the Escapist

Casual Friday

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The Crying Game

MEET THE TEAM!

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

I have never played a game that made me cry. Well, cry with laughter, maybe, as the few parties we've had at which someone broke out *DDR* were quite spectacular. But tears of actual sorrow from an in-game occurrence? Nope.

Clearly, from the above comment about *DDR*, I have found amusement in games. I've been angry at games (but generally, more at some annoyingly hard, twitchy jump I had to make 52 times before I performed it correctly). I've even jumped out of surprise and fright while playing a game. No weeping.

And it's not that I have no capacity for empathy. In fact, it's quite opposite. Just like all the women in *Sleepless in Seattle*, I cried at *An Affair to Remember*. I went to see *The English Patient* in the theater, and came out a bit red faced and puffy about the eyes. I cry every time Goose dies in *Top Gun*, and I cried again when he died in *ER* (well, not Goose, but Dr. Greene). I've been moved to tears at some arrangements of Pachelbel's *Canon in D* and by the soaring melodies of Handel's most inspired *Messiah*.

But never a game.

Maybe I haven't played the right ones. But Dana Massey makes an interesting point in his article this week: Most of the games we play would be akin to blockbuster action flicks. And while these films certainly get your adrenaline pumping, they're not well-suited to be overly emotion-inducing.

Along similar lines, but coming from a different angle, newcomer to *The Escapist*, Rod Humble, discusses where the true art of games is found. Rod feels that rules are what make games unique and able to have the most impact on the player's experience. Perhaps by considering rule sets and new gameplay mechanics we can broaden the potential emotional connection able to be produced by games.

Kieron Gillen also returns this week and writes about a game that has bent the rules a bit and offered a fresh play experience. In "More Than a Feeling," Kieron discusses his recent playtime with *Guitar Hero*.

Enjoy!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: Warren Spector's "Gaming at the Margins" continues to be essential reading. Part Four, "Breaking Out of the Best/Worst Trap" raises some very interesting points concerning the role of mainstream vs "marginal" work in creative fields. But then he offers this vision of the future:

"If we do all that, we might just find ourselves appealing to a larger, more diverse audience than ever before. If we do all that, we just might succeed."

With my game developer hat on, it seems to me that this epitomizes the problem. Speaking for myself, I don't want to appeal to ever larger and more diverse audiences. That's what the mainstream does. I see the way out of the trap involving small independent

studios making games which appeal to smaller, less diverse audiences.

With my consumer hat on... it's the same story. Whether it's music, film, food or games I don't share the tastes of the mainstream. But if someone wants to start making games just for me, they'll certainly get more of my custom. (Currently I buy only two or three games each year.)

Like many people with similar views, my hopes for the near future are currently pinned on Greg Costikyan's Manifesto Games. If all goes according to plan, that could easily become a flagship for the kind of innovation that we need to complement the mainstream staples.

Of course niche markets have to mean lower budgets but that need not be a bad thing. I don't think innovative games need teams of twenty artists any more than innovative films need large production crews. At least not if we're serious about the emphasis being on gameplay and narrative.
-**Dom Camus**

To the Editor: Just wanted to thank you for your wonderful magazine.

I stumbled (>Firefox PlugIn Stumble) over it today and couldn't stop reading in it. In my opinion your design concept is the best approach ever that I've seen for a Web-Magazine with the feeling of a "real" magazine.

Keep up the great work!
-**Bernhard from Germany**

From The Lounge: [Re: "WAL*MART Rules" by Allen Varney] Good article, Allen.

The dream of infinite shelf space, while solving some problems, has its own issues. When there are thousands of titles to choose from online, getting found becomes difficult. Marketing (viral or otherwise) becomes much more important. Sure, user recommendations and various social networks can help, but it's still going to be difficult. Small developers will be able to create original titles without retail oversight (if they can afford the development budget on their own), but they're going to have to find ways to make people aware of their games.

Still, I look forward to seeing digital distribution become more popular -- it should result in more titles, more originality, and better rewards for small developers.
-**Steve Peterson**

From The Lounge: [Re: "Friction Costs" by Jason Della Rocca] Great article and there is lots to do but one thing I'd really like to get clear. **Game development is not software development**, it is Entertainment. 70% of most teams are artists. Our job is not to follow a functional spec, our job is to create entertainment.

Those parts of the process that are software development may benefit from software development practices but trying to shoehorn a process that is fundamentally not software development into a software development style is bound to fail.

Do you think Spielberg follows SCRUM and Pair Directing as he makes his movies? I doubt it. To me, games are about a game director (and his team) expressing themselves through games to make entertainment similar to a movie director. All entertainment works this way, music, movies, books and games. Creative processes like movies IMO would never work through some formulaic system.

It's precisely that creative process which makes making games fun and enjoyable. Convert it to **software development** and it will turn into just a boring job where I punch in from 9 to 5 and fulfill the functional specs on my scrum goal list. Yuck.
-**George**

From The Lounge: [Re: "Friction Costs" by Jason Della Rocca] Oh gimme a break George, you're expressing one of the biggest misconceptions I've heard from some people in the game development community :) Sure, go ahead and look down on professional engineering practices as somehow not applicable to game development. Such an artiste...

I will grant you that having a formal "process" does **not** guarantee quality. For example being rated CMMI5 doesn't mean you make good products, it just means you passed a test. However, having a disciplined mindset when you approach your development, having decent processes in place, **and** then adhering to those processes is a big help. Next you're going to say that you're too busy coding to worry about creating a requirements document.

First off, the **lack** of any formalized development practices are probably the biggest failure of the industry... and I'm not talking about using a CM tool, which obviously most developers have mastered. That's not really rocket science. I'm talking about stepping up a notch where people actually use better project management skills in all areas of game development, not just software. WTF else would we be hearing about games suddenly switching from 3rd person to an FPS perspective in midstream? Or shipping without multiplayer support. Uhhh, that's not really a software issue, it's a failure to identify key UI or technology requirements, track risks, and mitigate them early.

But that's OK, I get the same attitude from our systems engineers. They don't "get" the whole define-how-your-system[game]-works-before-you-write-the-code part. What's their product? Oh yeah, a Word document. Doesn't have to be logically consistent, or god forbid actually execute. If you could, it would delete its own source out of embarrassment and then core dump.
-**"CMMI5 and Hacking Away"**

More than a Feeling

by Kieron Gillen

You hit an unexpected realization: Boston was probably one of the top ten videogame level designers of all time.

Problem being, they weren't aware they were designing a level. If you told them of this undeniable fact when they were doing it, Tom Scholz and his group of Massachusetts-based musos would have looked at you strangely before returning to the important business of recording double-tracked guitar solos and working out how to get the hand-clap machine working. They would have had no conception what a level designer was. One who designed levels? But levels of **what**? It was the mid-'70s, where conventions like "levels" were the far-off fancy of the loopiest of lunatics.

They had a pop career to take care of, and that they did. If you wanted to be factual, you'll note their debut album sold 17 million records – certainly enough to keep a man in plectrums for quite some time. If you want to be mean, you'd argue they were instrumental in the power ballad's creation, so they should be crushed with enormous rocks. If you want to give them a bit more credit, you'll note that with "More Than a Feeling," they invented marrying an insistent circular chord progression with a tiny-tiny-BIG-BIG-repeat! structure, which the Pixies cheerily stole for "Debaser," which Nirvana stole for "Smells Like Teen Spirit," which everyone else stole to invent '90s rock. And if you want to be me, you'll note their real import in history is designing the best level in *Guitar Hero*.

Fellow Massachusettsians Harmonix clearly understood what they had in Boston's design when they imported this piece of carefully crafted aural-terrain into the world of *Guitar Hero*. Some credit must go to the developers: While the level was clearly Boston's genius, the **game** design itself was Harmonix's. This small developer's aim is to "create new ways for non-musicians to experience the unique joy that comes from making music." It's a noble one. *Guitar Hero* is the closest they've come to achieving their goals.

It's easy to bracket *Guitar Hero* with other abstract party games in the PS2's armory – rest it alongside your *Dance Dance Revolution*s and *Singstar*s (what we do in Europe instead of Harmonix's *Karaoke Revolution*), and snootily dismiss it as just a giggle. *Guitar Hero*'s more than that. While *Singstar* and *DDR* sit slightly to one side from the main thrust of videogame design, *Guitar Hero* engages us with one of its secret magics. It probably has a special game designer name, but for the sake of our argument, we're going to call it the "input fallacy"; one, that's basically what it does; and two, it's got that sort of ring of polysyllabic seriousness which implies I know what I'm talking about, instead of just desperately bluffing.

Which always helps.

Games trick you into thinking you're doing something more difficult and interesting than you actually are. In *Prince of Persia*, you may just be pressing a single button, you're rewarded with a powerful leap from the lead character. The fallacy is your brain connects your action to the animation – that it was you that did that, thus you should feel the rush of reward. Your actions created that reaction. In a real way, many of the best games are based around this, and games which fail to make you feel as if your on-controller actions connect to your onscreen actions are dismissed out of hand. This is why – say – *Dragon's Lair* connected with gamers less than the similar period's *Defender*, despite the spectacular difference in the visuals. In *Dragon's Lair*, there was no real sense that you were controlling Dirk the Daring. In *Defender*, your slightest twitch was magnified spectacularly on screen. In one, you watch the hero. In the other, you are the hero.

It's this phenomenon around which *Guitar Hero* is based, and it's this which raises it above its peers. In *DDR*, there's no sense of your actions creating anything. The game merely judges your actions. *DDR* isn't about tricking you into thinking you're dancing – to actually succeed with *DDR*, you **are** dancing. There is no magic here, just you following orders. Similarly with *Singstar* and *Karaoke Revolution*: To do well in them isn't to be tricked into thinking you're a good singer – but it's to actually be a good singer. All the games may give you a little flash of the joy of **performing** with their feedback telling you how you're the greatest dancer or whatever, but that's a different thing from the flash of joy of performing the act itself.

Guitar Hero differs. *Guitar Hero* is about tricking you into thinking you're playing guitar. You press the buttons and strum with the flipper… and the appropriate noises appear. The power of Harmonix's system is how – even at the basic levels – they've judged the correct number of inputs to make you feel as if what you're doing has some connection to the music that's emitting from the speakers. That by waggling your fingers in a certain way, that riff screams out. You stop waggling your fingers… it stops. You're playing the music.

You know you're not. But you certainly feel like it.

What separates *Guitar Hero* from Harmonix's other offerings is its choice of peripheral. Playing on a controller creates a level of abstraction through the input method. Noises are appearing, but

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in a way which you know bears no relation to how they're really produced. With that plastic guitar hanging around your neck, that leap of faith is a lot easier to make. And this is where *Guitar Hero* achieves Harmonix's stated aim – to give a little of the absolute thrill of creating noise, feeling connected to this wave of pure sensation. You want to know what it feels like to play guitar? It's like the state of zen-tranquility in motion chased by surfers, samurai and shoot-em up addicts. It's a little like realizing you're the breath of God. *Guitar Hero* takes you into the neighborhood and shows you the view.

And as my ex put it after blasting through The Queens of the Stone Age's "No One Knows," "I deny anyone can be in the same room as *Guitar Hero* and be unhappy."

It's not a game. It's a pharmacological miracle.

And, returning to the point in question, Boston are level designers *par excellence* because their song shows off Harmonix's mechanics to their best effects. Other songs do various aspects of the performance better. Others are much more challenging. But none manage to express, in the topography of their guitar line, the varied and absolute pleasures of playing *Guitar Hero*.

It's more than just *Guitar Hero*, though. In its simplified - **distilled** - echo of real guitar playing, it teaches you a little of why guitarists play certain songs. Before playing *Guitar Hero*, I had something of an old punk's puritanical disgust for over-technical guitar players destroying records with their unwanted virtuosity. Now, I can see why the pleasure overwhelms them and they **want** to do so. The breathless rush after you fall off the end of a guitar solo into a hard, extended note makes you see this… it's addictive. So, they're addicted to it and can't help themselves. I don't really blame them. It's a feeling worth chasing.

You want to know what it feels like to play guitar? It's like the state of zen-tranquility in motion chased by surfers, samurai and shoot-em up addicts. It's a little like realizing you're the breath of God.

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It also teaches you that the best, the **very** best guitar-led songs manage to hit these sensations while still serving the song, because there's more than the act of guitar playing being taught. It's also engages with your understanding of the song itself. *Guitar Hero*, in some ways, is an active form of music criticism, opening the songs' guts to a layperson so you can see how it's working, like Natural Scientists trying to understand the universe's design in a daisy. For example, I know "Ziggy Stardust" is a great song, but by the game walking you through Mick Ronson's lyrical and **witty** guitar line, I understand it all the better: How it flicks between the hard and the soft and the counterpoint to Bowie's lines; how it's **really good**.

Even artists I've got less time for are shown in a better light. Take Franz Ferdinand's reheated, post-punk art-pop, represented by "Take Me Out." Coming from an entirely different tradition to the majority of the songs *Guitar Hero* offers, its oblique rhythms provide off-kilter challenge, and playing them shows you how imaginative, how ballsy, and how, through odd ingredients, its momentum is created. Playing the Chili's cover of Stevie's Wonder's "Higher Ground" and Sum 41's "Fat Lip" have led to similar grudging respect, against my previously developed critical (and **terribly** snobby) faculties.

Going further, and showing it isn't just that *Guitar Hero* makes all songs great, the array of B-level filler mostly just sits dead on the disc, taking up space. *Guitar Hero*'s explanation only works when there's something worth explaining. Flipping it around, obviously enough, songs you **already** love have their greatness re-affirmed. "Ace of Spades" is nothing less than the sound of the universe's atria slamming shut during the world's sexiest coronary, and captured perfectly here while (on higher difficulties) sitting on the absolute immaculate boundary being too hard to play and impossibly satisfying when you do. Equally, the Queens of the Stone Age's "No One Knows," whose dense rhythms can stun the unwary fledgling even on **Easy**.

"More Than a Feeling" isn't that hard – only on Expert does it start to really take your fingers apart, one knuckle at a time. This is part of its majesty as a level, gently walking you through everything great about *Guitar Hero*. Delicate movements of the fingers across the plastic fret board during its idyllic opening, before it releases the Searing Guitar Sound™ into a lyrical refrain, descending toward… oh, baby Jesus, hold me now – the golden moment: The long held note leading into the chorus, lengthy enough to give you all the time in the world to work the whammy bar to power up your Star Power meter before releasing the Bonus Power by holding your guitar aloft, just as the power-chords of the chorus kicks in. The whole screen lights up. Your face lights up. The stars shine brighter. The world's a better place.

It's More Than a Feeling, and you're feeling more than that. COMMENTS

Kieron Gillen has been writing about videogames for far too long now. His rock and roll dream is to form an Electro-band with Miss Kittin and SHODAN pairing up on vocals.

the Escapist

There is an ancient story of a game design that I think is worth remembering. It is the story of Senet.

Senet is one of the oldest games known to date, with boards and pieces dating back to 3500 B.C. It was a popular game in its time, representing something of historic importance to Egyptian society. The game has been pictured in paintings of tombs, and Senet boards were placed in graves as tools in the afterlife for esteemed persons. It is often portrayed as a bridge between the living and the afterlife, and its place in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* underlines the spiritual importance of the game's overall message. Senet artifacts are beautiful works of sculpture, engraving and clever combinations of technology, using all kinds of materials.

Unfortunately, however, the rules of Senet have been lost to us over the centuries. Without the rules, the game cannot speak, and its message, which was so compelling thousands of years ago, is gone. Senet, without its rules, is just a collection of pretty bits.

As an art form, game design is thousands of years old. Game designers today face the same fundamental artistic problems as their ancient counterparts. Senet illustrates how, for a large portion of history, game design was transmitted by spoken tradition, and how much can be lost. Nevertheless, enough has survived to instruct the modern game designer and remind us of our craft.

There is much understandable excitement in the potential for computer games to be the ultimate combination art form. There are games created today that combine dance, architecture, storytelling, improvisational theatre, music, painting and film-making in various ways.

Add to this amazing scope our ability to create shared online games, (where one to millions of players can communicate and compete) and it is easy to understand why computer game design is now in such a state of creative turmoil. It is hard to know where to begin with such choice.

Happily, there is a simple tool at the center of all game design, whose exploration requires no team or cost, and from which any game designer can learn by its consideration: rules. Furthermore, I believe that the creation and selection of game rules is an art form in and of itself. By this, I mean that the rules of a game can give an artistic statement independent of its other components. Just as a poem doesn't need pictures and a painting doesn't need music, a game needs nothing else apart from its rules to succeed as a work of art. It can certainly benefit from other elements but it doesn't need them.

By examining games from this point of view, a game designer can swiftly advance the quality and artistic merit of any effort.

Rules as Art

Rules are not entirely obvious as art, especially within the recent age of computer game development. Computer games can record thousands of rules, and a computer can remember and execute decisions based on these rules without (much) difficulty. Instead of inventing specific rules and weighing each one's meaning, it is easy to try and follow the path of simulation.

Today, many developers face a sea of choices about the representation systems that communicate their rule sets. To some extent, it is understandable that rules governing player choice have taken a back seat. This is largely because the simulation of complex, real-world phenomena (including human behavior) is an alluring mental challenge in and of itself.

However, while attempts at simulation can be enormous fun to play, they are usually short-lived. Soon enough, our suspension of disbelief gives way, and we find ourselves examining the rules. We cast aside the fiction and graphics to peer at the underlying boundaries that define our ability to interact with the objects and systems being simulated.

Why do rules have such power over our minds?

I believe that childhood play is about practicing within the rules designed for adulthood, testing them out in a pretend world first. Later on, grownups deconstruct literature or art for rules (and the ways they have been tested) in a similar fashion.

Similarly, game rules are highly compact artistic statements which can be played with as the user experiments with the system to see if it contains lessons which may be of use. To be sure, the representation of those rules, and simulations of their results are certainly compelling, but it is the rules themselves that will define each player's overall success. As a result, players scan for rules constantly.

Why do rules have such power over our minds?

Simple, easy to understand game rules are powerfully capable of delivering valuable lessons and artistic messages. In fact, I would argue that **even when the designer is not trying** to make any kind of artistic statement about life, players often find worthwhile lessons communicated by these rules. Rules that relate to the human experience and have far reaching consequences for a game: These are our brushes and violins.

Rules as Lessons

The point is best demonstrated by a few short examples of board games:

- **Chess**: Anyone who has managed a large organization or is a student of history will have given a wry smile at the king's place in Chess. He is incredibly powerful, moving in any direction… but slowly, slowly. He can only be defeated indirectly, by restricting his freedom of action.

- **Pachisi:** In this game, the lucky get luckier – a rule imitated so often that it is easily overlooked. Many games deliberately unbalance the game by making the lucky even luckier. In Pachisi, if you get a great roll, you not only get the benefits, you get to roll again. Life certainly can feel like that. Those born into wealth are often also graced with attractive mates or good luck in business, for example.

- **Oware:** This is a member of one of the oldest games families known, the Mancala family. In Oware, players sow seeds amongst houses representing the dispersion and acquisition of some commodity within a community. There are many versions, but in my favorite traditional version, a player is not allowed to wipe out an opponent even when he is able. In fact, the rules of the game go even further, stipulating that one must make a move that allows an opponent to play.

Thus, a player must win without directly attacking his fellow player. This rule representing cooperative/competitive political situations within a small village is a wonderful model which applies just as well to modern cabinet politics, corporate maneuverings and immediate interpersonal relationships.

- **Snakes and Ladders (aka Chutes & Ladders in the U.S.A.):** The original Victorian version of this game had the ladders labeled with virtues such as "Faith," "Reliability" and "Generosity," while the snakes were labeled with sins such as "Disobedience," "Vanity" and "Vulgarity."

The game's rules are possibly derived from an older Indian game of spirituality. As a lesson about life's nature, Snakes and Ladders is interesting work: Firstly, it is **entirely luck based**, and secondly, no matter how well someone appears to be doing, there is **always a chance** he will land on a snake (a sin) and be whisked back down the board.

- **Go:** The rules of Go have informed numerous areas of thought from politics to business. It is a timeless statement of conflict, focus, and the management of influence and direct

control. The elegance and aesthetic beauty of this game's rules are, perhaps, the finest invented so far.

I am not suggesting that all game rules are a deliberate form of artistic expression. Backgammon, for example, is an old and a great game, but its rules have no obvious meaning beyond being a fun gambling game, possibly derived from Mancala. However, I do claim that the creation of a set of rules within which the successful player must be creative is a form of expression exclusive to the domain of game design. No other art form does this.

Rules in Context

Let's examine some systems to see how rules have been designed so far. Here, we shall divide games into types, according to where the rules are created and where they reside during gameplay.

> **Type 1**: Rules are created in advance by a game designer (person or team), and there are few enough that they can be held in the player's mind during game play.

This class includes most family board games. In the digital age, we'll call simple or action computer games Type 1a. (We'll get to "a" subsets in a bit.)

> **Type 2**: Rules are created by a game designer and held in a book or umpire during play, with limited rules being held by the player's mind at any one time.

This type includes more complicated cardboard war games. Computer adventure games would be Type 2a.

> **Type 3**: Rules are created by a game designer in advance, and as it is played, extra rules are created or changed by an umpire or player.

This type includes pen and paper roleplaying games, as well as professional military umpired war games.

> **Type 4**: Rules are created at the start of the game by the player or umpire and modified as it is played.

This type includes children's play or make believe.

With the exception of Type 4, the designer's selection and creation of rules in advance sets the framework for the entire game. In Type 4 games, the designer is creating rules freeform to suit the situation and audience; this can become a team activity with several players becoming the game designers.

Rules and Machines

What is the relationship between these rule contexts and computing machines?

For types 1 and 2, there are computer (artificial) equivalents as noted in the examples. I have called them Types 1a and 2a.

As you can see, there are no 3a and 4a examples, because they do not exist yet. Type 4a would have the rules created at the start of the game and modified by an artificial player or artificial umpire.

If we could design computer contexts for Types 3 and 4, how would they behave? What would the player experience? Would they be capable of expressing a meaningful message?

Having the computer create a new game for us, even as we sit down to play - this is close in difficulty to the different dream of interactive stories.

One can imagine a Type 3a game that inherits from pen and paper roleplaying games or umpired war games. The players would be motivated to do things "beyond the rules" – and an artificial umpire would generate new rules in response to this desire, in real-time. We can call this a "judgment system."

For example: "I want to commandeer those civilian vehicles and use them to transport my infantry section to the next town, ahead of the main battalion." The umpire then decides the chance of this scheme's success, which is not covered in the rules.

It's not difficult to imagine games where the number of possible unique inputs is far beyond the number of represented rule-creating restrictions within the judgment system. This is the problem with natural language processing – and the reason we do not yet have automated game mastering for roleplaying games.

However, there may be an easy point of entry, here. Easier first steps can be made by creating an artificial umpire who can weigh competing emergent outcomes and make a rule out of the one which would best suit the game.

Compelling 4a games are perhaps the hardest to imagine. Having the computer create a new game for us, even as we sit down to play – this is close in difficulty to the different dream of interactive stories.

As above, however, there may be some easier paths and entry points for approaching this goal. Having a game build a variety of simple game types and respond to what the player prefers seems theoretically possible without first devising a fully human level of AI. We do not have to create the world as a first step. A simple puzzle game will do just fine. We also have the advantage that human players want to help and provide feedback to the system to make it more enjoyable.

If we could realize such a system, and its libraries of rules were well-annotated and significantly generative, would an artificial artist emerge? Perhaps, but the creator of this artificial artist would be a game designer.

The Art of Rules

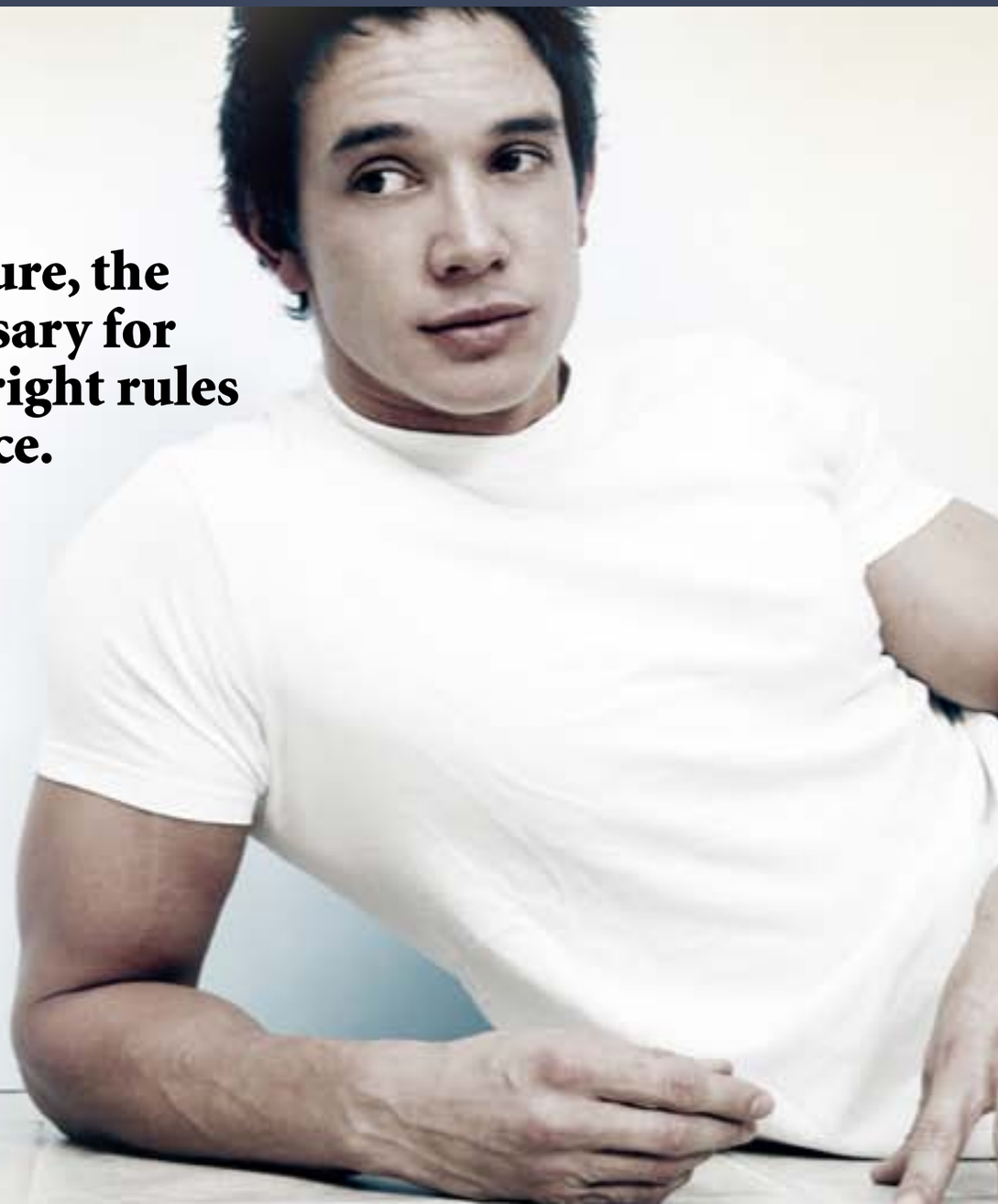
The possibility of such a system links the knowledge of long-dead designers to our present… and to an unexplored future.

There are plenty of opportunities for all kinds of art, from a massive and grand composition involving millions of players each playing their role, to the artful execution of a single, solitary game as it is created on the fly by an artificial game designer. As we approach this future, the fundamental skill necessary for creating and selecting the right rules grows in importance.

Thankfully, we do not have to worry about such grand speculations to practice the art of rule creation and selection; after all, game designers have been doing it for thousands of years. We merely have to pay attention.

There are many parts of a working computer game that dictate and translate player responses. World geometry, physics, music, character design; it's tempting to regard the game's actual rules as less important, modifying them in support of simulation systems and other game elements. Instead, studying the rules in advance and crafting a message from them represents one of the clearest and easiest creative opportunities for game designer. It is within these rules that the players will inhabit and practice their own art. COMMENTS

As we approach this future, the fundamental skill necessary for creating and selecting the right rules grows in importance.



Rod Humble is Vice President and Head of the Sims Studio at Electronic Arts. He has been in the games industry for 15 years as a designer, executive producer and head of studio.

Author's note: My thanks to Robin Hunicke for kindly reworking the piece for form. I am also indebted to Charles London for corrections and edits. Finally, Ray Mazza, Matt Goss and Hunter Howe for their insights.

Suspend My Disbelief:

WHERE GAMES LOST MY EMOTIONS

by Dana Massey

I have a confession to make. I shed a few tears at the end of *Braveheart*. It's not something I'm proud of, but it is the truth. It's the kind of personal investment most people can only make to a great movie. We're told over and over that games are meant to be fun, and they should be. Games are fun, but by their very nature, are they compelling? Designers need to think about games that make you laugh, cry and think. The benchmark of a good film or book – for me – is if it evokes some kind of emotion. As an industry, we've got excitement down. It's time to rethink some basic assumptions if we ever hope to grow beyond that.

The average videogame experience doesn't carry much more depth than the *Die Hard* trilogy. They're popcorn flicks where you're too busy to eat the popcorn. Games have the potential to be the most powerful entertainment medium. Events happen to "you," not some character on the screen. It's an edge begging to be exploited.

Imagine that nearly every single movie in theatres was an action flick. Every year, we get bombarded with them, but they're made even better by a compliment of different movies, movies that make you laugh and movies that make you cry. Take those other movies away, and I'd probably spend a lot more time reading. Videogames suffer this problem. The only emotions I've ever felt in relation to a videogame were excitement, enjoyment, curiosity, frustration, and very rarely, fear.

The artificial nature of most videogame mechanics is partly to blame. I cried at William Wallace's torture and death as I never could in a videogame. Death usually means frustration in games as your character respawns and takes a penalty. This is the paradox for the designer. Gamers claim they want to be in control, so how then do you make truly compelling things happen without wrestling control away from the player? Cut-scenes just don't cut it.

There is no single right answer, but more attention has to be given to the concept of failure and what that means, if games are to be more compelling. Without this aspect, it is nearly impossible to create

drama, sadness or a true sense of attachment.

Let's use a theoretical mission based, single-player spy game as an example. In the average *Bond* game, characters simply run around and shoot things to achieve their ends. Perhaps the game is slower and more tactical, like *Splinter Cell*. Beyond that, what is there?

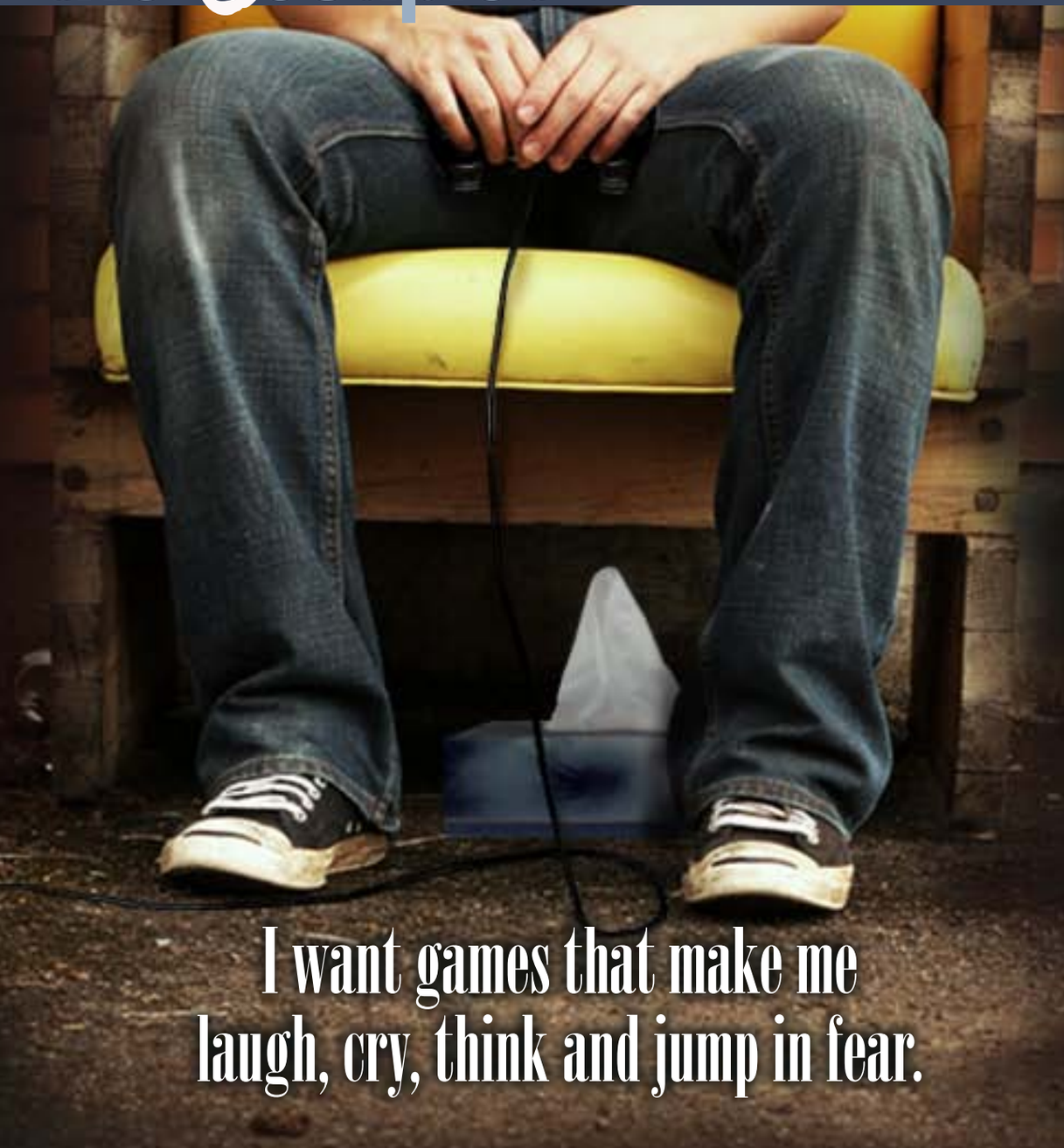
Start with some RPG elements that let you – the person – form opinions and bonds with the characters you meet. Whether it's the attractive worker at HQ that flirts with you as you prepare for each mission, or the crazy old inventor character who provides your gadgets, give each one personality. Then, write them into the story. When out on missions, these characters play an active role.

Then, rethink the concept of failure. For example, say one scene opens with you being interrogated. The puzzle has you verbally fencing with an enemy – say the wrong thing and a later mission gets harder – and doing a puzzle to escape your bonds. You fail. You take too long and the guards notice you squirming free. Rifle-butt to the head and the screen fades to black. In every game I've played, this means you re-load before the mission and try again. Right there, the spell is lifted and it is suddenly a task I – the user – need to perform, not a challenge my character faces. Rather than start again, the character could wake up in a musty prison cell with a new challenge to solve. If successful, they go to the level they may have eventually gotten to from a different direction had they escaped during the interrogation and explore a subplot slightly earlier. Eventually, all roads direct the player down a chosen - and compelling path - but this approach maintains the suspension of disbelief and lets the player feel in control. It's a recipe for emotionally charged gameplay.

Sound like a production nightmare? Probably, but keep in mind, as it stands now, most games can only be played once. Build the game so that all the areas are used, just not necessarily in the same order, with different dialogue and events based on what you've achieved so far and different triggered variables that impact difficulty level. This

creates the illusion of a dynamic, personal gameplay experience without forcing the developers into a thousand scripts, models, areas and contingency plans.

The goal of this example is to get away from the "try again until you win" and amend it so all paths lead to a conclusion, but not necessarily victory. Does it require more work? Yes, but done cleverly, the investment might not be as huge as it sounds, and the results would more than justify the time and money spent.



I want games that make me laugh, cry, think and jump in fear.

With the suspension of disbelief firmly rooted, it opens the door for more attachment to the main characters and those around them. If your actions get the flirtatious co-worker killed, it means something, especially when you know that had you done things differently, she may not have died. Actions have consequences and the combination of good storytelling and compelling gameplay might well produce a title where a consumer could truly shed a tear.

This change would redefine the gameplay experience and definitely not be something every gamer would like. The result would be a consumable product – more like a movie – rather than a challenge. There would be goals, action and puzzles, but in a situation where failure simply changes the circumstances of your next experience, everyone would reach an end of some kind. The key to keep in mind, here, is this example is only one way to help spice up the market.

Variety is what will break down the final door and bring gaming into the mainstream.

There is a wealth of emotions that need to be explored. I want games that make me laugh, cry, think and jump in fear. There will always be a place for the traditional game, but if we as an industry can step back and complement that with games that appeal to different senses, the benefit will trickle down across all types of games. A variety of experiences will make them all more interesting. The first step in this long journey is to make the game's story more than just a framework to justify gameplay challenges and attract storytellers who understand the medium and can stitch meaty stories into the realities of a game. After that, the story we create for ourselves can take us anywhere.

COMMENTS

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the Escapist

Hot and Bothered:

Toward a Sexual New Games Journalism

by Bonnie Ruberg

Remember New Games Journalism? Those initial moments of revelation, the refreshing breaks from traditional videogame coverage, the eventual spiral-down into seeming self-indulgence? In its better forms, New Games Journalism is still alive and kicking. But enthusiasm around the supposed *nouvelle vague* has died down considerably over the past year, giving us all some time to cool our jets and reflect.

Whether you've come to love it or hate it, the fact remains: New Games Journalism certainly made a splash. Why did it strike such a chord with the gaming community? Maybe because we needed a jump-start to help us break away from the stale, standardized forms of game writing that permeated the media. Or, maybe we simply enjoyed an excuse to hear ourselves rant. Either way, the idea was picked up across the reporting spectrum; it was heralded as the way of the future.

There are those among us who were glad to see the fervor pass. Still, the concepts at the basis of New Games Journalism have entered our collective gamer consciousness, and, for better or worse, that can't be undone. We've come to accept that our responses to games, not just the content of the games themselves, are what determine meaningful play experiences. A worthwhile game that doesn't affect us may not be worthwhile after all.

It's this sort of thinking that's sparked our recent interest in emotional response, in personal narratives, in questions like, "Can a Game Make You Cry?" We want to share our side of the story. No longer satisfied with knowing how we can interact with a game, we want to know how a game will interact with us. Newly empowered, we've turned the spotlight on a type of reverse interactivity. Our real-world reactions become linked with our actions in-game, and vice versa. A whole new dichotomy – or at least our awareness of one – has been born.

How can we react to a game? Through laughter, through frustration, even through tears. Skeptics may say videogames aren't deep enough to inspire real emotion. Insensitive gamers may claim crying over *Final Fantasy* is just lame. But, for the most part, these responses are acceptable, respectable, even normal. Happy, angry, sad. They

tell us how a game makes us feel; they show us, and others, how deeply we've connected with the game.

These, however, are not the only possible responses. When playing a game, be it *Zelda*, *Perfect Dark* or *Number Munchers*, we also respond on a bodily level. And while a catalogue of our purely emotional responses is well and good - and important in its own right - we can't overlook the physical side to our play. We may be part of an increasingly digital age, where even the most body-centric pastimes can be enacted online, but we still can't be separated from our real-life incarnations or their reactions to our actions on-screen.

How can we react to a game with our bodies? I can't speak for anyone else, but then again, I don't have to. After all, this is an article about New Games Journalism. Who better to put on the dissecting table than me?

To tell you the truth, *Halo 2* makes me nauseous. I've played through a hundred odd "slayer matches" in the last year, and I still can't adjust my mind – or my fragile stomach, apparently – to the controls. *Super Smash Brothers Melee* makes my palms sweat. I know, no matter how hard I try, I will never beat that level-nine Mr. Game and Watch. Mentally, I've come to accept that. My hands, however, are still desperately convinced otherwise. And *Super Mario 64*... Let's not even start on the creepy carousel music that made me jump so far out of my skin I refused to ever go back into Big Boo's Haunt.

These are just examples, perhaps not particularly riveting ones, but different all the same from what you'll normally find in a videogame review, even one written using New Games Journalism. Why are physical reactions excluded from our consideration of a game's merits? Because they're peripheral to the gameplay experience? Because they're messy? Maybe because, as gamers who are often less than proud of our bodies, we don't want to attract attention to them. Or simply because, as virtual citizens, we want to believe we exist above our physical selves.

And what if a game gets you aroused?

Not a sex game, a sexy game, or even sex in a game. Just a game. What if it

What if a game gets you aroused?

affects you, sexually? Talk about a topic not broached in reviews. Discussing sexual responses is even less popular than mentioning sweaty palms or queasy tummies. Sex may be a delicate and highly personal subject, but we always love to hear other people's secrets, so that shouldn't stop us. What seems to get in the way, instead, is that sexual arousal crosses the borders between emotional and physical reaction. We don't know how to classify it, so we don't want to be responsible for it.

Still, sexual arousal is itself a valid form of response. Does a game incite attraction? Repulsion? Whole reviews could be written about the sexual effects of a totally "non-sexual" game. Would they go over well with the general public? Of course not. But what would make them any more or less valid than pieces that record other types of human response?

I would like to humbly propose, if I may, a new New Games Journalism, one that will perhaps never catch on with anything near the ferocity of the old, but which never the less deserves its place - a New Game Journalism based on the sensual as well as the emotional. Let's call it a Sexual New Games Journalism, where sexuality comes to stand for our sensual relation with our environment, and specifically with games. And let's consider, if even just for a little while, what our brave new world is still missing.

COMMENTS

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Volume 1, Issue 41, © 2006. The Escapist is published weekly by Themis Group, Inc. Produced in the United States of America. To contact the editors please email editor@escapistmag.com. For a free subscription to The Escapist in PDF format please view www.escapistmagazine.com

Confessions of a Crybaby

by John Walker

I am a crybaby. And I don't care what you think. Well, that's simply not true, is it? If I didn't care what you think, I wouldn't be setting out to write a piece, on a widely read website, explaining why the crybaby gets the best deal. I **deeply** care what you think. In fact, if you don't like me, I may… sniffle… come on, let's get on with it.

This week's titular question is obviously a silly one. Answer: Yes. Next issue please! I think anyone who might take the stance that games cannot make you cry is either a sociopath, has never played *Angel of Darkness* and tried to walk in a straight line, or simply a big, lying coward. Begone, cowards! Today is the day of the ludicrously emotional – we shall triumph and probably get all weepy as we accept our victory.

Let me put things in context. I can't watch a Muppet movie without crying (please, no jokes about *Muppet Treasure Island* – I've deliberately never watched it). Not just in the amazingly sad bits where only evil monsters made of angry stone wouldn't shed 14 buckets of salt water, but pretty much all the way through. There's just something about them, something about the love behind them, the passion that fuelled (past tense, thanks to their vile murder via the Disney purchase – more crying here) their very existence. The purpose of this aside? To hyper-stress what a sap I am. The sappiest of the sappy. It's established. We can progress.

I believe that being able to burst into tears while playing a game is a great boon to a person. And I'm taking this as far as it will go. Were you to break down and sob every time you lost a race in *Project Gotham*, I'd have nothing but the deepest of respect for you. I'd think you a weirdo, but I'd respect you. Why? Here's the rub: You would be connecting with the game, and being **transformed** by it.

I want to present an example: 2003's adventure, *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon*. It was a splendid game, frustrated slightly by its wobbly steps into three dimensions, and certainly underplaying its historical/mythological base in an attempt to win over a console generation, but all the same, a thoroughly engrossing post-point-and-click adventure game. Having played the previous two in the series, during the '90s, I'd always enjoyed them, but never felt an overwhelming relationship with the central characters: George, the daft but big-hearted, American, world-traveling lawyer; and Nico, French photo-journalist, and the deeply sarcastic will-she-won't-she target of George's affections. Something changed about the third game – perhaps it was the accursed 3-D betraying a positive consequence via the portrayal of emotions on the character's faces – but this time they began to **matter**.

There's a scene toward the end (spoiler fans) where George, Nico and long-term friend Bruno are in a pyramid. It's all coming down, and death is imminent. The dilemma: The only way to keep the door open to leave is for someone to

stay inside. It's sacrifice time. Now, this is not a new idea on any level, and killing someone to create an emotional response can be a sledgehammer technique. But *Broken Sword* did something clever.

"It's all about empathy," says *Broken Sword*'s creator, Charles Cecil. "In a third-person game, like in a film, it's all about empathy. You never think you **are** that guy, but the aim is to have you experiencing the same emotions as the him."

Bruno, a man probably in his 70s, tells George and Nico very firmly that he will stay inside, and they must save themselves. There isn't time for deliberation, and Bruno's severity is convincing enough in that moment. They run for the exit.

"You've got to believe that you share emotions with him. With George, we're trying to tread a very careful line between association and empathy. Clearly you're **not** George, but we want you to have **more** association than you would in a movie."

The giant stone door slams down, Bruno is trapped, the situation is over, and now just the horror remains.

"We've got to accept that in games we're not good at profound emotions. We're much better at visceral emotions. Guns are wonderful in gameplay, because they work. Classical gameplay is about trying something, failing, knowing why you failed, trying again, and eventually feeling, 'fantastic, I've done it!' There's no ambiguity about firing a gun and having it hit, or not hit. That's the visceral. It's much more obvious."

George and Nico stare at one another. There's silence. And they stare. And George's eyes widen, his face crumples, and he is punched by grief. Nico's face softens, her fixed scowl suddenly gone, and you know in that moment that she loves George unconditionally. It is the consummation players have longed for the series' whole existence, and it is more beautiful than anyone could have imagined. It is tragedy, remorse, grief, companionship, relationship, passion and love. And I cried. I just sat there, looked at this unspoken scene, and wept.

"We're right on the peripheral in trying to create profound emotions, or, in inverted commas, 'games that make you cry.'"

So, how does Cecil achieve this? How do his characters manage to matter? It comes down to a lot of thought and preparation. "There's a set of three areas that have to be established," Cecil explains. "First of all, you've got to believe in your characters. Second, you've got to empathize with them. And third, you've got to share their motivations. And once you've got all that, then hopefully you'll start to love your characters. And only at that point can you be effective."

Certainly suggesting nothing disparaging about the game itself, Cecil mentions *Metal Gear Solid*'s characters as a comparison. "They're stereotypes. And because they created stereotypes, they've written them stereotypical dialogue. So you cannot care about them." He's right. I don't believe in them, I don't empathize with them, and I don't share their motivations, and hence I don't love them. I would be impressed by the player who wept when Snake died. And that's despite the desperate hollered wail of "SNAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAKE!" by any one of his compatriots. It's a false "SNAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAKE!" impossible to believe in, and in my experienced opinion, a source of great amusement with which to shout along. It doesn't matter when Snake dies – he exists to die, over and over. He offers the visceral emotion, and attempts nothing more. Should this be enough to make you cry, by the way, you win.

It doesn't matter when Snake dies - he exists to die, over and over.

So why does Bruno matter so much? Cecil observes, "If we tried to kill characters off too early, before you'd started to care about them, then that would come across as very cheap." It comes back to his list of three checks: belief, empathy and shared motivations equal love.

"We made you like his character, and then we put in a believable choice. It's about loving them, and then believing in their situation. And then surprising the player. You were surprised that Bruno offered to do it, as were George and Nico, but you absolutely believed him."

Cecil and his team deliberately set out to embellish upon profundity. "*Broken Sword 3* was primarily written by Neil Richards, who hadn't worked on the previous games. Neil brought a classical slant, coming from film and television, and his approach was quite different. We tried to bring forward the central characters, to make the main story more profound." And it worked. I love those guys.

This story has a pleasing punch line. Charles Cecil was speaking at the Edinburgh Games Festival in 2004, and shortly before, I'd forwarded him an email from a reader of the U.K. *PC Gamer*, stating that the very scene had made him cry. Cecil was speaking immediately after the bigwigs of EA, who puffed out their chests and boasted that their mission, since the '80s, has been to create games that would make the player cry, and that with this, that and the other, they believed that they were taking games to this place. Charles was then able to get up, take the mic, and begin, "Well, I recently received an email …"

So, there, an example of my becoming a complete blubbering wreck over a game. Yes, yes, yes, a thousand times, games can make you cry. So, why is that a good thing?

I'd like to present the completely unscientific suggestion, with utter

conviction, that such profound responses are the emotional equivalent of looking through 3-D glasses. Allowing oneself to buy into a story and fall in love with its characters, despite its appearing on the computer screen, is to place the ridiculous looking red and green specs on your amygdala and have the game come alive in a transforming way.

It's a giving over of oneself, a humbling step to allow a greater experience. Which means I wish I **did** cry whenever Snake died, or whenever my polygonal car collided with a tight corner's barrier. It would, admittedly, make games like *Tomb Raider* too harrowing to play, constantly grieving the death of poor Lara, but each and every gaming session would be all the more powerful, important and life-changing.

Oh, but I'm mocked. Because of my pride and conviction in having such loose tear ducts and having a big mouth, others quickly know of my weepy gaming and perpetually soggy keyboard. Anyone who foolishly mentions *The Longest Journey* in my presence will hear great tale of how much I **love** April Ryan, and how important she is to me, how transforming her story has been, and how I cried and cried at the revelation of her adventures. And they look at me, unnerved, perhaps taking a couple of steps backward. At that point, not seeing any sense, I'll probably confess that the latest *Tomb Raider – Legend* - brought dampness to my eyes with Lara's newfound motivation … Ah, and there it is again.

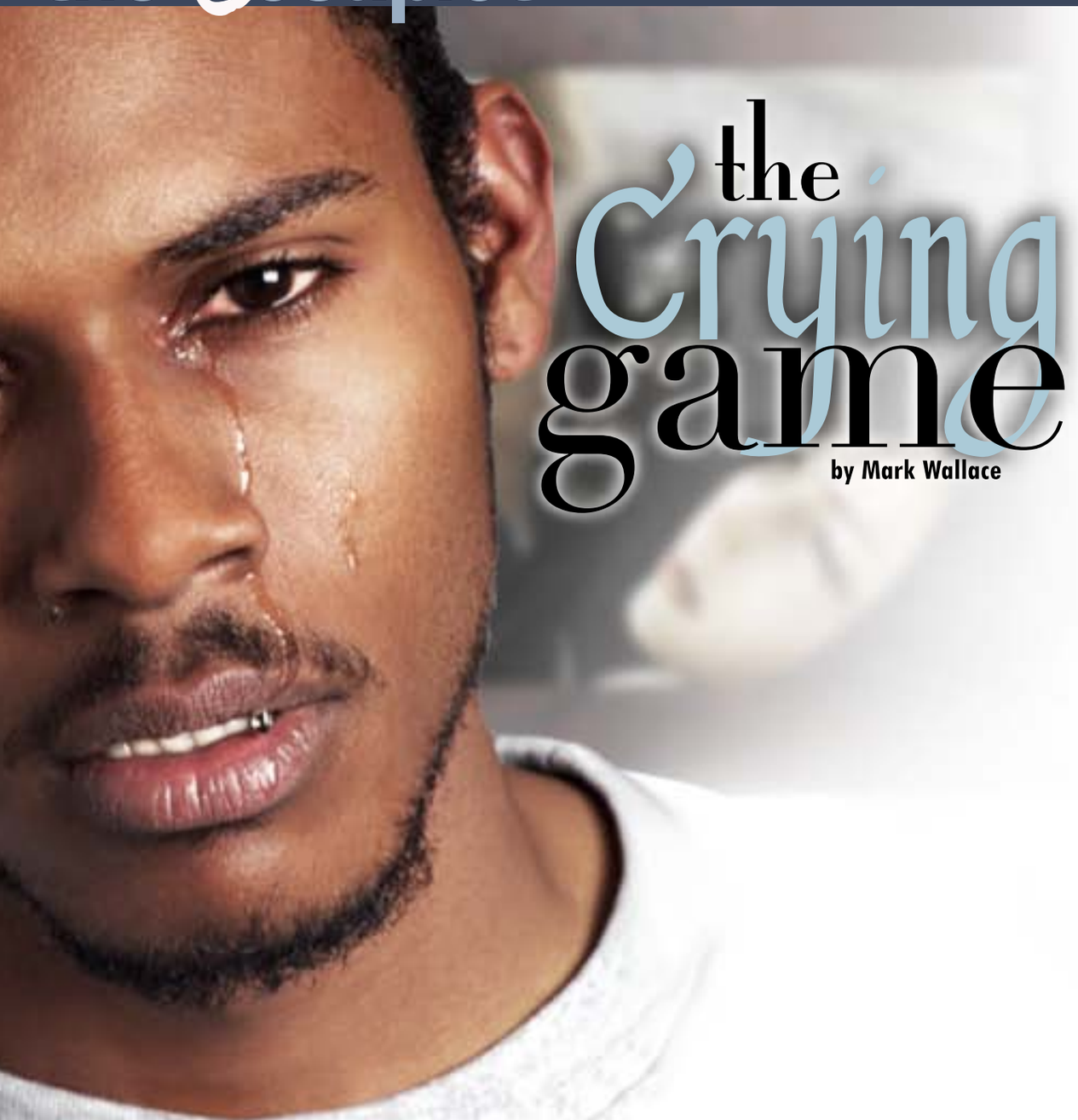
I never cared about Lara before. Think about how unemotional her deaths are. Oh, Lara's been chopped up by some blades. Oh, Lara's drowned. Oh, Lara's fallen onto spikes for the 50th time in a row. There was no emotional resonance, no sense of loss. This time, she explains **why** she raids tombs, and we see, in flashback, the horror of her mother's death, partly her fault, and learn of her father's subsequent public mocking in the face of his apparently crazy beliefs. Suddenly, thanks to a new development team (hopefully after the *AoD* developers had been fired into outer space), Lara has motivation. Exactly the ingredient Cecil referenced. She was grounded, made believable, and then given motivations with which I could empathize. And gosh, she brought a tear to my eye.

And then, it's blank, scared faces, quickly replaced by the mocking. But I don't care! I am a crybaby, and I'm proud! And I say crybabies of the world, let us stand together, arms around each other's shoulders, probably rather overwhelmed by the situation and getting a bit sniffly, and see off these mocking fools. Because it is they, those that look down on the emotionally mature, those that condemn us for forming relationships with our characters, that lose out. It is they who watch their games in flat, monotone misery, unable to let go of their pride, their stubborn grit, and let the tears flow.

They deserve our sympathy, fellow crybabies. Do not hate them. They are the losers, and we are the winners. Shed a tear for them – it's what we're best at.

COMMENTS

John Walker is a giant crybaby, games journalist, and professional weepy wimp. He's always going on about crying on his own website, http://botherer.cream.org. It's embarrassing, really.



the Crying game

by Mark Wallace

As videogames ascend the ranks of popular media - they are now played in at least 75% of American homes, according to the Entertainment Software Association - they have begun to shed their image as merely an entertaining diversion for kids who should probably be studying or out playing sports. Though they still carry a certain stigma for many people - and for not a few politicians - most of the country and much of the world now understands gaming as a worthwhile pastime for people of all ages. Studies show that what gaming takes time away from is not sports or school, for the most part, but television. Onscreen entertainment is moving into the interactive realm. Viewed from the proper perspective, the rise of gaming is merely an evolution, not a dangerous revolution at all.

But just how far can videogames rise? The words "screen art" used to bring to mind the names of great movie directors like Hitchcock, Truffaut or Scorsese. Now, they conjure up the names of gorgeous videogames like *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion* or *Shadow of the Colossus*. Can the "art" of videogames ever make the transition from assets to expression? Or, put another way: Can a videogame make you cry?

Any time this question gets hauled out, there are a few key moments that are cited as the most tragic in videogame history. Chief among them is the unexpected death of the character Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII*. Fans who had come to know and love Aeris over the course of the story were shocked to witness her death at the hands of the evil Sephiroth, the game's central villain. Some games, like some movies, do a better job of painting character than others.

By the time Aeris dies, her personality has been so well developed, we've grown attached to her; we care about her and we want to know more. To see her fall at the hands of Sephiroth is a loss that touches gamers as much as tearjerking scenes like E.T.'s departure or the students' "O Captain, my Captain" tribute to Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society* - or any number of other movie moments - touch moviegoers every time.

An on-rails single-player game like *Final Fantasy* - if it's **very** well written - can do that only because it's the gaming subgenre closest to a feature film. There is one plot and one outcome, and while in a game there may be slight variations in how you get to the end, there is really only one author of the action, and that's the development team.

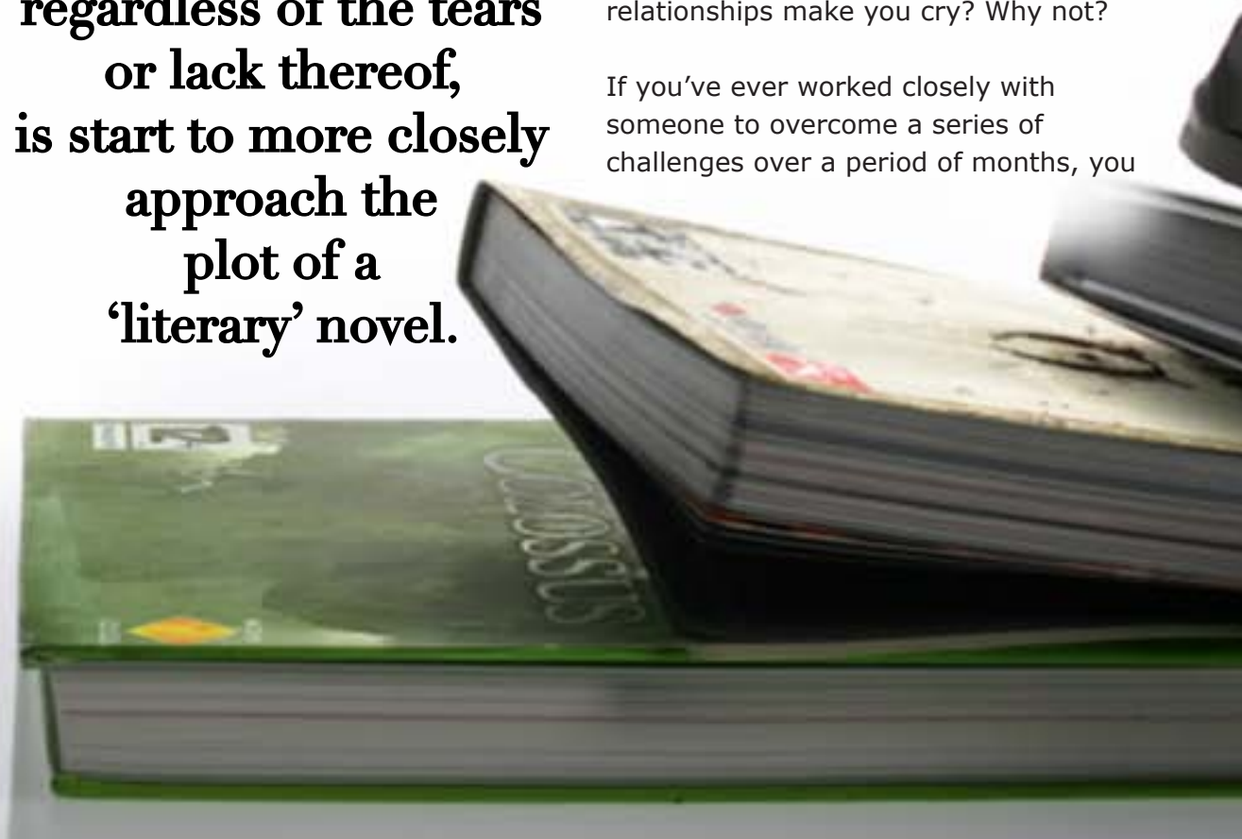
But there are games other than *Final Fantasy*, and unlike traditional media, in which the viewer is only ever a passive participant, some games can allow the gamer to take a more active role, not just in the action but in the authorship of the plot and development of the characters, as well.

Take an open-world game like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Gun*, for instance, or the recently released *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*, which has been capturing gamers' imaginations in droves. All of these games have their pre-determined plots, as well. The series of missions send players on what's essentially a long-range quest to build street cred and gain control of territory, take revenge on old enemies, or just save the world, depending on the kind of adventure you prefer.

But open-world games also allow their players to create their own plots, and that's where the possibilities get more interesting. There is no fixed set of people or places who may become important to you, but a rich mix of both to choose from. Most of the central characters in open-world games are governed by the same set of narrative rules as those in on-rails environments, of course. But to be banished from the 'hood by a rival gang in *GTA* or shunned by an NPC who had become an ally and friend in *Oblivion* can be just as painful as losing a companion adventurer like Aeris. Can it make you cry? Perhaps. But what it can do, regardless of the tears or lack thereof, is start to more closely approach the plot of a "literary" novel, in which people, places and things have a much more evocative presence. It asks players to contribute their creativity to the game. You've invested yourself in the game, not just as an observer but also as one of its authors, and if it was you who wrote that meaningful encounter into the gameplay - not through any software mechanics but by letting it mean something to you - any unexpected reversals are bound to have a deeper impact.

One of the places players have the most "authorship" is in MMOGs. Here, though, the "writing" of your experience is more collaborative. While you can invest in parts of the game in much the same way as in open-world, single-player games, there is a fair portion of the experience that is controlled neither by the game itself nor by the player in question, but by **other players** roaming around the same environment. And if you're in a PvP-enabled virtual "place," the authorship is even more diffused. Your own creativity is only part of the story. Some of your deepest connections may be formed, not with NPCs or favorite places in the world but with other real live human beings. Could such relationships make you cry? Why not?

What it can do, regardless of the tears or lack thereof, is start to more closely approach the plot of a 'literary' novel.



If you've ever worked closely with someone to overcome a series of challenges over a period of months, you

No matter how many trolls you do away with, after all, more will always return to take their place.

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know the joy that can result from being part of a well oiled team. If you've ever been betrayed by a close friend in your offline life, you know the pain that can arise when such a team fragments and falls apart. Though less may be at stake in an online world, the emotions are no different. But are these emotions and interactions **art**?

Who's to say? But it just might be, if by "art" we mean an expressive work that touches our emotions. It's just, in MMOGs, the emotions being affected can vary wildly from person to person. For some, such games will rise to the level of art; for others, they will always be only games.

As with the difference between on-rails and open-world single-player games, MMOGs come in a range of flavors, as well. The external trappings of swords versus spaceships are of little consequence, here.

More important is the extent to which players are able to interact with and affect the world around them. At one end of the scale is a game like *World of Warcraft*, in which important connections may be formed between players, but where those players never have an impact on the virtual world. No matter how many trolls you do away with, after all, more will always return to take their place. Adventurer after adventurer rides through the same unchanging landscape, and while your character may improve greatly over time, the backdrop against which your story unfolds remains static.

Slide along the scale a bit, though, and you come upon worlds like *PlanetSide* and *Lineage* - places where the landscape holds more than just a series of challenges to be beaten and then left behind. Both games feature players as central to the action, working both with and against each other to shape their virtual worlds by capturing and holding important points of territory. This is the battlefield, MMOG-style, and it mimics many of the emotions that are conveyed by the best big-screen portrayals of war, with one important difference: The players themselves share in the glory of conquest or the ignominy of surrender; it's you that stands triumphant after taking a rampart or hardpoint, and it's you that stands over your fallen ally on

the field of battle (though, of course, he's fallen only temporarily; there's little doubt about whether he'll get up). The potential for tears of joy or bitterness is far greater in worlds like these.

But what's really at stake, here? Resource nodes are one thing, but what about scenarios in which a full-scale war - not just a battle - rages across wide swathes of territory? Anyone who knows me well knows which MMOG I'll trot out next: It's the space opera *EVE Online*, of course, where alliances of well over a thousand players wage war against each other, with control of dozens of star systems filled with valuable resources of many kinds hanging in the balance. Alliances rise and fall over the course of many months, politics rend what were formerly powerful ties, and you learn to depend on the people you fly with, because *EVE* is a world where death hurts. Your story unfolds on an epic scale, and it's a story in which the world can be bent to your will - in contrast to the constantly regenerating landscape of *World of Warcraft*.

When the question is raised of whether a videogame can make you cry, it's usually in the context of art. Can the plot of a single-player game be made to include both engaging gameplay, and the kinds of characters, attachments and tension that can be used to create emotional moments on down the line? I see no reason why not. Though we've encountered this relatively rarely in the history of gaming, there's no reason to believe developers who are interested in making games into literature (not, mind you, interactive storytelling) will find a way to accomplish it on a more consistent basis.

Where MMOGs are concerned, though, it's a different story. Though there's a hefty single-player element in many MMOGs, the collaborative authorship that takes place in such games means that layering in a deep and moving plot is probably impossible.

But MMOGs have an advantage over single-player games for the same reason. The connections that form there are not between player and finely wrought fictional characters, but between real people on both sides of the bond. And it's the forming of such bonds - and the breaking of them - that is what moves people to tears most often in "real" life. The loss of a friend, the experience of belonging to a cohesive group of people, the interdependence that develops among colleagues - these things are no less real in an MMOG than they are in our physical lives. The possibilities are in the players' hands.

If you're deep in your game, why wouldn't it move you to tears? COMMENTS

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

EVE is a world where death hurts.

MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

"What's the most emotional response you've had to a game, and what game brought about that emotion?"

Mark Wallace, "The Crying Game"
When my *EVE Online* corporation moved halfway across the galaxy, we left behind hundreds of friends we'd flown with in combat for many months. It was jarring to see the shift in allegiances, but the strong bonds we'd developed as a tight-knit corp evoked more emotion. The move made me realize that we'd formed more than game relationships; these were actual friendships. Brought a tear to my eye.

John Walker, "Confessions of a Crybaby"
The Longest Journey. Not only did I get hugely emotionally involved, but it fundamentally affected my (already passionate) beliefs in the crucial importance of embracing imagination in our adult lives. The game fused with me as I played, and now appears to be a permanent part of me.

Bonnie Ruberg, "Hot and Bothered"
After Lisa Trevor, I was shaking for days. Eek!

Kieron Gillen, "More Than a Feeling"
People ask me this question a lot, and I always have trouble with it as I get a little too hung up on defining "emotion." Fear's an emotion. According to Lovecraft, the oldest, and I've had larger fear responses from videogames than any other art form. If that counts, take your pick from anything from the distant, violent slamming of trap-doors in *Eye of the Beholder* to *Thief: Deadly Shadows*' The Cradle. More generally, the only reasons I play games are for emotional reasons. They may be the more visceral end of the emotional spectrum, but I'm not going to apply some kind of f---ed-up chain-of-being on my reactions to the world.

Rod Humble, "Rules as Art"
I remember booting up *Alternate Reality - The City* on my Atari and stepping into another world. It felt like you were living in a different place, getting a job, listening to the music in the pubs, avoiding bad parts of town. The emotions were belonging and awe.

Dana Massey, "Suspend My Disbelief"
There was a lot of stomping about and cursing during my *UO* PvP days.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor
Opposite ends of the spectrum, but about the same level of response. Smashed a keyboard after getting PK'd in *Lineage* and dropping a +7 Katana. Years later, I had tears well up in my eyes after completing a quest in *WoW*, and watched the results of my actions play out before me.

Joe Blancato, Content Editor
Anger with the fury of a thousand stars. Take pretty much any sports game designed for the Super Nintendo, and I probably have a story about a time I destroyed a controller because of it. It drove me nuts, but part of me misses the days when "great opponent AI" meant "the Bengals' quarterback can throw 90-yard passes in the fourth quarter."

Jon Hayter, Producer
Rage.
Subspace.
The only thing worse than being the worst player in an online, skill-based game is being the second best at it. That's what I was. A friend of mine was arguably the best, and would log on and annihilate me whenever I was bragging about dominating the server. The stream of expletives I would scream at him was ceaseless.
Good times.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor
The Sims. Made. Me. Crazy. It really does not take 42 minutes to walk across a kitchen. But I loved the sound they made when they were doing something they liked. "Awriiighh! Uh huh, uh huh."