

# the Escapist

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

by **Julianne Greer**

Ahhh, here we are at the week of E3. The entire game industry and its fans are gearing up for one of the biggest and busiest weeks of the year. We are all abuzz with speculation over Nintendo's new platform and its name. We all want to see how the PlayStation 2 is shaping up. And many of us anticipate the various parties and whose will take the prize as best shindig of E3 2006. My bet is on a certain swank to-do at Privilege in West Hollywood ...

But I digress.

During this week of over-the-top glitz and high-priced display, the press' eyes will be focused squarely on the big guys with the big budgets. So this week we wanted to throw a little love in the direction of The Little Guys. In this week's issue of *The Escapist*, our writers sought out some small developers with big plans and found some interesting stories inside.

Enjoy!



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**In response to Chris Wheeler's *Youthful Indiscretions*:**

As a writer, I can understand the developer/artist who sees his "beach volleyball" girls as human beings; his "daughters." Anyone who creates characters brings to life aspects of his or her inner being. Our characters are - to us - as human as anyone else.

While the connection to our characters isn't physical and cannot be physical (Pygmalion is a STORY) it is superior to a real life connection in this one way: it always meets our needs. Even if your character is a mass murderer, he or she is going to be there and meet some inner need. As the ancient Roman said, "I am human; nothing human is alien to me."

In literature, you always sense when a character is being manipulated. That's when you put the book down and never pick it up again. We say, "She's acting out of character," or "She doesn't have

the ring of truth any more." Just as people resist manipulation, real characters resist manipulation by the writer. Many writers have spoken of their characters going off and doing whatever they wanted to do. The successful writers are the ones who let this happen.

This is what you're up against trying to give a character sexual behavior. If she goes for every boy with a mouse in his



hand, what is she? Certainly not real - not what we know as human. Or, if human, something human that elicits contempt. The real problem is, as soon as you, or the gamer, can manipulate her, she is no longer real.

Second, as a step-father, I say Mr. Wheeler is wrong (manipulative) about what fathers ought to feel for their daughters. Biological fathers back me up on this. My three (step) daughters brought many boys and young men home. None of them, not even the ones they married, were ever good enough from my point of view. That is what fathers really feel, for a variety of complex reasons I won't go into here. The father who "lets go" isn't quite complete - or he's only one type, and a sad one at that.

Example: After my second daughter announced her engagement to Alex, I took my son-in-law (married to eldest daughter) aside at a holiday gathering and said to him, "Well, Robert, we have to talk."

**-Chris Sweet**

**In response to 4 Days, from the Escapist Lounge:**

I think that the phenomenon you are experiencing is common to all gamers, or at least all gamers who are old enough to have serious jobs. There is a camaraderie, an understanding, a shared culture that causes them to be eminently accepting of others, and the places where they congregate seem to often be places where a gamer feels welcome. Glad to hear that the Escapist is no different.

I'm looking forward to the unique perspective you will no doubt bring to the Escapist, Russ!

**-Ethan Knoop**

**In response to 4 Days, from the Escapist Lounge:**

Russ man, you are living the dream. I can't imagine getting paid to write relatively freely about what you love. Furthermore, it sounds like you are surrounded by folks who share in the dream. Keep it up, 'cause you are giving a youngin' some hope that it can be

done. I know that I am not alone in wishing you the best of luck!

**-Dutty**

**In response to Chris Dahlen's Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me, from the Escapist Lounge:**

One thing that really has to be stressed is the relative maturity of romance in Black Isle RPGs. Most of the characters there are mature and they behave like that in-game, you can feel that in their romances. The believability of the writing really made it for me in *Baldur's Gate*, *Torment* and *KOTORs*. It is just so rewarding to play an RPG where love is not only the "teen heartbreak" sort.

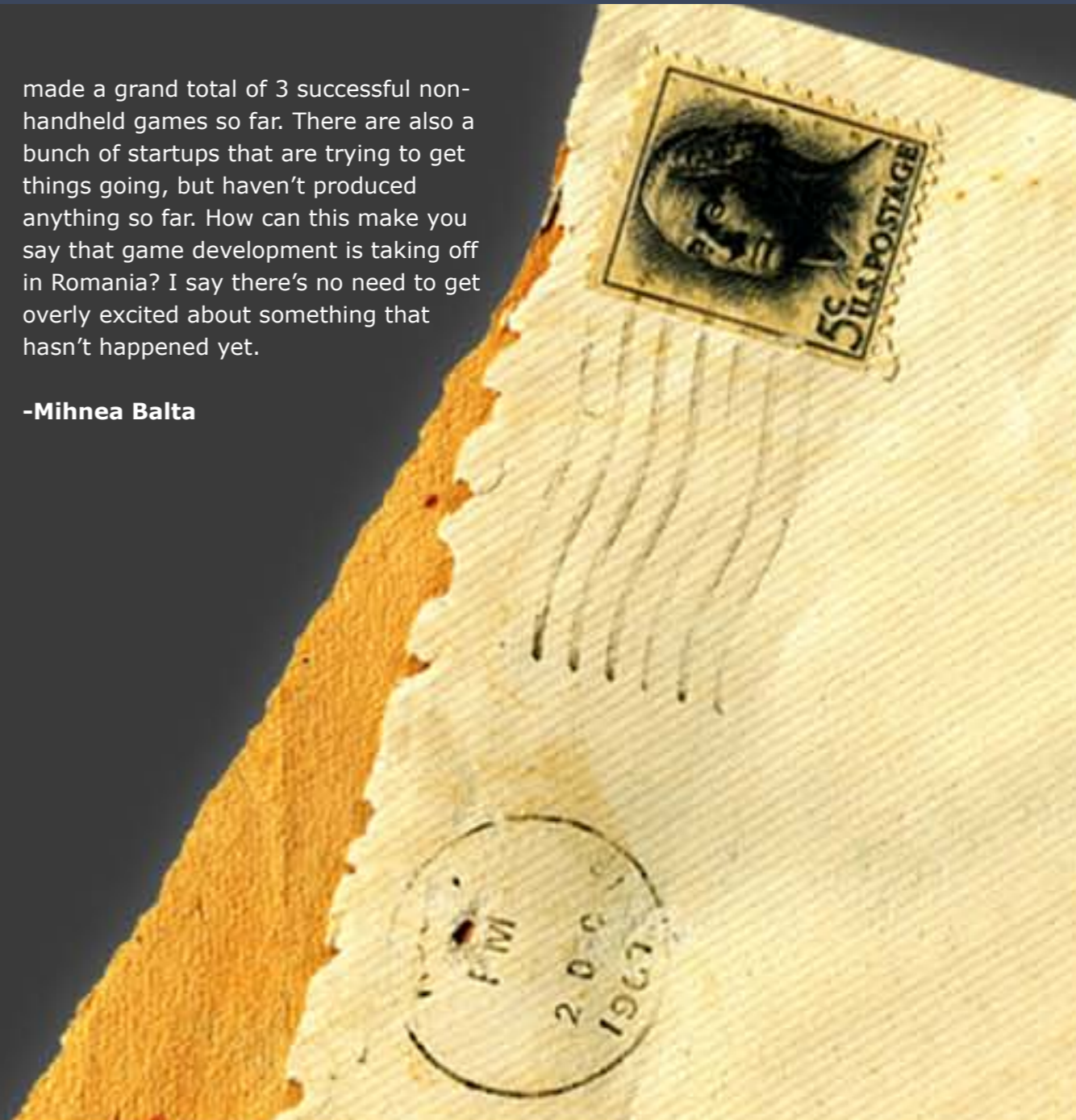
**-Wandering Taoist**

**In response to Laura Bularca's We Play, from the Escapist Lounge:**

I still don't see what there is to talk about, let alone write an article on. So there are 2 game companies in Bucharest (well, 3 if you count Gameloft separately from Ubisoft). So they have

made a grand total of 3 successful non-handheld games so far. There are also a bunch of startups that are trying to get things going, but haven't produced anything so far. How can this make you say that game development is taking off in Romania? I say there's no need to get overly excited about something that hasn't happened yet.

**-Mihnea Balta**



## DEFEND IRONTON!

How a decade-long gamble  
might just save a small town

by Justin McElroy

Ironton, Ohio may seem just like any other small town, but those brave enough to look below the surface will find the real, surprising truth:

Ironton really is just like any other small town.

It's got its own points of pride: the nation's oldest continually running Memorial Day parade and the Ironton High Fighting Tigers, just to name a couple.

It's also got its problems. They all come back to one, really: It's economically depressed, having lost nearly 1,500 jobs in the span of about 18 months. In a town of a little under 12,000, that's not a downturn, that's a catastrophe.

The city council reacted the best way they know how, trying to keep spending down, and enacting a municipal fee that's none too popular with the long-time residents. But somewhere in a local basement, a group of gamers from this area have formulated their own plan to save Ironton: They're going to destroy it.

TickStorm is not like any other videogame developer. They're a

developer with a clear mission: To surrender their home to an alien onslaught in a game so popular that it will single-handedly put Ironton on the map ... and save their beloved city.

### **The world's most unlikely studio**

The year was 1999, and Baltimore native and Navy vet Rick Eid had just been relocated to Ironton by his employer, Cabletron. He'd been asked to start a training department for the networking equipment company -, a new direction that quickly ran aground.

"I moved out here working for Cabletron's training department, and 10 months later, Cabletron shut down," Eid said. "But in that 10 months, I had really fallen in love with the area."

After years of moving around in the military, Eid had promised his two teenaged children, Rick Jr. and Nikki, that they could finish school in their new home. But Eid found keeping that promise to be difficult without work. Luckily, he was soon hired by Ohio University Southern, a branch campus in Ironton, which charged him with creating a game development department. It was

an idea Eid bucked at, largely because he thought the coding would be too difficult for students, but also because he wasn't very familiar with game design in the first place.

But never let it be said that Rick Eid is a quitter. He secluded himself in his office for a solid week, attempting to learn every in and out of a design program called 3D Gamestudio.

The classes filled quickly, but the new instructor discovered that his students were interested in something beyond an easy few hours of course credits. Eid found, as he taught, that they couldn't get enough. As their enthusiasm for projects continued outside the classroom, he hit upon the idea of creating his own game design company with the students, independent from the school. With few resources, no formal training and practically no experience, the world's most unlikely game studio was born.

### **A storm, some ticks and an identity**

They happened upon the name almost by accident. They had already settled on Melee Games, before a quick internet

search showed it was already taken by several other companies.

Their next choice, the one that stuck, was a name from Eid's past derived from a female student who was trying to pick an email identity during a particularly bad thunderstorm: TickStorm.

Oh, and also, the girl loved ticks. It's pretty much your typical company name origin story. But they figured it was memorable, and you wouldn't need a bit of Googling to figure out they were certainly the only ones using it. What the team still lacked was a big idea. They drew their inspiration, in the end, from the same economically depressed climate that had brought Eid into their lives in the first place.

"One of the reasons for picking game design to teach at OUS was that we wanted these guys who had high-tech skills to be able to do a job and not have to leave the area to be employed," Eid said. "And with game design, it's something you can do at home."

For the employees of Tickstorm, home was Ironton, and it was a home they were willing to defend.

### **A miracle gone awry**

The plot of *Defend Ironton!* begins like the answer to the city's prayers. A large manufacturing plant moves into town and employs all those that are struggling to find work. But the locals soon learn that the bosses of this new corporation (psst, they're actually aliens) have something far more sinister on their minds: abduction.

"They all start work, the doors close, and no one sees them again," Eid said.

"They've put up this impenetrable field around the city, so the Army can't come in; no one can. You're on your own, and it's up to the residents of Ironton to defend the city."

The agenda, besides the benefit of working with an area they're extremely familiar with, is to give Ironton the boost it so desperately needs; just a little bit of extra attention to help bring a real (hopefully non-extraterrestrial) economic savior to the town.

"The students love this area, they were born here, they want to stay here," Eid said. "Hopefully, we can put Ironton on the map."

### **Total Insanity**

The team — now comprised of 44-year-old Eid and about eight of his students — didn't want to just slap the city's name on the box. They wanted authenticity, with all the town's buildings perfectly modeled, but reality soon intervened.

They drew their inspiration, in the end, from the same economically depressed climate that had brought Eid into their lives in the first place.

the *Escapist*



the *Escapist* lounge

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After working for weeks to model The Depot, a now-defunct Ironton restaurant, the team realized that recreating the entire city with as little experience as they had might have just been more than they could handle.

The group had limitless energy and passion but didn't have, as Eid said, a setting with no limitations, where they could "step out of reality a bit."

"One of the guys said, 'What if we put the game in an insane asylum? Think of the stuff you could do,'" Eid said. "We started brainstorming, spent an entire day doing nothing but storyboarding and came up with so much fun for this game."

Tickstorm's maiden voyage would be *Insanity*, an off-kilter, first-person shooter set in a mental institution. They don't have the money for top-notch rendering and lighting, so they're putting their faith in work ethics and their own creativity.

"The gameplay and humor in this are going to be a blast," Eid said. "Things like you come around a corner and herd of squirrels start attacking you, clowns walk by and wave and then walk into a wall. Every time you look into a mirror, you see a different reflection. It's total insanity!"

Although it may not be particularly rib-tickling on the digitally printed page, Eid has enthusiasm to spare, and he manages to sell it. Besides, he's quick to

add, *Insanity* (which they hope to release in 2007) is just a dry run for the big show, though it's a dry run that has to finance said show.

"We're learning quite a bit by doing *Insanity*," Eid said. "Whatever money we make from that, the group's already said they want to roll a good portion, if not all of it, back into the company so we can afford better computers for every one of them and better software. For instance, I have an Alienware laptop, too, that fried on me. I mean literally, smoke was rolling out of the keyboard."

### Coming to a town near you

With *Insanity* slated for next year, and *Defend Ironton!* due in 2010, times are tight, financially. But that doesn't deter Tickstorm's big thinkers; in fact, Eid is already planning on a franchise.

"It opens the door to unlimited sequels, you know, *Defend Cleveland!*; *Defend Cincinnati!*; *Defend Baltimore!* The world's the limit," Eid said. "If we get to the point where we're big like Blizzard or like EA with a graphics department, we can just continue to work on it."

For now, though, the going is slow. Most of the work is done on the weekends, not including that done by Eid, who recently left his teaching job to work on Tickstorm fulltime. The hope is that, one day, his whole team will do the same.

"The hard part about doing this on our own is that these guys have to have jobs, they have to work, some of them work at Pic 'n' Save and other places," Eid said. "They have to make money, so they can't spend all their time doing this. Not too many guys want to come and work for you when they're not going to get paid until the game sells. One day, we're hoping that these games sell enough that these are the only jobs they have to do and they don't have to work at McDonalds."

Eid himself has not yet drawn a paycheck from TickStorm.

## Migration

All of the long-range planning may seem far-fetched, but Eid and crew don't see it that way. Their determination is almost

fanatical. They're always working to improve their situation, whether it's the regular LAN parties they put on for gamers in the area, or small projects to help increase their toolset. For instance, they've even begun to pick up on Maya with personal learning editions, but they still don't have the money to buy it.

To that end, they've just picked up their first paying game design gig: creating a safety training game for the Southern Ohio Medical Center of Portsmouth. In the game, which the team is frantically building models for, players learn the proper way to evacuate the facility in case of a fire or other emergency. No, it's not *Half-Life*, but it's work.

The big games are still years away, but it almost makes the effort that much more noble. They're not just wagering their years of work on a game concept or play mechanics, they're wagering that, in 2010, there will still be an Ironton worth defending.

But Tickstorm doesn't think that way, and neither does Ironton. In their minds, the game making a splash and the city's rebirth is practically a forgone conclusion. This small southeastern Ohio city and the game studio share the same intangible power all the graphic artists and multi-million-dollar budgets in the world couldn't match: They believe. [COMMENTS](#)

*Justin McElroy is the news editor of The Ironton Tribune and a freelance gaming writer. He lives in Huntington, W.Va. with his fiancée, Sydnee.*

*Defend Cleveland!;  
Defend Cincinnati!;  
Defend Baltimore!*

The world's the limit.



# GOOD for the Soul

by Jim Rossignol



Surprising English poet William Blake probably wasn't talking about developing videogames when he said, "I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's," but his point still stands firm. If you're going to create something, rather than simply manufacture it, you have to decide how much of it you want to belong to you, and how much you are willing to give way to the aspirations and demands of others. Are you simply willing to craft something for someone else? Or is your act of creation going to belong wholly to some personal, private ambition? Most game developers have to make a decision along these lines, and, for the most part, whatever road they choose will end up being pretty rocky. But the hardest and most obscure route is that of the genuinely independent developer – one that controls all aspects of the games they produce. Such a situation is rare, and one of few the companies that walk that path is the British development house Introversion Software.

"We didn't take any money from publishers because we didn't want any publishers f---ing up our game." These fighting words from Introversion's acceptance speech (uttered by Mark

Morris) at this year's Independent Games Festival drew a roar of agreement from the audience. Anyone who has ever railed against the corporate homogeneity of the mainstream games industry couldn't help but feel a twinge of vicarious pleasure on the team's behalf. It was a moment of victory in a struggle against considerable odds – a struggle for independent success in the games industry. Introversion had done well, and received due credit from their peers, receiving the top prize at the indie games awards ceremony. Their strange strategy-combat dreamscape title, *Darwinia*, had captured imaginations, and was unlike anything the corporate game studios had attempted in 2005.

But Morris' war-cry speech would not have been possible without the sheer determination of the small British team, and the talents of their lead designer, Chris Delay. Delay is, like so many programmers, partially self-taught. He started making games in his bedroom; something that happened a lot in the 1980s, and has become a near-impossibility in the corporately dominated environments of 21<sup>st</sup> century games. It's Delay's desire to create his

own games (and be “The Last of the Bedroom Programmers”) that has found a mature form with the creation of his company, Introversion Software.

It began with the home computers of the 8-bit era. As Delay recalls, “The Spectrum came with a programmer’s manual - a sort of quick-start guide to BASIC. I didn’t even look at this for the first year, but it did make me curious. At first, I started typing in programs direct from the manual, but after a while I started to experiment. Spectrum BASIC was really where my interest in programming started, and it matched my love of games perfectly. It sounds crazy, but by the time I moved on from the Spectrum, I’d written a complete game (based on *Garfield*), and made the packaging for it and everything. It had a title screen, a few levels, a hi-score table - the works. Of course, I was about 13 at this time, so it was never published.”

Later on in life, Delay’s talents found new purpose in the understanding of friends. A few of his peers saw that Delay’s homemade hacker-game, *Uplink*, was potentially more than just a private exercise in programming creativity. Chris Delay, Mark Morris and Thomas Arundel

met for the first time at Imperial College in London, U.K., in October 1997, and by the end of their degree courses in 2001, the team had completed *Uplink* **together**. A clever take on the idea of hacking as a game, *Uplink* was finished, packaged, sent to magazines, and given a website (and they even sold a few copies). This bedroom-programmed videogame was well received by the gaming press, and its accomplishments signaled the beginnings of Introversion as an evolving company.

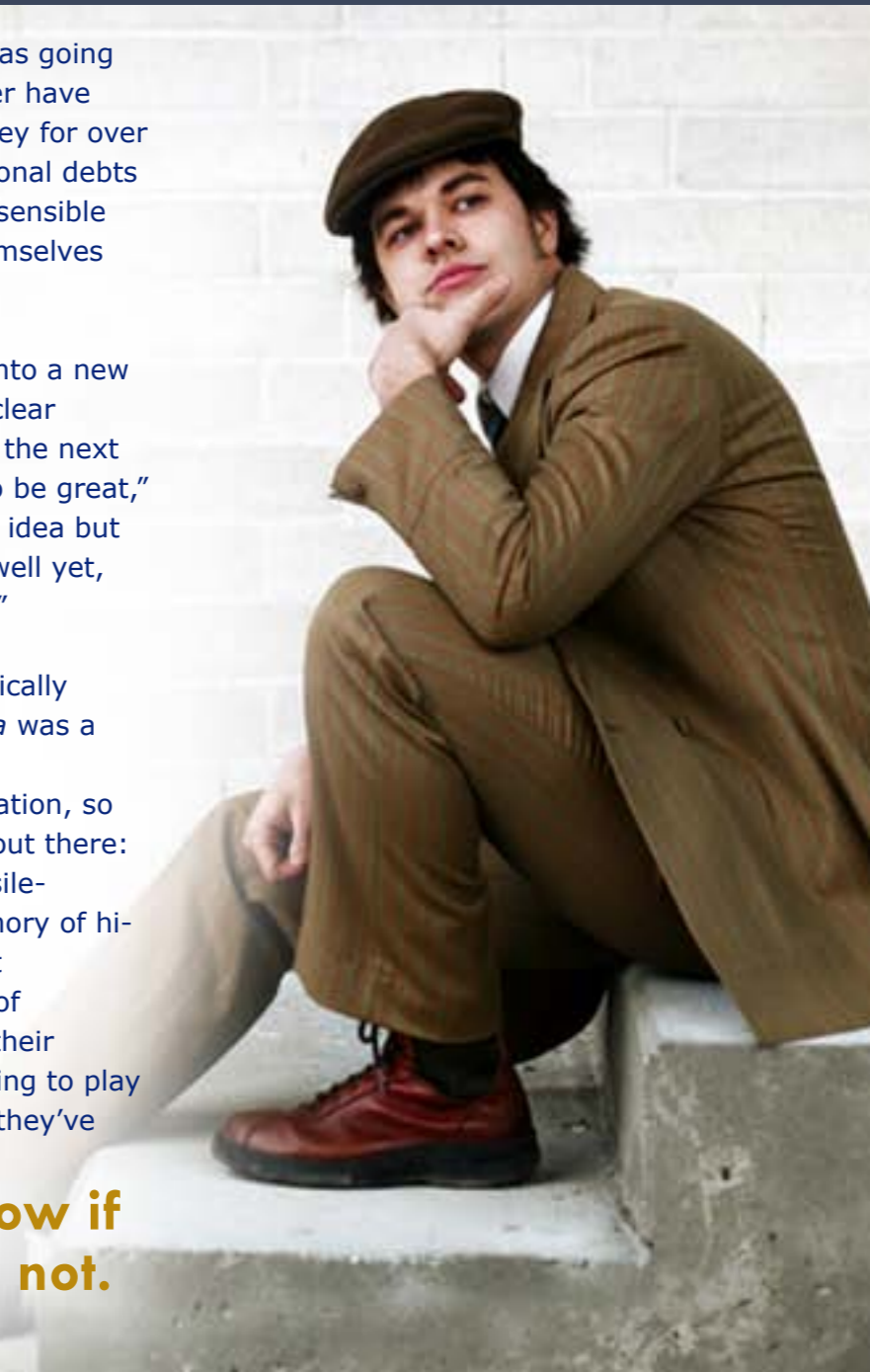
“After *Uplink*’s launch, we really didn’t know if we wanted to form a game company or not,” Delay explains. “I can distinctly remember coming back from our first (and only) trip to E3 feeling incredibly demoralized - why on Earth would we want anything to do with this industry? For a while, we planned to put Introversion on indefinite hold until we had another game to sell, and go back to doing real jobs. But something made us stick together and push on until *Darwinia* was finished, and I’m glad we made that decision. But if we’d known in advance

how long and hard *Darwinia* was going to be, we probably would never have started. We went without money for over a year, wracking up huge personal debts to banks and parents, and no sensible person would willingly put themselves through that.”

Now, of course, Delay is well into a new game - *DefCon* - a thermonuclear wargame that should arrive in the next few weeks. “*Defcon* is going to be great,” says Delay. “It’s such a simple idea but we don’t think it’s been done well yet, and that’s always a good sign.”

But, once again, it’s also a radically different idea. Just as *Darwinia* was a unique exploration of strategy, storytelling and iconic presentation, so *DefCon* is unlike most games out there: a modernized multiplayer missile-command, replete with an armory of hi-tech options. Introversion isn’t attempting to follow any kind of predetermined template with their development, nor are they trying to play on any unique successes that they’ve

**After *Uplink*’s launch, we really didn’t know if we wanted to form a game company or not.**



made for themselves. Delay does not want to be seen as a one-trick pony.

"I guess that's the high-level aim for Introversion - we want to create new things and experiment with new ideas with every game we release, and we want people to follow Introversion because we're the only company willing to do that. We want to be absolutely fearless in pushing on to the next new idea, when all of our existing partners are offering us small fortunes to develop our old games into franchises. We really believe it's so easy to fall into that trap - something you make is successful, so you make a sequel, and then another, and after a while all you are doing is making sequels,

and all your original ideas are shelved because they are (of course) much more risky than those safe franchises. But then, one day, your franchise falls out of fashion or runs head first into its own identical clone from someone else, the whole dev team goes down the toilet, and what do you have to show for it? A decade's work and half a dozen games - all the same. That's not for us."

*Darwinia* was certainly not "the same." It was a real-time strategy with an ecosystem of digital souls, viral enemies, an analogue of British inventor Clive Sinclair as guide, and lavish geometric-color-against-black presentation. The tiny lives of the Darwinians had to be

managed and saved from oblivion, and their plight was resolved through gesture-based mouse controls. Weird and satisfying, *Darwinia* seems to have made a permanent mark on gaming history for this little game company. It's iconic, beautiful, clever and fun. Even against the best independent and commercial games, it stood like a

"It's been extremely difficult, and no, I've never thought about giving up and going to EA. I've worked in the real games industry for a year and a half at two different companies, and that was enough for me to know that I never want to go back. I have quite strong game ideas floating around inside my head that I really want to make, and the

## Weird and satisfying, *Darwinia* seems to have made a permanent mark on gaming history.

beacon. There was no danger of the stark retro colors of the polygonal theme park being confused with anything else. *Darwinia* was **unique**. Which, of course, created a problem of its own: Who would buy this oddity?

PC gamers aren't renowned for their capacity to seize the unusual. Worse still, this was not going to be a project that was written off as another loss by a big company. It was the entirety of what Delay and friends were doing. Being self-employed is akin to a nightmare, so was it really all worth it for Delay, Morris and Arundel? Hadn't they considered going and getting a well-paid job at an EA studio?

games industry is the hardest place of all for me to do that. At least if I had another type of day job, I could work on these game ideas during evenings and weekends, but in the games industry I can't even rely on that. Working on movie-licensed platform games really does take away any desire to do anything other than cry in your spare time."

Just when it looked like *Darwinia's* poor sales might mean tears before bedtime for the Introversion team, the last few months have seen things start to go their way. The IGF awards have been coupled with greater commercial successes. Valve's online content delivery system,



Steam, has adopted *Darwinia* and doubled the tiny company's sales in just two weeks (and *Darwinia* posters on the walls of the Valve offices demonstrate who is the fan of whom in that particular relationship). "Steam has been awesome for us," reports Delay. "It's really given *Darwinia* the sales boost we never managed ourselves."

Moreover, Steam represents a niche for which developers who want to follow Introversion's independent trajectory can aim. "Something interesting is happening with online digital distribution," says

Delay. "Specifically regarding Steam and Xbox Live Arcade - we now have two distribution channels that offer excellent royalty rates direct to the developer along with high numbers of potential sales, with none of the problems of retail store releases. Both of those channels are open to indie games made by small bedroom teams, without a publisher or retailer in sight. To my knowledge, this is the first time this has ever happened, and it's very exciting to be part of it."

Very exciting, but also fairly profitable for a developer who has, so far, avoided

taking any of that tainted publisher cash. Could it be that Delay and friends are just trying to make a buck, after all? Is Introversion doing this all for love, or for the almighty dollar? "We're, of course, working for love," says Delay. "But money is nice, too. For a while, we worked for love only and no money on *Darwinia*, and it was a very difficult and painful experience that I wouldn't want to repeat. Furthermore, we'd never have finished *Darwinia* or started on *DefCon* if we hadn't made some money to keep going. I guess you could say we work for love **and** money, and most companies just work for money."

That's the core difference between what independents like Introversion are doing, and what it means to be a small cog in a large company. Even the bosses of those big companies are directed and manipulated by forces that will never be under their control. As I was putting this article together, I took a trip to see some other game industry folks who are following their dream and stepping

outside the accepted way of doing things. One of these people (who shall remain nameless, since this article is not really concerned with his story) was once one such boss of a very large company. As he drove me back to the train station, he admitted how relieved he was to finally be doing something other than simply aiming to make money. He shuddered at the memory of over-marketed franchise-farces of old. "At last," he smiled. "It feels like I'm doing something that's actually **good for the soul.**"

In Introversion's case, what's important is they keep a light on for those people who do want to take another path. Who do want to make it on a shoestring, and to **make it their own.**

Introversion may not win the war, but their battles have been joyous, even righteous. They are making what they want to make, and at the same time remaining independent. They're **creating their own system.** That's definitely worth fighting for, and it's definitely good for the soul. [COMMENTS](#)

*Jim Rossignol is a writer and editor based in the South West of England. He writes about videogames, fiction and science.*



**Could it be that Delay and friends are just trying to make a buck, after all?**



## Doujin A Go Go, Baby!

by John Szczepaniak

Many turn to indie games for an alternative to what is found on the shelves of the average games store.

If your commercial tastes lean toward import games, Japan's doujin games (doujin soft) scene is likely to be the focus for any indie engagements. Doujin soft to indie, is **very loosely** what Manga is to graphic novels.

For newcomers to the doujin world, though, the **astounding** amount of free titles available (not to mention the complication of commercially sold doujin soft), often coupled with pages of incomprehensible Japanese text, can prove very confusing and ultimately alienating. English language websites like Insert Credit and Canned Dogs help matters to an extent by reporting on big events that occur and pointing people in the direction of particular highlights. This increased English coverage, along with doujin games catering to now-ignored genres, has resulted in growing

appreciation beyond the standard niche groups of intensely dedicated followers.

There is **so much** information, that this brief feature can only hope to be an introduction for the uninitiated. And despite being a huge fan, I am by no means an expert. So, allied with a fluent translator, I tracked down France's residing doujin expert, Mr. Roni, who is also the head of leading online resource Doujinaroni . He was eager to speak of things, including the perceived East and West dichotomy. "The principle difference is the market and public's demand. In the West, the indie scene isn't really followed by the public, whereas in Japan there are many fans of the scene, so the games can be sold and distributed in specialized shops, not only online. Over there, it's a true alternative to mainstream. Another major difference is, of course, the unique Japanese influence; whether it be in the style or [artistic] form, or in regard to the dynamics of the gameplay."

But he was also very quick to address the West's occasionally perverse fanaticism for a Japanese auteur. "In our countries (U.S.A., France, etc.) there is sometimes a 'mystification' of the Japanese doujin developers. Sometimes, when I read articles about the doujin scene, I want to say, 'Hey man, get back to Earth, doujin games are not made by Shaolin monks who live on Mount Fuji!'" I assure him of my wish to remain focused on the facts; the truth is, such creators range from bureaucrats to students mostly working in their free time. Many have wives and kids and don't even concentrate much on the scene beyond their own creations; like Takase, the one-man-team behind *Arm Joe*. Some are even professionals in the games industry, such as certain individuals from Capcom who cannot be named. According to Mr. Roni, only a few live a fully "doujin lifestyle" encompassing everything they do.

He also elaborated on the numbers involved in development. "It can be done by one person alone, who is in charge of everything from programming to graphics and music (like Omega with

*Every Extend*, or Kenta Cho). But a Doujin game can also be developed by an enormous team of people, like *Melty Blood* or *Eternal Fighter Zero*. For a game like *EFZ*, there are multiple graphics people, animators... In the end, there's no point hiding it: [These guys] aren't there to have fun, they want the pro status. We can't really [describe them as] amateur developers. They were [amateurs] many years ago, but today, they're the best on the scene. With *Melty Blood*, you can clearly see it's professional work. Neither SNK nor Capcom could have done better." And with pro status comes greater exposure for doujin games which are commercially sold. The *Melty Blood* PC CD-ROM will set you back 3000 Yen (\$25). Fighting fans regard it as the best of the genre on Windows. It was so popular, an update was ported to the arcades, and there are rumors of an imminent official PS2 port.

The flurry of names and games that Mr. Roni fires off is impressive, though at times tricky to follow, due to this being such a **rapidly shifting** movement. Everyone has their preferences, and with some titles gaining limited exposure,

only occasionally do followers have precisely the same interests. Last year, thanks to the kind assistance of Japanese translator Andrew "Shih Tzu" Davis, I was fortunate enough to speak to three established figures whom I personally regard highly. One was the aforementioned Omega, a university student and self-proclaimed fan of mecha. He's the mind behind titles like the popular, genre-defying *Every Extend*, and pastel colored shmup *DanDaDan*. Both of which are free to download, and highly innovative in what they do. These titles are like a reinvention of older ideas; not surprising when you hear his views. "I don't like modern styled games so much. These games use so much '3-D graphics' - but they don't make games any easier to watch. They often have a 'growth system' - but that needs memory cards and isn't easily playable. They also have so many buttons and complex interfaces - but that only makes it more difficult, not more interesting to play! I spend much time making visuals that are easy on the eye, an easy system to understand, and an easy control interface to use. I believe



that `a nice game is easy to play, but hard to master.”

Omega raises an interesting point regarding genres for doujin soft. There are flirting/dating games, and also **a lot** of “ero-ge,” or hentai titles. Otherwise there is heavy emphasis on 2-D fighters, shmups and traditional RPGs; mainly 2-D genres, which are no longer well-represented by mainstream developers. These are also more viable for small teams to develop.

Omega’s words are echoed by industry insider Hikoza, a doujin superstar since his 2003 release of the elegant *Warning Forever*. “As one who works on modern games for a living, I see a climate that doesn’t deem games sales-worthy without gorgeous graphics, epic stories, and tons of characters, and I think there is too much time and money spent on parts of the game that have nothing to do with the amount of fun. The next generation of consoles [makes] the programming even more complex, with network play increasingly [common]. I’m worried that game developers will be spending too much energy on things

aside from making the games fun, and that we’ll wind up with fewer and fewer fun games overall. No matter how many people worldwide you can fight in real-time, no matter how pristinely the characters show up onscreen, a dull game is a dull game, and I wish we would spend more time and energy on just making sure the games are fun.”

Hikoza’s reason for making games outside of work is having control over the entire project and making the games **he** wants to make. He’s created several titles, but *Warning Forever’s* beautiful simplicity proves a point. It contains only a single green wireframe boss which evolves, based on simple algorithms, allowing further appendage growth. People quickly fell in love with its unique aesthetic and masked level of depth. “The fun of making games, for me, is seeing how much playability I can get out of the least amount of data creation. I’ve received countless messages from people throughout the world. I’d assumed that a classical 2-D game wouldn’t find reception outside of Japan, but I was happy to be proved wrong by those who’ve enjoyed it.”

Wanting another opinion on genres, I spoke to Insert Credit’s doujin front man, Chaz. Though he openly proclaims his regular “Doujin Roundup” simply recaps news from Japanese forums and websites. “I just dig through piles of porn adventure games and discussions about porn adventure games, find more suitable material, read as much as I can in Japanese, then update the site.”

And his conclusion after such adventures? “Doujin games are not only an entertaining and fresh take on games, but also a fascinating field of social and cultural study about the interests and concerns of a more and more influential part of the Japanese population. They also present an interesting case of IP management, as most games adapt universes and characters from either professional licenses or other doujin games without permission, yet this

**Hikoza’s reason for making games outside of work is having control over the entire project and making the games he wants to make.**





recycling fuels new interest in the original IPs and, therefore, isn't seen as a plague but on the contrary, as [good]. Doujin softs are home to great genres that have been abandoned or marginalized by mainstream companies, such as shooters, fighters, brawlers, the importance of good writing, and 2-D representation ... and porn adventure games. As most of these successful doujin titles are not free, they prove a viable economy can exist around niche products that target their audience intelligently, even in the [risk averse] game business."

The usage of others' **modern** IP is quite different to Western indies, but also commendable considering it allows one to play exceedingly high quality fan work, sometimes based on games that

## The usage of other's modern IP is quite different to Western indies.

aren't continued. Being a **fervent** fan of *Skygunner* on the PS2, I've been paying close attention to *Gunners Heart*. The PC disc retails for 1890 Yen, but a free demo

is available. The game is a wonderful 3-D shooter based on *Skygunner*, with some **extremely** high production values, and should definitely be investigated.

But commercial doujin soft can prove problematic to acquire when living outside Japan, with only some stores like Himeya making purchases in the U.S.A. easy. Within Japan, according to Mr. Roni, dedicated stores are big business, while development isn't. "There are chains of doujin shops like White Canvas or Melon Books. It is easy for a Japanese guy to get his game distributed in these. They aren't very demanding, [with] both good and bad in the shops. [Success can't be gained through advertising], everyone has the same chances to make a name on the scene. However, it's only wishful thinking for [someone] to live off

his work! The doujin scene is not an El Dorado, [but there have been exceptions]. The average game sells between 100 and 500 maximum. There

are no rules or regulations, the game can either succeed or fail. Commercial logic is completely absent. It's a hard job without pity, and to become known you need luck."

He **elaborates considerably** that *Melty Blood's* runaway success is not a common occurrence. Profitability is mainly for the specialty stores, which focus more on doujin Manga than games. While some groups do treat development like a job, they're paid very little. It's a path only for the passionate, like Murasame with *Gundeadline*, who wasn't concerned about money. Regardless of commercial ambitions, the biggest form of publicity and distribution, apart from the net, is at the regular Comiket convention. According to Roni, though, some, like the hugely popular Kenta Cho, never display their work there.

Despite having to purchase some games, there are still many more free titles released than commercial. This creates a **huge** archive of games to download. Despite hitting the net at the tail end of 2004, a defining landmark release that people are **still** strongly enamored with, is *Doukutsu Monogatari* (aka *Cave Story*)



## Pixel makes no pretenses about his creative methods.

by Pixel. There has been a translation, tribute sites and a lengthy TIGS interview conducted alongside my own questions.

The influence of *Metroid*, *Castlevania* and *Megaman* are plain to see, while a five year development period ensured faultlessly high production values (doujin soft development lengths vary wildly from a month to half a decade in some cases). The zealous praise it received was unsurprising, two teams even competed to create an English translation patch, and it's rightly regarded as an example of how great doujin games can be. What **is** surprising is the humble nature of the game's origins and its **incredibly shy** creator. "At the time I started work on *Doukutsu Monogatari*, I was a student, but now I'm an office worker. My entire life had changed by the time this game was finished. At home, I help with household duties and child care. Any personal software development of mine takes place primarily late at night. I can't help but feel

a thrill when I see little pixel people running around over simple, light backgrounds."

Pixel makes no pretenses about his creative methods; the haunting melodies were composed by randomly arranging letters until he found a sound he liked. In fact, nothing about the game was pre-planned; it came about through sheer hard work and long hours. He invented things as he went along, leaving plot intricacies to the player's imagination. Surprisingly, it worked perfectly, showing there's no recipe for great games. The characters are memorable, the weapons satisfying, and the sense of discovery is simply magical. But above all, everything is uniquely imaginative. Despite the similarity, to other games it **never** feels hackneyed.

For those who find the world of doujin soft daunting, *Doukutsu Monogatari* is a great (though old) place to start before plunging deeper into online stores and conventions. While only so much can be covered in one sitting, hopefully I've piqued your interest

enough to explore further. Doujin soft is far removed from both the standard game market and Western indie scene. It has its own visual styling, genres, subculture and even unique form of commercialism. It is another facet in a rapidly diversifying industry, and one that deserves exploration. Just stay away from the hentai.

[COMMENTS](#)

*John Szczepaniak is a South African freelance videogame writer with a preference for retro games. He is also a staff member on the Retro Survival project, which contains articles on retro gaming and is well worth investigating.*



# SCRATCHWARE auteurs

by Patrick Dugan



I sat down in a room in the San Jose Convention center and basked in the greatest gathering of artistic intelligence I'd experienced in my entire life. The day before, the Experimental Gameplay Sessions had taken place in that same room. I managed to grab one of the presenters, *Cloud* designer Jenova Chen, minutes before the "Scratchware Auteurs" roundtable was scheduled to begin. By sheer serendipity, Tom Long, a web game designer and straight-up Indie, happened to tag along. Waiting for us were Chris Bateman, a veteran designer operating out of International Hobo Inc. and Greg Costikyan, board, computer and mobile game designer turned firebrand. Late-comer, Santiago Siri, an advergaming designer and the mind behind *Utopia*, a one-man assault on politically weighted, socially simulated interactive storytelling, also joined in.

Patrick Dugan: We're gathered here on the premise that being a Scratchware Auteur is the best thing you can be as a designer. Or at least it's a vital, vital role that more people need to fill lately. Scratchware means, basically, software that's developed for scratch, we're talking paper thin budgets.

## AAA Batteries

PD: *Psychonauts*, pegged as an "art-house" favorite for 2005, definitely fits as an auteur-produced game (by Tim Schafer, the Jack Black of game design). The story people don't like to mention about that game is that it didn't make enough profit for its publisher, Majesco Games, who ended up replacing their president or something. The question is: Is the AAA production process suited towards the "art game"?

Chris Bateman: Well, no. (Laughs) Clearly, it's not. The AAA process is an excellent mechanism for refining already established gameplay concepts. *GTA: San Andreas* is an example of how a large budget lets you refine things that have already been put in motion and let them appeal to a very large audience, admittedly a gender-narrow audience. But it's still very large, \$16 million is the figure that's been bandied about. However, it's a terrible way to go about experimenting with new ideas.

Jenova Chen: It's also really hard to define what is an "art game," you know? When something different comes out, not many people know about it, and they'll say, "It's revolutionary, it's art!"

Then, the next one comes out and does pretty well, and people say, "Well, it's kinda like that other game." By the time the third one comes out its pretty solid and sells out, but by then everyone says, "Oh, it's just a sequel mill, why aren't there any original games!"

Santiago Siri: I hate to speak in these terms, but the success of niche games really has to do with the market. When you speak of hardcore gamers who buy AAA games for the consoles, it's a very mature market. The average gamer age is 29 years old, they've been consumers for 10 years and have very crisp ideas about what kinds of play they want, but it is still a young consumer market. And another thing, speaking about art games, all games are art. Art isn't [inherently] a good thing, it's not [always] a positive thing, there is a lot of crappy art and very few true gems in the history of all art. Lets not make "art" a pretentious thing.

Greg Costikyan: I would say there's "art" and there's "innovation." Blizzard makes good art - it's very polished and refined and well crafted - but they haven't innovated in a long time. Rembrandt was a very good craftsman, but a terrible

innovator. He tended to paint what he was good at. Budgets reflect this; you don't get a whole lot of innovation in the Hollywood system because the budgets are huge and everyone is trying to cover their ass, and everyone has a say in what the final product looks like. It's possible to get highly innovative games through these systems, but it's extremely difficult. You have to be Will Wright or Stanley Kubrick or the equivalent. One of the problems with the industry is that conventional publishers have tried, as much as they can, to deny recognition of creators, and so there are very few people with the clout to get innovative titles published.

### Plays You Can Play

PD: At the rant today, Seamus Blackley, who was arguing about this from a pro-business standpoint, put out an interesting phrase: "*Brokeback Mountain*." Where is the "*Brokeback Mountain*" of games? Why isn't there a game that makes conservative people feel uncomfortable about riding horses with each other? (Laughter) And that ties into the question of storytelling; most of the storytelling in games these days is just tacked on. It might add

something to the experience, but it doesn't really affect the way the player makes decisions - what we tend to call "gameplay." What do you all see as the prospects for "drama games" or "interactive storytelling"? Or whatever you want to call it. How could that be implemented?



JC: I have some experience with writing for film and television, and I also design games, and I feel they are very different beasts. Story is the spine of an entire film, it's what it's about, and then you add on the visual execution. Videogames don't need to have a story; *Tetris* proved that. I've been trying to find what the spine is for videogames. I think games have more to do with experience; this could be something very simple, like a child bouncing a ball. Story in games is a tool that helps to serve the desired experience.

PD: Well I'm thinking more of a fusion, where the player is a co-author.

JC: Sure, there have been lots of people who tried to do that, often a designer's goal is to make the player feel like the director or the writer. It's very hard, but many have tried.

SS: Creation and play are concepts that I think belong together, in Spanish, the terms are closely related.

CB: What words in Spanish?

SS: I can't really express in English the language concept I have in mind. But

“interactive storytelling” or “drama games,” thinking beyond that, I think we want games to be meaningful to people’s lives. We want people to recognize that games have something to say and aren’t just superficial entertainment. It doesn’t have to be precisely an interactive drama. It can be, for instance, *Katamari Damacy*. I once read on Ron Gilbert’s blog how he defined *Katamari* as a metaphor for Japanese consumerism, where you just keep collecting more things.

CB: I swear Takahashi had no such intention when making *Katamari*.

JC: Actually, last year I was at his session. Takahashi was describing what he thought were the intangibles of games. He kept joking with us, but by the end he said it was a feeling, like if you watch little kids rolling the ball, you can feel the love, this kind of childish, silly excitement. He was also talking about this at the Game Design Challenge today.

SS: He said we could save the world if there were enough gaming romantics. It’s this idea that you can put a romantic feeling in a game without betraying the game. He made a game, he didn’t try to

make a film or a novel. A lot of games try to be films, like *Metal Gear Solid* - you get huge cinematics that last for three hours. *MGS* is the only game I’ll play with popcorn. (Laughter from group) I’ll think, “OK, time to see a movie.” But *Katamari* is pure to the medium. He wanted to make a great game and he wanted to say something through a ludic metaphor or whatever you want to call it. I don’t know how to describe it exactly. It’s very poetic.

GC: I can’t resist addressing the story vs. game issue. You have to think of games as being akin to music in this fashion. There are musical forms that are tightly connected to storytelling, such as opera, the musical, the rock and roll ballad; then there are forms where story is irrelevant.

PD: Like pop.

GC: Or symphonic music. There is a narrative in the sense that there is change over time, but it’s not “story” per se. There are many games that integrate story very effectively; there are many games where story is irrelevant. To me, the search for the interactive narrative

game is one of those things that people have bashed their head against the wall about since the beginning of computer games - and if you want to bash your head against that wall, that’s great. Sooner or later someone will break through the wall, but me, I’ll go do something else.

CB: Keita Takahashi has been just an enormous influence for me, and that other guy from the same publisher, his name escapes me, Tuori Iwatani, the *Pac-Man* guy, his talk was fantastic. I didn’t fully take on board what he was saying until some time afterwards. He spent ages talking about escalators, and I was like, “Why is this Japanese game designer talking about escalators?” But the point he was getting across is: When someone comes to an escalator, they know what to do with it. There is no learning barrier in using an escalator. It’s a fluid experience.

SS: Shiguero Miyamoto said the same thing about a Rubik’s Cube. From a designer’s perspective, you get a cube in your hands and you know you want to line up the squares. It’s self-explanatory. That’s the philosophy behind a lot of



Japanese games and they know how to do that stuff, so ...

JC: I've got something that might help you guys: One I night I had dream with a very unique, dramatic story about four vampires. (Group laughter) It was like a movie, there was a lot of depth that actually reflects on the society. I wanted to share this with my friends, so I woke up and sat down to write something. The first thing that came to mind was screenplay format - that was obvious. Then I think, "I'm a game designer, can I communicate this in a game better than in a film?" I tried to figure out how to enhance the story in a way that film can't, but I couldn't figure it out. You can do a story so easily with just a pen and some paper, or with a book or a film, but when you come to games, you get stuck. Most designers just tell a story like a film and have gameplay in between.

GC: Actually, I would recommend you look at what are called "Narrativist" paper RPGs. There are a number that are designed to create experiences that shape into a story for people. The way they do that is constrain the narrative arc so the shape of the story remains the

same, but they allow people enormous freedom of action within that. It's kind of the opposite of a traditional tabletop RPG, where players can go off in any direction but moment to moment they have to roll a die to see if they can do what they do. Instead, they can do whatever they want, moment to moment, but the narrative arc is pushing you. It's weird, bizarre. ... I don't know how you would do it in a digital environment.

CB: Maybe in a moderated massively multiplayer context. If you look at the strengths of tabletop roleplaying, a lot of the strengths seem to come from allowing one person to take control on the understanding that their role of being in control is a cooperative one with the entire group. MMOGs don't really tap into that potential successfully.

PD: I think, with massively multiplayer, you have all these unpredictable people and the complexity goes up rather than down, though I'd like to see someone approach the problem from that angle.

CB: One of the problems most tabletop RPGs have in that regard is the amount

of reading expected from the players in order to absorb the background. Because if that's needed to play, that's a real barrier. [That's] one of the great things about the *Star Wars* RPG ... The advantage there is the player is coming to that already knowing the background. I think it was a really elegant piece of RPG design because the core mechanics were well suited to the style of narrative the *Star Wars* name supports - to the extent that I never bought the rulebook. I have the two-page handout, and that was sufficient to play the game. The concept was so tight that you only needed a basic framework to get it going, because players already knew the mythology. I think that some of the most successful tabletop roleplaying games piggyback on backgrounds the player's already have.

### **More than One Way to Play**

PD: Let's talk about different types of play. Chris wrote a book called *21<sup>st</sup> Century Game Design*...

CB: I'm actually only a co-author.

PD: Right, right, and when we talk about different kinds of autism, I'll mention your humility. (Group laughs) You were

building off of Nicole Lazzaro's different kinds of play types. There's "Hard Fun," the adrenaline rush Santiago mentioned, and this is where the industry has been focused primarily; there's "Easy Fun," which is like *Katamari* and *Fireball* and *Cloud*; "Serious Fun," like *DDR* and management simulations; and then there's "People Fun," which she cited primarily as being in social aspects of MMOGs. I'm thinking this wraps back around as a way of looking at social challenge and interactive storytelling.



CB: Um, no.

PD: Alright, whatchya got?

GC: Interactive storytelling, drama games; what you're doing is interacting with artificial people. I can get involved in the actions of a character in a novel and I may be able to get involved in other characters in a drama game, but that's not the same thing as interacting with a real person and will never replace it ... up until we have true AI and the machine is legitimately a person.

JC: I come from China, and originally worked at a MMOG company. I spent a lot of time designing MMOG social structures, and when I think about it I was trying to come up with a new genre of MMOG - though I don't want to get in detail - but the more I look into it, the more I see that an MMOG actually reflects what a real social structure actually is. It's a max: How do you create a social structure that meets everybody's needs and makes them all happy?

GC: Nobody wants to be a peasant.

JC: Yeah, as the game becomes bigger, it becomes closer in structure to what

the real world is. Maybe we can eventually find out how to solve real social problems through [MMOGs].

CB: I think academics are very interested in the massively multiplayer area for that reason. They're toy environments for exploring social issues that you don't have the capacity to explore in the real world. Because how do you get 100,000 people and put them in a new country and measure what they do?

GC: Testing politics is probably going to be difficult, testing economics is the most difficult. I used to play *A Tale in the Desert* ... and this is a game where some of the tasks really require dozens or hundreds of people. If you want to do

some of the cooler stuff in the game, you have to join one of the mega-guilds, which are designed so the people who join new are treated as slaves and given tasks like baking a thousand bricks. People do it willingly because they want to be a part of the effort. There is some opportunity for experimental social structures in games.

### Scratchware Autuers

PD: I want to talk about autuerism. Do you think having individuals who are empowered as the name brand of the game, like, "This is a Howard Hawkes game." Do you think this has creative value, or at least marketing value?

GC: It's absolutely beneficial from a marketing standpoint. It's a two-edged sword if you're a publisher; because if this guy's name has recognition with the audience, that's another lever we can use to sell this game, but it also means he's going to ask for more money and more control in the future. There is a danger in having individuals recognized for their work in that sometimes those aren't really the people who did the work. I'm thinking of *Alpha Centauri*, which Sid Meier didn't really design.

PD: Right, Bryan Reynolds.

GC: Yeah, and we also need a more sophisticated appreciation for who are the key talents on game. In film, we know it's the director, we know it's the producer, we know it's the screenwriter and the major actors. It isn't clear who the major actors are in developing a game, but it's more than one person.

PD: One thing I really enjoyed about working with Mr. Bateman here is he made his personality a very transparent interface to the project. It reminds me of something Mark Healy told me - he's another scratchware auteur, the guy behind *Rag Doll Kung Fu* - and he told me he didn't see himself as working for Peter Molynueux when they made *Dungeon Keeper* and *Black and White*, more like he was working **with** Peter. He said they all were their own ingredients and Peter would just stir the pot. The question is: Is it better to be a "rockstar" game designer or a "humble" game designer, or is there synergy between those?

CB: Wow, what a question. I know what I set out to do with *Fireball*, and what I hope to do further down the line, is to



create a core game design that is solid enough that other people can come to it and find their own creativity. So there are multiple levels of play before it gets to an audience. What I did with *Fireball* was I put out an open call and said, "Does anyone want to contribute to this?" and I got people like you and Maurizio. There was an enjoyment that you guys got out of playing with those tools and creating stuff with it. When the audience finally comes to it, they're going to experience these little individual art pieces that you all made for it. And that's fantastic. That's what I'm really exploring now - creating a core game design that allows other people to explore different kinds of play experiences and provide that to an audience.

PD: You give credit to the people who make the content. It's like auteur franchising.

CB: Yeah, that's one way of looking at it. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to create a framework of design that would allow another group of people to come in and express themselves. I'm not trying to control the whole experience. I'm trying to facilitate something else happening.

PD: And on the other hand, we have Santiago who is trying to solve drama, maybe not from such a high level approach as Crawford. It's geared towards a specific context, and you're doing it all on your own. You're doing the art, the programming and the design. Do you see yourself as becoming like, "Hey, this is a Santiago Siri game," and you going on talk shows and stuff? What are your delusions of grandeur?

SS: Uh, I do have delusions of grandeur. I'm a human being. I do tend to think of myself winning an Oscar or something like that. I agree that a game designer is not writing a story where every detail is controlled, he's creating the rules for a player. The boundaries of authorship in games are really very mysterious due to the nature of interactivity. Interactivity enables people to modify what you give to them. It's sort of like the DJs; they remix the music and suddenly, because the technology gets ripe, the DJs become very famous and recognized as artists. The nature of interactivity puts into questions the nature of authorship, but I'm trying to create tools that enable authorship in the sense of community creation. Like Wikipedia - it was created

by a million users worldwide. Interactivity empowers the creativity of individuals. But, I read a lot of biographies, I admire people that do something different. In games there are, of course, Will Wright and Ron Gilbert and so on. We need to look up to these people and we need to be those people who make a difference, because individuality also has its good side.

PD: Jenova, your game, *Cloud*, was your vision, and you came up with the basic play mechanic, but you made it happen with, I think it was six other people?

JC: It's really hard. Before we made *Cloud*, we made another game called *Dyadin*. We were here last year at the EGW with that. That game was made by everyone. Everyone on the team started talking about the game, contributing to it and debating about ideas, and finally we got an idea that was mediocre to everybody. OK, so everybody is happy to make it, but I feel that the more people that get into the design, the more the final product suffers. If you have more than seven people involved, it's going to be very hard.



PD: Is seven the magic number, before you stop being a scratchware team and start becoming AAA?

JC: Yeah. But you can't have a magic space that everybody will like. You need somebody to lead it. That's why, in *Cloud*, because I started the project, people would say, "You are the lead and you get to make this decision." So, I became the choice-maker for the team. It's kind of like being the president: You can't really do anything without your team. You can pass out ideas, but they have to agree if it's going to happen.

CB: That situation definitely gets worse when you have a big team. The barrier

to doing anything interesting is that you have to satisfy everyone on the team.

SS: This is a very interesting debate because it has a lot to do with the philosophy you bring to the particular game you're making. American games very much focus on the business model. The creative process becomes highly collective and systematized. I like a lot of Hayao Miyazaki's movies. He's a brilliant artist, and I once read a quote of his: "When people work with me, I don't give them time for discussion, you'll do it my way or you don't do it at all." His movies are quite personal.

JC: I learned about this the hard way with *Cloud*, we'd go through about five iterations based on player feedback, so as a designer, I can't make a game for myself, I have to make it for the player.

TL: That's the same thing as anything, even making a website. People make the websites not for themselves but for a company, and it sucks. But when you make a website for a client, that's when it succeeds.

JC: What happened was one player would tell me to do this and it would be

more intuitive. It's all about control. So, I'd listen to them and change it and then two other players would say, "This sucks." (Group laughs) I'd change it back or find somewhere in-between - a compromise - and then, another guy would stand up and say, "Hey, you should do it the old way." You never really solve it for everybody. A friend of mine, who is an art major, said, "Why do you listen to anyone? You're making art and you make it for yourself." It's very conflicting. On one hand, you want a design that is a system you'd love to play yourself, and on the other hand, if you want to sell your game you have to compromise for others.

TL: I just want to say there are no statues of committees.

PD: On that note, Tom, you work on games with your wife. Evidently, this whole male/female duo thing is popping up on the indie scene. I don't know if any of y'all played *Mount and Blade*, it's a very high-quality indie game. I recommend everyone play the demo. It's being made by a Turkish couple; he does the programming and she does the graphics. Maybe that's the best sort of team mechanic you can have.

CB: I've got to know how that works in practice.

TL: Yeah that's funny. I didn't think we were the Partridge Family of videogames, but thanks for pointing that out to me. Both my wife and I are extremely opinionated and it's like two dictators running the same ship. There's a lot of yelling and screaming and crying - and then she talks. (Group laughs) But, uh, no, we both agree after the cussing and discussing [that] it's a much better product in everything that we do for our clients. Together, it might be the best teamwork. As a spouse, you come together because the other has strengths that facilitate your weaknesses, and vice versa. I think in a project that might be our ultimate strength.

To read the article in its unedited entirety, visit [The Lounge this Friday](#). [COMMENTS](#)

*Patrick Dugan is a ludosophist. He runs King Lud IC, a blog regarding game design theory, memetics and interactive storytelling. He looks forward to prototyping with Chris Crawford's Storytron, and to pioneering socially-oriented narrative challenge.*







## to the **EDGE** of **REALITY**

by N. Evan Van Zelfden

Binu Philip steps to the podium. He makes a joke, smiles broadly and begins to speak. He brings up the current platform transition, the rising development costs, higher production values, unfriendly publishing contracts, recruiting shortages.

The audience listens, beginning to wonder not about, "What is the rightful place in the game industry for independents?" but, "Who in their right mind would want to be an independent?"

Then, Philip quotes *Lord of the Rings*: "**Certainty of death. Small chance of success. What are we waiting for?!**" He wonders aloud if this is the motto for independent studios these days. The audience chuckles. It's true, and it resonates with them.

Philip is president of Edge of Reality, a successful independent developer with a background of ports (such as *The Sims*) and movie licenses (such as *Over the Hedge*). He tells his audience, "In order to have a discussion

about the future of independent game studios, we must first have a discussion about intellectual property."

### **Hillside Property**

I'm sitting in Binu Philip's office, talking IP. Edge of Reality's building sits on the ridge of a hill. It overlooks a river, a landmark bridge and Austin's downtown skyline. Down below us, on the hills heading into the valley, are buildings that house all the great technology companies in town.

Philip is telling me: "The beauty [of being an independent developer] is that you don't have to sell yourself to a publisher, and be part of an organization that has thousands of people under employment, and massive overhead. You can still be part of a relatively small studio and create something ...

"The cool thing about intellectual property is that intellectual property is valuable ... [regardless of] ... how many people worked on it. You can come up



**I don't want to be in a position where we're forced to have 300 people to complete a game in a year.**

with a very valuable game that took 30 people to make.”

Edge of Reality's growth is dictated by what it takes to make the best game possible. Philip says, “These enormous teams that you'll see at large publishers are a result of trying to get the game out within a certain financial quarter. And they need all those people to hit a minimum bar of quality.

“That's an equation that's juggled by financial people working with production people,” he explains. “And, usually, the financial people will out-muscle the production people into living with a short time schedule and having a million bodies to compensate for it.

“I don't really fear growth, because we've done a lot of growing in the last eight years. We're not new to growth at all. I just don't want to be in a position where we're forced to have 300 people to complete a game in a year. I think that's a recipe for disaster. At the end of the day, you're better off with a smaller group, working over a larger period of time, to get a game of higher quality.” Philip adds, “That's what I believe.”

## **An Independent Future**

Philip believes independent developers are important to the industry's future. “They have the freedom to do R&D and to try out different forms of gameplay. They're only responsible to themselves; they're not responsible to a greenlight committee until a game is signed with a publisher.”

And that's important, because once a greenlight committee is involved, “they're mostly about minimizing risk.” And when you're trying to advance a game, truly trying to create something that stands out, you want to be in a position to take as many risks as is necessary to create something “breakthrough.”

“That's not to say publishers won't create breakthrough product, I just think it's easier for independent developers to do so,” says Philip.

## **Banking on Reputation**

People are attracted to Edge of Reality for a variety of reasons. “They see us as an underdog,” Philip explains. “We're not owned by a large publisher. And that's kind of attractive to a lot of people, because we're not going to have nine

layers of bureaucracy to deal with. When they have an issue, they can come directly to anyone in management; it'll get ironed out pretty quickly.

“They know that we have a reputation for shipping titles,” Philip adds, “and that we have commercial success with our titles. There's some stability attached to that. Someone can come here and be part of creating something new.

“The thing that all game developers have in common is that we all want to be part of something successful. A game takes two or three years to make. You've only got so many of those in your career. Maybe 10. It's very important when you invest that kind of time.”

## **The New IP**

Thus, Edge of Reality is working on new intellectual property. “We've had this goal for five or six years now,” says Philip. “That one day we want to be in a position where we can take a risk on a new IP.”

And the company has been working up to this point, earning royalties from previous ports and licensed titles. “We want to be in a financial position where

we can take this risk. And if it's a failure, it won't sink the company.

"It takes a while to earn that right," Philip says. "It's been a goal of ours, that we've stated within the company, just not as loud as it's been for the last two or three years. And for the last two or three years, we've been telling people as we've been talking to them about potentially joining the company, that we are in the process of doing this.

"And this process just takes forever. Even the planning stages - before any work is done. It took months to get a concept we all agreed to. We're two years into working on our next-gen tools and technology; a year (and change) into the actual game."

## A Smart Gamble

"We try not to take a risk where we're betting the future of the company on any one thing," Philip says. "It's still an important and expensive bet, but [the bet] won't fold us. It'll be a learning step, to help make the next one better.

"That was one of the factors of us starting now. Not only could we afford to take the bet, we could afford to lose the

bet. That said, we're very determined to win the bet. Our ultimate goal is not to become a subsidiary of a large publisher."

Which raises the question: What's so unappealing about mega-corporations? "There's a couple big things. One of them is control. And the other is we want to make an impact. At a big company, they're going succeed or fail regardless of what you do. It's nice to make a difference. It's more rewarding if you succeed because of your hard work.

"Thinking about companies that we'd like to emulate in the long run," Philip says. "One that comes to mind is Pixar, before Pixar sold to Disney. They have a long track record of creating original properties, and it's much deeper than any videogame company."

For an independent developer, there's more at stake than making Wall Street happy. It's about making a product you're happy with, that you know will resonate with the audience, and will sell. As Philip concludes, this is what is at stake: "Leaving a mark in the videogame industry. It's coming from a point of inspiration, instead of following a corporate mandate."

Developers love to complain, so they'll always complain about how it's impossible to develop independently these days. As Philip says, "The fact is, you can do it if you're willing to pay your dues, and if you have the right processes, and the right resources in place to do so. That doesn't necessarily mean having to sell your company to a venture capitalist to pursue your dreams."

## COMMENTS

*N. Evan Van Zelfden expects great things for the future of games. Games are the greatest art form to date, he asserts. This is why he plays games, writes about them, and continues to work in the industry of games.*

**We want to be in a financial position where we can take this risk.**

**And if it's a failure, it won't sink the company.**



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## MEET THE TEAM

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

### "What's your favorite small-budget game?"

**Justin McElroy, "Defend Ironton!: How a decade-long gamble might just save a small town"**

It's got to be *Dink Smallwood* for the PC, which you can still find at [www.rtsoft.com](http://www.rtsoft.com). A free RPG that features an abusive uncle, a villain named Milder Flatstomp and a town that worships ducks ... how could you go wrong? You can't, that's how.

**N. Evan Van Zelfden, "To the Edge of Reality"**

*Indiana Jones and His Desktop Adventures*. As the box said, visit exotic locales, meet interesting people! Back in

1996, it only cost \$21.64. And, the box advertised billions of possible games. If that isn't value, nothing is.

**John Szczepaniak, "Doujin a Go Go, Baby!"**

My favorite small-budget game, mentioned this issue, is *Cave Story* (a.k.a. *Doukutsu Monogatari*). Not so much small-budget, as no budget at all! In fact, I like it **so** much, I normally classify it alongside my favorite commercial games. You know, the kind that cost \$50 a pop. Stop reading, and just play it.

**Patrick Dugan, "Scratchware Auteurs"**

I'm currently wrapped up in *DROD*, an addicting and cerebral dungeon crawler/puzler. *Mount and Blade* had better combat than most AAA RPGs. *Tower Defence* was a tight refinement of a fan favorite RTS mod. *RIP* was a rockin' 2-D shooter/RPG. But my favorite? *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*

**JR Sutich, Contributing Editor**  
*Uplink*.

**Joe Blancato, Associate Editor**  
*Uplink*, man. Any day of the week, and twice on Sunday.

**Russ Pitts, Associate Editor**

*Serious Sam*. Serious. Old school action, 3-D graphics and that indelible Eastern European charm? Winner.

**Jon Hayter, Producer**  
*Galactic Civilizations 2*.

**Julianne Greer, Executive Editor**

Online mahjong, because I don't have to clean up the tiles.

