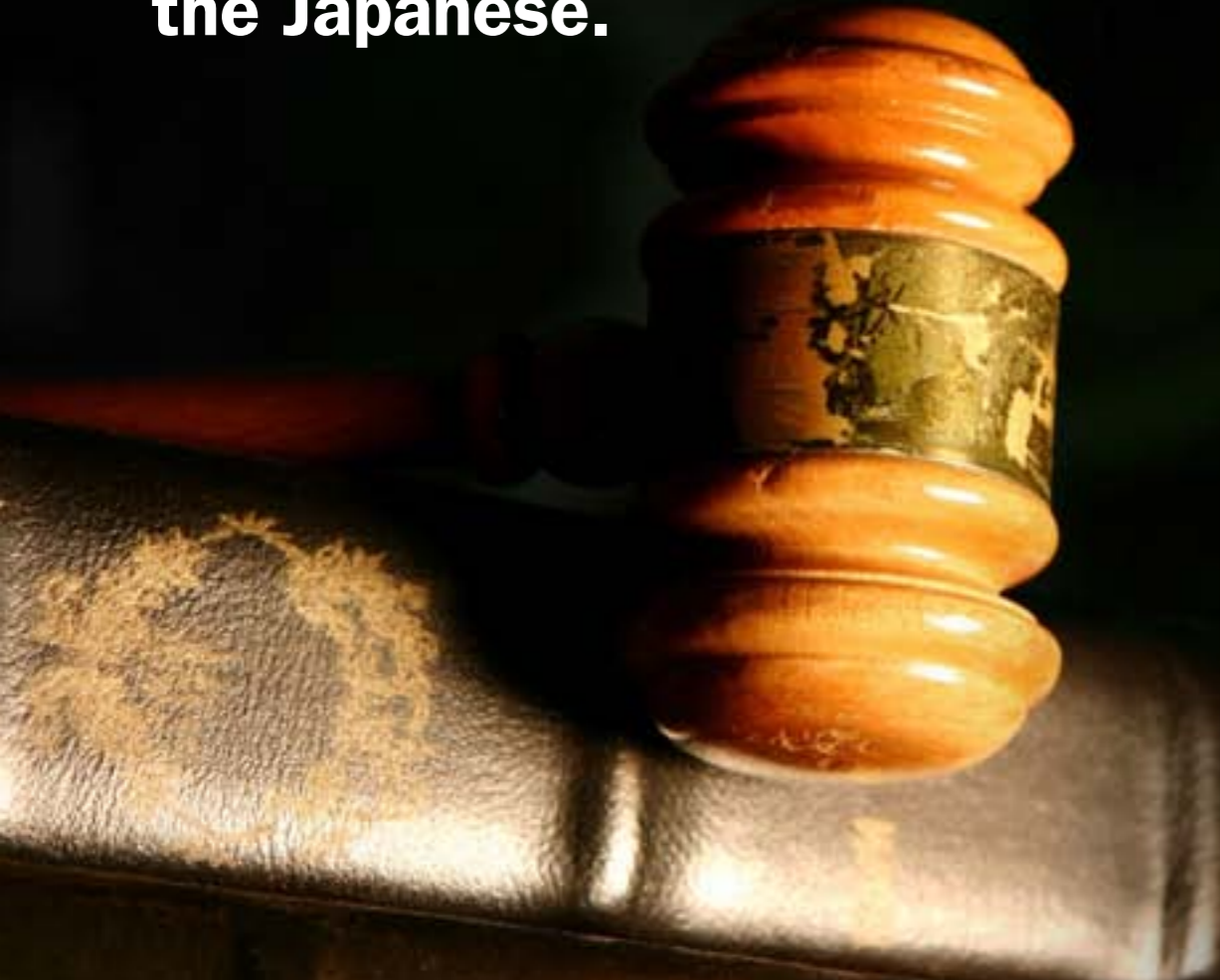
In 1975, Universal Studios had successfully taken RKO Pictures to court in order to prove the image and story of *King Kong* were over 40 years old and therefore in the public domain, clearing the path for **Dino De Laurentiis** to remake the movie in 1976 without paying any expensive royalties. Coupled with Universal being unable to convince the court there would be any confusion between *Donkey Kong* and *King Kong*, Sheinberg's reiterated comments about his legal department being able to turn a profit (which did not impress the Judge one bit) and the subsequent scare tactics used against Nintendo's licensees, Judge Sweet ruled in favor of the Japanese.

Although Nintendo also had the opportunity to claim damages from Tiger Electronics for their infringement of the *Donkey Kong* image (as Judge Sweet determined the alterations were not sufficient to differentiate it from Nintendo's game), Arakawa and Lincoln instead decided to let Tiger off the hook and reclaim the profits Universal had made from the original *King Kong* license; publicly embarrassing the Studios.

In good Nintendo fashion, the company once again issued an immortalizing thanks to someone who had served the company well. This time, John Kirby had a popular videogame character named after him: The amorphous *Kirby* character from their hugely popular (and ongoing) series, so people would always remember the service he had done them in winning that monumental court battle. They also bought him a \$30,000 boat christened the *Donkey Kong*, but that's nowhere near as prestigious as having a videogame character named after you, I'm sure you'll agree.

It wasn't until 1985 that Nintendo filed a counterclaim against Universal Studios, who Judge Sweet subsequently ordered to pay \$1.8 million in expenses to the videogame developer. Both appealed the counterclaim a year later, but the previous decision was upheld, most likely to put a lid on the massive, ongoing case once and for all.

Naturally, many of the other companies who had been muscled out of their lucrative *Donkey Kong* licenses and had



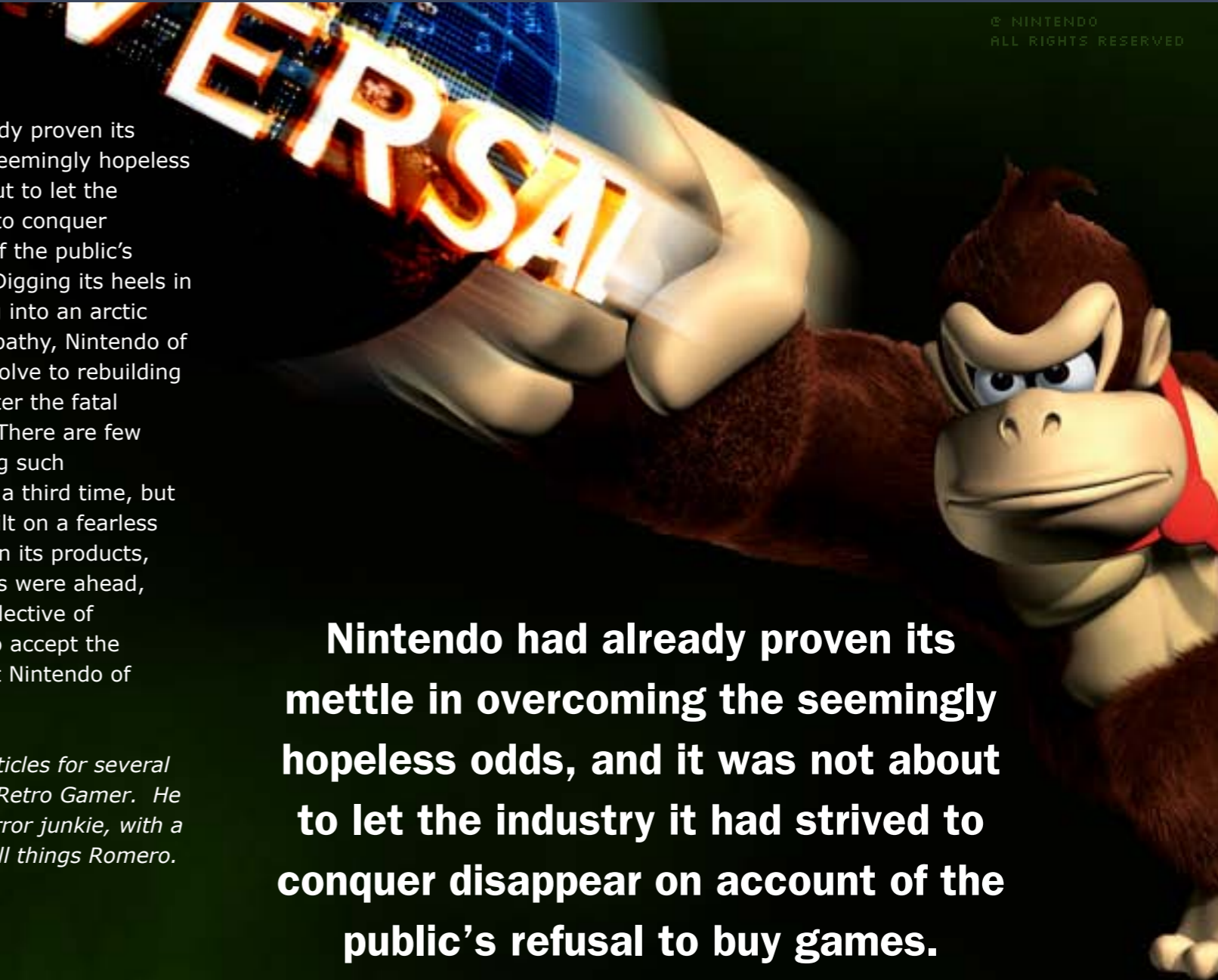
their valuable relationship with Nintendo severely shaken (including - and especially - Coleco) followed the David and Goliath example and filed suit against Universal. In Coleco's case, Universal went right back to the original notion it had used to bring Arnold Greenberg to the table with Sid Sheinberg and purchased a large amount of stock in recompense.

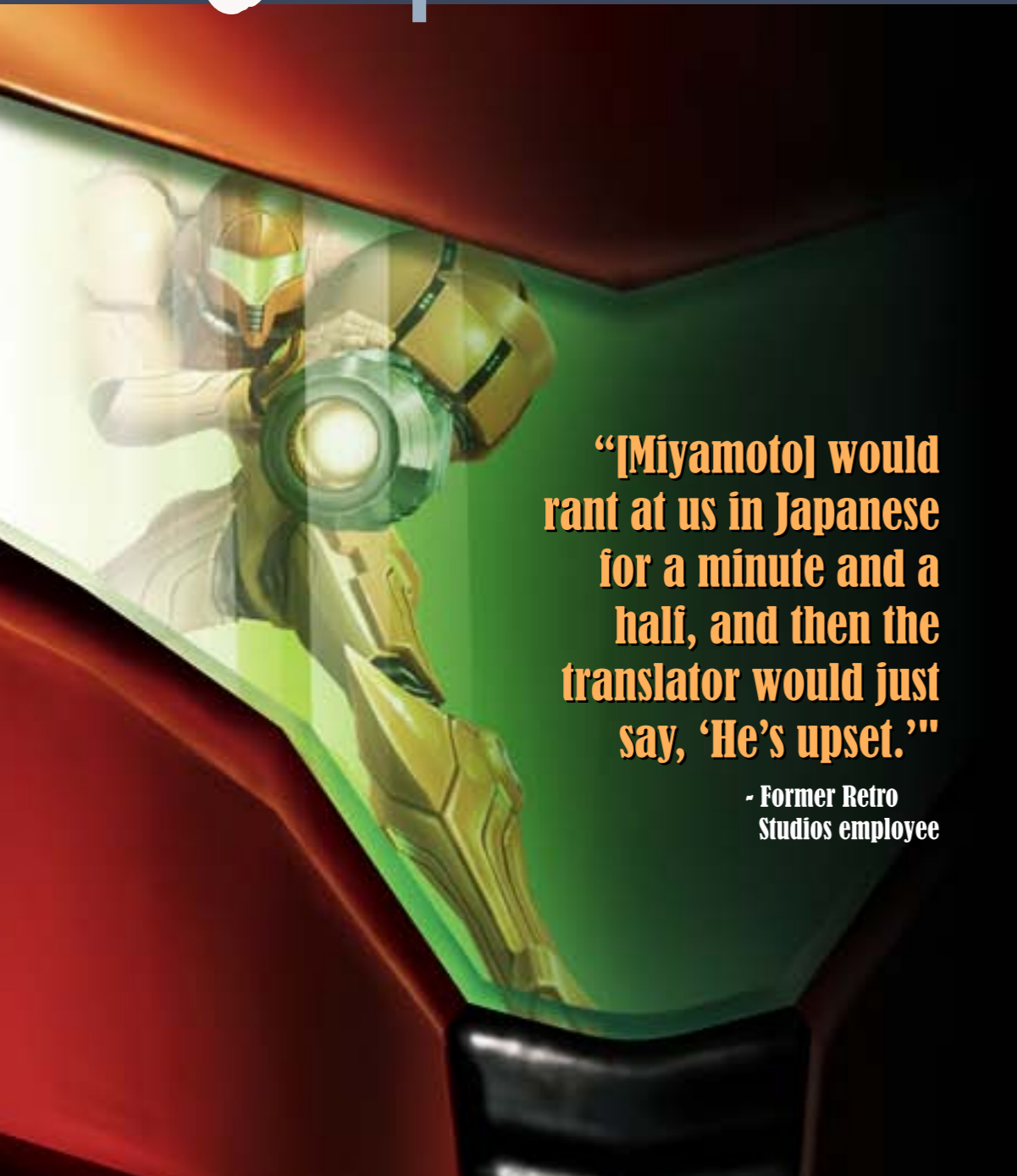
Nintendo was finally recognized as a major player in the industry, and one not to be trifled with. They had shown a passionate dedication to deliver innovative new products to the hungry consumer, but had made it quite clear that any business would be done on their terms. Unfortunately for the new power on the block, and despite the felling of a mighty adversary, timing was ultimately against them, and before the legendary court battle of *Universal City Studios, Inc. vs. Nintendo Co., Ltd.* had even finished, the entire industry had collapsed into a black hole of avarice.

But Nintendo had already proven its mettle in overcoming seemingly hopeless odds, and was not about to let the industry it had strived to conquer disappear on account of the public's refusal to buy games. Digging its heels in and marching headlong into an arctic blizzard of consumer apathy, Nintendo of America set its iron resolve to rebuilding the industry it loved after the fatal market crash of 1984. There are few people capable of facing such overwhelming odds for a third time, but this was a company built on a fearless and unswerving belief in its products, and though rough times were ahead, there was no better collective of dedicated individuals to accept the challenge than those at Nintendo of America. [COMMENTS](#)

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

Nintendo had already proven its mettle in overcoming the seemingly hopeless odds, and it was not about to let the industry it had strived to conquer disappear on account of the public's refusal to buy games.





“[Miyamoto] would rant at us in Japanese for a minute and a half, and then the translator would just say, ‘He’s upset.’”

- Former Retro Studios employee

Metroid Primed

Nintendo’s second-string franchise is poised to jump higher

by Allen Varney

Unerringly, Svengali-like, you can tell if a friend has played the original 1986 *Metroid* for the Nintendo Entertainment System. Pick your target and read this aloud: “The fastest known *Metroid* speedrun – a complete play-through, start to finish – is 18 minutes, 35 seconds.”

Did your friend gasp?

Seasoned fans remember Nintendo’s *Metroid* for its pioneering open-ended action-adventure side-scrolling platformer gameplay. As galactic bounty hunter Samus Aran, players ran and jumped and rolled (in “morph-ball” form) through labyrinthine alien ruins. Automap? Automap was for wussies! In 1986 – that archaic aeon before strategy guides – *Metroid* players wandered those trackless low-res polygons for 10, 12, 20 hours. They dodged floating jellyfish monsters, fought Space Pirates and found a dozen weird devices that let them explore still further. When they beat the big final boss, Mother Brain, they ran like mad to escape the ruins before the whole joint blew up. And they liked it!

They liked it so much, Nintendo produced two more *Metroid* games in the 1990s, each bringing the familiar gameplay to a new platform: *Metroid II: Return of Samus* (Game Boy, 1991) and the much-loved *Super Metroid* (Super NES, 1994). The *Metroid* gameplay influenced Konami’s *Castlevania* games so strongly that reviewers coined the umbrella term “Castleroids” to describe the style of “nonlinear exploration-based gameplay with lots of power-ups.”

But the *Metroid* franchise lapsed through the Nintendo 64 era. Players wondered if Samus Aran had blown up her last labyrinth.

Then, in 2000, in advance publicity for the N64's successor console, the GameCube, Nintendo announced a new *Metroid* game was in development. This shocked fans in two ways. First, the side-scrolling series was moving not only to 3-D, but to (gasp!) first-person 3-D. Second, the new *Metroid* would be created not by Nintendo in-house, but by a new, unheralded outside studio in, of all benighted places, Texas. On newsgroups and message boards, longtime *Metroids* publicly weirded out.

As it turned out, the fans had excellent reason to worry. But behind the scenes, Nintendo management was pushing past obstacles and exploring alternative paths as risky as anything Samus Aran ever faced. The outcome of the GameCube *Metroid* project is an object lesson in both creativity and management.

Going Retro

Nintendo has historically had fair-to-mixed luck with its second-party developers. ("Second-party" means Nintendo has part ownership in the company, as opposed to third-party companies to which Nintendo licenses development rights but has no ownership.) Through 2001, Nintendo's

leading second party was Rare Ltd., the U.K. house responsible for *GoldenEye 007*, *Donkey Kong Country* and its sequels, and the *Perfect Dark* and *Banjo-Kazooie* series, among many others. But in the late 1990s, as Nintendo prepared the GameCube, Rare's involvement with Nintendo was declining; later, in 2002, Microsoft acquired Rare. To support its GameCube publishing strategy, Nintendo sought new second parties.

About this time, Jeff Spangenberg was seeking new horizons. He had already racked up more hits than most producers enjoy in a long career. Six-foot-eight, self-taught and saturnine, Spangenberg started out in the late '80s porting arcade hits (*Afterburner*, *Space Harrier*) to the Amiga. In 1991, he started Iguana Entertainment in Santa Clara, California, then moved it to Austin, Texas in 1993. The next year, the studio scored its first big success with *NBA Jam*. In 1995, Acclaim bought Iguana and renamed it Acclaim Studios Austin. Spangenberg soon rose to President of Worldwide Product Development, overseeing Acclaim's software studios. His hits from this time include *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter* and several sports games. He made a bundle; a February 1997 article called



“Within minutes of the news breaking on the internet [that *Metroid Prime* would be first-person], the backlash to the news spread across message boards and chat rooms. If you thought the response to Jar-Jar Binks from the *Star Wars* faithful was bad...”

- Pete Deol, N-Sider

Metroid's Father

Gunpei Yokoi (1941-97) started with Nintendo as a toy designer; in 1980, he created the Ten Billion Barrel puzzle. After developing the Game & Watch, Yokoi headed Nintendo's Research & Development Unit 1, where he helped produce the *Donkey Kong* arcade games with Nintendo's rising star, Shigeru Miyamoto. In 1984, Miyamoto left to lead his own R&D unit. Yokoi's R&D1 produced the first *Metroid* in 1986. Nintendo released it simultaneously with another fondly remembered Yokoi title, *Kid Icarus*.

After *Metroid*, Yokoi's R&D1 went on to create the Game Boy. But after his Virtual Boy flopped in 1995, Yokoi left Nintendo in disgrace. He started Koto Laboratory, which partnered with Bandai to develop an interesting handheld called the WonderSwan. Yokoi died in a 1997 car accident, two years before the WonderSwan's release. Bandai ceased production of the WonderSwan in 2001.

“It honestly felt a little like living in a Communist-bloc country: You kind of didn’t know who to trust, who would rat on you, that sort of thing.”

- A former Retro employee, quoted in N-Sider

“Boys and their fast toys” in – not making this up – the *Lubbock* (Texas) *Avalanche-Journal* quotes Spangenberg buying a red Ferrari 355 Spider (“It was sort of like an impulse buy, really”) and planning to get an \$85,000 Hummer (“If anybody gets in your way, you just drive over them”).

But Spangenberg was fired from Acclaim in July 1998, allegedly because he had said he planned to start a new company after his contract ended. Three months later, having secured millions in financing from Nintendo of America, he incorporated Retro Studios as its owner, with Nintendo holding a minority position. In June 1999, Spangenberg opened Retro’s 40,000-square-foot Austin complex, including a state-of-the-art motion-capture studio and onsite theater. Poaching big-league design and art talent from many competitors, Retro undertook an ambitious slate of not one,

not two, but **five** major GameCube projects. One, begun right away but not announced until 2000, was *Metroid Prime*.

On all five projects, almost from the start, things went wrong. A lengthy N-Sider Retro retrospective tells the tale: Working in black, windowless offices deep inside the building, employees endured political infighting, egregious crunching and a paranoid atmosphere. They missed milestones. They couldn’t make the games work. Spangenberg delegated a lot and was often absent.

At this point, Miyamoto got involved.

Knocking Over the Table

Shigeru Miyamoto, world-renowned designer or producer of Nintendo’s most popular games – *Mario*, *Zelda*, *Animal Crossing* and many more – had never been involved in a *Metroid* game. But as

head of Nintendo’s Entertainment Analysis & Development (EAD) division, Miyamoto supervised relations with Retro, and in fact assigned it *Metroid Prime*.

It was the first time Nintendo had worked closely with a foreign development team to create a game from scratch. EAD held monthly phone conferences with Retro and exchanged employees every two or three months. In a February 2003 Kikizo.com interview Miyamoto said, “I’ve actually, from the very initial stages of this project, been directly involved with the producer; and actually, at EAD in Japan, I have three staff members who are almost kind of half-directing the game, in cooperation with Retro Studios. So our level of involvement is very, very high on the project.”

“Nintendo would come down about three times a year and rip on most of the games,” a Retro employee told *Electronic Gaming Monthly* in April 2001. In 2000, Miyamoto himself visited Retro, an event compared to the Emperor visiting the Death Star. But a closer parallel might be the 2003 film *Lost in Translation*, where Bill Murray plays an American actor





“[L]et’s say there’s something in the game that I think is fun. I bring that over to the programmers but I don’t get any response [...] what should I do then? Well, if I’m not getting the message across, then it’s time to put some light in their eyes.”

- Miyamoto

vainly trying to get direction from a Japanese-speaking filmmaker. A former Retro employee recalls, “[Miyamoto] would rant at us in Japanese for a minute and a half, and then the translator would just say, ‘He’s upset.’”

In Miyamoto’s lecture at Tokyo University in July 2003, he said, “You fall into the dilemma where the guys up top are like, ‘Are you working, or what?!’ and the guys down below are like, ‘See, it’s the people up top! What can you do?’ And the project begins to go haywire. When it gets to that point, I bust it all out in a conference. People refer to that point as the time where I ‘knock over the table.’ [...] When I flip out, it’s because I’m being sincere in my desire to get something done with the project.”

Miyamoto sincerely disliked *Metroid Prime*’s original camera system. He ordered the game changed from third-person to first-person, which destroyed the schedule. He commanded Retro to implement several types of visors Samus Aran could use in the game, such as a scanner to bring up gameplay hints or interesting history about targets. And his changes didn’t stop with *Metroid*.

Installing a New Regime

Miyamoto pressured Retro to cancel several other projects, first (April 2000) an action adventure (working title: “Action Adventure”), then (February 2001) their football and car-combat games, and finally (July 2001) a *Zelda*-style roleplaying game called *Raven Blade*. The action-adventure team shifted to *Metroid*, but the later cancellations forced corresponding layoffs. For the second layoff, of 26 employees, CEO Jeff Spangenberg was so distraught he didn’t show up for work.

His distress apparently didn’t last. In 2002, photos were posted on the web showing Spangenberg in hot tubs with lightly-clad (or less) women. Soon after this, Nintendo abruptly bought out Spangenberg for \$1 million and he left Retro, sort of the way King Kong left the Empire State Building. Later that year, he founded Topheavy Studios, which in 2004 released an interactive peep show called *The Guy Game* for PS2 and Xbox. In assigning it a Poor rating, an Honestgamers.com review suggests playing *The Guy Game* is not only dull, it lowers your sense of self-worth. In December 2004, a coed who appeared topless in the game sued Topheavy,

the Escapist

Microsoft and Sony on the grounds she was underage when the footage was shot; last July a judge ordered *The Guy Game* yanked from the shelves. It is unclear whether anyone noticed its absence.

Spangenberg's replacement as Retro CEO was Steve Barcia, who had joined Retro as VP of Product Development after many years at Sim-Tex and Microprose (he designed *Master of Orion*). But this did little to improve staff morale; the current version of Barcia's Wikipedia entry alleges Retro disgruntlement. In April 2003, Nintendo replaced Barcia with longtime company insider Michael Kelbaugh, who still runs Retro today. Barcia now works at EA Canada in Vancouver, where he produces the *Def Jam* series.

These changes, covered extensively in the gaming press, brought *Metroid* fans to despair. After this troubled gestation, what could they possibly expect for *Metroid Prime* other than sheer disaster?


Happy Ending

Metroid Prime debuted in America in November 2002. Every Nintendo fan knows how the story turned out:

universal acclaim. Its current Metacritic score is 97%; on Rotten Tomatoes, it's 100%. *Prime* took Game of the Year at the 2003 Game Developers Conference, among many other awards, and became the GameCube's flagship title. Reviews praised *Prime's* impressive look, fine soundtrack, smooth control scheme, creative use of the visors and ingenious puzzles. Many commented on how, even with the switch to first-person 3-D, the game still felt like a *Metroid*: the open world, the doubling back to reach areas previously inaccessible, etc. In short, it was a total success.

Nintendo's successful takeover of Retro contrasts with the similar case of Electronic Arts buying another Austin studio, Origin. Origin's acquisition led to its lingering, agonizing death, owing to EA's pernicious company politics. Also, EA annually shifts managers among its divisions; each new manager arrives, sweeps away his precursor's work, starts everyone working on some new project, and then the next year, before anything ships, **bam!** it all happens again.

In comparison, Miyamoto's EAD unit stuck with Retro for years, maintaining continuity on a critical project, rotating



“This first-person action adventure game is filled with so much detail, style, and originality that literally every gamer should play it.”

- Greg Kasavin,
GameSpot review of *Metroid Prime*



in new managers until someone finally worked, and then (note well!) stopping. The results speak for themselves: Retro today is, by all accounts, a much nicer place to work. And after its halting progress in its first four years, Retro has already followed up *Prime* with a direct sequel, *Metroid Prime: Echoes* (2004).

More Metroid, More!

Though Nintendo let the *Metroid* franchise languish for eight years, *Prime's* success heralded a resurgence. Nintendo has now embraced *Metroid* and released a slate of products that elevate it, lo, even unto the lofty heights of Mario and Link.

Metroid Fusion (2002) for the Game Boy Advance was released in conjunction with *Prime*. A disconcertingly linear sequel to *Super Metroid*, the game obsessively limits the player's ability to "sequence break" the layout, to make speedrunning less rewarding. (Current best time: 50 minutes.) If you plug an Advance running *Fusion* into a GameCube running *Prime*, completing each game unlocks new content.

In 2004, Nintendo published *Metroid: Zero Mission*—the original *Metroid* with

modern graphics for the Game Boy Advance. The *Zero* remake adds an automap that helpfully indicates where you should go next, which means you finish the game in not much longer than 18 minutes, 35 seconds. (Okay, five hours.) When you complete the mission, you unlock the original NES *Metroid*, 1986 version, on the same cartridge.

Which makes it odd that Nintendo then reissued the original NES *Metroid*, 1986 version, as part of its *Classic NES Series*, also for the Game Boy Advance. They should have subtitled it "Generation Gap." If you're old enough to have played the original, the *Classic* reissue instantly recalls your halcyon youth. If you're younger, well.... Check this startling comment from one "big_tom_2k6" titled "rubbish RUBBISH": "sometimes nintendo can lack off and this my friends is one of them they brong out puzzle games for ds that are rubbish and bring out so called 'classics' but [...] its all in the past just like an embarrassing thing you done 2 years ago or setting an old womans house on fire and nobody knows it was you so please leave it all behind we dont want to see it again."

Given that Samus morphs into a ball, 2005's *Metroid Prime Pinball* is perhaps defensible. From Greg Kasavin's glowing GameSpot review: "Not since *The Pinball of the Dead* has a concept of *Metroid Prime Pinball's* caliber become a reality. Seriously. Well, sort of."

Newest in the growing family is *Metroid Prime Hunters*, just out for the Nintendo DS. A first-person shooter (unusual for the DS), *Hunters* introduces six new bounty hunters for four-player wi-fi deathmatches. You unlock the new characters by completing the single-player adventure.

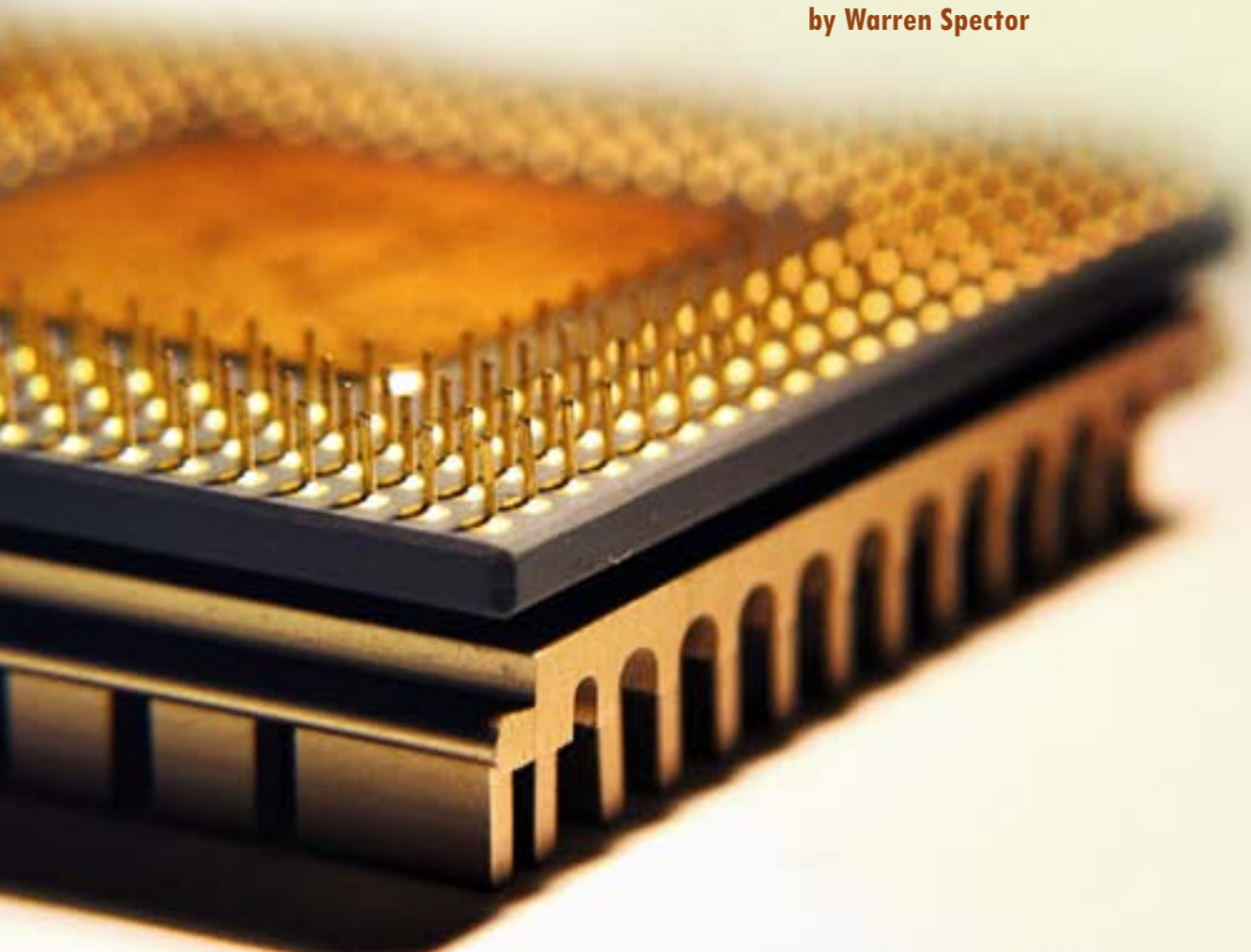
Meanwhile, Retro Studios is working on *Metroid Prime 3* for the next-gen Revolution console. According to the sparse Retro website, they're hiring. A former employee says, "From what I hear over there now, it's like night and day" from what it was. [COMMENTS](#)

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

Gaming at the Margins

Part 3: "Hard" problems

by Warren Spector



In the last installment of this series, we talked about what might be called "soft" problems — games and culture... gender, age and ethnicity issues... gaming as a social or solitary activity...

This time, I want to talk about "hard" problems — hardware and business issues. And I want to talk a bit about content.

Hardware

The Situation

Existing hardware allows us to do amazing things. **New** hardware on the horizon offers staggering possibilities.

In anticipation of the Xbox 360, Revolution and PS3, I'm digging out proposals and design concepts conceived 15 years ago because, finally, the hardware seems capable of realizing a vision that was literally impossible to pull off back then. Everything's about to change and, in all likelihood, get better — graphics, sound, AI, physics... you name it.

Shortly before I gave the talk that inspired this article, I showed a friend an early, un-retouched screenshot from a game we were prototyping at Junction Point Studios and found myself marveling at it — not out of any sense of ego, but, rather, out of a sense of awe. It looked like something pre-rendered, not something playable in real time.

But power comes at a price. Once the hardware is **capable** of something, someone's going to **do** it. And once **someone** does it, everyone will be expected to. So, for example, once someone throws 100 artists at a game, and it looks like something from Pixar but real time and interactive, we're **all** going to be expected to ooch ourselves above that new, higher, way more expensive quality bar.

When that happens, team size goes up for everyone, development time goes up, costs go up. That means marketing costs go up. Next thing you know, independent developers have it even tougher, the rich get richer and finding someone willing to back you in any sort of risky endeavor becomes harder than it's ever been — and it's never been easy.

In the last decade, my games have gone from \$2.5 million dollars and 30 person teams, to \$5 million and 40 people to \$12 million and around 90 people. Looking to the future, that seems like the place you **start** if you want to play in the next-gen, triple-A game development game. And it may be more hype than reality, but I've talked to plenty of folks planning on spending \$20 million and up on future games.

And I'd bet that 90% of that cost is down to that terrific new hardware

coming, with all sorts of incredible capabilities we "have" to exploit!

There **is** an upside in all this. Games **will** look better than they ever have. And there's at least the **possibility** (remote, I fear) that someone will harness the power of the Xbox 360, PS3 and Revolution (and whatever comes after them) for something other than putting prettier pictures on the screen — non-combat AI, characters you care about, problems that can be solved without resorting to guns, knives and baseball bats, anyone?

But the cost of exploiting all that power, even for Good, is going to be great. And the experiments we get to try will be determined by the folks with money —

the same folks who've proven risk averse in the past. I'm not optimistic.

Not just next-gen consoles and more powerful PCs...

As if powerful new consoles and PC's weren't enough, they're only part of the near-future picture. We also face **another** set of hardware challenges.

- Used to be, there were computer games.
- Then, there were computer games and videogames.

... you're either a player in the triple-A videogame arena or you're not.

• Now there are computer games, videogames, PDA games, handheld games

• Heck, my cell phone is more powerful than the computers on which we developed the old *Ultima* and *Wing Commander* games!

Now, in one sense, more platforms are a good thing — platforms that don't require crazy graphics or support the depth of gameplay that drives costs up offer small developers new options. That's all to the good.

The interesting thing is what happens when players start expecting to be able to access their games wherever they are and via whatever hardware they happen to have handy. That day's coming, sooner than most of us expect. And we better be ready for it.

The Choice

Given the way the game business works these days, I'm not sure there **is** any choice to be made as we face a frightening future of high-priced hardware. Given our single-funding source model (publishers) and our near total dependence on boxed games sold at retail, you're either a player in the triple-A videogame arena or you're not.





You either spend what it takes to be competitive — \$8, 10, 12 million and up — or you better not even try to compete. Go where EA and Activision and the big-time MMOG guys **aren't**. Make puzzle games or boutique games aimed at a more targeted (and likely smaller) audience. And spend a couple million bucks or less.

The Outcome

Until and unless the business model changes, I see only one possible outcome: A business that's already heading in a rich-get-richer direction will see the trend accelerated and the situation exacerbated.

Those who can afford to compete at the triple-A, movie-budget level will; those who can't will either be driven out of business entirely or driven to different parts of the business — boutique online games, cell phone games, casual puzzle games...

Even mid-pack publishers will have trouble competing in the coming years, and marginal ones will cease to exist. There just aren't many companies that can afford more than a couple of \$20 million bets a year. If even one of those

bets failed (and given the "four out of five" game failure rate the received wisdom says we suffer now, you know most of those bets **will** fail), a lot of publishers are going down.

And as far as games that operate across PCs, consoles, handhelds, cellphones and so on? Well, that's going to require IP ownership and distribution that reaches consumers on all those platforms — that's a mighty big play, one available only to the existing power players, or new players with sufficient cash and connections to buy their way in. Developers who own their own IP? They're going to be even more of a *rara avis* than they are now.

In many fields, more horsepower can provide the little guy with tools to challenge The Man. Call me cynical, but in the world of game development, I see upcoming hardware shifts benefiting the existing power elite more than anyone else, maybe exclusively. Unless the business changes in some radical way, and/or the powers that be support more interesting work than they've been willing to support in the past, gamers will be stuck playing prettier GTA clones, sports games, shooters, me-too MMOGs

and the 1,001st damaged-DNA knockoff of Tetris...

Internationalization

The Situation

The internationalization of the game business is inevitable. It's no longer worth thinking about as something that might happen someday. It's already happening.

Sales

For years now, a bit more than half of my sales have come overseas. Last time I checked, a third of those sales came from Germany alone. From a business perspective, anyone who isn't thinking about foreign sales is leaving a lot of money on the table.

But internationalization means something more than just selling your product overseas. It means competing with developers who are as clever and creative as you are — and typically get paid a lot less. That's a scary combination.

Foreign Competition

There's always been healthy competition between North American and Japanese

developers. The *Final Fantasy* series could never have been made in the U.S. and it's unlikely Doom could have come from a Japanese studio.

But now, we're seeing games like *Serious Sam* coming from Eastern European teams a quarter the size of many American teams. We see terrific studios like Io and others creating games with universal appeal, and typically doing it for less money than U.S. developers with no noticeable difference in quality.

And if you haven't checked out what's happening in Asia outside of Japan, it looks as if there's going to be an explosion in creativity — and competition from that quarter as well.

Outsourcing

As costs increase, in any business, everyone starts looking around for way to economize. Clearly, the easiest way to reduce costs is to pay people less. Can't do that locally, without losing resources to competitors — and other industries — willing and able to pay more.

What happens next is utterly predictable: Jobs are increasingly "off-shored." It's happening in games as it's happening in

most industries. Unless you're a major player with a major cash-cow hit, competing in the triple-A game space requires teams far bigger than you can build internally.

Sure, I know of studios throwing 100-plus people at projects. I tried a bargain basement version of that approach at Ion Storm — with over 90 people working on *Thief: Deadly Shadows*. And looking at the demands of next-gen hardware, it looks as if teams of 100, 150-plus people will become increasingly common.

At Junction Point Studios, a start-up working on its first project, I simply can't afford that. And, frankly, I wouldn't want to deal with the management and team/studio culture issues associated with teams that big, even if we **could** afford it. To compete, we have to look to Asia and Eastern Europe to supplement our internal asset generation capabilities.

Am I putting American developers — artists, mostly — out of work? I guess so, and I hate it, but I don't see any other choice, any other way, to compete in the triple-A game space.

Am I putting American developers - artists, mostly - out of work? I guess so, and I hate it ...



It's hard for me to see a downside to internationalization.

The Choice

How do North American developers remain competitive in the global marketplace? That may end up being the most critical question we face, thanks to a perfect storm of business and creative elements.

- Should we ignore the problems we cause for local talent by off shoring jobs? It's just business, right?
- Should we make games that appeal largely, if not exclusively, to local audiences, ignoring the huge potential audience beyond our borders? We're making plenty of money...
- Should we ignore the competition from foreign studios whose capabilities more and more frequently match those of bigger, more established studios in the traditional game development powerhouses of the U.S., Japan and Western Europe? "They'll" never be able to compete with us, creatively.

To be honest, I love the idea that there are game development "garage bands" out there who can beat the pants off us.

If they can make games with strong sales appeal at lower cost than we can, more power to 'em.

And if there are folks in Asia and Eastern Europe who can provide art resources at low enough cost to allow independent developers to compete with the internal publisher teams, we should take advantage of that all day long. (Though, to be honest, I'll be hoping for the day when those folks realize they're being underpaid and start demanding higher wages, which will level the playing field again.)

The Outcome(s)

It's hard for me to see a downside to internationalization. Smaller, cheaper, more agile developers competing with bigger, more established players can only make the medium stronger. And, frankly, short of cutting a lot of peoples' salaries, there doesn't seem to be much we can do about studios in parts of the world where they can pay people less than we do.

Along those lines, I have a fantasy that involves a game development world that's a bit more like the movies, where there aren't a lot of 200 or 300 person film studios waiting around for their next project to start. Instead, there are lots of producers, in tiny six person offices. The people there create and nurture properties until they have one around which they can build a "package" to take to a studio. Only then do they build the team to make the movie.

Maybe Wideload Games is onto something, and there's a game development future that includes many independent shops of anywhere from a dozen people to, say, 50—production people, designers, programmers, artists. Those people would create concepts, shop them to funding and/or publishing partners and then form the core that shepherds the concepts to completion. These shops would have a consistent, on-staff, creative core, and a leads group to prototype and prove concepts, pipelines and so on. Those same folks could then coordinate and lead the

efforts of outside resources who would generate the assets necessary to complete the game.

Maybe that really **is** a fantasy, but I'd rather see five independent studios of 50 people than one, monolithic, development studio any day. And it would take advantage of outsourcing in a way that could benefit everyone.

It's the Content, Stupid!

The last crossroads we face is a content crossroad. Let me get this out of way: I'm sick to death of the constraints we impose on ourselves when it comes to gameplay, game genres, visual and thematic approaches — the whole content shebang.

The Situation

The range of content we explore is so narrow, it's kind of scary. But there's more to content woes than that. The **amount** of content we generate in any given year is just overwhelming. Look at E3. It's getting bigger, louder, more crowded and, unless you're blind, deaf and dumb, way more depressing every year.

Most of the product (and I use the word "product" purposefully here) consists of sequels and licenses. That in itself isn't a bad thing at all, as I said in my design keynote at GDC a few years back. Personally, I still hope to work on a licensed game before I hang up my development shingle and move on to whatever comes next. What **is** a bad thing is the **quality** of those sequels and licensed products. The processes that lead to a proposal being greenlit by a publisher seem driven less by any kind of creative spark than by mandated release dates, insufficient budgets and licensors/IP-owners whose demands reveal little knowledge of what makes our medium special.

And, worse, to my mind, even the "original" product is pathetically "me too." It's hard for me to get worked up even about new IP projects (with apologies to Will Wright, Nintendo's first-party developers and a handful of others).

Creatively, I see some real challenges ahead. For us to say we've fully plumbed the depths of game design would be insane. We've barely scratched the

surface of what games can and should be.

The Choice

Once again, we can just continue on our merry way, hoping no one notices that, past the glitzy graphics, past the pounding soundtrack, past the supposed opportunity to "live the movie," there's just not much going on that's new, different or uniquely "game-like."

I've been told by people in positions of authority at more than one publisher — people who ought to know better — that "GTA clones are making money hand over fist. All we have to do is keep making them until players tell us to stop."

With attitudes like that driving decisions at the top our only realistic funding and distribution options, is it any wonder that, from a content standpoint, games just haven't made much progress in the last decade? With rare exceptions, it's still all-combat (or all-sports), all the time.

Alternatively, we can acknowledge that (though I'm saddened that I still have to say this, literally, 10 years after I first



Look at E3. It's getting bigger, louder, more crowded and, unless you're blind, deaf and dumb, way more depressing every year.

spoke those words at a conference at MIT), games remain an infant medium. We can resolve to grow up, at least a little. When I first started thinking about games as developmentally challenged, back in the '90s, I thought we'd be so much further along by now than we are — I figured we'd at least grow up to be whiny adolescents.

The plus side of the realization that we're stuck in a content and gameplay rut is that there's plenty of room for innovation! I mean, where are our love stories and soap operas? Where are our comedies and musicals? Where are our suspense dramas and political satires? And where are the Carmack equivalents willing to tackle problems like non-combat AI, virtual actors, conversation systems, collaborative storytelling questions? The technical challenges associated with these necessary

elements of more mature content are at least as challenging and fun to tackle as the graphics, sound and physics stuff we usually go after. Surely, there are people out there champing at the bit to tackle them.

The Outcome

Sticking with the tried and true might result in financial success, for a time. But stagnation was never the friend of any medium and filling the retail channel with tons of me-too games all aimed at

... stagnation was never the friend of any medium ...

the same audience is obviously short sighted.

At a time when seemingly every other medium is moving into narrow-casting mode — finding ways to reach specialized audiences with an insane variety of content — gaming is stuck in mass media theory of the 20th century.

So, the easy answer is to say: Let's start varying things up, people. Let's tackle the design and technical risks associated with trying to solve really hard problems... let's try making games that are funny and sad, try to find ways for players to interact in non-competitive but interesting ways.

I wish it were that easy. But there's real risk here — far more than in, say, reaching out to women developers or giving players more interesting choices

than pulling this trigger or that. I'm not proposing we jettison the old content but, rather, that we find ways to make experimentation possible, that we find ways to do some R&D that doesn't involve renderers or the purely technical aspects of game development.

Next Time

With all of these problems ahead of us, all these big choices we have to make, is there any hope? That's what we'll talk about in the fourth, and final, installment of this series. [COMMENTS](#)

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



NINTENDO'S POWER

by Jon Schnaars



A company's narrative is equal parts public back story and manufactured concept created by the company's image. By creating a theater in which consumers can interact with and learn about their purchases, as well as new products that have yet to hit the market, a company can often control its own destiny.

Nowhere is this concept more important than in the world of videogames. As a medium, videogames are a form of communication unlike any other, allowing consumers to interact and participate in their entertainment in a way unlike any seen before. This interaction and participation opens a window through which any company able to tell a good story can climb in and form a relationship. Perhaps no company has done this with more style and enthusiasm than Nintendo.

Since it first hit newsstands in July of 1988, *Nintendo Power*, the official magazine of Nintendo, has had a special role in bringing exclusive coverage of all things Nintendo to the horde of Donkey Kong, Link and Pikachu fans. By speaking directly to consumers, *Nintendo*

Power has had a unique part to play throughout videogame history. As the magazine's managing editor, Scott Pelland, wrote in an email, "Telling the story of Nintendo is really at the heart of what we do. Every page is telling part of the [company's] evolving story."

Nintendo Power's lineage can be traced back to its ideological predecessor, *The Nintendo Fan Club Newsletter*. Beyond acting as a forum for fans to sound off about games and receive information about upcoming titles, the *Newsletter* also provided gameplay tips and secrets. Pelland described how, with assistance from Japanese publishing company Tokuma Shoten, the concept behind the *Newsletter* was fleshed out into a full-fledged magazine.

"At the time, the concept of creating a corporate magazine was quite novel, and there were no other North American publications that were dedicated entirely to videogames," Pelland wrote. "The early content reflected the look of Japanese gaming magazines since the designers at Workhouse USA were trained in that business."

Less than two years after its inception, *Nintendo Power* became a monthly publication. By this point, tried-and-true departments such as Game Watch, Classified Information and Now Playing had developed their role and could be counted on by frequent readers to provide the coverage that they had come to expect. With gamers reading *Nintendo Power*, Nintendo, through its new venture, had expanded its influence beyond the time consumers spent in front of their television.

Today, Nintendo of America stands at the precipice of what they hope will be a quantum leap forward not only for their company, but also for videogames as a cultural medium. A look at the videogame best-seller charts reveals little in the way of variety. Instead, it's the *Grand Theft Autos*, the *Final Fantasys*, the FPSes and the EA franchises that dominate. And why not? Like most Hollywood studios, game design houses have learned that to minimize risk and maximize profit; their best bet is to stick with what works. They pump out sequels and brush ups of older, successful titles.

As the next generation consoles move closer to market, there has been a great deal of discussion and speculation about what Nintendo's role would be. For its part, the company has fueled this debate by largely remaining tight-lipped. When they have spoken, however, their words have carried great weight. In January of 2005, a Kyoto newspaper interviewed Nintendo's president, Satoru Iwata, and he offered few details, but said only that the company's newest system, the Revolution, would represent a "paradigm shift" in the world of gaming.


In a March 8th editorial for IGN.com, veteran Nintendo critic Matt Casamassina, armed with the latest information released about Nintendo's new console, discussed Iwata's proclamation. He explains that at the crux of Nintendo's planning is a fundamental disagreement with Sony and Microsoft over the future of videogaming. "Nintendo bigwigs believe that graphics have reached a 'saturation point,' and that gameplay, not more detailed game worlds, is in need of a renaissance."

Casamassina continued by underscoring this philosophy, "One thing I've learned about some of my Xbox 360 games is that while the graphics are initially impressive, you eventually take them for granted, at which point gameplay returns to its rightful place as the most important factor."

He concludes by arguing that the Revolution, with its innovative yet familiar looking controller and significantly smaller price tag, will be the system that truly breaks into the mainstream market. Games like *Grand Theft Auto* may sell three million copies, he says, but the Revolution has ambitions of bringing current non-gamers into the market and, well, revolutionizing the way the populace thinks about videogames.

Casamassina's ideology is one that melds seamlessly with the story being produced monthly by *Nintendo Power*. The paradigm shift spoken of by Iwata is evident in the editorial content of the voice of Nintendo. It becomes even more visible when one compares it with the official voices of Nintendo's two main competitors, Sony's PlayStation and

Less than two years after its inception, *Nintendo Power* became a monthly publication.



Microsoft's Xbox. Like *NP*, the *Official PlayStation Magazine (OPM)* and the *Official Xbox Magazine (OXM)* seek to bring gaming coverage directly to the fans of their respective systems. For the purposes of comparison, let us look at the March 2006 issue of each magazine.

The cover of a magazine is the most important editorial space in the publication. As in any business, it is critical that a magazine put its best foot forward. In the case of videogame magazines as a genre, this usually means highly illustrative cover art, typically from the game that will receive the most coverage within the magazine. This holds true in the case of all three official magazines. *OPM* features a largely bare (by game magazine standards) cover, split only by a circular bullet hole. The headline, referring to the highly polished FPS which reached shelves this month, reads: "*Black: The Last Great PS2 Game?*" *OXM* trumpets an "exclusive hands-on" feature on *Scarface*.

Meanwhile, *NP*'s cover is much more text heavy; the largest element is a two-word headline that screams: "Gonzo Gaming!" The choice of adjective itself tells a great

deal. Meaning bizarre or unconventional, gonzo recalls wild-man journalist Hunter S. Thompson or the eponymous blue-haired, loose cannon of the *Muppets*. Adorning the cover alongside the headline is one of Nintendo's newest gaming creations, the gonzo *Chibi Robo*.

Turning inside the magazines, the differences become even more marked. *NP*'s cover story, titled "Breaking the Mold," is almost too obvious in its furtherance of Iwata's mantra. The article opens by stating: "For discerning game enthusiasts—those who shy away from cookie-cutter sequels and status quo action bonanzas—the pickings can be brutally slim at times." The piece, a "tour of the unexpected," then goes on to profile five games, all Nintendo exclusives, that break with what most would consider traditional gaming genres.

In his March editor's letter, Pelland emphasizes the shifting paradigm, as well, when he refers to games discussed in the "Breaking the Mold" feature. "[They] explore topics and game styles few gamers or game makers have ever contemplated...[They] aren't just technical or visual experiments; they're

The largest element is a two-word headline that screams: "Gonzo Gaming!"



innovative games that lead to truly great and often-surprising experiences.”

In full, the magazine dedicates 34 pages to features covering upcoming or recently released Nintendo-only games.

The staff picks the game it would most like to see on the PlayStation. Their pick: *Animal Crossing: Wild World*.

Among this coverage is a three-page spread, part of a now eleven-part series, focusing on the team developing the forthcoming *Zelda* game, *Twilight Princess*. This nearly yearlong exposé is the perfect example of Nintendo allowing its fans an exclusive view into the world of the games they love. Each month, a different member of the development team writes in the first person about their experiences not only with *Twilight Princess*, but also with other *Zelda* and Nintendo exclusives like *Luigi's Mansion*. For those who are familiar with the titles, this type of interaction leads to greater enjoyment of their purchase. For those who have yet to play these games, the series engages them in the continuing story of Nintendo and its games, asking them to join in the conversation.

The editorial offerings from *OPM* and *OXM*, while similar to one another, are vastly different from the coverage in *NP*. Both magazines contain features, but neither offers anything comparable to the substance in Nintendo's publication. *OPM* dedicates its largest spread to its cover story, a sprawling, eight-page review of Criterion Games's *Black*. In-

game screenshots and a chart of weapon illustrations (fetchingly titled “Nice Rack”) predominate. True to FPS form, bullets are flying and things are exploding. *OPM*'s verdict on the game speaks volumes: “It's gun porn.”

In comparison to *NP*'s “Gonzo” feature, *OPM* reviews upcoming PlayStation 2 and PSP titles whose genres should be easily recognizable to anyone who has held a game controller in the last decade. Aside from the *Black* review, the magazine also breaks down five 3-D action/adventure titles, four RPGs, three sports cartridges, a racing game, a WWE title and a couple of other rereads and ports — all in all, nothing that steps outside the standard fare.

What was perhaps most interesting, however, was a one-paragraph note in *OPM*'s front of magazine section called Hype. In the short take running under the headline “Game Envy,” the staff picks the game it would most like to see on the PlayStation. Their pick, *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, wasn't nearly as interesting as their rationalization. They write:

No, we haven't suddenly regressed into a staff of babies, but there are quite a few aspects of *Animal Crossing for the DS* that we're jealous of... We'd rather have a new and interesting game that emphasizes socializing, debt repayment, tree planting, letter writing, and T-shirt designing as opposed to yet another game that has a gun, or a sword duct-taped to a gun.

In terms of editorial content, *OXM* offers even less than its PlayStation counterpart. The only features to speak of in their March issue are the extended preview of VU Games' *Scarface* and a very similar write up on the much-delayed 3-D Realms/Human Head Studios FPS *Prey*. Their eight game reviews feature a handful of sports franchises, racing extravaganzas, a fighting game and other equally pedestrian game concepts.

Where both *OPM* and *OXM* do succeed in out-dueling *NP* is in their coverage of the technological advancements of their next-gen consoles (read: flashy



It is a story that stretches back to the coin operated *Donkey Kong* that put the company on the map.

graphics). But in doing so, both publications, and the companies providing them material, are playing right into Nintendo's hands.

Instead of trying to "wow" gamers with stunning visuals, Nintendo has set a course to engage the hearts and minds of game fans. That is not to say they have pushed visuals aside; quite the contrary. Recent titles like *Windwaker* and *Resident Evil 4* have proven that the company is quite capable of producing a visual experience on par with any competitor. The Revolution will continue to push the boundaries of graphic representation in games, but as Iwata made clear and *NP* shows month in and month out, innovation will be the new bar by which Nintendo products will be measured.

Just as they did in their March issue, the staff at *Nintendo Power* magazine will continue to engage their readers with the story of Nintendo. It is a story that stretches back to the coin operated *Donkey Kong* that put the company on the map. Along the way, new characters

have been introduced and others have been phased out. Through four household consoles and six instantiations of their handheld unit, Nintendo has occupied and fascinated generations of gamers. *Nintendo Power* has played a unique part in Nintendo's history and will continue to shape the company's future.

As Scott Pelland points out, it's all about the story. "When [editorial consultant] Reggie [Fils-Aime] talks about business strategy or [staff writer] Chris Shepperd gives insights into beating *Castlevania DS*, it expands reader's perception of the gaming world. We believe that we have the most compelling story in the game business to share with our readers, and our insider status at NOA, while it may be questioned by some, gives us the best position to deliver those stories with accuracy and passion." [COMMENTS](#)

Jon Schnaars is a freelance writer with interests in genre and representation in gaming. He blogs full-time about issues in psychology and mental health for Treatment Online.

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PENSIONERS THAT PLAY:

How the DS is Shaping a New Gaming Audience

by Gearoid Reidy

Mainstream: It's the gamer's comfort word. Since the advent of the PlayStation, we've been told in countless breathless media reports that gaming is now mainstream. That now it's OK.

But in reality, the only thing mainstream about gaming is its perception in the media.

Gaming targets young, well-off males – exactly the type of people who dictate in the media what is and isn't hip. Games, we have been told, need no longer rank alongside building model planes and attending *Star Trek* conventions in the playground of "cool."

Just like in the playground, that acceptance brought solace. And yet, gaming is still a niche, still with shockingly few games that target anyone outside the 13 to 25 age bracket.

Gaming is now at a curious crossroads, one where many other forms of media, from science fiction to rock music, have stood. Like them, once considered crude,

pulp entertainment for the brainless masses, gaming can take to the mainstream – but only when it makes itself relevant to the lives of ordinary working Joes.

The Real Revolution

Enter Nintendo.

While Nintendo's new console may or may not end up being called the Revolution, on the streets of Japan, the real revolution is already here, and it's taken many people by surprise.

After all, when the DS was first announced, the sniggers of journalistic derision were audible. Compared to the sleek PSP, it had a screen that many cell phones would be ashamed of, and all the power of a hot Baghdad afternoon.

These journalists – all predominantly well-off young males, of course – forgot one thing: Their graphics-are-everything view of games is not one that is shared by everyone. Every week of sales figures for Japan is proving Nintendo right.

the Escapist

The real revolution began with *Nintendogs*, which, as already reported, was a game many had thought could not - should not - succeed.

Instead, Nintendo bypassed the fanboys and carved out an entirely new market, composed of both the curious novice and the bored hardcore, men and women in almost equal proportion. It's a market Nintendo continues to mine.

Animal Crossing: Wild World may look like a kid's game, but Japanese commercials have pitched it toward stressed-out women, who can enjoy the "slow life." The result was Japan's biggest-selling game of 2005.

But more than any other, the game that has found a new audience is *Nou wo Kitaeru Otona no DS Training*, which will come to the West as *Brain Age*. Combined, the original game and its recent sequel have sold over 3 million copies in Japan. To put that into context, that's more than twice what any Xbox game other than the *Halo* series has sold worldwide.

Otona no DS Training is made for adults. Professor Ryuta Kawashima, upon whose design the game is based, is a genuine and well-known Alzheimer's expert. The game tests your "brain age," with the lowest possible score - i.e., the best - being 20. There are no flashy graphics, nothing more than basic sounds, and absolutely no signs of Mario. The newest version has you do such un-game tasks as writing haiku and counting change.

The result is something familiar yet entirely new. It may not be a classic by most gamers' definitions, but it is a game with almost universal appeal, one anyone can pick up and play instantly. It is a game that is drawing the attention of the world.

At the beginning of March, the DS made headlines across the world, thanks to an Associated Press story on its success with older gamers.

"People who never even liked computer games are now getting hooked," the article quotes Nintendo's Ken Toyoda as saying. "We're not surprised."

Well, of course they aren't. For years, Nintendo has been telling anybody who'd listen that this was the new market for games. And right now, Nintendo is the only one exploiting it - with games like *Eigo Zuke*, a drill for improving English that at once skillfully exploits both a niche in the English-obsessed Japanese market, and the unique handwriting features of the DS. Or the forthcoming *DS Bimoji Training*, a drill for improving handwriting, which taps the grumble of many elderly Japanese that cell phone-obsessed youth can't write properly. A talking cookbook and dictionary might well outsell the more talked about web browser and TV tuner.

**The real
revolution
began with
Nintendogs.**





There Is Another

The success of these games is forcing publishers to slowly realize that, in their pursuit of fanboy homage, they are letting a world of profit pass them by.

No less so than movies or music, the game industry must take stock of itself and ask why it's losing customers. Why statistics show that teenagers are playing less games, and the market has declined since its peak in the late 1990s. Why half of the top-selling PC games in the U.S. in 2005 weren't even released that year. Why the U.K. top-seller list could have come from 1995 or any year since - two soccer games, two movie licenses, *GTA*.

It may be an exciting time for the market, but the future may not be so

Handhelds might just be the way gaming finds the mainstream.

bright. Xbox 360 and PS3 games, sold on the promise of high-definition graphics, will bring the colossal risk of having a multi-million dollar flop that could ruin companies. Games threaten further appeal to the lowest common denominator for maximum possible profit.

But there is hope. The success of the DS in attracting new gamers hints the future of gaming may lead in a different direction.

Until this generation, handhelds, with their inferior screen and archaic graphics, had been regarded, at best, as an aside, at worst, as gaming's black sheep, the relative you try not to bring up at parties.

But now, like the original PlayStation, handhelds have broken through a barrier; the one that Steven Poole, the author of *Trigger Happy*, once described as "the switch from 'that looks like a computer game' to 'that looks like a film.'"

These sleek handhelds exist in a time when portable electronics like cell phones or iPods are commonplace and

cool. With consoles threatening to aim increasingly at a tech-savvy early-adopter market, handhelds might just be the way gaming finds the mainstream - compared to the investment needed in a 360 or a PS3, handhelds are practically impulse buys.

And with smaller budgets, niche games are possible. Seeing the success of DS games such as *Trauma Center: Under the Knife* or *Phoenix Wright* warms the heart because it offers a peek into exactly the sort of new market games can tap. There are millions of people stuck in *Dilbert* cubicles who dream not of being a sword-slinging warrior but a lawyer or a surgeon. These games are the first steps toward letting them live that dream.

It's time the games industry learns that even when we grow up, we can still want games. We can still have fantasies, and not all of them need be final. [COMMENTS](#)

Gearoid Reidy is a journalist working in Japan, and yes, he is a well-off young male. You can find him at www.gearoidreidy.com.



On a date I'll avoid mentioning, the world changed. Simply acting odd in an airport now might result in an off-record trip to a nightmare gulag and getting electro-shocked until you admit to Jack Bauer that you know where the anthrax is, when all you really know about Anthrax is **they are f-ing metal, man**. You can imagine my distress at being forced to do unnatural things to electronic devices in the middle of LAX.

I leaned down and blew very gently on my Nintendo DS, shifting my eyes side-to-side like a cartoon villain. Fortunately, the coast was clear, and that meant no screaming headlines ("Terrorist and Internet Jerk Arrested for Being Just Plain Weird with Electronic Box") and no scream-inducing torture in my future. My client needed me. I had to get these fingerprints even if it meant a long time in a prison that doesn't exist. If Phoenix Wright can endure, so can I, and we needed these prints to prove our client innocent.

The dust drifted away and the fingerprint became clear, and I had my first inkling that something big was coming toward me (and not just that LAPD cop). When

it debuted, the DS felt like a gimmick, a bunch of input geegaws and doodads that might let you pet an e-dog. It felt more Virtual Boy than Next Generation of Interaction, if you get my drift, something that let you play a few pseudo-games before giving you awful headaches.

However, developers picked up the concept and ran with it, as *Phoenix Wright* was busy showing me in LAX, despite my reluctance and fear of jail. I blew gently on the DS to gather fingerprints, shouted into the microphone, used the touchpad to zero in on items of interest, and otherwise shifted through a series of interaction methods that seemed wholly unnatural, pre-DS. It was all smooth, transitioning from method to method as the game demanded, rather than some forced, half-baked system grafted on top of the standard two-button, D-Pad setup.

Looking back, Nintendo may not have officially standardized gamepad design, but they did lay waste to the competition. Pre-NES, the controller world was a Wild West of joysticks and twisty knobs and all out keyboards.

Nintendo's massive success imposed a cleansing alternative on the input-device world, and though you can still pick up arcade sticks and weird devices at your leisure, the Dual Shock, Controller S and other standard controllers are all lineal descendents of the classic NES gamepad. Like European nobility, the controller family tree is more of a straight line, which explains the occasional genetic oddity like Sony's lamented "Boomerang" for the PlayStation 3.

If the signs coming out of trade shows and the press are any indication, the DS was just the beginning of the beyond-the-usual forms of interaction Nintendo plans to unveil in their next console. The Revolution's controller is, if nothing else, very different, and if the concepts they're playing with in the early previews are any indication, a new way to play is hovering just around the corner.

PC gamers have long gloated over mouse and keyboard inputs, while console designers see throwing more thumbsticks at a problem as a solution. Nintendo's design is much simpler: Point and shoot. Tilt sensors and 3-D

movement detection open up whole new possibilities, like treating the controller as a fishing pole in a fishing game, or using it to conduct a symphony, or waving a sword around to smack Ganondorf right in his pig face. Imagine concepts like that with a year or two of refinement, simple but revolutionary things like actually batting in a baseball game, or squeezing the stick and pulling the trigger for a goalie-killing shot as the Fat Guy in *Ice Hockey*, or chopping up food and stirring the wok in a bizarre Japanese restaurant game.

Shigeru Miyamoto's known for game industry blasphemy, such as, "We want a system that takes advantage of new technology for something that anyone, regardless of age or gender, can pick up and play. [Something with a] gameplay style that people who have never played games can pick up and not be intimidated by. We wanted a controller that somebody's mother will look at and not be afraid of." And I think they've done it this time.

The closest analogy I can make is a simpler time, back when it was possible

A new
way to play
is hovering
just around
the corner.



to pick up a controller and figure out how to play in 10 seconds, because the buttons actually did stuff that made sense. We've pushed forward in console input design since 1986, but it seems to be common developer sense that having

16 buttons means every single one of them needs to be used in the game, or you lose (or something). The problem we're running into lately is human-based: Nobody has the octopus-like hands required to operate further

iterations of the More Buttons and Thumbsticks school of design, though that doesn't stop anyone from trying.


The Revolution controller hearkens back to those halcyon days of yore, by being so intuitive you instantly know what to do with it. Oh, to look up, I point the controller up? Simple, but at the same time, completely outside the state of the gaming industry today. For my Mac-using compadres in the audience, I'll make a comparison. It's like using OS X after using Windows. Suddenly, you're in a world where you have to think like a normal person, rather than an insane computer engineer from the moon. It's jarring, but I think ultimately, it will push the industry into a new phase of game design, when it'll be possible for anyone — Mom, Grandma, the dog — to interact with a game, because we're back to the controls making sense, rather than "Ye gods, buttons!"

Or if you want another... you know, **gaming**-type comparison, consider *Guitar Hero*. Pick up the guitar-shaped controller, eye the five colored buttons, and how you play is instantly apparent

without having to sit through 30-minute tutorials where they pretend you're in a future guitar science lab to explain why hitting **Y** controls the strum function. A friend of mine picked up the guitar, put it on, strummed and pressed the fret buttons, and instantly knew how to play without even turning on the PlayStation 2.

The Revolution controller drinks from the same well of intuitive design and new ways to interact mean new styles of game play, the same way I can shout into my DS to convey to the judge that I object in *Phoenix Wright* or draw out a spell in *Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow* or cuddle my e-puppy in *Nintendogs*. The PSP promised a bigger, brighter screen and overpriced movies, but the DS keeps on selling. The PS3 and 360 promise hi-def support and new iterations of the same games you've played a million times. Nintendo's platform offers incredible possibilities for new ways to play. [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.



Nobody has the octopus-like hands required to operate further iterations of the More Buttons and Thumbsticks school of design.

You've Come a Long Way **GAME BOY**

by Brian Easton



Ever since the release of the original Nintendo Entertainment System, Nintendo has continued to be one of the most successful companies in the videogame industry. Even while their grasp on the home console market has loosened, the company remains profitable. Much of this success is owed to Nintendo's portable line with its flagship series of Game Boy systems.

Released in 1989, the original Game Boy featured a 160 x 144 pixel monochrome screen capable of four shades of gray. Suffice to say, even though it was a great improvement over its Game & Watch ancestors, in the beginning of the 16-bit era the capabilities of the 8-bit Game Boy were less than impressive. What set the Game Boy apart from its competition (aside from increased battery life) was the software, namely that the Game Boy came bundled with *Tetris*. By 1992, three years after its initial release, over 32 million Game Boys had been sold.

While emphasizing quality software and gameplay experiences over pure hardware power (a stance still

maintained today), Nintendo was able to maintain a large majority of the handheld market. But this position didn't mean Nintendo stopped developing hardware; in 1994, the Super Game Boy allowed gamers to play Game Boy games on their TV in 13 colors, through their Super Nintendo, and in 1996, the Game Boy Pocket offered the Game Boy experience in a greatly reduced form factor with an improved screen and battery life.

The 1998 release of the Game Boy Color was a sign of things to come. While often seen as merely a small improvement over the original Game Boy, the Game Boy Color was a separate system in its own right. While maintaining backwards compatibility with previous Game Boy titles (a first for any videogame system) the Game Boy Color featured an improved processor and its own library of exclusive games. Despite this, many Game Boy Color games were developed to be compatible with the original Game Boy.

In 2001, just three short years after the release of the Game Boy Color, Nintendo introduced the Game Boy Advance. The

Game Boy Advance offered a full fledged successor to the Game Boy line. Armed with a 32-bit processor, the Game Boy Advance is capable of 15-bit color on a 240 x 160 pixel display, and its power has been compared to the highly regarded Super Nintendo. While the Game Boy Color was often relegated to playing software that was merely enhanced and retained compatibility with the original Game Boy, the Game Boy Advance enjoyed a great amount of success with its own library of software. By late 2005, Nintendo had sold over 70 million Game Boy Advance units, and over 296 million Game Boy Advance games.

But such success in the handheld market did not come without its failures. In 1995, Nintendo released the Virtual Boy, a device that would live on only in infamy. Seemingly modeled after virtual reality helmets found in popular science fiction, the Virtual Boy was intended to bring gamers a true 3-D experience. Unfortunately, it often gave its users headaches and back pain. These problems, coupled with a small library of titles, resulted in the Virtual Boy being discontinued a year later.

Despite the failure of the Virtual Boy, Nintendo has continued to push the envelope with innovative hardware. In 2004, Nintendo cautiously released the Nintendo DS. Without the Game Boy name, the DS is very much a departure for Nintendo handhelds. Like the Game Boy family, the DS is backwards compatible with Game Boy Advance games, but it will not run software designed for the original or Color Game Boys. The largest departures, however, are the additions of a touch screen, microphone, and Wi-Fi capabilities. These innovations have opened the market to a wider array of customers and game play styles; without the microphone and touch screen games like *Nintendogs* or *Feel the Magic* would be impossible. And while the touch screen and microphone allow for new game experiences, the upgrade from a link cable to Wi-Fi puts older games like *Animal Crossing* and *Mario Kart* in a new light.

The history of Nintendo handhelds shows an emphasis in innovative software, hardware, and low consumer costs over pure processing and graphical power. From *Tetris* to *Pokémon* to *Nintendogs*,

Nintendo handhelds have always appealed to a wide audience with new and interesting game play. If the Revolution's design reflects this philosophy, it will have the potential to be something truly special. [COMMENTS](#)

Brian Easton is a freelance writer currently working on his first novel and a new entertainment website.

Nintendo handhelds have always appealed to a wide audience with new and interesting 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:

"What's your favorite Nintendo hardware?"

Gearoid Reidy, "Pensioners that Play"

The Nintendo 64. More than any other console before or since, playing games like *Mario 64* or *GoldenEye* felt like new experiences in a different world. Every console and game I've bought since then has been a futile attempt to recapture what I felt playing them.

That sounds suspiciously like what habitual junkies say, but anyway!

Shannon Drake, "A New Way to Play"

Light gun. When you absolutely, positively have to kill every last motherf--ing duck in the room. Accept no substitutes.

Spanner, "The King and the Donkey"

I have a growing collection of Game & Watch units, which I began collecting when I was a young 'un. All these bloody 'retro gaming' fanatics (yeah, I'm talkin' about **you**) are driving the prices up, though. **Stop buying my stuff off Ebay! Get your own hobby!**

Allen Varney, "Metroid Primed"

Like much of the planet, I played Tetris on the Game Boy until my thumbs ached. I'm abashed to confess I haven't owned any other Nintendo hardware, save for an old Nintendo 64 I got last year at a pawnshop for \$20. I need to load up *Mario 64* and *GoldenEye* and

remedy this gaping void in my gaming education.

Warren Spector, "Gaming at the Margins, Part 3"

DS all the way. The touch screen offers truly new gameplay possibilities. Multiplayer magically works, whether you're in the same room with other players or halfway around the world. Graphics and sound are more than good enough - the built-in microphone even lets us talk to our games! And the DS is small enough that I always have it with me. Home run, Nintendo!

Jon Schnaars, "Nintendo's Power"

I was one of the eight people in the U.S. to actually purchase a Virtual Boy. And although it gave me wicked headaches sometimes, I loved it with all of my 13-year-old heart. It remains one of my favorite, albeit ill-advised, video game purchases of all time.

Jon Hayter, Producer

My favorite Nintendo hardware is definitely the light gun from the original NES. Aside from the joy of using it as intended - running around pretending I

was some sort of cyber-cowboy, equipped with the latest in law-enforcement technology kept me entertained for hours... Wow - I am a nerd.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

The RAM Expander Pack for the N64. It made *Episode 1: Racer* a completely different game. It doubled the awesome.

Joe Blancato, Content Editor

I'm going to go with the Virtual Boy. Hey, **I** didn't get migraines or backaches from playing the thing, and *Mario Tennis* kicked all sorts of ass on that thing. I never actually bought it, just rented it from an EB. That was a great weekend.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor

Yikes, I have to choose just one. As brilliant as the DS is, and as much as I love my red Game Boy Advance, I have to say the original NES game pad. So simple, so intuitive - it's the model for all current controllers, as Shannon says in his article. It's really one of the most important advancements in console gaming.