the escapist

Casual Friday
We Play!
Coffee Break Worlds
MEET THE TEAM!

Scratching the SURFACE:
Richard and Robert Garriott Look To The Future
by Shannon Drake and Julianne Greer

The Revolution began with Paper
by Greg Costkiyan

Gaming on the Orient Express
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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Originally, this week's issue was supposed to be "Gaming's Young Turks and Slavs," an issue about the rise of gaming in Eastern Europe, both in development and in playerbase. I received several article pitches on the topic and the issue was nearly full. And then flu season hit. And then allergies hit. All but one of my writers for this issue has fallen prey to flu, allergies or a minor bout of forgetfulness. I blame Spring.

Despite these various ailments, we received several interesting article submissions, quite out of the blue. And these submissions were good. So we here, at *The Escapist* headquarters, put two and two together: on the one hand, lacking regularly scheduled content, and on the other, possessing these special articles.

And so now, this week, we are proud to bring you what has been lovingly called in the office for a few weeks, "Mish Mash." This is a departure from our usual thematic issues. But it works quite admirably in a pinch. I'm curious to know what everyone thinks of our putting an interview with the Garriott brothers, an article from newcomer Nick Bousfield about an old adventure game, *The Last Express* and an article from Greg Costikyan sharing the roots of games, all in the same issue. I'll look forward to your comments on The Lounge.

Cheers,

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I love *The Escapist*. As a magazine it does more than inform about games - anyone can so that. You on the other hand inform about the society and sociology created by the existence of games, which is as important, in my opinion, as the games themselves.

I have been captured recently by an undercurrent that seems to thread through many of the latest articles: The need for diversity, but also the need for emotional connection and varying consequences. In the articles "Where Games Lost My Emotion" the "Gaming at the Margins" series and even "The Play Is the Thing," you described the need for games that show the consequences of our actions, and allow us to make decisions that will affect the outcome of the game. In our society there are fewer and fewer people willing to take responsibility for their actions or believe that their actions have no consequences. Many of these people are in the marketing demographic for video games. It is great to see a group of people who are interested in showing the need to understand and account for the effect our actions will have on others, and I thank you for stressing this need in your articles.

I would ask one thing, if it is at all possible, please report on how this need is being filled. I am sure that your plea has not fallen on deaf ears, nor would I think that you are the only ones in the industry to discover this need. So if there are games meeting your described needs, what are they and who is making them? Where can I get them? Maybe if people were to see that others have successfully accomplished (or are currently attempting to accomplish) this goal, they would be likely to follow suit.

Keep up the good work.

A loyal reader,
Nathan Jeles

To the Editor: First, let's get the usual pleasantries dispensed with. I love the magazine, read it every week, enjoy thinking about the issues it throws up, and love that other people think games are more than they may first appear.

There's one game, one, that has made me cry. Others have made me feel various things, anger (thank you *WoW* ganking), frustration (*Ninja Gaiden* really is Nintendo hard), and satisfaction (but it's so rewarding when you finally manage to beat up the nunchaku guy).

But, for making me cry, that honor goes to *Xenogears*, the Japanese RPG by Squaresoft that was remade into the more recent *Xenosaga* series.

The game is two CDs of complex, interwoven, thematically fascinating story. In what other game do you find out not only that you have to kill God, but that God is in fact the power source for an ancient planet-killing biological

weapon that has created everyone on Earth to use as spare parts in its 10,000 year regeneration process?

In what other game would you have a love story between two people that get continuously reincarnated for the whole 10,000 years, only to have the woman die in the man's arms every time?

Even now, I still get goosebumps.

To be honest, I'm probably not the only one who will say that a Japanese RPG made them cry. Currently, they have two factors in their favor for producing strong emotions: They're long, letting you build up feeling for the characters and get to know them, and they're very narrative-based, meaning that there actually are characters, and that stuff happens to them.

Thanks for the awesome read.

- Nick

To the Editor: [re: Dom Camus on Warren Spector] One point perhaps lost is that the current situation is one of games stuck in one rather specific niche. Game design can advance without becoming "mainstream" (Though I see nothing wrong with that - to each his own), for there are many more interesting niches waiting to be filled. As Julianne mentioned in this week's editorial, no game has made her cry. Surely there could exist a tragedy niche, just as action-adventure is a niche already well-addressed by games.

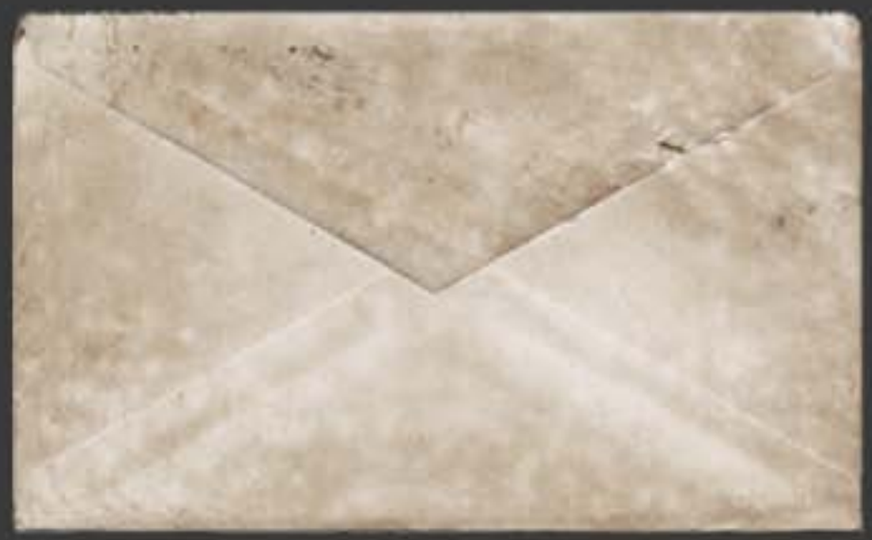
- Peter Robinett

To the Editor: In the Wal-Mart article in issue 40, you quoted the programmer of *Deer Hunter* as having said that its target audience had been "ignored by the game market (or worse, ridiculed by games like *Redneck Rampage*)." He's right about the ignoring, but wrong in his implication of *Redneck Rampage.*

Your redneck has a deep sense of humor, and is not too concerned about maintaining a politically correct stance to avoid offending those who occasionally fry up a possum and serve it with Moon Pies and corn liquor. *Redneck Rampage* was fun and not mean-spirited. The series sold several hundred thousand units, a large percentage having been sold from the shelves of Wal-Mart. The "Wal-Mart audience," as you call it, bought more copies than did the wired, black-clothes-wearing, Marin-County-dwelling, $4,000-computer-having audience.

Regards,
Bill Dugan
President, Torpex Games
(Producer, Interplay, *Redneck Rampage,* 1997)

To the Editor: I enjoyed your magazine. There are lots and lots of men on every single article ... except the sexuality one. Then there are all women.



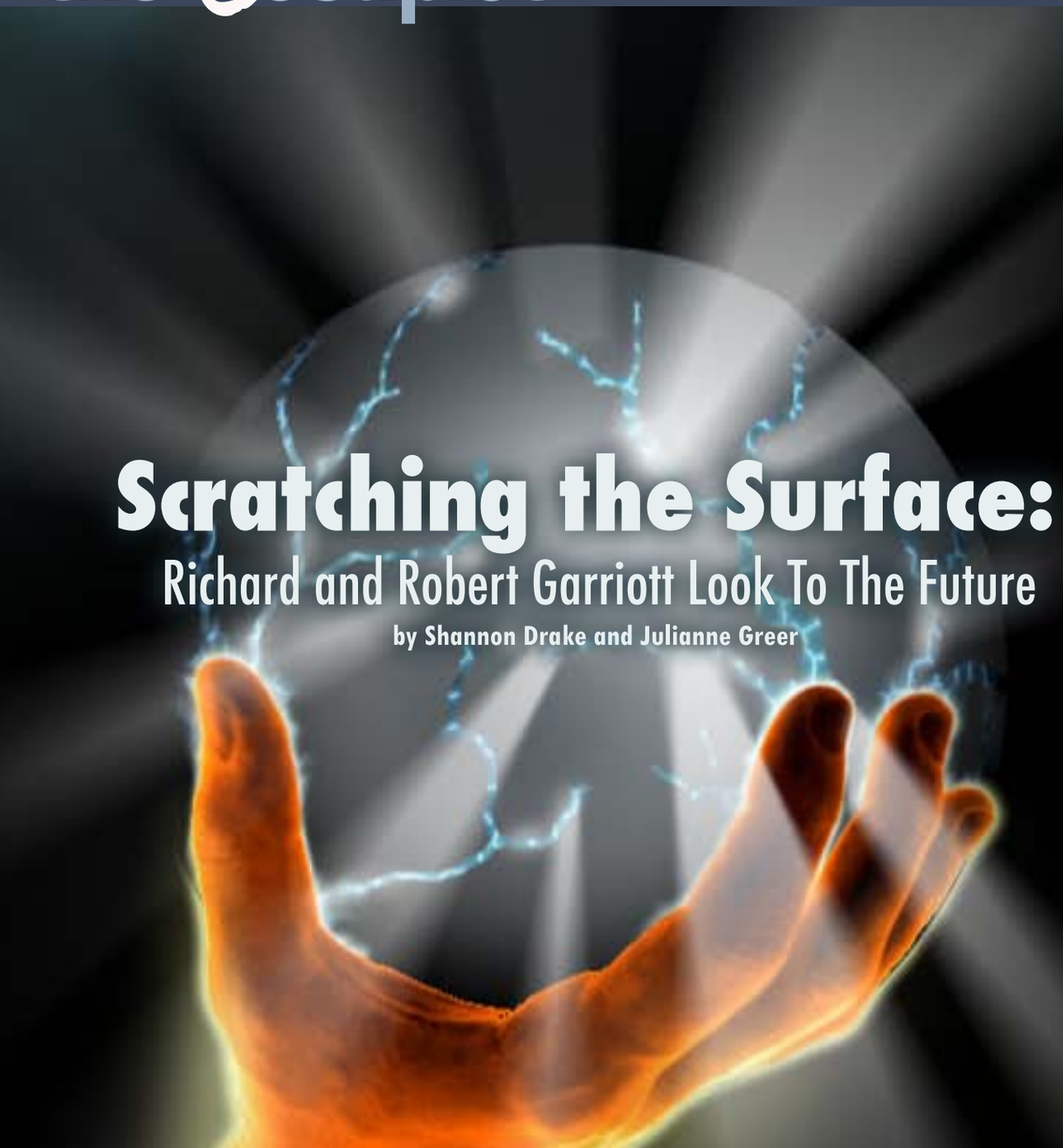
What gives?

- Malia

To the Editor: I wanted to applaud *The Escapist* and the content it's publishing. It summarizes the current flaws in gaming in today's world and makes me feel a little better about being a game designer.

Thanks,
Mike

the Escapist



Scratching the Surface:

Richard and Robert Garriott Look To The Future

by Shannon Drake and Julianne Greer

Origin created worlds, from the battle-ravaged world of *Wing Commander* to the spooky space station of *System Shock* to the involving fantasy world of *Ultima*. The swift, merciless death of Origin around the turn of the century left the studio a hollow shell of its once great self. Quasi-mythical founders Robert and Richard Garriott were left to wander the earth, like Caine from *Kung Fu*. The wandering years took them to their own company and, eventually, to NCsoft's Austin operations, where they preside over the mysterious *Tabula Rasa* and NC's other titles. Our writers caught up with the brothers Garriott at a recent conference, seeking insight into the past, present, and future of the MMOG world.

Richard opened with a critique of the present, saying, "You know, if you look at the online games that have come out to date, and it's almost been ten years since *Ultima Online* … Frankly, the fundamental game design structure of most that have come to pass is pretty similar to what I consider first generation thinking. There's been very few groups that have really published a game successfully and then gone on to create a new game having learned the lessons of their first game, if you know what I mean.

"We've really only just begun to scratch the surface of what online games can become," he said, adding, "Most online games have the same fundamental design premise, in contrast to solo games where you get to be the one great hero that saves the world and everything about the game is there to make you believe that. Online games, on the other hand, your life is pretty average," echoing the famous lament of *Star Wars Galaxies* players who wanted to be Luke Skywalker, but instead found themselves a nameless farmer on Tatooine. "You know, half the people are higher level than you; half of them are lower level than you."

The typical game design is still the same as it has always been for first generation MMOGs. "You tend to grind levels; it's really your whole goal," he says, capturing the experience in just a few words. "Your play cycle paradigm goes something like this: Your first mission is to go out and fight level one monsters.

You go out there to the fields where level one monsters continually respawn and you farm them for XP and a little more weapons or equipment. You go back to town and cash it in and you get sent out to the level two creatures, and then you just repeat this process. That, interestingly, is already compelling enough to have brought in millions of people into the online games race."

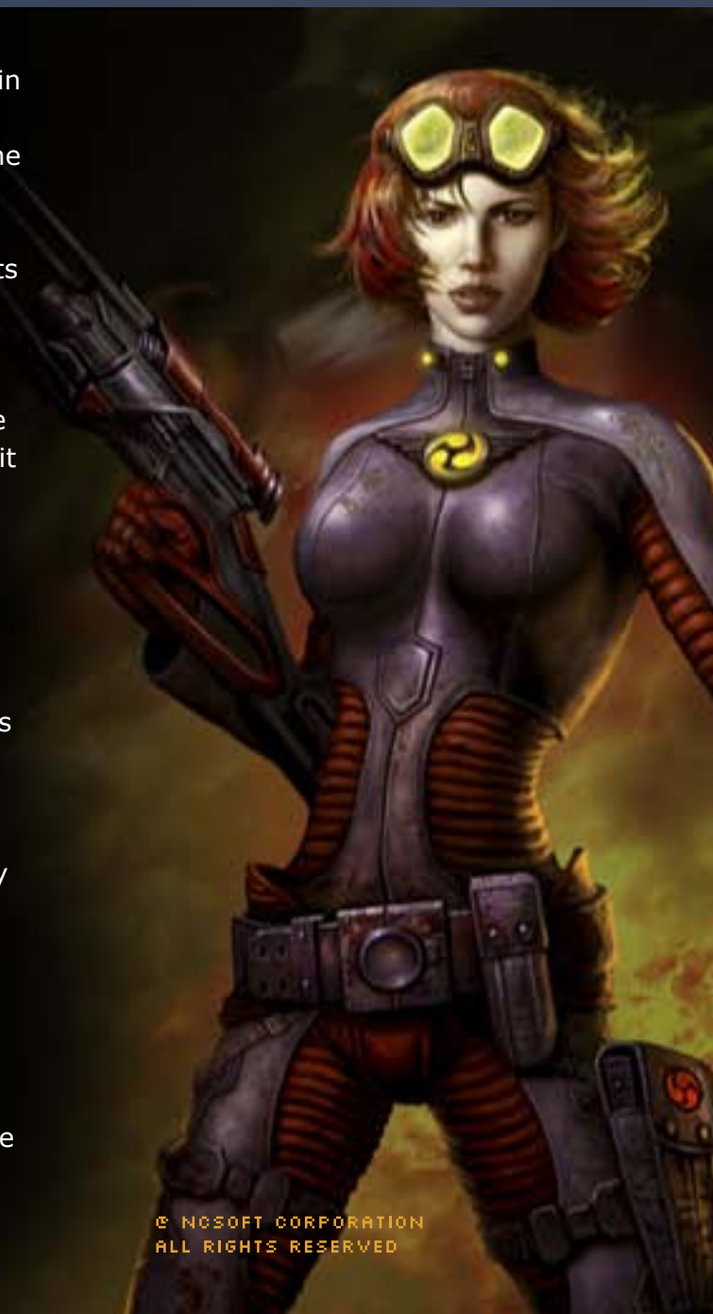
While some are content to rest on that particular design until the end of time, you can sense a bit of dissatisfaction in Lord British when he says, "But, fundamentally, I think it's not particularly elegant." Looking to the future, and including his own *Tabula Rasa*, he sees developers learning from and expanding beyond this model. He continues, "Most of the developers who have built one successful online game realize the error of their ways and now have moved on and said, 'Okay, what can we do that's bigger and better than that?' And so some of these answers, which to me should sound pretty straightforward these days, are things like, as opposed to demanding a level grind where the only way you can feel successful is to be doing it for 12 hours a day, we've got to create games where people can have 30 minute play cycles. You get in, you get out, and [you] don't feel that while [you're] out, [your] friends are going to level beyond [you] to a point where you can't even play together anymore."

The problem with the first-generation model of gameplay is it's, well, kind of boring. Richard sums it up as, "[You're] going out in a field and farming/grinding on the same monsters that respawn in the same area again, and when you're farming, you're just standing in front of each other seeing who does the most damage over time, if you've heard that phrase at all. Most games now even provide you the calculated damage over time, which is horrible. It's indicative of the fact that the whole point in this game is just to raise that one number, and then you go close your eyes and mash the buttons some more." In summation, he says, "Horrible, horrible gameplay."

Not only is the existing model too boring, the ideas on what the genre is — or could be — are frustratingly limited. "There's the phrase 'massively multiplayer online role-playing game and sometimes the word persistent thrown in there. If you add all that up, that really narrows the interpretation of what online games can be." That definition is "way too narrow." Rather than thinking of "online" as a particular genre, like sports or shooters, "online" should be "a technology. It is the technology to, instead of having AI characters in there to deal with, you have other real people to deal with, and whether you're doing it socially, or you're doing it on the same team, or you're doing it competitively, that's a tool by which you can now provide entertainment."

In the future, Richard thinks designers will finally take the step of saying, "Let's not worry about the model that *UO*, *EQ* and *WoW* have repeated and solidified and refined. How can we now provide these experiences that people will really appreciate and enjoy more?" Is finding those models difficult? "I really don't think they're that hard," he answers, "I just think people haven't had a chance to turn to them yet."

While Richard is "Lord British," the game designer, his brother Robert is the business-focused President of NCsoft-



the escapist lounge

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North America. Robert puts it succinctly, "He talks about changing the future in terms of game design. My standpoint is when I look at it in terms of, you know, genre and business model, and where I think companies are going to be taking this.

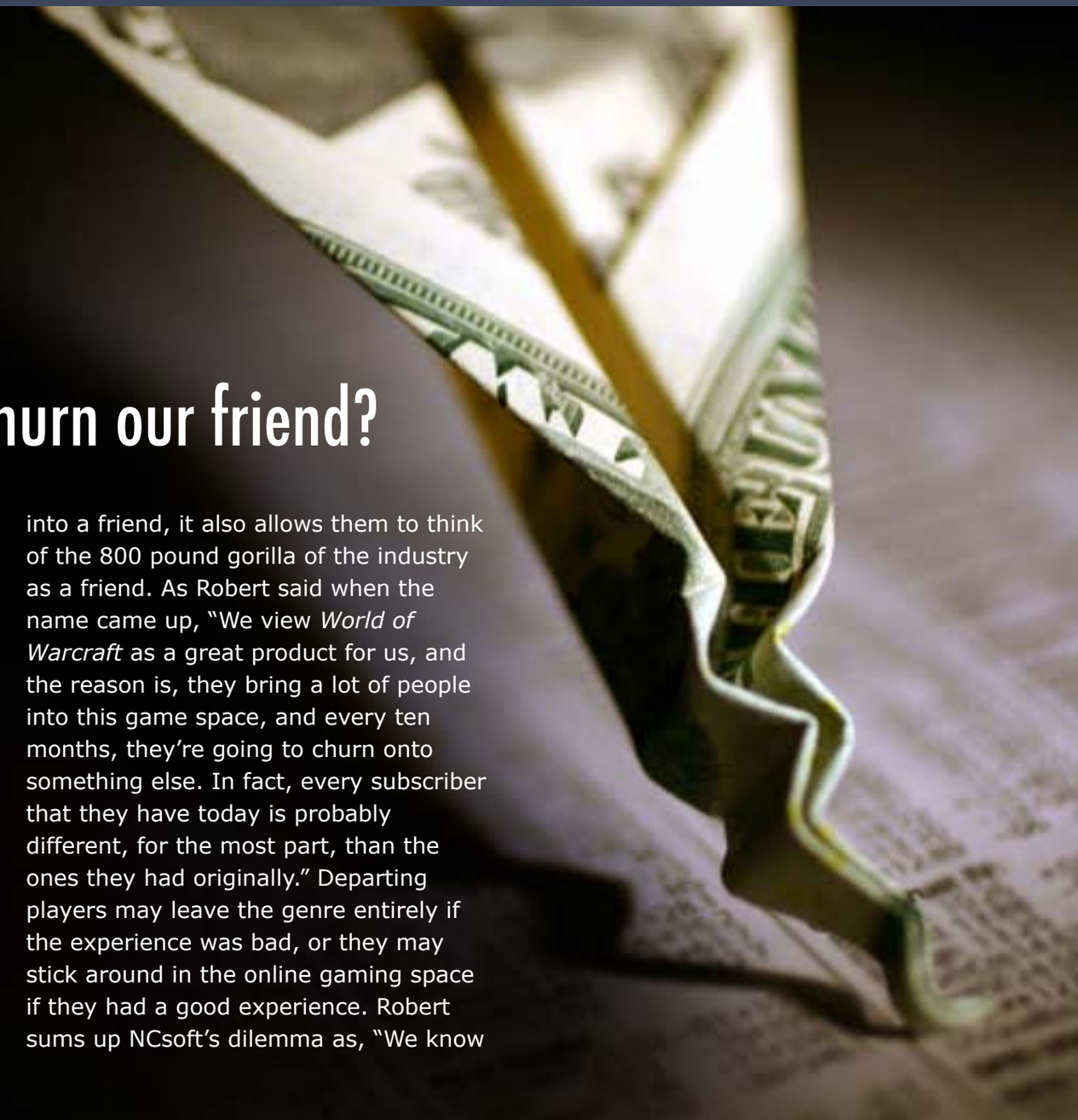
"Two things. One is, the only successful online game anywhere in the world was roleplaying, but the other is that until recently, there were no companies with more than one online roleplaying game that were successful. Our belief was that: One, we have to really expand the genres to grow the market. The other is that there's a value to having multiple products within one portfolio.

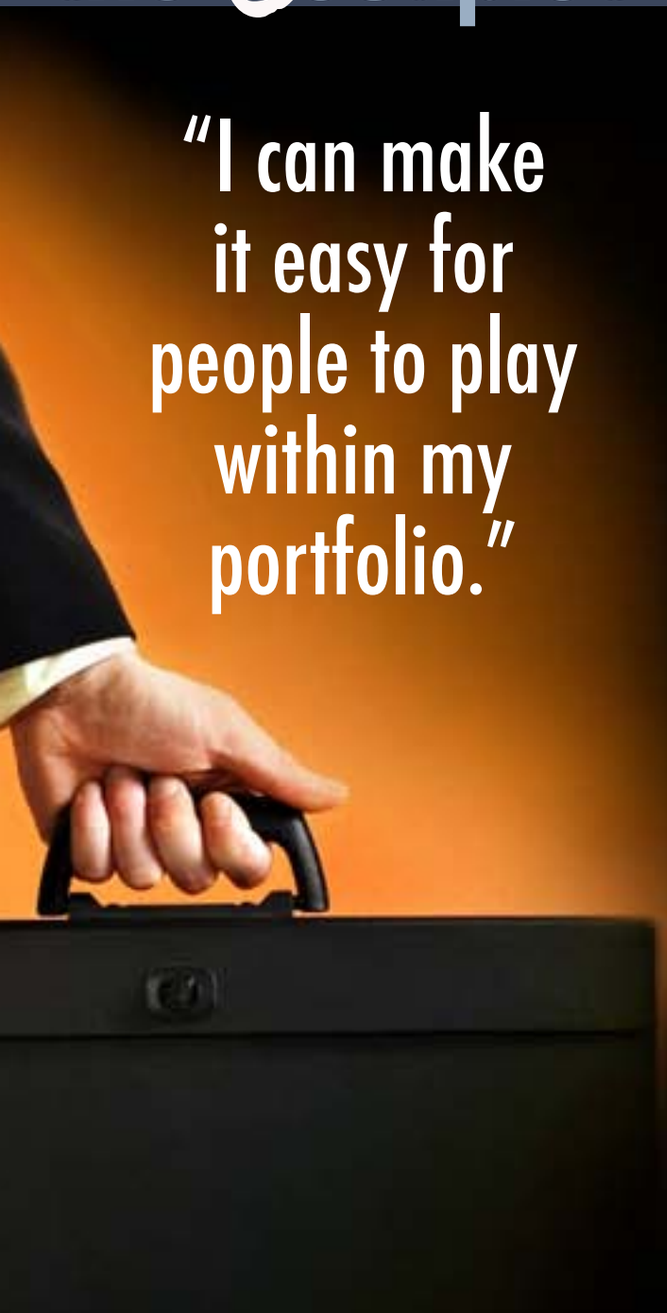
"And so you might ask how is that going to change things," he says, beating the question and continuing on. "That's sort of the impetus behind what we've been doing, in terms of trying to develop a whole portfolio of supporting and different products. A long time ago, we looked at the business, and we said churn is the biggest expense for our business, just like a telephone business." Churn is industry lingo for turnover rate, the number of people who leave a game each month. "If you switch your [phone] carrier, it's a giant cost and lots of people churn very rapidly. And in the online game space, basically, people churn every ten months.

"So you play it, you like it, you stay for ten months, and then you leave," he says. Rather than fighting what they saw as an obvious industry trend, NCsoft decided to go a different way and embrace it. "As games become more casual, churn rates go up. So, we knew the churn rates were going up, so we started saying, well, how can we make churn our friend? Because there's nothing we can really do to stop the fact that churn is going up. Interestingly, if you're a single product company, you can never make churn your friend," because people leaving your one cash cow undermines your entire company.

How can we make churn our friend?

NCsoft's strategy of diversification not only made the detrimental force of churn into a friend, it also allows them to think of the 800 pound gorilla of the industry as a friend. As Robert said when the name came up, "We view *World of Warcraft* as a great product for us, and the reason is, they bring a lot of people into this game space, and every ten months, they're going to churn onto something else. In fact, every subscriber that they have today is probably different, for the most part, than the ones they had originally." Departing players may leave the genre entirely if the experience was bad, or they may stick around in the online gaming space if they had a good experience. Robert sums up NCsoft's dilemma as, "We know





"I can make it easy for people to play within my portfolio."

that churn to Blizzard is bad, because if they lose somebody, they lose somebody. And if that rate goes up, they lose more people. How can we change that?"

The answer proved to be fairly simple. "We felt we'd put a portfolio of products together, which we've been doing," he says, getting into the secret of turning churn lead into subscriber gold. "If we incentivize and then somehow change the probability slightly, that instead of someone stopping playing *Lineage* and then going to *EverQuest*, the probability is slightly different that they might go to *City of Heroes*. And how can I change that probability?

"I can make it easy for people to play within my portfolio," he says, and details a very simple strategy of working with his customers, rather than trying to entrap them in a single game. "I can give them free trials. I can download things automatically to their hard drive. I can send them advertising from the portfolio. I can send them clips automatically within the portfolio. There's a whole lot of things that I can do to support a portfolio of products that slightly changes the probability they will stay with us." Retention is a numbers game. Influence the odds just a few points and you come up big over time. "If you look at the probabilities, if I have changed this, just slightly, churn becomes my friend. As a matter of fact, the higher the churn rate, the more certain I am that I will eventually own everybody." It's refreshing to meet an executive that talks like a Bond villain, but with a portfolio of cool games instead of an orbiting space laser. He continues, "So, given that we know churn [will happen], we've been trying to design a business that allows for and thrives in that new area. Which is why I think that a multi-product, multi-genre portfolio of products that support each other is going to be valuable in the future." In other words, even if a player leaves one of their games, Robert wants another game in their portfolio to be appealing, because in the end, all the subscriptions go to NCsoft.

While he might be out for industry domination, he still talks a lot about taking care of his customers. "Our goal as a company is to develop a relationship with the customer, so that we can provide them value that they're willing to pay for. It doesn't matter what that looks like beyond that statement," he says. "The great news is that once you've gotten over the hurdle of developing that relationship in the first place, like getting their credit card number, which is the hardest step … it is now more convenient for them to stick with you than it is to go other places. Why do you think people buy from Amazon? It's because one click does it all." Robert sees Amazon as "totally trustworthy," which also happens to be his goal with NCsoft. He wants the company to be "a totally trustworthy place that you can go that has great products and, if you don't like it, no problem. You can get your money back. We want to find the way that people are most comfortable with."

Instead of building a model and hammering players into it, he's taking a different approach and embracing the business paradigm the customers want. "We don't care if it's 'you buy an episode and then there's never recurring billing,' we don't care if that is 'the whole game is free and instead you buy virtual

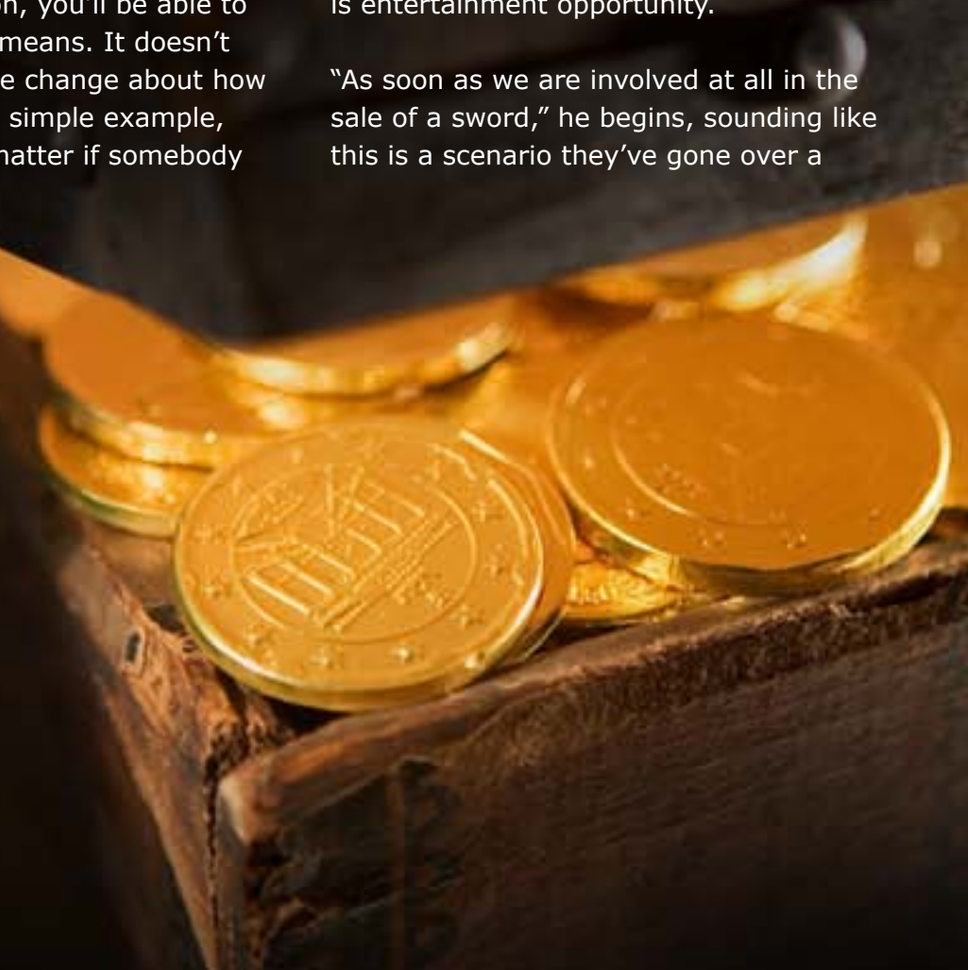
property.' We don't care if it's a subscription-based game, and we don't care if someone invents yet another business model. They're all fine." He uses the Korean parent company for an example, saying, "They're launching what is called NC Coin, which allows us to do micro-billing. You'll be able to play arcade-style games for a quarter." It's ironic that a super-progressive online games giant might be able to revive the sputtering arcade model. They're also working on "a product coming out that's basically going to allow you to play for a certain amount of time, up to a certain level, and you can play all the way through the game. But if you want the super-uber swords and the higher level experience and upper-level dungeons, then you can pay a small subscription fee, five bucks a month, or something like that. So, basically, [it will be] a fairly simple game that people can get into and have a good time, play a lot, and once they feel like they're getting really good value out of it, then they can pay more to actually have upper-level stuff."

Since he raised the issue, and since it's the talk of the industry of late, we had to ask. Virtual property: Good, bad or ugly?

Richard fielded that one with an unexpected answer, saying, "Well, I think first of all, it's inevitable," taking a moment to comment on the legal ramifications before getting back to that "inevitable." "What I mean by inevitable, I think the definition of value has something to do with the amount of human labor that goes into the creation of something. Gold is hard to find, therefore it's more expensive. Aluminum is pretty easy to mine, so it's pretty cheap. People invest a lot of time in getting gold or things of high value in a virtual world. It makes sense that that has real world value. Therefore, of course, secondary markets will exist to allow people to shortcut that work and reward cycle," he says, showing a remarkable grip of economics and human nature without the high dudgeon so common among game designers on this issue. "I buy virtual gold all the time," he says, adding, "I have no problem with it. I'm a supporter. I understand that my position on this is different from our sole corporate perspective. But anyway, I participate in it."

With the accompanying PR rep in need of medical assistance, he shifts his perspective back to that of a publisher and developer, saying, "That being said, as a developer and as a publisher, there is a real big legal problem associated with the sale of virtual property. As long as what we're selling for our subscription fee is access to our service, and all we're warranting is that, oh, you'll be able to play, whatever that means. It doesn't matter what rules we change about how you play." He uses a simple example, saying, "It doesn't matter if somebody comes up to you and says, 'Hey, I'll give you two gold for that incredibly valuable sword that I'll convince you is valueless,' and you sell it to them, and then find out tomorrow that, in fact, it was worth a gazillion gold pieces. None of those things matter, because what we're selling is entertainment opportunity.

"As soon as we are involved at all in the sale of a sword," he begins, sounding like this is a scenario they've gone over a



"I buy virtual gold all the time."

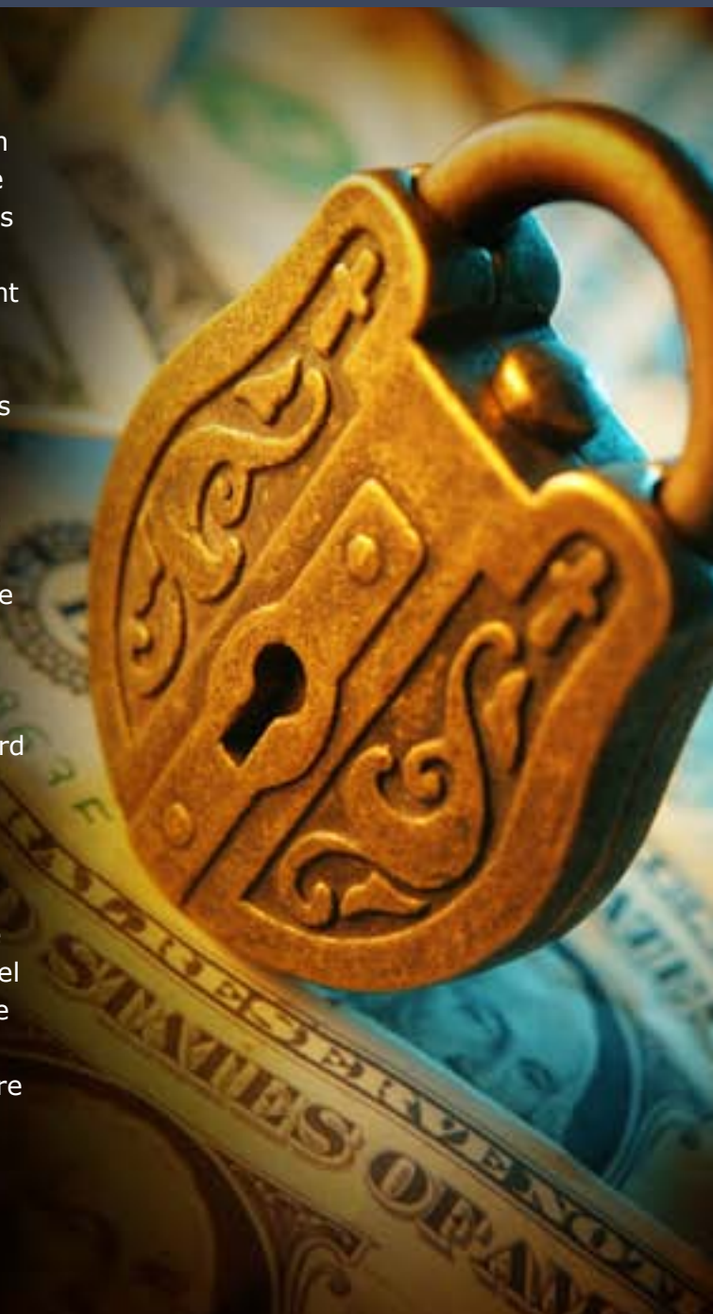
time or two. "Suddenly, if its value changes because we change the rules, suddenly if it gets lost because of a technical glitch, if you get bilked out of it by some other character in the game, all those things suddenly mean that our company is exposed legally to that transaction, like it would be in the real world with a real sword. If you sell somebody a rusty sword that disappears, you're in trouble. If you sell a sword and charge ten times what it's really worth, you're in trouble.

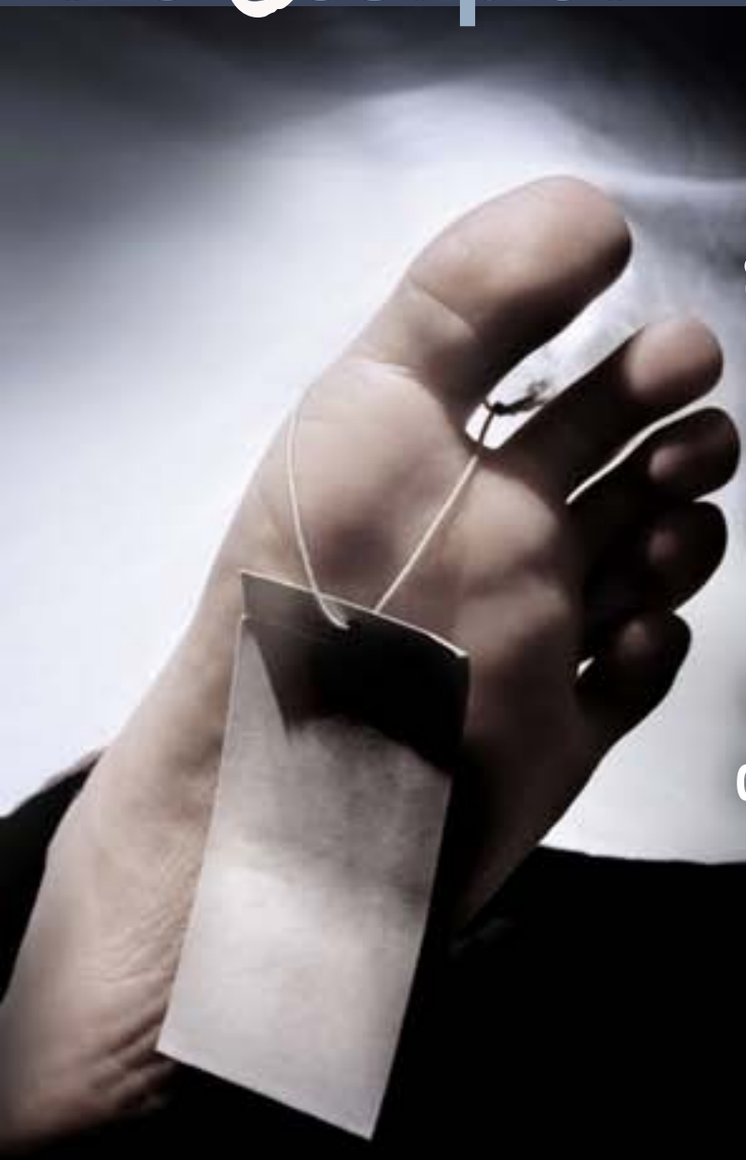
"There's a line there that I think, once a game developer has chosen to go across, you just have to prepare your content to expect that. That is not what the current designs are designed for," he says, echoing RedBedlam's Kerry Fraser-Robinson. "Anytime you're selling items, you expect a certain amount of data integrity in backing that up. You go to an airline, for example, and you buy even a $50 ticket on Southwest. You show up at the airlines and they say, 'Hmm, looks like we lost your ticket; guess you're going to have to buy it again.' You're going, 'Wait, that's not fair. You can't just lose my ticket.'"

Disclaimers aside, though, Lord British says he's "very interested in creating games that have virtual items that are sold just outright for real money, and skip the front end. As an enthusiast, I think it makes a great deal of sense, but it has to be backed up with all the rest of the banking backdrop, which most of the people doing these early ones are not [doing]. The only people I think are going to succeed these days, out of the few companies that are selling items and stuff, tend to be small companies who are not worried about losing their portfolio, or they're in Hong Kong or China, where you can't sue them anyway, or they work through other people and just sort of connect people. They're trying to protect themselves from being able to be sued. I'm really interested in seeing how the Sony [Exchange] works out, because they are obviously a major company and they're backing it up. I don't know that they've had any real problems, but probabilistically, they are going to when they lose something substantial, and how they back that up, I'm really wondering."

The problem with a legal solution, when it comes to the virtual property issue, according to Richard, is, "We know the people who run IGE, and they are so well-protected, you wouldn't even begin to know who to sue." Robert adds some perspective from his end of the business — trying to find a way to confront overseas sellers — saying, "The copyright laws are different over there. Plus, try suing someone internationally, and the expenses are astronomical. Plus, there's companies that provide service for companies that provide service for companies that provide services for the little person sitting in a shack in the middle of nowhere that happens to have a computer. Try going through that. It's ridiculous."

Shifting the conversation to Asia, Richard gives us a bit of insight into the Asian gaming culture. "Using *Lineage* as a touchstone," he says, "And Korea and Taiwan, where 20 percent of the population of those countries are active subscribers to *Lineage* today … that level of penetration is approaching things like Coca-Cola, and when you have that amount of penetration, of course you are going to see the cross-section of life issues that show up. That's why, occasionally, a press report comes out





Out of five people, someone is going to commit suicide. In fact, it's probably a low rate, so people should play this game so they don't commit suicide. They probably have a more fulfilled life than those that are not playing.

about how in Asia, some guys in a massively multi-player online game got in the real world and killed each other. Well, it's like 20% of the population [of the country] is in this game. Out of five people, someone is going to commit suicide. In fact, it's probably a low rate, so people should probably play this game so they don't commit suicide. They probably have a more fulfilled life than those that are not playing."

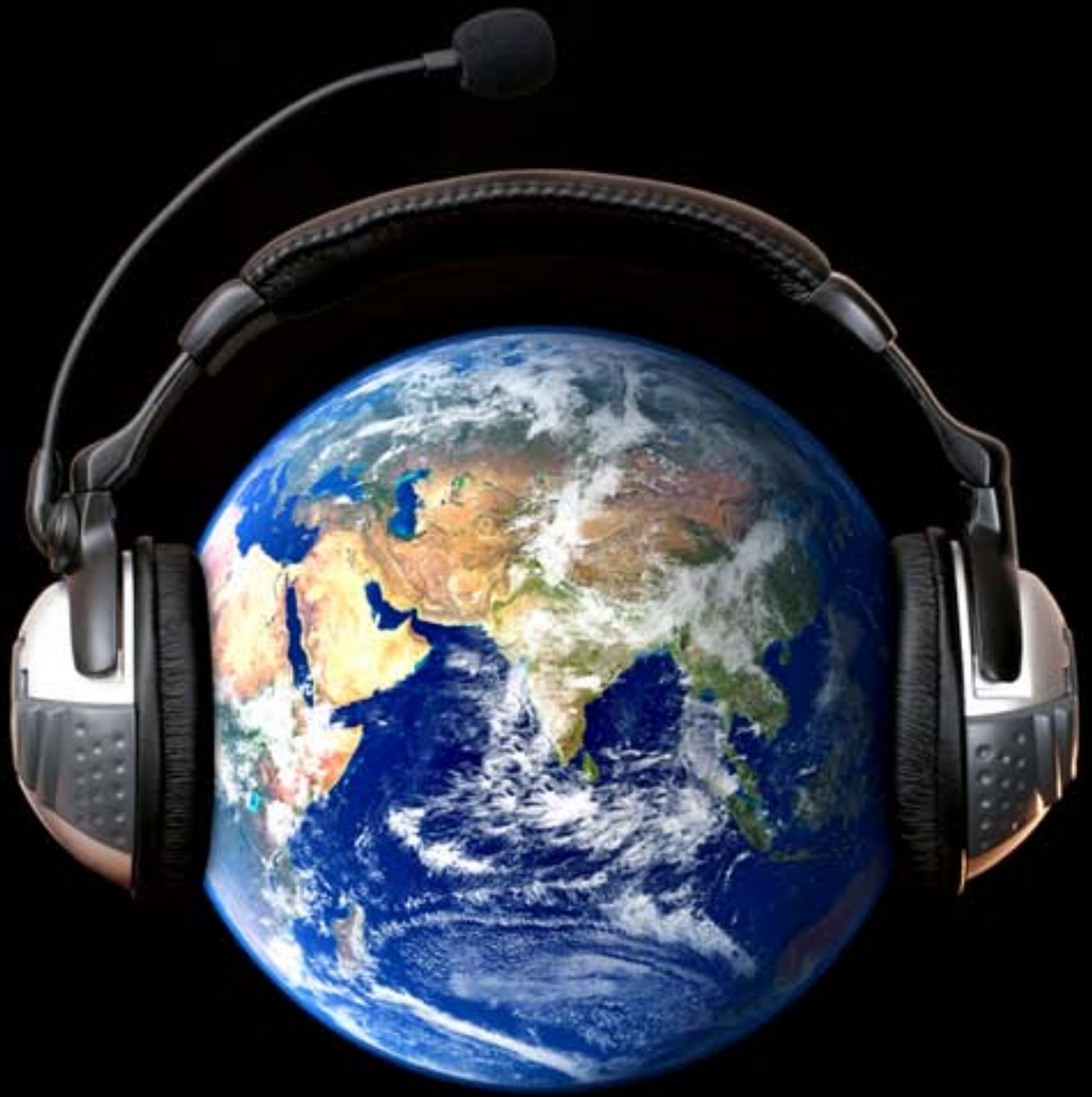
Is 20% penetration realistic for the United States? Richard says the outlook is hazy. "Possible? Of course, it's possible. Is it reality? Who knows. No one in their right mind is predicting that sort of thing. But on the flip side, though, every year that I've been in this business, [they've said] that the market is surely saturated by now, surely it won't grow again. It started with *Ultima Online*. The sales predictions for *Ultima Online* were 15,000 units prior to its release. Then, of course, 50,000 people paid us to become part of the beta testing cycle, which immediately told people that the predictions were a little off. And, of course, it was the fastest selling PC game in history at the time, and it outsold all the previous *Ultima*s by a factor of five or ten. Even then, people were like, 'Oh, that's because *Ultima*'s got a hardcore fan base of 20 years, and surely this isn't going to be repeatable by anything other than something like an *Ultima*,' and then, of course, *EverQuest* comes out and does about twice that." It's a familiar picture, one where, "each year, there is the latest and greatest, which brings in another few hundred thousand to million people, and now *WoW*, which has a couple million people, and each time it just gets bigger and bigger."

Richard contrasts the U.S. to Asia, saying, "The thing that [is] unique about Asia, compared to the U.S., are things like broadband penetration, because they are densely populated areas. There are things like, in Korea, for example, game machines were banned up until recently because of a holdover from World War II that they didn't want to import Japanese console machines. If you're a gamer in Korea, you're a PC gamer, not a console gamer, and those kinds of thing drive it to a uniquely rapid and high point. Fundamentally, over the long haul, there's no reason to think that

culturally, as we're all becoming one world — because we really are blending even our gameplay styles, where it used to be all PvP over there and all PvE over here, and slowly those things are coming together."

In the long term, he says, "It's reasonable to think [in] the U.S., like Asia, it will be incredibly common for people to play online games. What we call online gameplay will also be very different. Over there, all online gameplay is very hardcore, while over here, the online gameplay is much more casual. Pretty soon, [it's] all going to develop until there's more and more online capability, and the big MMOG games are going to sort of downgrade." Richard sees a future where the boundaries and genres as we think of them now are blurred. "It's going to be hard to differentiate between what is an offline game and what is an online game. They will have all sorts of mixed components. When you really look at even an online game, and what you can do with instanced adventures where you basically go off and do your own thing, really, that's a single-player game or light multiplayer game that you're playing in an online game. You've got online games that look like single-player games, so you can 'win' them, and you're going to have single player games that look like online games, so you can take your friends. So, really, this whole business is going to merge together and be a giant business and that, combined, will have the sort of penetration rate we're talking about." We bring up his earlier comments, about no one in their right mind saying these things, and he retorts, "Did I ever say I was in my right mind when I started it?"

The console market will pick up, but, "not in the way, I think, people predict. Another thing I hear all the time is online games capped. Another thing I've heard since I started is the death of the PC. It's still dying. It's been 30 years now and it's still dying. They ship more high-end PCs every year than game machines. So, here's my take on online games on consoles. If you think about what consoles do great — and by the way, I left my cell phone in my bag, but I even play online games on my cell phone now — they're going to be great at different things." He cites *Parappa the Rapper* as the last console game that got him very



excited, "Which speaks to his mental level," cracks Robert, as only siblings can.

Unphased by Robert's wisecrack, Richard plunges on, "The great games, in my mind, on consoles, tend to be games where I sit on the couch, the monitor is well away from me, the user interface device is very simple, the play session is incredibly short, and if you're socializing, it's actually better to socialize with people on this side of the screen." Perhaps he's familiar with rubbing a friend's — or a sibling's — face in ultimate triumph. "And, yes, if the AI on the other side of the screen was really human, then it might be better. And if the experience is light enough, like I'm here to shoot them, then it might be compelling. But on the other hand, I think what the PC does is far better. It [has] games where the experience you want to have with that person or what's beyond the screen is deeper than something I want to shoot at. In which case, you look at the personal computer. You generally are sitting upright in the chair, where you're comfortable for longer periods of time. The types of interfaces you have, including the keyboard or much more traditional or diverse input variations, your face is much closer to the screen, where you're pretty much almost putting your face through into the virtual world."

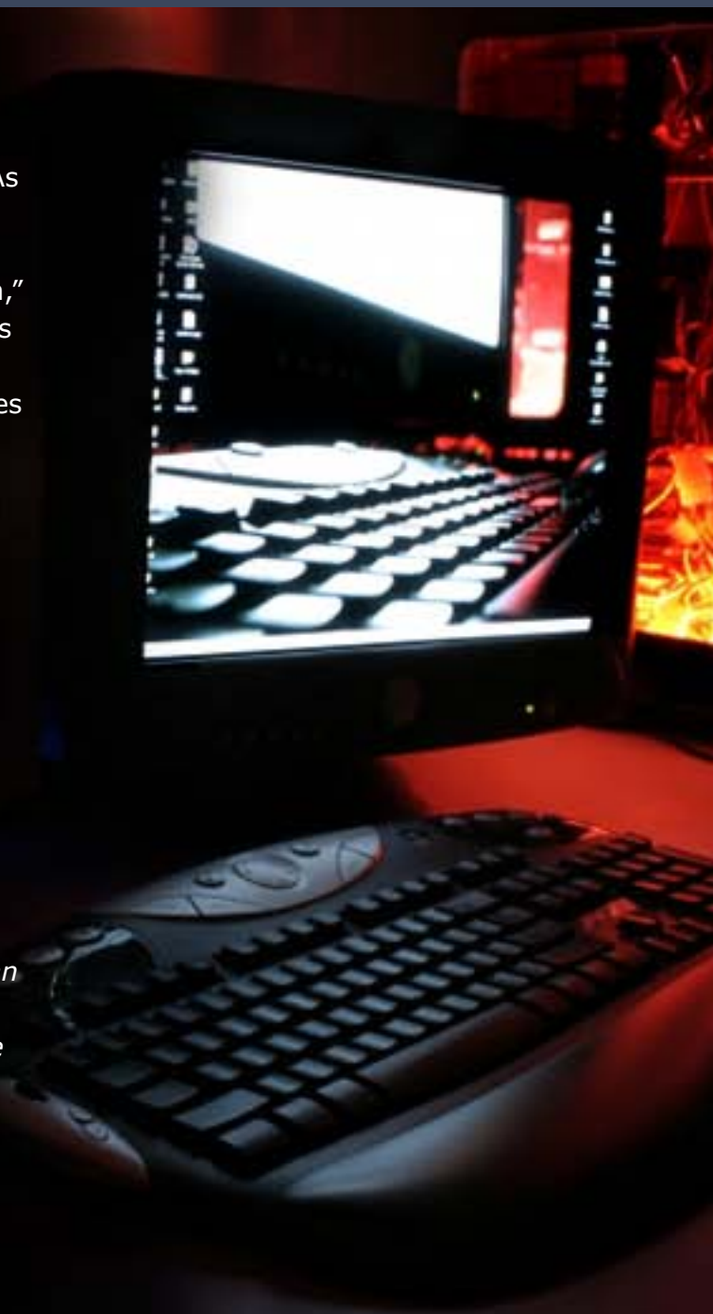
"I think the more in-depth online games will always be favoring the PC," he says.

"I think the more in-depth online games will always be favoring the PC."

"The social online games. The first-person shooter, combat-oriented ones might very well be at least as prevalent, if not maybe more prevalent, long-term, on a console. And you'll have even different experiences that would be more like what we'd call *Animal Crossing*, that might even be the most popular on my cell phone, where it's literally just a pick up, 30 seconds to five minutes at the most, thing you do on your cell phone."

Before we could get him in much more trouble, the newly-resuscitated PR rep was busy shuffling the brothers away. As a closing, Richard added a thoughtful, "The platforms really kind of define the games that will be best to play on them," and though he admitted he wasn't in his right mind earlier, there really is something to that. We said our goodbyes and left them to go back to the land of Austin where they build worlds once again. COMMENTS

Shannon Drake and Julianne Greer collaborated on this article. Shannon can typically be found here at The Escapist or at WarCry.com, while Julianne is The Escapist's Executive Editor.



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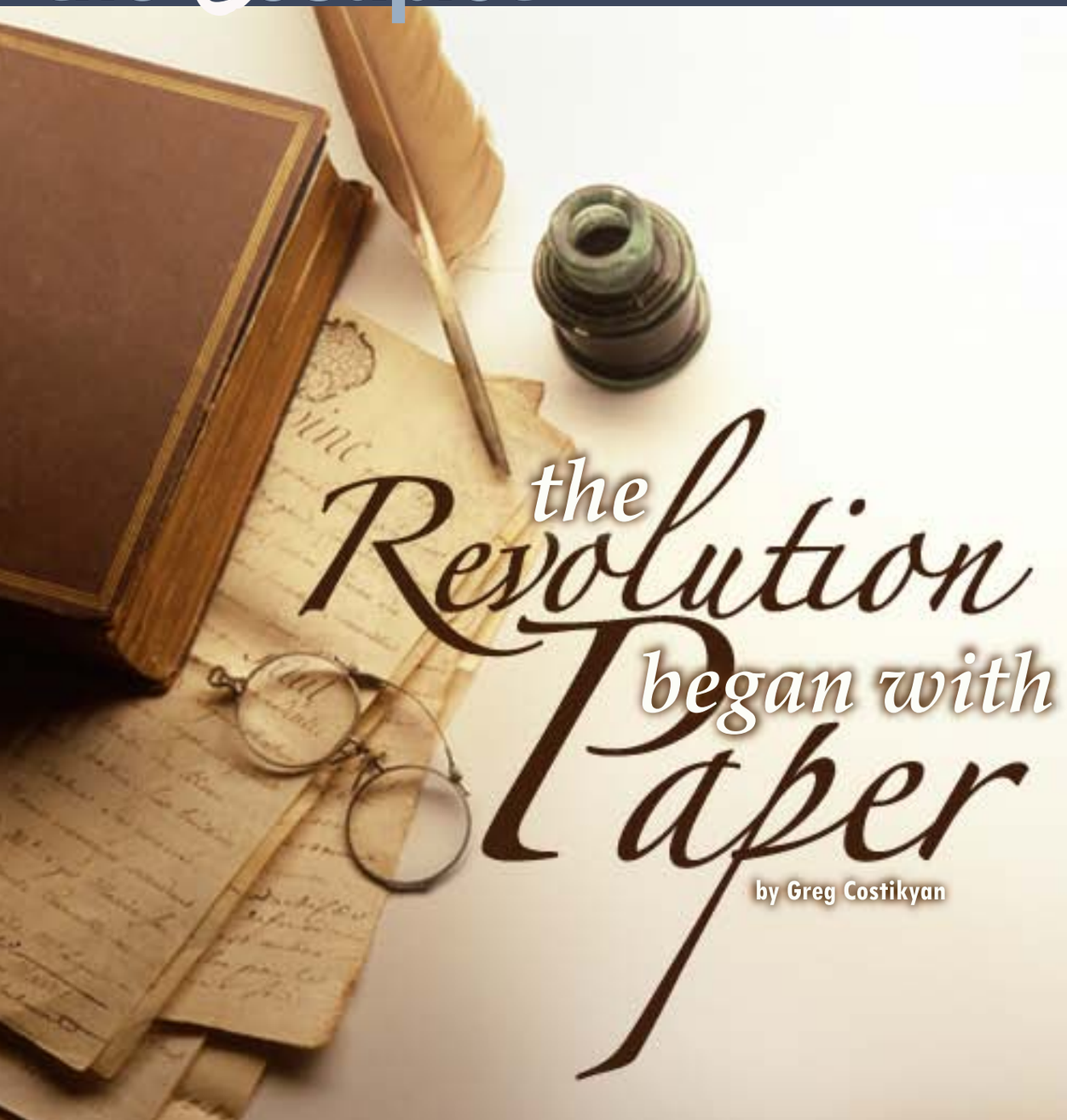

The Revolution Began with Paper

by Greg Costikyan

When the press looks at games, what they see is a multibillion dollar industry filled with glitzy graphics, interactive stories and armies of geeks in huge sweatshop teams laboring for long hours to create the Next Big Thing. And to be sure, that's a fair description of the modern digital games industry today. But it's a remarkably incomplete view of what games are, how they've become a major cultural force - and how and where innovation and growth in the field can be sustained.

In the last 25 years, we've seen an explosion. Games have grown from the passion of a few into the casual entertainment of the many. The popular perception - one shared by many game researchers who ought to know better - is that the explosion has been fueled, in the final analysis, by Moore's Law: The arrival of processors cheap enough to include in arcade cabinets, game consoles and desktop PCs has created this multibillion dollar marketplace and a novel popular art: the game.

It's not that this view is completely wrong, but the revolution didn't begin with *Pong*, and the game explosion isn't limited to digital media. The importance of computing for games is, instead, that digital media permit mediation of an interactive experience in a way that hides the underlying complexity of that experience from players, thereby making it possible to offer rich and complicated games to people who would not have the patience to learn and master them if that interaction were provided to them in non-digital form. In other words, if you want to play a boardgame, you have to read the manual and perform whatever computations are required yourself. Videogame players notoriously do not read manuals, and they don't have to, in most cases, because the rules are embedded in the software.

If it didn't begin with *Pong*, where did it begin? Let me suggest some key moments.

In 1759, a British publisher of hand-tinted, cloth-backed maps named Carrington Bowles published a game designed by John Jefferys called *A Journey Through Europe*. It is the first known game that we can ascribe to an individual designer. In other words, prior to that time, all games were analogous to the anonymous epics that spurred the

rise of literature; they were what Dave Parlett (in *The Oxford History of Board Games*) calls "folk games." *A Journey Through Europe* was, in essence, a line extension by its publisher - a way of reconfiguring a map (in this case, of Europe) to provide a game rather than a reference, thereby appealing to a different audience. As a game *qua* game, it is nothing to get excited about; it's a straightforward track game, with players advancing by the use of a teetotum (a sort of top with multiple sides, each side numbered, the player advancing as many spaces on the track as the number on the side on which the top comes to rest - a common component of early boardgames, since dice were viewed as gambling instruments and hence not to be permitted in respectable households). The players begin and end in London, and many spaces advance players or transport them to other portions of the board, e.g.:

"He who rests at 28 at Hanover shall by order of Ye King of Great Britain who is Elector, be conducted to No 54 at Gibraltar to visit his countrymen who keep garrison there."

or:

"He who rests at 48 at Rome for kissing ye Pope's Toe shall be banished for his folly to No 4 in the cold island of Iceland and miss three turns."

A whole series of games, most but not all travel games associated with maps, were published in Britain during the late 18th and early 19th centuries; we may imagine that they were pricey items, given the need to hand-tint and hand-mount the maps. It wasn't until the mid-19th century, with the arrival of (relatively) cheap color printing, that original board and card games obtained what we might consider a mass market, with the rise of such publishers as McLaughlin Brothers, Milton Bradley's eponymous firm, and George Parker's vehicle, Parker Brothers (his brothers Charles and Edward handled the business side).

The mass market boardgame industry continued to grow throughout the early 20th century, and, in the post-war era, grew enormously with the spread of department and chain outlets and with the growth in leisure time. In the latter

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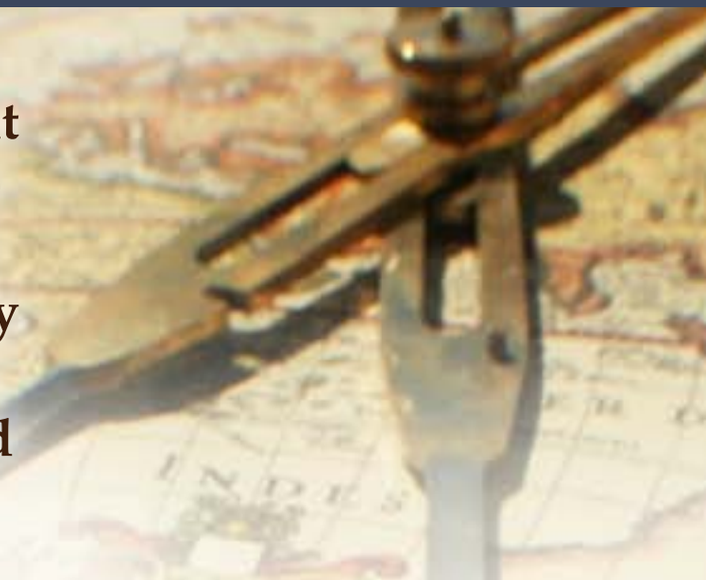
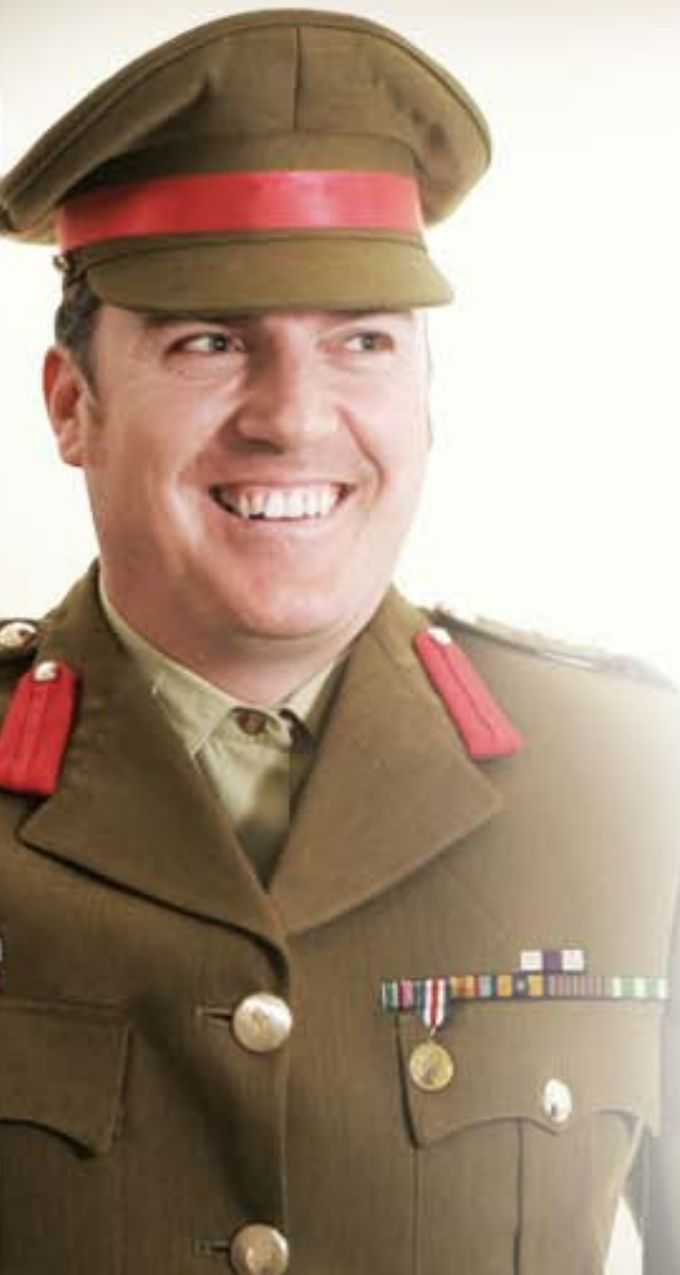


half of the 20th century, a handful of game designers, such as Alex Randolph and the immortal Sid Sackson, found it possible to make a full-time living from games, and began to evolve a language and approach to game design that is recognizable to modern designers. Sadly, however, a combination of American unease with "childish" entertainment and the eventual establishment of a virtual monopoly in the market by Hasbro (which now owns Parker, Bradley, Selchow & Richter, Avalon Hill, TSR, and Wizards of the Coast, among others) has relegated the American boardgame market to the publication of old standards and licensed drivel for pre-teens. Those of us who are admirers of the art of board and card game design today gravitate mainly to German imports, because Germany retains a thriving and highly competitive boardgame industry, where designers such as Reiner Knizia, Klaus Teuber and Alan Moon (an American forced to seek publication abroad because of the deficiencies of the U.S. market) continue to do highly creative and innovative work.

The mass market boardgame industry, however, was instrumental in paving the way for the modern digital industry. It established a distribution channel that



the earliest console games sold into (toy and chain stores); it established the idea of games beyond the traditional ones in the public mind; it demonstrated the importance of design; and the kinds of games it fostered continue to influence modern digital games, particularly in the "casual downloadable" market.

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That, however, is only one strand in the skein of influences that brought about the games revolution. To explore another, we must begin with *The King's Game*, created in 1780 by a man known to history only as Helwig, Master of Pages to the Duke of Brunswick. *The King's Game* was, in a sense, a Chess variant; but its board contained 1,666 squares, containing different types of terrain, and the units represented infantry, cavalry and artillery. In other words, unlike Chess, it was a simulation, an attempt to represent military conflict of the era, not an abstracted pastime. The connection between *The King's Game* and the rise of kriegspieler in the 19th century - military training games intended as both simulations and training for warfare - is uncertain, but we can imagine *The King's Game* served as inspiration. The first kriegspiel we know of was invented in 1824 by Lieutenant von Reisswitz of the Prussian army, who devised a game using realistic military maps at a scale of 1:8000; he demonstrated it for the Chief of Staff of the Prussian army, who exclaimed, "It's not a game at all; it's a training for war!" and he ordered a copy for each regiment of the army. The game and its variants continued to be played in the Prussian and German armed forces for decades thereafter.

In 1876, Colonel von Verdy du Vernois of the German army devised a new sort of kriegspiel: The complex rules of von Reisswitz's game were dispensed with, and instead, an experienced officer was brought in as a game master. Players were permitted to do whatever they wished, as long as the game master ruled it feasible. In a sense, these less rigid kriegspieler were forerunners of the modern tabletop roleplaying game.

Kriegspieler were used in military training across Europe by the end of the 19th century; and their derivatives, complex combat simulations, both manual and computer-moderated, are widely used in the armed forces of all developed nations today. But they remained a non-commercial game style, until 1911 ...

… When H.G. Wells published *Floor Games*, updated in 1913 as *Little Wars*. It was the first published rules for waging battles with military miniatures, and while we can assume people had been playing with miniatures for centuries before (and may have evolved their own house rules) Wells' games are the first to codify them in a commercial product. Perhaps curiously, *Little Wars* did not immediately spawn a market; indeed, until the 1950s, it's rare to find any other miniatures rules in print, Fletcher Pratt's 1938 *Rules for Naval Wargaming* being a notable exception. In 1957, Jack Scruby began publishing *War Game Digest*, a small press magazine devoted to miniatures gaming that often published rules, and within a decade, dozens of rules sets for different periods were on the market. They remained historical in nature, however, until 1971, when Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren released *Chainmail*, the first rules for fantasy miniatures. In 1983, Games

Workshop released the first edition of *Warhammer Fantasy Battle*, which today is played by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, and has relegated historical miniatures to a small audience of enthusiasts (which, of course, is where it always existed).

Miniatures gaming led directly to the creation of what's called the hobby games or "adventure games" industry, non-digital games sold primarily to an audience of hardcore game geeks. The first game style to become established after miniatures was the board wargame, a genre created by Charles Roberts who, in 1953, published *Tactics*, a game with a square map grid and cardboard pieces representing military units, simulating a battle between two abstract armies. It was self-published, but sold well enough for Roberts to turn to publishing under the Avalon Hill label full-time in 1958, releasing *Tactics II* as its first title. By the late '60s, there was an enthusiastic audience of board wargamers who purchased every new Avalon Hill release, and in 1969, AH got its first real competition, when Jim Dunnigan and Redmond Simonsen founded what became Simulations Publications, Inc., which published games far more frequently and helped to expand the audience further.

By mass market standards, board wargames were incredibly complex, with the simplest having several thousand words of rules, and the most complicated enormous tomes. But the wargame market had a major impact on the development of the modern industry; it created, in essence, the first game geek culture. Wargamers were the first to call themselves "gamers" and to view themselves as something of a nerdy elite; the first books on game design emerged out of the field; and, indeed, the term "game designer" first appeared in the wargames industry (coined by Redmond Simonsen, SPI's art director), along with the first games to credit their developers on a consistent basis. And it spawned the first "star designers" - Dunnigan, John Hill, Richard Berg and John Prados, to name a few. Many of the earliest stars of computer gaming, including Chris Crawford and Dan Bunten, became interested in games because of the wargames they played. And board wargames retain an influence today; e.g.., Rick Goodman, creator of *Empire Earth*, is an old school board wargamer.

Board wargames continue as a viable, if small, commercial medium, but in the hobby market, they have been eclipsed by two subsequent game styles: roleplaying games (RPGs) and trading card games (TCGs).

The first RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, emerged out of the *Chainmail* rules, which had the concept of "heroes," individual characters as powerful as whole stands of regular units. Dave Arneson modified and refined the rules, approaching Gary Gygax, *Chainmail*'s publisher, with the results. As refined by Gygax, the first edition of the game was published in 1973 (a few pre-release copies were available in 1972). Despite dismal production quality and equally badly written rules, it was an instant smash hit, and by the early '80s had become a genuine cultural phenomenon, played by geeks and nerds in high schools and colleges across the nation and the world. No other game ever dislodged *D&D*'s dominance of tabletop RPGs, but by the late '80s, dozens of competing games were on the market, taking the basic paradigm of the RPG to different settings and genres.

Conventional histories of digital games generally take, on the one hand, arcade amusements and pinball, and on the other, academic experiments with computer games like *Space War* and *Colossal Cave* as their starting point - and while those were important influences, any history that doesn't recognize the importance of tabletop roleplaying is missing the boat. A whole generation of digital game designers became fascinated with games at least as much through their exposure to *D&D* as because of the Atari 2600 or the arcade. Richard Garriott's *Ultima* was directly inspired by D&D, as were almost all the earliest Western digital RPGs - *Wizardry* and *The Bard's Tale* and the rest. Will Crowther, the original creator of *Colossal Cave/Adventure*, the ur-text adventure, has also said he was inspired by *D&D* (although the earliest version of *Colossal Cave* predates *D&D*'s release), and there's a reason that Bartle and Trubshaw's *MUD-1* was a "multi-user dungeon." Indeed, you can make the case that a huge number of modern digital game styles - RPGs, adventure games, action-adventure games, and MMOGs - derive directly from tabletop roleplaying.

The last big piece of the hobby game market is the trading card game, created by Richard Garfield in 1993 with the publication of *Magic: The Gathering*. Garfield observed that hobby games were increasingly being sold in comic book shops - and that many of these stores stocked trading cards in additional to games and comics. He understood that this was merchandise they were comfortable handling, and that a game based on trading cards could be successful. *Magic* was the result; and like *D&D* before it, it quickly became a cultural phenomenon, growing to eclipse the tabletop RPG market in terms of dollar volume, with kids comparing cards and playing the game at playgrounds everywhere. So far, aside from a few "virtual" TCGs (and *Magic Online*), TCGs have had little direct impact on digital games - but then, the generation that played and loved *Magic* has not yet gotten into positions of power in the game industry, and its impact may be to come.

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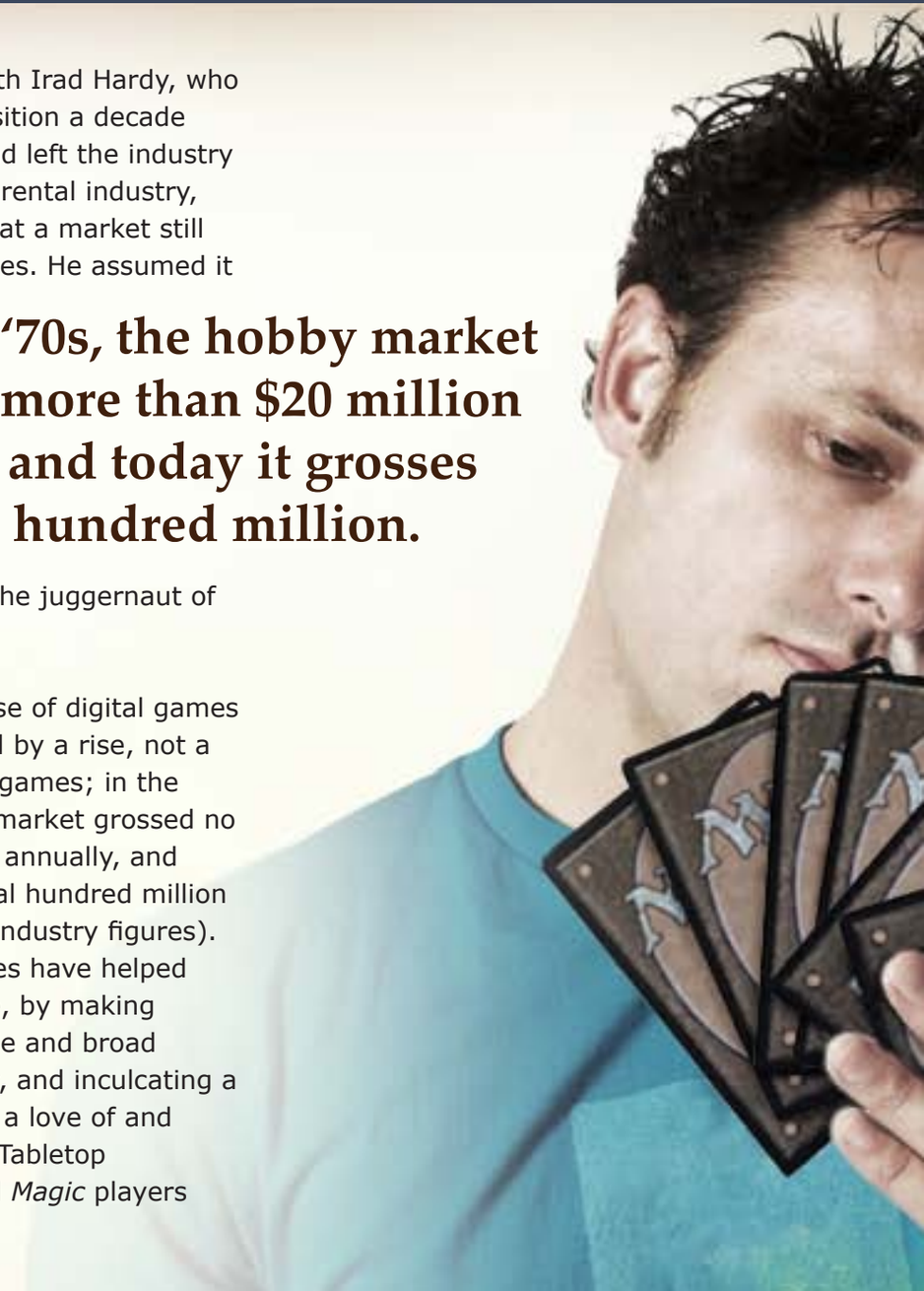
In the mid-'80s, when I was Director of Research & Design for West End Games, a wargame and tabletop RPG publisher, we got into contact with Irad Hardy, who had held the same position a decade before for SPI. Irad had left the industry for a career in the car rental industry, and was astonished that a market still existed for hobby games. He assumed it had been crushed by the juggernaut of videogames.

In the early '70s, the hobby market grossed no more than $20 million annually, and today it grosses several hundred million.

But the truth is, the rise of digital games has been accompanied by a rise, not a decline, in non-digital games; in the early '70s, the hobby market grossed no more than $20 million annually, and today it grosses several hundred million (there are no reliable industry figures). In essence, videogames have helped hobby games to thrive, by making "gaming" an acceptable and broad practice across society, and inculcating a whole generation with a love of and desire to play games. Tabletop roleplaying games and *Magic* players



play videogames, too - and many videogamers are wholly comfortable sitting down with a German boardgame, a TCG or a tabletop RPG. Games, of all sorts, are no longer the purview of a few proud geeks, but the common vernacular of anyone under 40.

Paper games are largely ignored by both the industry and general press, and it's understandable why: Non-digital games, as a business, are an order of magnitude smaller. But the reality is that the two sides co-evolve - the growth of digital games brings new players to paper ones, and the ability of the paper field to innovate and experiment at far lower cost than digital games gives it a disproportionate influence on the imaginations of designers. That influence is more than indirect, too; many designers began in paper gaming and moved to digital, if only because if you want a career as a designer and also to live a reasonably comfortable middle class living, it's hard to do that in hobby games. See the chart for some examples.

While the movement from paper to digital is long established, we're starting, perhaps, to see a motion in the other direction, too, as videogame budgets rise and it becomes harder and harder to get anything original funded: Jordy Weisman, who started in tabletop with the *Star Trek RPG* and *BattleTech*, then founded a computer game developer and sold it to Microsoft, went back to tabletop a few years ago, founding WizKids, and releasing the *HeroClix* line of collectible miniatures games ... a big success in the hobby market, if not at the level of *D&D* or *Magic*.

Designer	Tabletop	Digital
Jeff Briggs	*Editor for West End Games*	*President of Firaxis*
David "Zeb" Cook	*D&D 3rd Edition*	*City of Villains*
Paul Jaquays	*D&D adventures*	*Quake III Arena, Age of Empires Series*
Sandy Petersen	*Call of Cthulhu*	*Doom II/Age of Empires Series*
Bruce Shelley	*1830, Titan*	*Civilization, Age of Empires*
Warren Spector	*Toon*	*Deus Ex*
Mike Stackpole	*Tunnels & Trolls*	*Bard's Tale III*
Jordy Weissman	*BattleTech, HeroClix*	*MechWarrior series*

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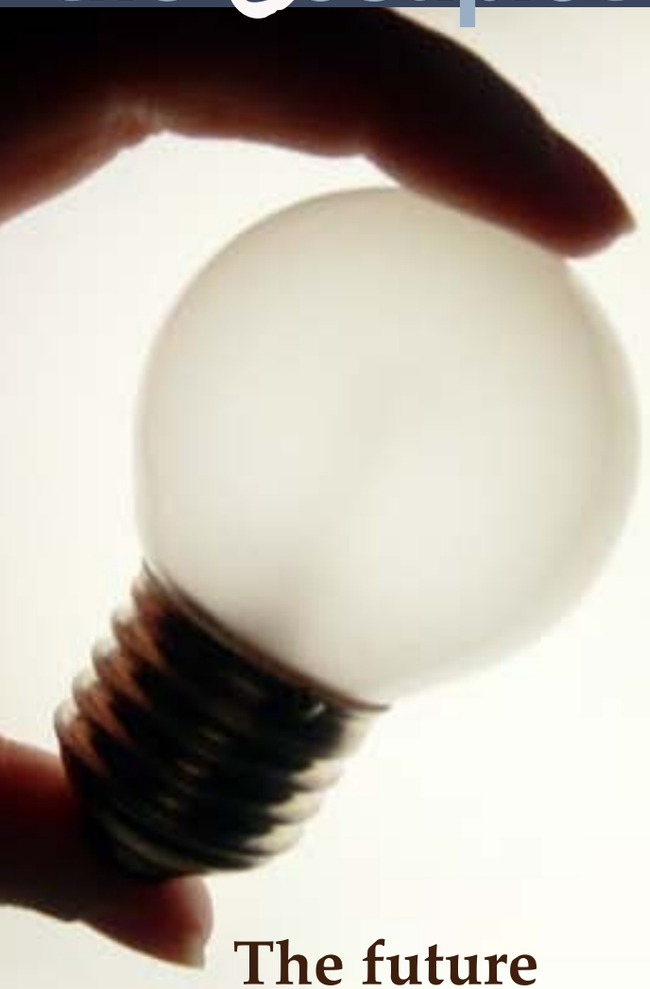
Games, of all sorts, have always been fueled by passion. George Parker designed his first games because he loved the boardgames he played as a child, but rebelled against the soppy religious and self-improvement themes they then promulgated - he wanted games that grappled more with the realities of life and the concerns of the day-to-day. H.G. Wells took time away from his career as a writer to produce a commercially pointless little exercise in game design because he liked to play with toy soldiers. Jim Dunnigan stole telecommunications equipment from the warehouse where he worked to sell on the black market to fund SPI - never really believing that a viable business was in the offing, but just that he wanted to create better wargames, and by God, he could do it. (I wouldn't normally say something like this, except I've been at conventions where Dunnigan has said this, flat out - and when questioned by the audience, has simply said, "Well, hell ... the statute of limitations has expired." Sometimes, an entrepreneur's gotta do what an entrepreneur's gotta do.)

Gygax and Arneson didn't create *D&D* with the idea of making millions, but simply came up with a very cool idea that they had to share. Nolan Bushnell, playing with breadboards in the office carved out of his young daughter's bedroom, could not have known that his



The future of games lies with people who love them.

little tennis game would spawn a multibillion dollar enterprise that, as long ago as the early '80s, was being ballyhooed as "bigger than Hollywood." Richard Garriott, coding on his boss's time while handling the few customers who wandered into a little hobbyist computer store, just wanted to put a little bit of his roleplaying experience into software. Ken and Roberta Williams wanted to put some graphics into the adventure games they loved, and never imagined that someday they'd sell Sierra to a publicly traded company for eight figures (and have doubtless suffered considerable heartache since, at how badly it's been managed). Peter Adkison was running a little third-rate publisher of roleplaying adventures when one of the freelancers he worked with showed up with this strange little game based on collectible cards that was so bizarre it couldn't possibly sell, but so cool that you had to publish it.

The central problem with the conventional game industry today is the problem that every other creative industry - maybe excluding book publishing - has utterly failed to solve. As budgets rise, you have to manage risk, and that means not taking risks. But risk-taking is what spawned the modern industry and gave it life.

The future of games? The future of games does not lie with the EAs and Ubisofts of the world any more than the future of music lies with the BMGs or Sonys, or the future of film lies with Disney or Universal.

The future of games lies with people who love them. And here's where to find them:

In the hobby games market, of course, where the distribution channel is still open to the off-beat and odd-ball, and where development costs are low enough that experimentation is still possible.

In the live-action roleplaying movement, particularly in Scandinavia, where it has become a major cultural phenomenon, in which people are experimenting with integration of gameplay into realworld spaces.

In the "big games" and "alternative reality games" movements, in which people are experimenting with games that "break the fourth wall" (or, *pace* Huizinga, "the magic circle") by creating games that integrate with everyday life.

In the "indie RPG" movement that views roleplaying as closer to theatrical improv than to traditional ideas about "the game."

And in the independent digital games movement - people creating games on small or non-existent budgets and praying for a viable path to market, experimenting with novel game styles that will mostly fail, but just might set the world on fire.

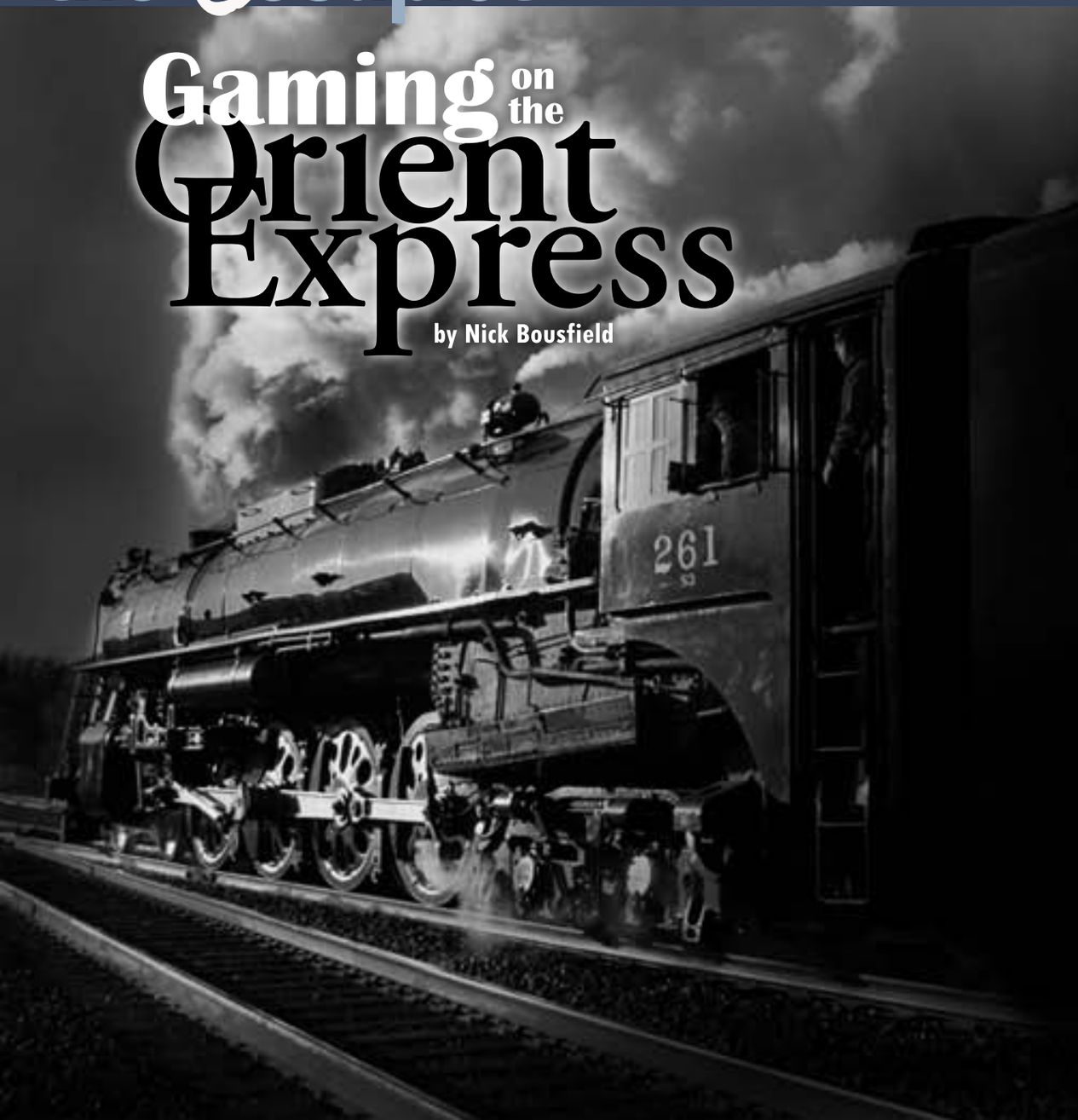
Games are a big business now. But games are an art form. And as with any art form, if you want to understand its future, don't follow the money. Follow the passion. COMMENTS

Greg Costikyan has designed more than 30 commercially published games in various genres and platforms. He has written about the game industry for publications including the New York Times, Salon, and Game Developer magazine. He's also the CEO of Manifesto Games.

the Escapist

Gaming on the Orient Express

by Nick Bousfield



The Last Express opens in Paris, June 1914, the eve of the First World War. Boarding the famous Orient Express is a diverse crowd of anarchists, aristocrats, musicians, dissidents and businessmen. Amongst them is an American, Robert Cath, a doctor and a fugitive, wanted for his part in a nasty episode in Ireland that left two men dead. Boarding the train at the very last moment, Cath makes an unpleasant discovery: His contact, Tyler Whitney, has been murdered by one of his fellow passengers. Stuck in a berth with a fresh corpse and with the police already after him, Cath needs to think fast.

In retrospect, it's tempting to compare Jordan Mechner's 1997 opus, *The Last Express,* with Yu Suzuki's *Shenmue*, released some four years later. Both were hugely ambitious and expensive, with Mechner's game costing $6 million to Suzuki's rumored $20 million. Both comprised a large cast of speaking characters and, though linear and story driven, offered a large degree of freedom in how the player progressed. And, of course, both began with a murder.

After producing two award-winning platform titles – *Prince of Persia* and its sequel, *The Shadow and the Flame* – it must have been tempting for Mechner to sit back and watch his franchise reel in the money. Instead, he formed a game studio, Smoking Car Productions, and set to work on an ambitious cinematic adventure set aboard the last Orient Express train to traverse Europe before the outbreak of the war.

The game was to be a point and click adventure title, but one which featured some unusual and innovative game mechanics. Unlike previous adventure games, which organized themselves solely by location, *The Last Express* worked to a timetable of events occurring in the half dozen or so carriages of the Orient Express train. Like *Shenmue*, the game used an accelerated real-time system and directed its cast around the player, rather than having the player's interactions dictate the flow of events.

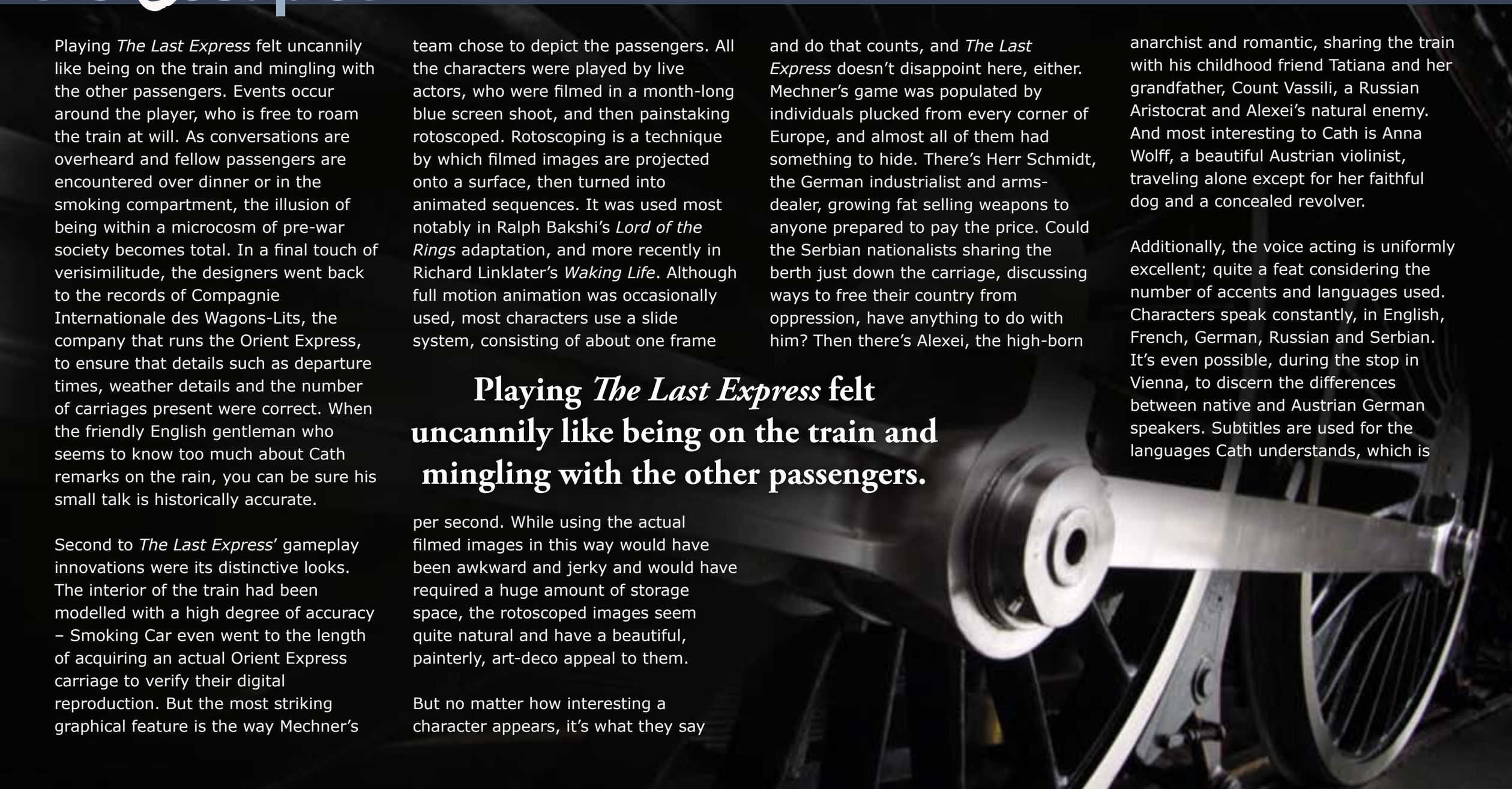
Playing *The Last Express* felt uncannily like being on the train and mingling with the other passengers. Events occur around the player, who is free to roam the train at will. As conversations are overheard and fellow passengers are encountered over dinner or in the smoking compartment, the illusion of being within a microcosm of pre-war society becomes total. In a final touch of verisimilitude, the designers went back to the records of Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits, the company that runs the Orient Express, to ensure that details such as departure times, weather details and the number of carriages present were correct. When the friendly English gentleman who seems to know too much about Cath remarks on the rain, you can be sure his small talk is historically accurate.

Second to *The Last Express*' gameplay innovations were its distinctive looks. The interior of the train had been modelled with a high degree of accuracy – Smoking Car even went to the length of acquiring an actual Orient Express carriage to verify their digital reproduction. But the most striking graphical feature is the way Mechner's team chose to depict the passengers. All the characters were played by live actors, who were filmed in a month-long blue screen shoot, and then painstaking rotoscoped. Rotoscoping is a technique by which filmed images are projected onto a surface, then turned into animated sequences. It was used most notably in Ralph Bakshi's *Lord of the Rings* adaptation, and more recently in Richard Linklater's *Waking Life*. Although full motion animation was occasionally used, most characters use a slide system, consisting of about one frame per second. While using the actual filmed images in this way would have been awkward and jerky and would have required a huge amount of storage space, the rotoscoped images seem quite natural and have a beautiful, painterly, art-deco appeal to them.

Playing *The Last Express* felt uncannily like being on the train and mingling with the other passengers.

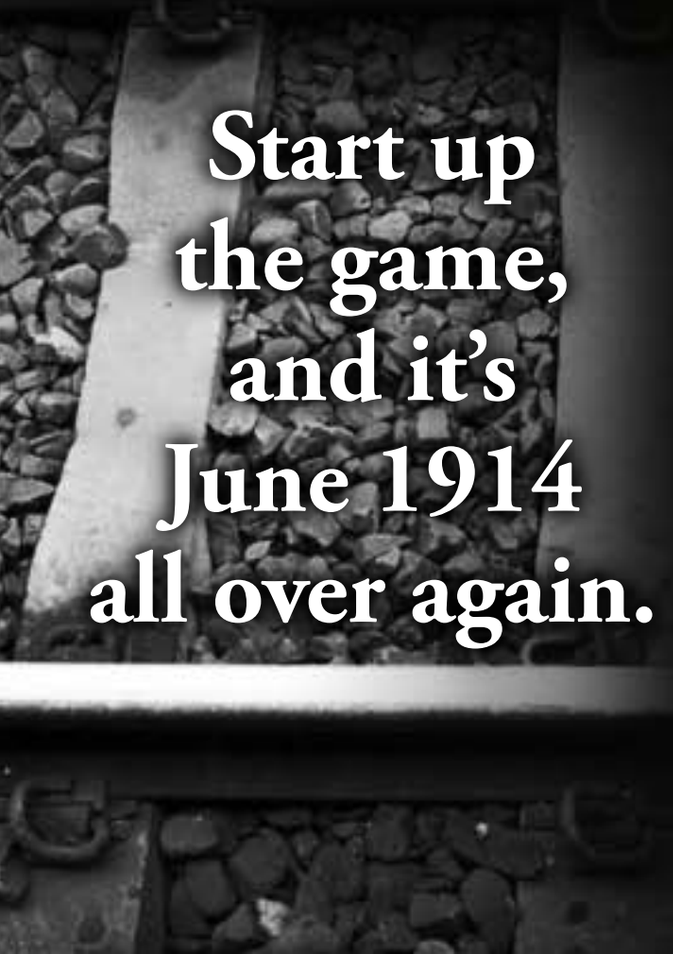
But no matter how interesting a character appears, it's what they say and do that counts, and *The Last Express* doesn't disappoint here, either. Mechner's game was populated by individuals plucked from every corner of Europe, and almost all of them had something to hide. There's Herr Schmidt, the German industrialist and arms-dealer, growing fat selling weapons to anyone prepared to pay the price. Could the Serbian nationalists sharing the berth just down the carriage, discussing ways to free their country from oppression, have anything to do with him? Then there's Alexei, the high-born anarchist and romantic, sharing the train with his childhood friend Tatiana and her grandfather, Count Vassili, a Russian Aristocrat and Alexei's natural enemy. And most interesting to Cath is Anna Wolff, a beautiful Austrian violinist, traveling alone except for her faithful dog and a concealed revolver.

Additionally, the voice acting is uniformly excellent; quite a feat considering the number of accents and languages used. Characters speak constantly, in English, French, German, Russian and Serbian. It's even possible, during the stop in Vienna, to discern the differences between native and Austrian German speakers. Subtitles are used for the languages Cath understands, which is



several. The player is freely encouraged to keep their ears open, as much of the games clues are in snatches of overheard conversation.

The Last Express is more than just an entertaining yarn. Each of the characters stands for a different faction in Europe, and watching them interact with each other and with the player offers a fascinating perspective on this period of world history. The game ticks all the boxes required by the arthouse games movement: innovative gameplay with a fresh slant on an old genre, an original graphical approach and a sophisticated, adult story and theme. So why isn't *The Last Express* better known?



Start up the game, and it's June 1914 all over again.

The answer is fairly simple: The game sold only 100,000 copies. It finished somewhere around a million units shy of breaking even. Just as Smoking Car Productions was putting the finishing touches on *The Last Express*, the cracks were appearing in publisher Broderbund, whose share price had been steadily falling since 1995. In 1997, just before the game's release, Broderbund dissolved its marketing department. As a result, *The Last Express* was released with almost zero publicity and advertising. Despite this, it still garnered excellent reviews across the board.

But worse was to come. Broderbund was in partnership with Softbank and its subsidiary, GameBank; a publishing deal formed in a bidding war for the rights to Mechner's game. Abruptly, Softbank decided to pull out of the games market, cancelling the almost complete Playstation port of *The Last Express* and dropping the game completely.

The next year, Broderbund was bought out by educational software publisher, The Learning Company, who promptly ditched Broderbund's gaming division. Left without any publishing deal at all, Smoking Car Productions watched the game it spent five years making quietly drift away, unsold and un-played.

Smoking Car Productions shut down, shelving their plans for further titles. Jordan Mechner wouldn't return to game design for another five years, when he agreed to work on *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* for Ubisoft. Ironically, while receiving mass critical appeal, that game was also set to suffer from low sales and poor marketing, though thankfully not to the same degree. Since then, he has turned to filmmaking, producing the award-winning documentary *Chavez Ravine: A Los Angeles Story*, filmed while he worked for Ubisoft, and has not made public any future plans regarding gaming. *The Last Express* is currently out of print, though copies can be acquired via eBay and similar channels. For the curious, the official site has been mirrored by one of the Smoking Car design team.

And that's where the journey ends. *The Last Express* could have been another *Myst*, a game capable of attracting gamers and non-gamers alike. Perhaps it could have joined *Sam and Max* or *Broken Sword* and become a classic of the genre. Either way, it did not deserve to become a footnote in gaming history. Even today, almost ten years after the game's completion, *The Last Express* still looks, sounds and plays as well as it did in 1997, offering the exact same level of immersion. There are relatively few titles one can say that about. Start up the game, and it's June 1914 all over again; at Paris, Gare de l'Est the journey is about to begin anew.

All aboard. COMMENTS

Nick Bousfield is a freelance writer who loves games, books, films, music and comics. He also loves being paid to write about them and harbors the crazy dream that one day he'll do it for a living.

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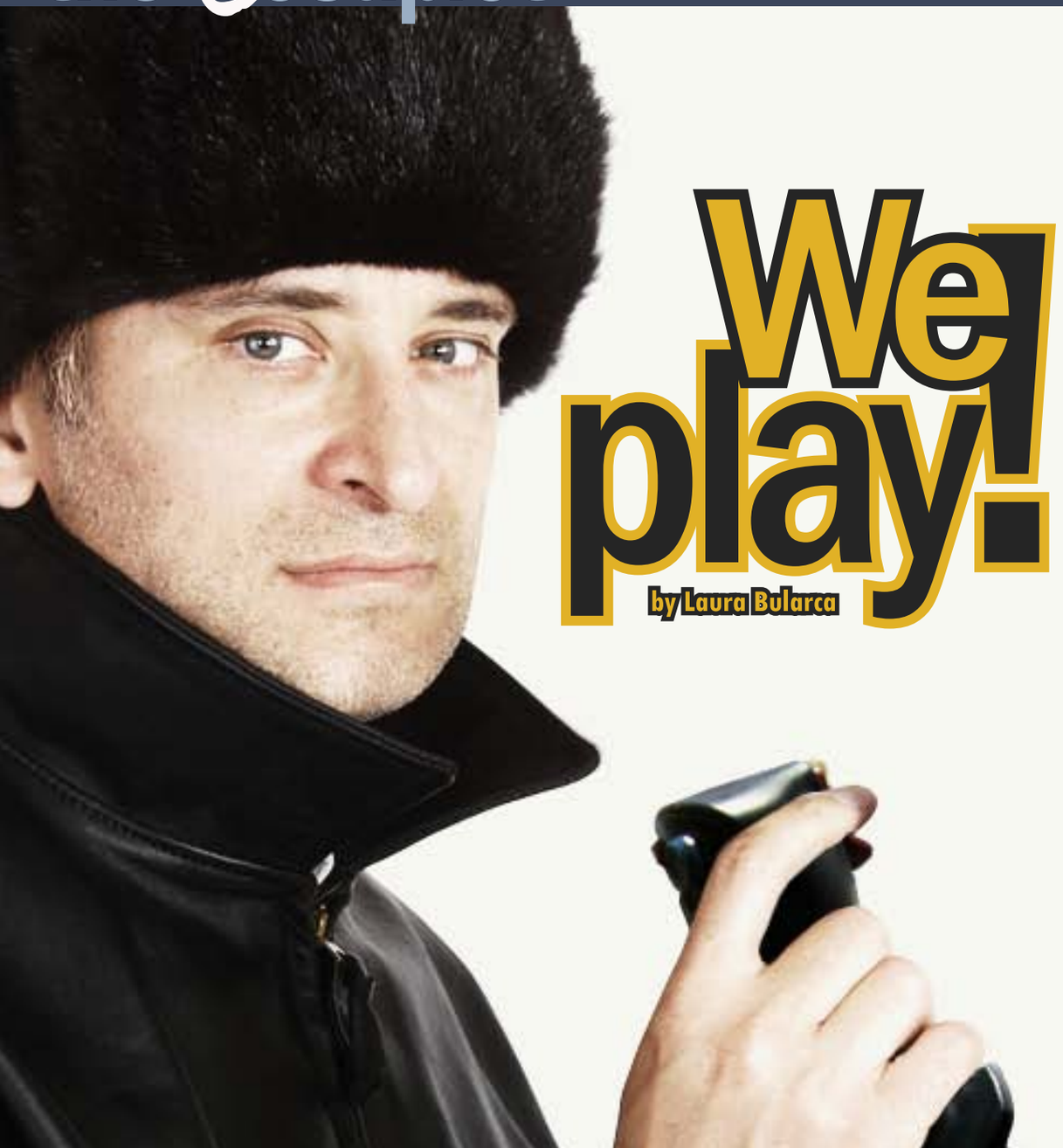


We play!

by Laura Bularca

Ubisoft Romania became famous because of *Silent Hunter 3* and *Peter Jackson's King Kong*. Romanian developer Fun Labs made a name for itself with the *Cabela* games. *Serious Sam*'s place of birth is in Croatia, *Mafia* is a Czech product … I could go on and on with examples such as these to prove that Eastern Europe not only exists, but is also very active in the international gaming industry. But what does that give you, other than a few names and "Did you know?" trivia best suited for a quiz show? Yes, we code. We have proven that Eastern Europeans are able to create competitive products very much appreciated by any gamer. But knowing this, you still have no idea about the reality of the Eastern European **gamer**; you don't even know we exist, and I'd wage you never even thought about it.

It may come as a shock for you to find out that one of the biggest *World of Warcraft* guilds was established by Romanians, one of *EVE Online*'s most notorious pirates is Romanian, and World Cyber Games first prizes have gone to Eastern European players. How did this happen? How is it possible for Eastern Europe to establish such a powerful name in gaming? And you didn't even know about it; you, who are the prime target of every game distributor and developer; you, who have access to the latest hardware and software technologies; you, who are rich and benefit from the power of freedom and information; you, the gamer every gaming magazine writes for.

The Americans dominate the videogame industry. Numerically speaking, this will be true for many years to come, due to the simple logic of economics. But what the Eastern Europeans lack in numbers is compensated with quality, passion and unity. We don't want to be the biggest, but we intend to be the best. The amazing success of online games uncovered our hunger for electronic entertainment, and surprisingly enough, it also showed we are no longer poor, nor closed minded, nor uninformed. In fact, what the American gamer should fear is our ambition and our enthusiasm; we offer fresh faces and our gaming market isn't glutted. We've stepped into a world where the American gamer is already bored. We've reached a point where we feel we have to make a statement: We're just as good as you.

And as surprising as it sounds, the turbulent shift from a communist nation to a capitalist one has given us numerous advantages in catching up to the rest of the world.

Advantage number one: piracy.
Until 1996, Romania was one of the so-called most favored nations due to our economic collapse under communism. Our new government lacked many of the regulatory laws required to balance a free market. More to the point, we didn't have a copyright law, so possessing and distributing pirated software, including games, wasn't a crime. Pirated games flooded into the market and is how games became popular in Romania.

Discovering games was like getting ice cream after a terrible flu. In a situation like that, I can never get enough goodies; I want more and more until I make myself sick again.

While copyright laws have been introduced, old habits die hard - we still have a very high piracy rate. Once you get your hand in the cookie jar, it's hard to stop, especially when you truly can't afford to buy many cookies. But still,

Discovering games was like getting ice cream after a terrible flu.

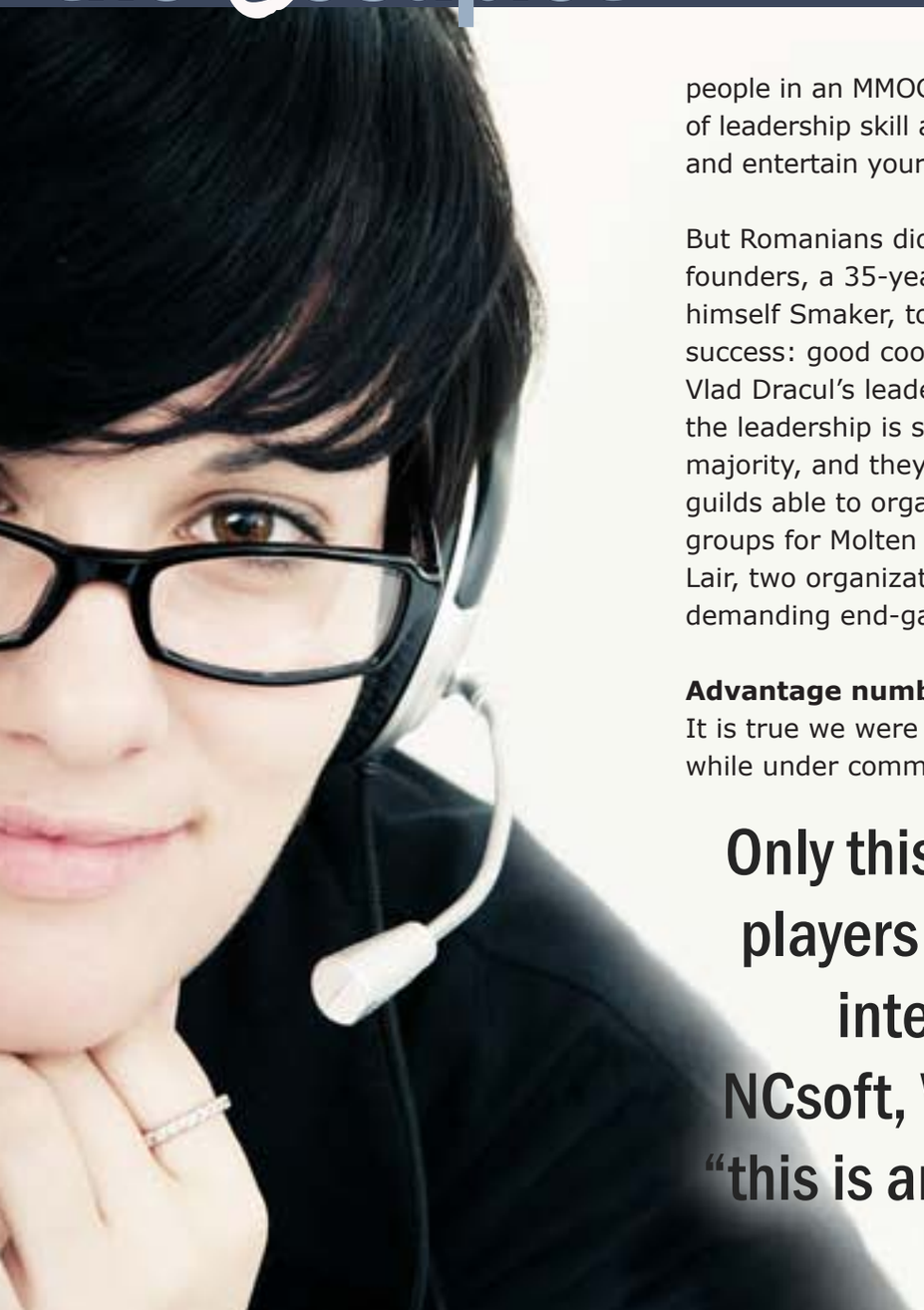
20,000 pirated *Lineage 2* accounts say a lot about our interest in games.

But we're not all bad. Despite the huge amount of pirated copies, 1,300 copies of *Lineage 2* were sold in Romania, and 300 people have preordered *Guild Wars: Factions.*

Advantage number two: ambition.
Let's talk about *EVE Online*. It's a game that requires an awful lot of time and patience, but tickles your ego in such a pleasant manner, you become obsessed in no time. It is also a game where it's very hard to become important. But Gavroche is an ambitious 23-year-old Romanian who wanted to show the world that all it takes to make a statement about his homeland's potential is passion and courage.

He was talented enough to become a pirate with a 1.6 billion ISK bounty on his head – meaning he's one of the most notorious characters in an online world that currently numbers over 100,000 subscribers. His first battle ended with him killing 10 people, and the taste was so sweet, he never left that way of life. He is now a representative of the Romanian *EVE Online* community, working hard to enrich and promote Delta Team and Romanian Renegades, two well-known organizations. "It makes me feel so good to know that Romanians unite for a single purpose," states Gavroche. "As a nation, we have a bad name, but I think that now we stand a chance to show our real value, at least in *EVE*."

Advantage number three: unity.
Vlad Dracul is Dracula's Romanian name. But Vlad Dracul is also the name of one of *World of Warcraft*'s largest guilds. Established by five Romanians who first became friends playing *Asheron's Call 2,* Vlad Dracul had over 1,000 members at its peak. Of course, not all of them were Romanian – only 20 percent of the peak membership were born and raised in Dracula's land; but they all thrived under Romanian leadership. I don't think I need to explain how hard it is to manage 1,000



people in an MMOG. It takes a great deal of leadership skill and patience to keep and entertain your members.

But Romanians did it. One of the founders, a 35-year-old gamer who calls himself Smaker, told me the secret of success: good coordination. Currently, Vlad Dracul's leader is a Croat, although the leadership is still Romanian in majority, and they are one of the few guilds able to organize simultaneous raid groups for Molten Core and Blackwing Lair, two organization and manpower demanding end-game instances.

Advantage number four: money. It is true we were poor and oppressed while under communist rule, but that was 15 years ago; things change. In 2005, Romania's first nationwide internet provider, RDS, offered affordable prices for broadband cable connections. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, in 2006 there will be approximately 5.5 million Romanians connected to the internet. This is possible not only because of competition among providers, but because the average monthly salary in Romania reached approximately $270 in 2005, in comparison to around $200 in 2004. That's $50 more per month to spend on, well, anything.

Only this year, three of the most important players in the gaming industry expressed interest in the Romanian market: NCsoft, Vivendi and Valve, who stated that "this is an emerging market and it matters." The situation is even rosier in other Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, where the average salary showed even bigger growth since they joined the European Union.

Only this year, three of the most important players in the gaming industry expressed interest in the Romanian market: NCsoft, Vivendi and Valve, who stated that "this is an emerging market and it matters."

But this is only the beginning. We have no government restrictions on what we can play and when. How could we, when coders are a rather wealthy segment of our population and when the internet is widely available to the masses? Besides, everybody has a chance to prosper, since Eastern Europeans offer a new challenge, a new and fresh culture, a lot of enthusiasm, and the willingness to overcome new boundaries and preconceptions.

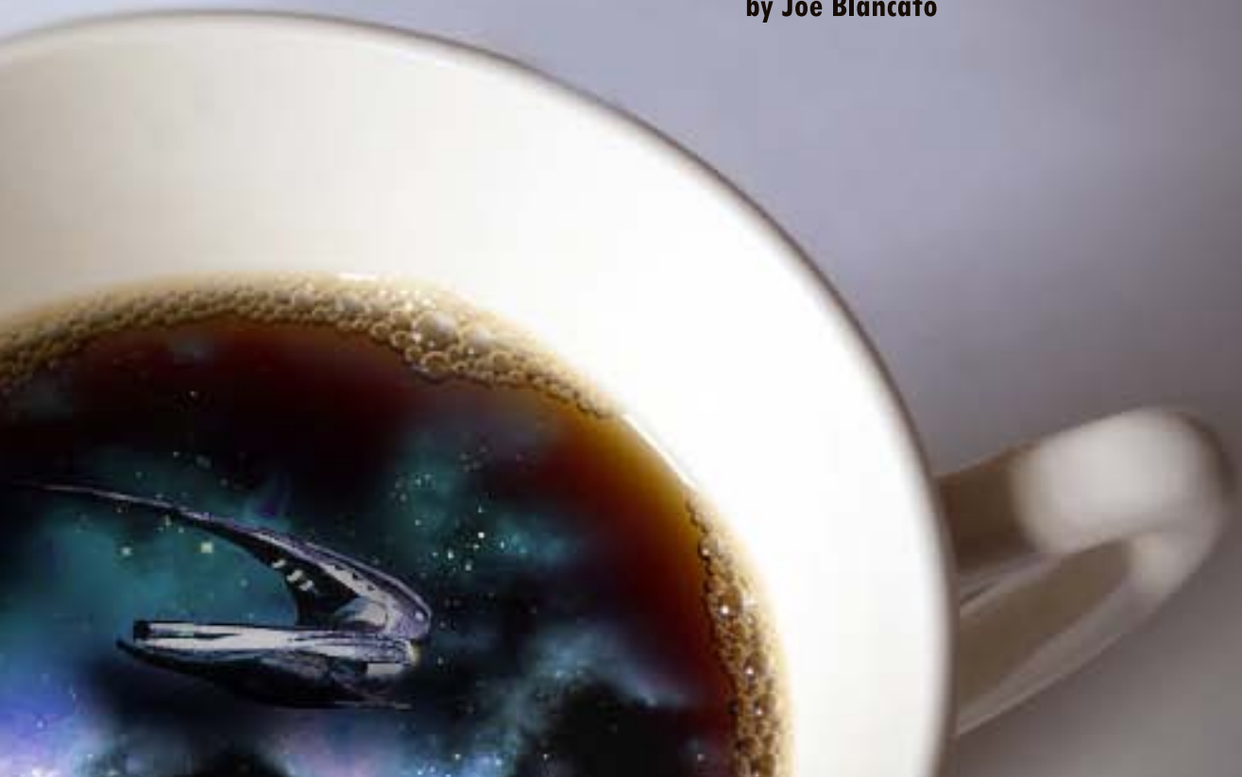
I am Romanian; I know my country. I know its ups and downs, and I know how it feels to be a gamer here. It feels damn good.

COMMENTS

Laura Bularca is a freelance writer from Eastern Europe. She's making her English-speaking debut in The Escapist.

Coffee Break Worlds

by Joe Blancato



I've noticed games are a lot more fun when I'm not actually playing them.

Let me explain. After I've beaten the final boss, run off a group of PKs or won the Super Bowl, more often than not, I exit the game and look for someone with whom to share my accomplishments. Invariably, the conversation with a friend becomes longer than the original act, percolating into strategic talk, old catchphrases and half-remembered stories of triumph and sorrow in similar situations. And when you play the same games as all your friends, when you start living the games outside of their media, it only gets worse.

I'm part of a group of guys here at work that can only be classified as enablers. Every time I put gaming on the backburner for a new hobby, someone inevitably drags me back. Jon, Producer for the magazine, got us all playing *EQ2* for a while. Then, Erik, our Web Developer, convinced me *Shadowbane* was the place to be. Then Jason, our IT Director, got us all playing *Oblivion*. We're a group of addicts with ADD, chasing a content high, devouring everything in front of us and burning out like relapsed junkies. It's all about the Fix, and whenever I get away, the guys find something new.

Of course, I'm no better. I've led unsuccessful charges into *UO*, *Shadowbane* (not to be confused with Erik's suggestion - we're not immune to landing in the same place twice) and *Vampire: The Masquerade: Bloodlines* (this one would've worked if it hadn't demolished every PC it touched two Novembers ago). No matter the game, there's always the resultant dialogue. Did you do this quest? Where were you last night? We should form a guild with a stupid name like Tasty Breakfast Treats. Jesus Christ, how did JR (our intrepid Contributing Editor) figure out the best min-maxed template **again**? When we're at work or out drinking or hanging out at someone's house, our nerd-speak pokes through, a latticework of facts and trash talk connecting over whatever branch we land on.

Most fresh in my mind, though, is our relationship with *EVE*.

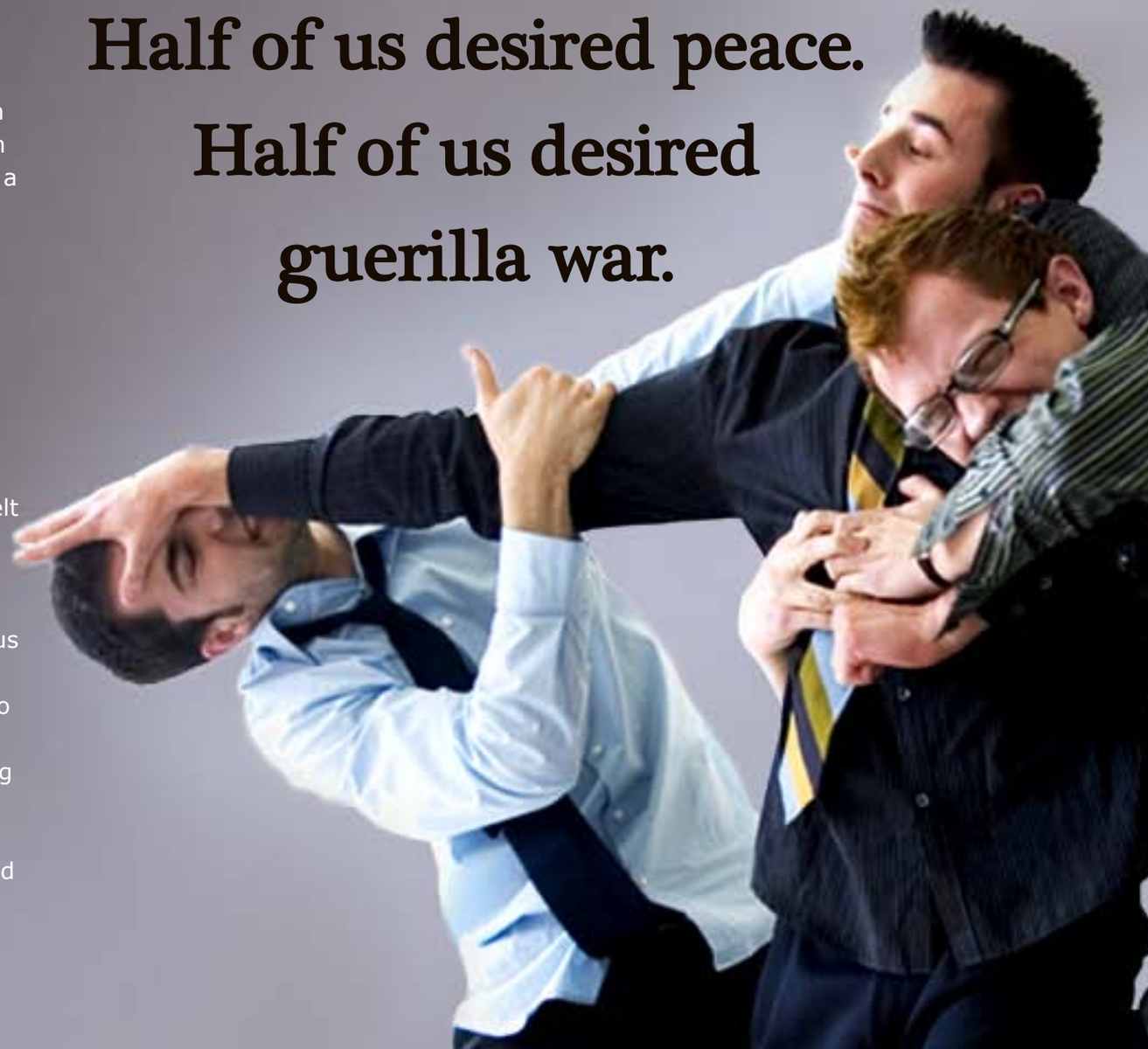
Getting us into the game commonly described as "the best screensaver in the business" was a pretty tough sell; it took two members of the group to drag the rest of us in. Jon and Shannon (our Industry Relations guru) led a two-pronged assault on the rest of the group. I'm the gaming equivalent of a faux-cynical pill popper. I'll talk a lot, but at the end of the day, I'm taking whatever's in front of me; the only way to find fun is to continually look for it, so I was the first to subscribe. Quickly afterward, everyone else fell in line, taken in by Jon's offer of free crap, Shannon's mid-work stories of stealing stuff from other players like a debonair Dread Space Pirate Roberts, and me constantly appending "in spaaaaaaaaace" to everything I said. How could anyone opt out?

We all jumped in, joining into Jon's corp about as quickly as we were destroying it. Shannon had a couple weeks of skill training on us, and he had already developed a reputation as an ore thief, someone who would fly up to defenseless miners, take their harvested minerals and run off to the nearest station before the miners could call for help. In *EVE*, ore thieves enjoy a special rung on the social ladder. In the real world, they would be right around white-collar criminals. In *EVE*, these are the people even murderers look down on.

Needless to say, our band of merry industrialists (and, in my case, pirate in training) was drawing a lot of heat from other corps, and these other corps had a lot more manpower than six or seven newbies with chips on their shoulders. By the time the second corp declared war on us and blew a few of us out of the sky, the talk at work turned ugly.

Accusatory looks got cast at Shannon from across the room, and two camps quickly formed: those of us who didn't particularly care and those of us who felt death's sting. And in *EVE*, death **really** stings. We were no longer a group of buddies playing games, we were a disjointed group of junkies and half of us didn't like the way the other half rolled. Rather than talking about which skills to train next or where the best missions were, we were arguing between sending enemy corps money as peace offerings and trying to pick off their individual members as we could. Half of us desired peace. Half of us desired guerilla war.

Half of us desired peace. Half of us desired guerilla war.



The worst part, though, was we all liked the game in our own ways. We trumped the "screensaver" crack after getting through the awkward newbie experience, and we all found a niche rather quickly. A few of us got into the tactical side of truly 3-D combat, Erik loved the idea of being a space-trucker able to make millions in a single run across the galaxy, and the rest of the contingent really enjoyed mining ore and producing tons of player-created objects. All in all, we had the potential to become a pretty good corp, despite our size, if only we could get around Shannon's insatiable need to piss off miners.

That's how the disintegration started. The unspoken understanding between all of us that the needs of the many outweighed the needs of the one seeped into everything we did as a group. While those of us in the pro-war faction tried to keep the peace within the group, Shannon's antics, combined with our own, were too volatile to jive with the guys who were just trying to make a buck.

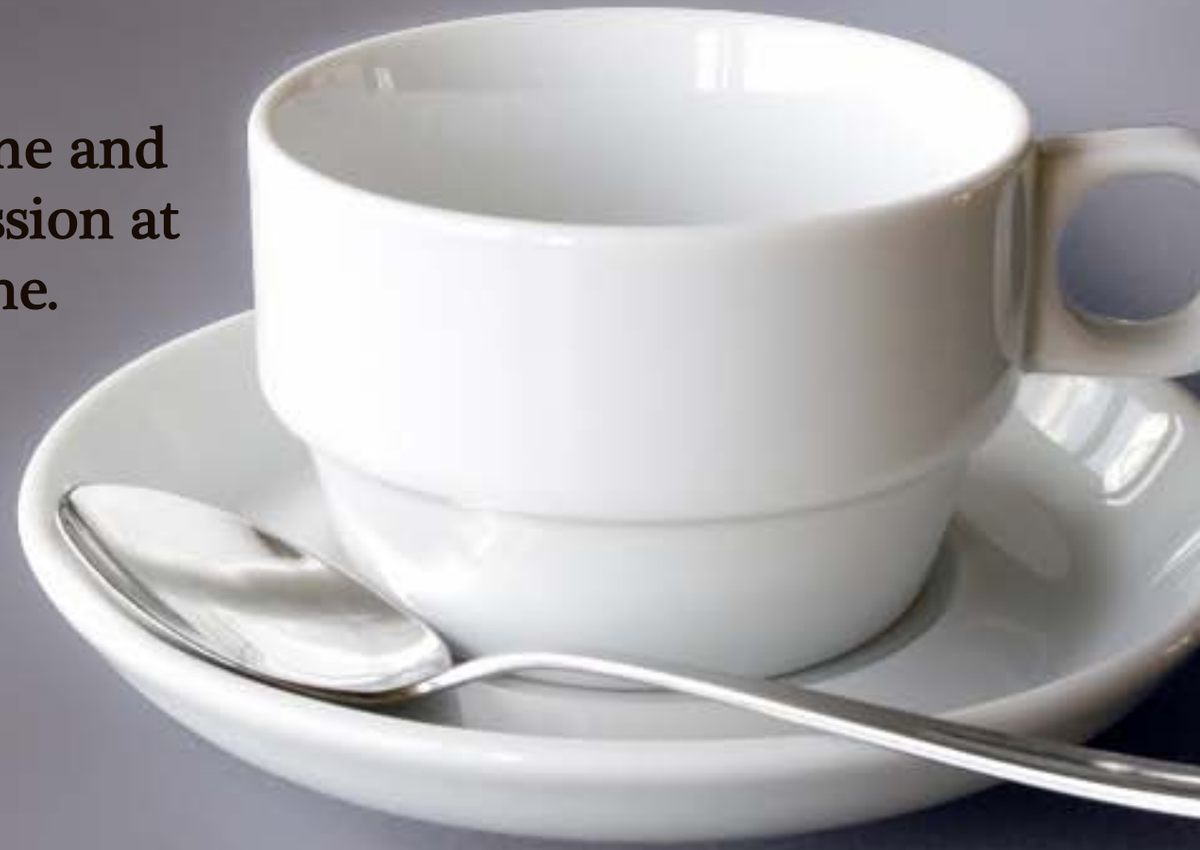
Pretty soon, no one was working with anyone. What's worse, no one was talking about *EVE* in the office. The best part of playing together was replaced with aggressive silence, everyone daring one another to bring up the fact our play styles were utterly incompatible. The high we'd been chasing finally arrived, but it all affected us in personally different ways.

It's less about the game and more about the BS session at the coffee machine.

One by one, we began to drop off. Shannon was the first to go, but the exodus commenced shortly thereafter. Once the levee broke, it was a lot easier for all of us to make our departure from *EVE* and head off in our own directions for a while, looking for our own thing before inviting the rest of the group into it.

What was most interesting during our period of virtual self discovery was the talk around the office, though, and how each world would interact and merge with the others. My 30 second *KotOR2* review mingled with Jon's *EQ2* story, which somehow got JR and Erik onto their misadventures in *WoW*. Really, it's less about the game and more about the BS session at the coffee machine. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what world you're in, as long as you're in it with someone. COMMENTS

Joe Blancato is a Content Editor for The Escapist Magazine.



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 is the answer to life, the universe and everything?"

Greg Costikyan, "The Revolution Began with Paper"
From a study of evolutionary history, we can deduce that the purpose of life is to beget further life, and that organisms that fail to reproduce fail to pass on their genes to future generations, and thus their life, however meaningful in the short time frame in which they live, is ultimately void. Ergo, the first principle must be to reproduce; failure to have children is to relegate yourself to an evolutionary dead end.

Beyond that, we have no means of ascertaining whether the universe has any sort of underlying principle, direction or meaning; and in the absence of such direction, it is our responsibility to find meaning where we may. Or as my ex put it, our job is to entertain ourselves until we die. This is a non-trivial task, as any activity becomes tedious if we do not invest it with meaning. Dr. Laurence J. Peter, creator of the Peter Principle, once said that work is the only thing capable of engaging a person for an entire lifetime; if you accept this, then beyond simple reproduction, your task is to find work that engages your talents and allows you to accomplish things you find meaningful.

I trust this answers your first question. As to the universe and everything, I may be able to elucidate further post-singularity.

Shannon Drake, "Scratching the Surface"
Liquor.

Nick Bousfield, "Gaming on the Orient Express"
Up, Up, Down, Down, Left, Right, Left, Right, B, A, START

Laura Bularca, "We Play!"
If we believe Mister Adams' computer, you're reading that answer right now. At least *The Escapist*'s version. I wish I'll end up having 42 true friends and 42 good reasons to smile. But if I end up with half of that, I think I will proudly state that I found the Answer.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor
Crush your enemies, see them driven before you and to hear the lamentations of their women.

Joe Blancato, "Coffee Break Worlds," Content Editor
More liquor.

Julianne Greer, "Scratching the Surface," Executive Editor
Learn from the past, savor anticipation of the future and live wholeheartedly in the present.