

the Escapist

The Conquest of Origin

Origin created worlds.

EA shipped games.

EA won.

by Allen Varney

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by Russ Pitts

The return to sanity.

The Escapist team arrived home from E3 well into the morning hours of Saturday, after a long, sleepless night of air travel. Many are still recuperating. Some are ailing from the excesses of one too many long LA nights; others from what is being called "The E3 Virus." This editor suspects the two afflictions may be one in the same.

I have two things - no - three things to say to the ESA regarding E3 2006. The first: When you announce that there will be food, please, for the love of God, make sure that there will actually be food.

Second, E3 2006 had to be the best presentation of games, consoles and game industry spokespeople it has ever been my pleasure to behold. I am now positively bubbling over with excitement about what the years to come will bring to our shared pastime - on all platforms. To the ESA I say "Thank you."

The last thing I would like to say to the ESA regarding E3 is this: Please get over Los Angeles; I have. That is all.

Those who are interested in news and reviews from the largest, most widely attended gaming industry conference in the world can find write-ups and impressions from The Escapist staff at The Escapist Lounge. We'll also be bringing you our special **Escape From E3** Issue of *The Escapist* next week (after we all return from doing just that), but for this week we're proud to present a selection of our favorite articles from issues past.

So heat up a cup of soup, curl up in a warm blanket and catch up on some fantastic pieces of videogame journalism you may have missed the first time around.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To The Editor: Just a quick note to say thank you - I hope and trust you receive many of these, because you deserve them. I really enjoy your magazine; it's well-written, intelligent and thoughtful. Even when - perhaps especially when - I don't think I'm especially interested in the theme, I always find something to make me go "ooh, I didn't know that / didn't think of it that way."

I've been in the industry for 12 years and am profoundly and nastily cynical as the next developer, but you achieve a neat and thought-provoking balance between enthusiasm and reality.

-Kim

In Response to "Whither Sony" from The Escapist Lounge: If you look at the historical pattern of how many cycles it takes between a console makers entry to market and their eventual squeezing out, its typically 3. Atari had the 2600, the 5200 and the 7800 (or something)



before bowing out in the wake of Nintendo. Sega had the Genesis, the Saturn and the Dreamcast before being squeezed out. Now its Sony's turn, the PS3 will be their last console. Nintendo has been the sole exception to this pattern.

-Patrick

In Response to "Wii and We: Wee!" from The Escapist Lounge: Thanks for the write-up, Russ. Hearing the generally good news from your mouth puts to rest many of my worries concerning the Wii.

Looking at those pictures, with all their fancy lights and shimmering stage-walls, I am amazed at how much money goes into creating things like "The Expwiirience," as you dub it, as well as E3 in general, and, really, any type of human gathering involving more than, say, six people. Where do people put all this money, such that I myself never seem able to find it, steal it, and spend it

on intoxicants? That's really my foremost concern, here.

-Philip

In Response to "Warhammer Online or, 'Do I expect Too Much' " from The Escapist Lounge: Its painfully evident that this is your first look at the game. I suggest you go read up on it (even at this early stage information abounds) and then try and say that it isn't looking innovative.

-Dumyr

I really appreciate this review. It seems fairly objective, other than a few biases ("I wanted to see what the follow up to Imperator's failed development was"), but a good baseline opinion from a non-Warhammer fan.

-Morskittar

In Response to "At Night, the Ice Weasels Come" from The Escapist Lounge:

Could you hint at the Guitar Hero guys that *some people* would like to have it on another console. I would like to try it out but I'm not going to buy a PS3 and all my money is going to the Wii and DS so I don't have any spare cash to buy a PS2...

-Suyi



The Conquest Of Origin

Origin created worlds. EA shipped games. EA won.

by Allen Varney

"Trip Hawkins is the Antichrist."

The scene: a bar at a gaming convention in the late 1980s. The speaker: an executive at the computer game company Origin who today, no doubt, would prefer to remain anonymous.

Why the holy-fire view of William M. Hawkins III, founder of Electronic Arts? Because (as this exec explained) EA meant to win in the computer game business not only by making good games, but by preventing competitors from making good games too - by actively interfering with their ability to do business. As one example, EA had filed a frivolous lawsuit against Origin. Forced into a costly out-of-court settlement, Origin execs asked Trip Hawkins why he had allowed the suit; he responded, "This is just business. This is the way we're going to win."

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Furthermore, EA was all about marketing. For Hawkins the question was never, "How good is this game?" It was always, "How can we sell this?" To high-minded execs at Origin - makers of the *Ultima* and *Wing Commander* series, the high priests of the high end, who valued commitment to an artistic vision - this attitude was sacrilege.

Ultima designer and Origin co-founder Richard "Lord British" Garriott even worked an EA reference into *Ultima VII* (1992). Two high-profile nonplayer characters, Elizabeth and Abraham, perform seemingly helpful tasks for the player - but E. and A. turn out to be murderers in league with the player's nemesis, the Guardian. The three items that power the Guardian's evil generators are a cube, a sphere and a tetrahedron - the former EA logo.

This reference in *Ultima VII* proved prophetic. In 1991 Hawkins left EA to found the short-lived 3DO Company. The next year, 1992, Origin entered dire financial straits and sold out to EA. Yet Origin never sold its soul; rather, EA spent the next 12 years gradually and painfully devouring it. The sad story

could be a case study for future MBA students.

Why did Origin sell? It was partly due - brace yourself - to the price of floppy disks.

Changing the World

Founded in 1983, Origin was a creature of the dawn. Garriott had already gotten rich in high school, from a game he coded in BASIC in his bedroom and sold in a ziplock bag. Founding Origin with \$70,000 in family money, he and his brother Robert created a culture that prized creative vision and expansive, thoroughly developed game settings. The company later took the slogan "We create worlds."

Origin project director Stephen Beeman recalls, "Origin's cardinal virtue was its commitment to do whatever it took to ship the director's vision. We had a motto for it: 'A game's only late until it ships, but it sucks forever.' If the game's creative vision demanded a megabyte of graphics, and the only way to load that into memory was to write our own operating system -" (the dubious "voodoo memory" scheme Origin created in 1992 for *Ultima VII: The Black Gate*)



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the *Escapist* lounge

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"- well, that's what we did, and damn the risk to the schedule or the consequences to the budget, not to mention the programmers' lives."

In recent years, Electronic Arts has taken heat for its sweatshop working conditions, but marathon crunches were a fact of life at Origin long before the purchase. Project teams endorsed Beeman's doctrine: "Sleep is for the weak."

Producer Warren Spector worked at Origin from 1989 to 1996. "I always felt we were genuinely trying to change the world," he says. "There was a feeling of creating something new, of being on the cutting edge; that was incredibly exciting. That, more than anything else, drove people to do exceptional work."

Employees treated each game as a learning experience. Richard Garriott made it a point of pride to start each new *Ultima* entirely from scratch, with not a line of code carried over from earlier games. Even the map editors and other tools were coded anew.

Beeman says, "We started with the vision of what we wanted the game to be

Employees treated each game as a learning experience.

- a vision generally inspired by our love of film - then busted our asses to figure out a way to pull that off. By contrast, companies like LucasArts or id started with an idea of what it was possible to do, then crafted killer gameplay around that. When our creative vision turned out to be achievable in a reasonable time (as with *Wing Commander I* and *II*), we hit home runs. When the creative vision turned out not to be achievable, development dragged on until the next year (or beyond), when improvements to the hardware made it achievable."

The problem was, creating worlds took a lot of disk space.

Seventy Cents Times Eighty Zillion

By 1992, Origin faced a cash shortfall caused by factors almost entirely outside its control.

Origin was a publisher, which meant manufacturing boxes and stocking them in the retail channel. In that primeval pre-*Myst* era, computer games shipped not on CD-ROMs but on 3.5-inch, 1.44-

megabyte high-density floppy disks. Origin games, in particular, required lots of disks - often eight to ten disks that cost about 70 cents apiece. Cost of goods became such an issue that while *Strike Commander* was in development, the team jokingly suggested shipping the game pre-installed on its own 20MB hard drive. (*Strike* shipped on eight floppies in 1993, but CD-ROMs finally became commonplace in time for a later expanded edition.) *Wing Commander* was a huge, unanticipated success, and the high cost of manufacturing it consumed all the company's ready cash and more.

In a single year Origin's payroll skyrocketed. Prior to *Wing Commander* and *Ultima VI*, Origin games were created by a programmer or two, with some contract art and writing. *Wing*

Commander had five core team members; *Wing Commander II* suddenly had 25. Star designer Chris Roberts, among others, drew a substantial salary.

While Origin's cash reserves were tapped harder than ever, the Apple and Commodore 64 platforms collapsed, taking with them many small retailers. Origin not only lost the sales of its Apple and C64 back inventory, but it suddenly had to eat bad debt from failed companies in the channel. Worse, Richard Garriott had chosen to develop new projects first on the Apple platform rather than the technically inferior IBM PC - "a horrific mistake," he now says. Retooling the pipeline would take six months.

Normally in this situation - high short-term expenses, but higher long-term potential - a company borrows money. But as bad luck would have it, at that time there was no money in Origin's home state, Texas. The savings-and-loan

Wing Commander was a huge, unanticipated success, and the high cost of manufacturing it consumed all the company's ready cash and more.

industry had collapsed following a real-estate bubble. With half the state's financial institutions unable to lend money, banks could ignore small businesses in favor of big, safe corporations. Just a year or two later, this crisis passed, but Origin got caught at just the wrong time.

As the Garriotts dipped into their own savings to make payroll, they contemplated options. Richard says, "Ultimately we chose EA because EA's vision for the future, their prediction of platform shifts, and their planning to meet that challenge was right on."

And, too, Trip Hawkins had left EA. "Had Trip still been there, there's no way we would have gone with EA," said an Origin staffer involved in the deal.

Starting Out Fine

Origin's employees on the early years after the purchase:

Spector: "For the first couple of years, EA's acquisition of Origin changed the place for the better in nearly every way. EA brought some much needed structure to our product greenlight and development processes. And we certainly

got bigger budgets! We were able to do more and cooler things than we'd been able to do before. In most ways, though, EA gave us a lot of rope - enough to hang ourselves, as it turned out!"

Garriott: "We doubled the size of the company from 200 to 400 that first year. We went from 5-10 projects to 10-20, and staffed those projects almost entirely with inexperienced people. It won't surprise you to learn those projects were not well managed. That was totally Origin's fault. We failed, and we ended up killing half of those products. That's probably what set up the EA mentality that 'Origin is a bunch of [deleted],' pardon my French."

Spector: "Once it became apparent we were getting a little crazy, EA started taking a firmer hand with us, integrating us into the machine in subtle and not so subtle ways, and that's when things started to get a little less pleasant. Every company has its politics but, in my relatively limited experience, EA was an incredibly political place - lots of empire building, folks jockeying for bigger, better jobs, competing for resources, marketing dollars and so on. And there were certainly people at EA who, let's

"In most ways, though, EA gave us a lot of rope - enough to hang ourselves, as it turned out!"

just say, lacked confidence in Origin's development management and - less sensibly, I think - in the Austin development community in general. There were a lot of strange decisions."

Denis Loubet, artist: "Before [the purchase], the desire to keep Origin afloat did much to keep politics on the back burner. But afterwards, survival transformed into a competition at the feeding trough. As production groups became more insular, Origin fractured. That was the death of any 'Origin Culture.' It didn't help that each production head was a dictator over his team, yet each had to brown-nose EA for funding."

Steve Powers, artist and programmer: "When EA assumed control, much of the joy began to fade from the Origin company culture. It was a running joke through the company that we went from





working for the Rebellion to working for the Empire. Our company had a culture that made work an incredible joy, day in and day out, even though we worked tremendously long hours. And the culture **had** to be appealing, because Origin paid a pittance. I started there at wages that were just above poverty level. EA began to bring salaries up to a competitive level for the region, and people who were equivalent to hobbyists were suddenly in a career. It was no longer a nerdy fraternity; it was business.”

Garriott: “There are people at EA to this day who I respect either as brilliant or at least well-intentioned. [CEO] Larry Probst was often not supportive of the things I was doing, but I respect Larry because he was always clear, rational and consistent in his lack of support. I felt [Chief Creative Officer] Bing Gordon understood sometimes; I always felt Bing’s intent was to help me do my best. Nancy Smith [Executive VP, North American Publishing] empathized and desired success for all at Origin. [But] there were others who got into politics, who very clearly would get into the mode of ‘Your success will work against my success. EA caring about you will

mean they care less about me.’ The politicians began to look at us as the enemy, and would actively work against us.”

The Hatchet

After EA bought Origin, authority for the new division fell to the president of EA Worldwide Studios, Don Mattrick.

A Canadian from the Vancouver suburb of Burnaby, Mattrick wasn’t just a suit; he could claim seniority over many Origin coders, having programmed (with Jeff Sember) his first published game, *Evolution* for the Apple II, in 1982 at age 17. Mattrick joined EA in 1991 when EA paid him \$13 million for his company, Distinctive Software, maker of edutainment and sports games such as the *Test Drive* and *HardBall* series. Distinctive became EA Canada, and as its Executive VP and General Manager, Mattrick led it brilliantly from strength to strength until 1997, when EA CEO Lawrence Probst III promoted him to Worldwide.

Once EA started exerting a tighter grip on Origin, Mattrick pushed teams to stay on schedule (an insistence that badly damaged *Ultima VIII*, according to

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Garriott). Mattrick killed many projects because they had spun out of control, and cancelled other projects for reasons staffers still consider mysterious. Some staffers believe (though not for attribution) Mattrick undermined Origin because it competed for resources with Distinctive's new incarnation, EA Canada. This view arose particularly because of the way Mattrick managed Origin's late-'90s move into online games.

This move was not his idea. Originally there was no money in the Origin budget for *Ultima Online*. Garriott went directly to Probst to ask for \$150K in seed money to kick off the project. Without Probst's approval, *UO* would have been delayed, maybe never started at all. Garriott said in a 2004 GameSpy interview, "*Ultima Online* was kind of a red-headed stepchild during development. Everyone at EA was focused on *Ultima IX*, which was seen as more of a sure thing. Nobody at EA really understood what *Ultima Online* was all about." But after the beta test drew 50,000 volunteers, EA made a sharp reversal. They insisted Garriott shelve *Ultima IX* and work only on *UO*.

Launched in 1997, *UO*'s unheralded success (it peaked at about 250,000 subscribers) kicked off the MMORPG industry and roused EA's interest in online games. Origin presented EA a suite of ideas for followups: a Flash Gordon-style space opera, a martial arts game using collectible electronic cards, online soccer and more. None of the proposals were sequels, spinoffs or licenses.

But EA, which sold sports and licensed games by the millions, was used to releasing sequels every year. The corporate office commissioned *Wing Commander Online*, *Privateer Online* (based on the 1993 space sim), and the licensed *Harry Potter Online*. And, inevitably, *Ultima Online 2*, which the marketing department retitled *Ultima Worlds Online: Origin*.

Staffers argued against doing *UO2*, because it would compete with *UO*. But Mattrick greenlighted it in 1999, cancelled *Wing Commander Online* and assigned its team to *UO2*. A bunch of guys who liked spaceships, reassigned to animate monsters? They quit six months

later, and *UO2* had to start over. The game never really recovered.

In March 2001 Mattrick cancelled *UO2*. Among his reasons: *UO2* would compete with the original *UO*. (EA repeated this story precisely with *Ultima X: Odyssey*, greenlighted 2002, cancelled 2004.)

Business Matters

Privateer Online: cancelled in 2000 to avoid competition with EA's big bet, *Earth and Beyond*. The core *PO* team moved to Verant (later Sony Online Entertainment) and created *Star Wars Galaxies*.

Harry Potter Online, cancelled at Origin 2001, assigned as *Hogwarts Online* to EA studio New Pencil, cancelled 2005.

Transland (a surrealist game), *Silverheart* (an RPG with design contributions from Michael Moorcock), *Firehorse* (Hong Kong John Woo-style full motion video), mainstream RTS *Technosaur*: cancelled, cancelled, cancelled....



"The business was changing radically, in ways an independent developer/publisher like Origin probably wasn't equipped to handle," says Spector. "We were becoming a blockbuster business, like the movies. When Origin's revenue and profits took a hit and EA gave us a very... aggressive budget number to hit, it was mostly my projects that got killed - I wasn't happy about that. But what were they going to do? Kill Richard Garriott projects? Chris Roberts projects?"

Spector's games (*Ultima VII Part 2: Serpent Isle*, *Ultima Underworld*, *System Shock* and many more) consistently brought returns a small studio would think quite respectable. But the economics of a billion-dollar corporation are different. For EA it makes more sense to reach for the sky with every single project. The games that die or get cancelled become tax writeoffs, and the rare hit pays for all the rest. The worst case is the mere modest success, a mediocre return on equity without corresponding tax advantages.

Spector says, "Mattrick told me I needed to make games more like Richard and Chris - swing for the fences, go for the

megahit, spend a ton to make a ton - instead of consistently turning out smaller games, making some money every year. I thought he was nuts at the time. Took me several more years to admit that, like it or not, he was right and I was wrong."

The forces that propelled Electronic Arts to success and gave it the funds to purchase Origin - the incessant marketing, the quest for blockbusters, even the ferocious executive infighting - also made it difficult to exploit Origin effectively. EA could have preserved Origin as a small design house gestating new ideas. Rather than alienating staffers and discarding the valuable *Ultima* and *Wing Commander* brands, EA could have kept Origin alive in body and spirit, just as it could have preserved the other studios it bought: Westwood and Bullfrog and Maxis and...

But though this was technically possible, it was not imaginable. Like any huge company, EA is risk-averse. The company has every incentive to play it safe and do a competent job on *Madden 2009* or *Tiger Woods 2017*.

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A *New York Times* article on EA (August 8, 2005), "Relying on Video Game Sequels," observes, "Electronic Arts plans to release 26 new games [in 2005], all but one of them a sequel, including the 16th version of *NHL Hockey*, the 11th of the racing game *Need for Speed* and the 13th of the *PGA Tour* golf game." In the article CEO Probst said sequels appeal to Wall Street investors because they have a steady following among consumers. "He added that the company had a goal of putting out at least one entirely new game every year, and had several major original games in its pipeline." Blogger Bill Harris observed, "A 'goal' of one new game a year? Damn, Larry, don't be so crazy ambitious. Remember *Icarus*."

Beeman says, "You'd like to think a marriage of EA and Origin would result in a merger of their strengths. But instead of combining EA's execution with Origin's creativity, the end result was more like Origin's execution with EA's creativity. EA limited Origin's selection of projects to sequels or other 'proven' ideas, then let Origin run wild. I think this was pretty much the introduction of that meme into the industry, but clearly we still see it today."

"I still think it was possible to make it work," Garriott says now, "except no one made time to make it work, and there were evil elements in the company."

Red Dots

In 1992 Steve Powers found in a Marketing department trashcan a group photo of the entire company. "It was taken on the steps of the Wild Basin building during the *Ultima VII* ship party," Powers recalls. "I scanned it and used it as my Windows wallpaper for years. One by one, as people left or were fired, I Photoshopped a red dot over them, blotting them out of the scene. Most of the dots tended to come in clusters around Christmas. Just before Christmas 1997, I dotted my own face



and left. For years I kept the image updated while working for other game studios, and it wasn't until fairly recently that the last face got erased."

Some notable dots:

Wing Commander designer Chris Roberts left Origin in 1996 to found the game company Digital Anvil. Roberts wrote and directed the 1999 *Wing Commander* movie (Rotten Tomatoes score: 7%). He released the space game *Freelancer* in 2003 to modest success, then left Digital Anvil to found Point of No Return Entertainment. So far the name appears apt.

Warren Spector left Origin in 1996 to work for Looking Glass, then run ION Storm Austin. In 2000 he produced the bestselling game, *Deus Ex*. The genesis of *DX* was an Origin project called *Shooter*, which EA cancelled shortly before his departure. "DX could have been an EA title!" Spector says.

Artist Denis Loubet left Origin in 1997 and is now a partner in Iron Will Games, which runs the boutique MMOG *Ashen Empires*. One of the designers once described it conceptually as "Ultima V for 10,000 players."

In 1998, Don Mattrick opened a \$54 million EA Canada development studio in Burnaby. By 2003 it had 700 employees, and Mattrick made plans to add another building. The studio currently produces sports games such as *NBA Live*, *Triple Play Baseball*, *NHL Hockey*, and *FIFA Soccer*, the best-selling sports game in the world. "Don Mattrick is a champion of the [British Columbia] high-tech industry," said studio president Sydney Williams in a 2000 interview. Last month, in a move that stunned the industry, Mattrick, the heir apparent to Larry Probst, left Electronic Arts after 23 years with the company "to seek other opportunities." EA gave no reason for his departure.

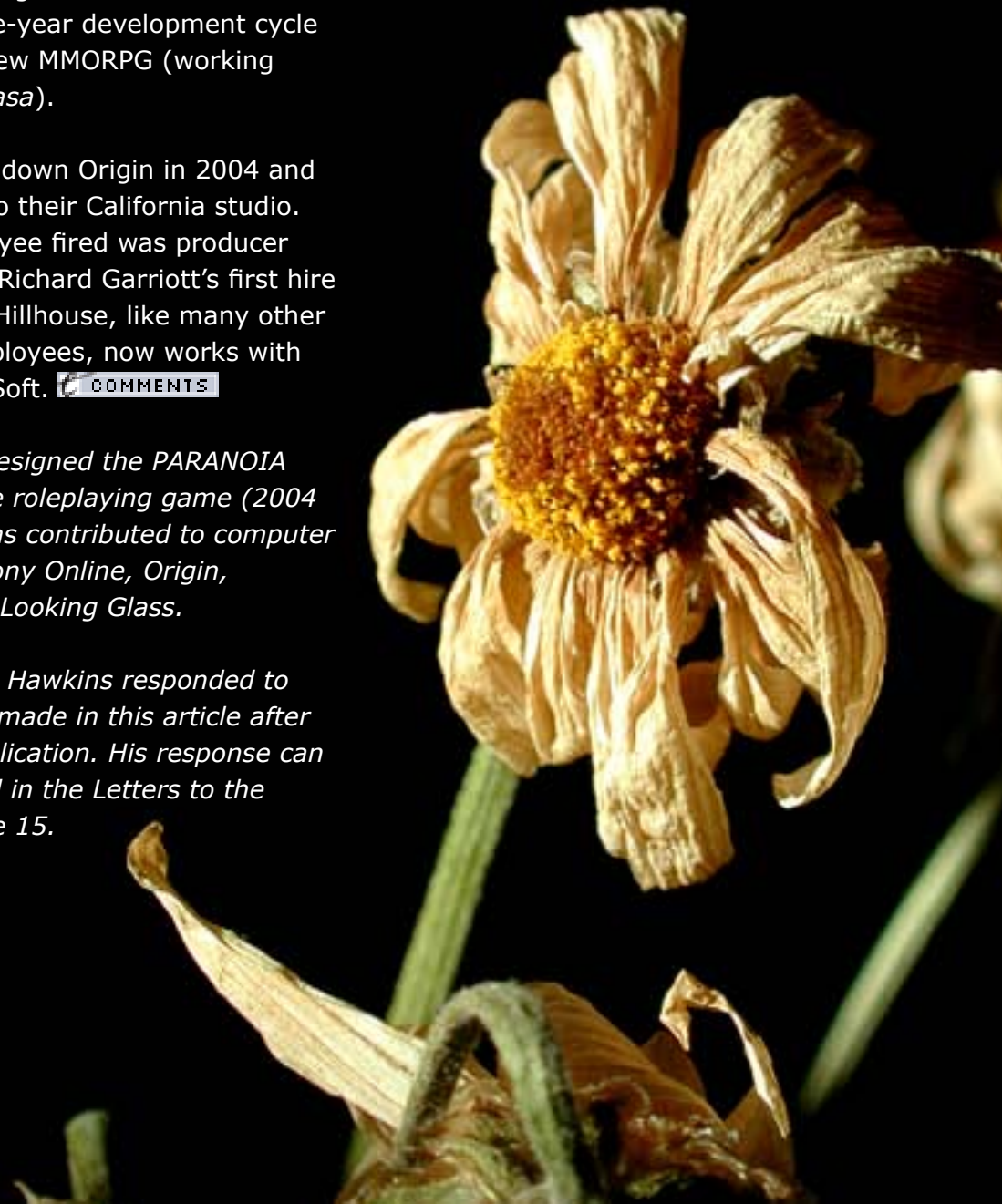
In 1999, four years after *Ultima VIII*, after colossal labor and at least two complete restarts, Origin released the disappointing *Ultima IX*. No one at the time realized this would be Origin's last new game. Richard Garriott soon left Origin and founded Destination Games (get it?), hiring most of the *Ultima IX* team EA laid off. In 2001, Destination metamorphosed into the American branch of Korean online gaming giant NCSOFT. NCSOFT Austin has published *City of Heroes* and *Guild Wars*, and is now

struggling through Year Four of a projected three-year development cycle on Garriott's new MMORPG (working title: *Tabula Rasa*).

EA finally shut down Origin in 2004 and relocated *UO* to their California studio. The last employee fired was producer Jeff Hillhouse, Richard Garriott's first hire back in 1983. Hillhouse, like many other key Origin employees, now works with Garriott at NCSOFT. [COMMENTS](#)

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

Ed. Note: Trip Hawkins responded to several points made in this article after its original publication. His response can be found in full in the Letters to the Editor for Issue 15.



CULTURE WARGAMES

by Kieron Gillen

We need a Straw Man. Any volunteers?

Ah, here we are. Could you repeat that for the crowd, Senator Deanna Demuzio of Illinois?

“Video games are not art or media. They are simulations, not all that different from the simulations used by the U.S. military in preparation for war.”

Excellent.

Senator DeMuzio is the sponsor for the current legislation being propelled via peristalsis through the bowels of the Illinois State Government. The bill would introduce a legally enforced rating system for games. The current rating system is voluntary, much like that of the film industry in the U.S. The new rating system would hold that if a retailer sells a game to a person below the age limited by the rating, they would receive a hefty fine and so on and... well, so **irrelevant**.

To be honest, I don't have an **enormous** problem with a legally-enforceable rating system for games. As a citizen of the UK, I already live in a country which has a similar (in fact, in terms of fines, more

severe) system in place. If a game features any significant measure of adult content, it goes before the BBFC and gets exactly the same rating as a film or a video.

My issue with the legislation is the reasons it is progressing. First, the text of the bill claims videogames cause definite psychological harm to players. This is, as yet, unproven. Second, related to the quote I've just taken, the position that videogames don't receive first-amendment free-speech rights as they're not actually a form of expression. Games are just simulators, virtually identical to the ones we use to train our soldiers. No one's saying anything through them.

Hmm.

Let's put aside the question, exactly in which imminent conflict the armed forces expect to utilize their finely-honed gold-coin-collecting skills. Let's take the good Senator at her word - games are almost military simulators, so not expression - and move forward

By an odd quirk of fate, I found myself in Prague a few weeks back, visiting

Bohemia Interactive. They're best known for their breakthrough soldier-sim *Operation Flashpoint*, critically acclaimed for its extreme devotion to realism. The critics weren't the only ones who noticed. After its release, they were approached by cheery governmental bodies to transform the game into a training simulator for soldiers. The resultant VBS1 is used by the US Marines and National Guard, among others, as part of their training.

So, in the case of *Flashpoint*, Senator Demuzio is very much right. *Flashpoint* is exactly the sort of game she was thinking about when making her statement, with the game and the war-simulator merely tweaked versions of one another. Where she's entirely wrong is arguing that this somehow makes the game not a form of expression.

Bohemia is actually one of the more idealistic groups of developers I've met. They talk about their moral discomfort in creating a game about a real conflict, recalling a specific project based on Vietnam. The team disposed of months of work because they thought it impossible to make a game that was both accurate and enjoyable. They spoke

of adding destructible buildings to their engine for future games, explaining the addition isn't because they want to give people the visceral thrill of seeing a building fall apart. Rather, it is because they want to create a persistent world where your successes and failures remain to remind you of your errors. Fail to defend a farm, and that burnt out shell is going to be sitting there for the rest of the game.

“Bohemia is actually one of the more idealistic groups of developers I’ve met.”

When thinking of the campaign structure for their future games, Bohemia doesn't choose a life or death struggle for supremacy between equivalent forces. While dealing with fictional situations and antagonists, they base their campaign on the assumption of American Military supremacy in any conventional war. Rather than making the game about whether the Americans will win, they make it how the Americans will win and your character's experiences along the way.

Compare and contrast with the recently released *Battlefield 2* demo, which posits the U.S. Marines and a Middle-Eastern army as equals on a technological footage. Both are rooted in the language of the military, but they're expressing wildly separate views on the nature of a conflict. *Battlefield 2* presents a beleaguered U.S. in a war which is more cowboys and Indians than anything else, while Bohemia reaches for something more akin to a comment on the nature of war using theoretical examples. Even within the genre of pseudo-military simulators, there are clear differences from game to game to what the nature of conflict actually is. Put simply, *Flashpoint's* world is a world away from *Battlefield 2's*.

The conclusion we can draw from this is that simulators aren't, by their nature, neutral. They're as prejudiced as their creators. Simulators say something about the world they describe. Simulation **is** expression.

In fact, simulation is a cornerstone of the history of most cultural forms. Putting aside the obvious history of representation in visual art, even literature demonstrates the pattern of simulation as art. What is *Anna Karenina* other than Tolstoy's simulation of society life in 19th Century Russia? "Simulation" is just another way of saying this is life, and this is how it works. The only difference is, in games, the representation created isn't static; the



“Simulation is expression”

player is placed inside and left to explore its contradictions and limits.

Restraining ourselves to classical simulator games, it's easy to pick out examples where a developer's beliefs, philosophies, prejudices or priorities reveal themselves in a game. Remember how it proved impossible to construct a decent functioning city in *Sim City* without an extensive public transport system? Imagine how the game may differ if created by an advocate of the automobile industry. Staying with Maxis games, consider the egalitarian sexual politics which permeates *The Sims*, with sexual orientation being a matter of choice and all decisions being equally respected. At the other end of the seriousness spectrum, until relatively recently Sports Interactive's incredibly thorough management simulation of the football/soccer leagues, *Championship Manager* (now *Football Manager*), had a terrible tendency for Everton to perform above what their statistical abilities should suggest. Eyebrows will remain unraised when I reveal that the Collyer brothers support a certain Liverpool-based team.

Implicit decisions in design can reveal similar thought processes in general. I remember an early review of *Civilization* written by British games-writer-turned-developer Gary Penn, well before it was enshrined as a modern classic. He was only luke-warm towards it, being disappointed by how it presented a world where everything was inevitable. You had to invent the wheel. You had to invent religion. Rather than being free to experiment in possible civilisations, it implies we live in a Liebnitzian Best of All Possible Worlds. The world is what it **had** to be, and to Gary Penn, it was a shame. I've no idea whether Sid Meier believes in something like the inevitable march of history, but *Civilization* certainly does.

In other words, a simulation is never just a simulation. Equally, freedom is rarely actually free of designer-imposed desires. Even in games with the most self-expressed mandates of "choice" for the gamer, it doesn't mean that there isn't a message. In *Deus Ex*, the generally politically liberal Ion Storm Austin created a world where you could choose between violence and pacifistic approaches, but the charismatic characters urged you towards peace while the monsters suggested violence.

A LOOK AT VIDEO GAME LEGISLATION

Inspired largely by the title *JFK Reloaded*, HB 4023 (The Safe Game Illinois Act) was introduced after strong remarks on the harmful nature of video games from Governor Rod Blagojevich late last year. The governor's originally stated goal in suggesting the legislation was to help parents who "face unprecedented challenges in monitoring and protecting their children from harmful influences." The bill bans the rental and sale of violent and sexually explicit video games to children younger than 18. The bill also requires retailers to label violent and sexually explicit video games, similar to the "Parental Advisory" label found on music CDs, and to post signs explaining the video game rating system. Retailers who violate the ban face a fine of \$1,000. Fines are also imposed on retailers who fail to properly label games or place proper signs.

While it is certain HB 4023 will be signed into law shortly, attempts to legislate video games across the United States are being met with mixed results. In California, Assembly Bill 450 (Assemblyman Leland Yee) was voted down in May by a committee of the California House of Representatives, which later reconsidered and approved it on a bipartisan, 6-4 vote. Reviving most of Yee's original bill (AB 1792) from the year before, AB450 proposes fines of up to \$1,000 for retailers selling M-rated games to children less than 17 years of age. North Carolina Senate Bill 2, also addressing game sales to minors, is currently in House committee.

The key problem for video game legislation is making the law durable enough to withstand challenge once it is approved. Federal courts have already struck down various regulations previously approved by Washington State, Indianapolis and St. Louis County in Missouri, stating they encroach upon rights protected by the First Amendment.

To be praised by someone actually worth liking, you had to restrain your more scarlet impulses. *Deus Ex's* central tenet was freedom of choice for the gamer, but it's clear what choice Ion Storm wanted you to make.

At the other end of the ethical scale, *Postal 2* is a genuinely monstrous game. You are positioned as an everyday Joe, going about everyday tasks, whose everyday frustrations lead you to entirely atypical, grotesque violence. Most troubling – and it's this that reveals there's something more than lizard-hind-brains at the developers, *Running With Scissors* – it's a choice by the player which leads to the slaughter. You are presented with the choice of sitting through a tedious delay or short-cutting it by pulling out a shotgun and starting to blast away. It's a nihilistic, sick gag, but it's only really funny because you've been made entirely complicit. They may have wanted you to, but it was you who pulled the trigger. It's a game which plays games with you.

But that moves beyond the strict "simulations" which our Senator was referencing, which only illustrates by how great a distance she missed her

“Describing Ocarina of Time as a boy-with-fairy simulator fails to really convince... or do justice.”

mark. Most games bear no relation to military simulators at all. In fact, what games mostly choose to simulate bears no relation to reality at all. Most of these games can't be called a simulation except in the very broadest sense. You could argue the base laws of physical causality, which form the majority of games, make most games simulations. However, it sits awkwardly when you're describing a simulator of something that simply doesn't (and never will) exist. Describing *Ocarina of Time* as a boy-with-fairy simulator fails to really convince... or do justice.

Except, perversely, that's what it actually feels like to play the *Zelda* pantheon. Even if it's a ludicrous, fantastical situation, it convinces you of its truth. And it's here where we find what I suspect is the central core of gaming's power and why it should be the premier form of interest of the twenty-first century. In this future, games can be

viewed as machines for artificially inducing sensation in the gamer - digital hallucinations creating holidays in places that don't exist.

Well, yes, but the counter-argument to games' rising importance is that's equally true that most forms of art or entertainment induce sensation. For example, reading any piece of fiction, from Dr. Seuss to James Joyce, is an exercise in building images and fictions in your mind. Where games differ is their interactive nature. The feedback loop between your decisions and the game involve you in a way other forms simply can't match.

Games create a cybernetic system between you and the machine, with your senses eventually expanding to possess your avatar when you've sufficiently mastered the control system. This is the absolute magic of the form, where you stop thinking, "I need to press X to

jump," and start thinking, "I'll jump." Just look at the language people use to talk about games to show how much their sense of identity has merged with their in-game character. If someone's enjoying a game, it's, "It hit me," never, "It hit my character," in the same way that a human's sense of self can expand to include the vehicle they're in ("He hit me!" versus the actually correct "He hit my car!").

Videogames are the simulator which swallows your consciousness alive and takes you to another place. While other forms just let you look at how the creators believe the world to be, games let you step inside an artificial construct and allow you to actually **be** there.

“Games create a cybernetic system between you and the machine, with your senses eventually expanding to possess your avatar.”

the Escapist

This is a fundamental power of the form and can't be overstated. There's never been anything quite like a videogame before. For this reason, Neophiles gather around games, because they're a form which still has a little bit of The Future in them. While you can argue that games are grounded in postmodernism in that they, by their nature, celebrate the death of the author and explicitly make the "reader" the driving force, the fact there's still so much to do with them makes them absolutely modernist. As the rest of pop-culture plays remix tricks with the past and can't even be bothered to start thinking about ways forward, videogames have a grand vista before them of new, uncharted possibilities. But it's not purely in potential where games are interesting. There's more than enough in their current actuality, rather than their abstract future, to make them

“While other forms just let you look at how the creators believe the world to be, games let you step inside an artificial construct and allow you to actually be there.”

interesting and worthy of discussion. Living solely for the future is just as bad as living solely for the past.

It's in that spirit we find developers and gamers denigrating themselves. The feeling seems to be that even though games are amusing enough at the moment, because they're stuck dealing with primary-coloured emotions and without the subtle blend of emotion that literature manages, games are somehow lesser. When will a game chart the emo-sque moment of seeing someone who reminds you of a person with whom you had an ill-fated affair and now you experience regret mixed with longing with a touch of realization that nothing will ever be the same again, and perhaps a little bit of the colour mauve, as well as literature can?

All this line of argument does is lacerate games for not being another form. It's bemusing why games are always compared either film or the novel, as if they were the only art-forms worth mentioning. Why aren't games compared to – say – dance or architecture, which are equally accepted as art forms and don't operate anything like the silver screen or the printed word?

This form of inferiority complex has always been endemic in any new cultural form. Last year, I finally got around to reading Aristotle's *Poetics* and was charmed to discover that large sections involve Ari discussing the relative merits between the new-kid Tragedy versus the established form of Epic Verse. He cites other critics who argue that Tragedy, featuring vulgar elements such as singing and creating works of hugely less scale, is a lesser form than the traditional Epic Verse. Aristotle plays it cute, arguing what they've analyzed as weaknesses are in fact strengths, allowing Tragedy to move people in ways Epic Verse simply can't.

I think he missed a trick in his determination to prove one superior to the other, however. Rather than being a



competition where one must triumph, the real situation is that Epic Verse succeeds in different things in different ways than does Tragedy. That's all. In other words, things in ancient Greece were exactly as they are now. The new forms are judged according to the standards of the old forms, and found wanting, until someone notes that while the new form may not excel in one area, it far exceeds the old in others.

So, no, games aren't currently as able as literature or film at capturing those

“...things in ancient Greece were exactly as they are now. The new forms are judged according to the standards of the old forms, and found wanting...”

quiet, sensitive moments. And, while I personally doubt this will prove to be the case, maybe they never will be. Really, it doesn't matter. When you manage to show me a book that captures the exhilaration of flying down a snowy slope while pulling a physically impossible contortion even a fraction as well as *SSX Tricky* does, we'll talk about which one is intrinsically superior. And please bury that absolutely vile concept that primal sensations are somehow "lesser". Saying it's vulgar is just another way devotees of another form admit they can't manage to appreciate it even a fraction as well and, through this label, put limits on what's an acceptable sensation for a work to translate.

Despite the nay-sayers, games are still in the enviable position of being capable of expressing experiences other forms have had difficulties with, where its competitors' possibilities are at least partially quenched. While film, and its

smaller-screened sister television, casting the last hundred years in soft, flickering light, still achieve magnificent things, its ideas and boundaries are increasingly well plotted. Games have barely even started.

It even helps games' case that film is a more limited form in what it can present. Games can and have consumed influences from all other arts, and integrated them into a seamless whole. While the academic fisticuffs between the mechanic-hungry Ludologists and the story-obsessed Narratologists have attempted to define what games **should** be, all either has done is make the grand totality of games smaller to fit their prejudices. As much as a classical Narratologist may snort at *Tetris* or a Ludologist take issue with a *Final Fantasy* game, to remove either from the canon lessens the import of the canon. That beloved games with real power have come from both traditions, and

successful hybrids appear at every point between the two poles, shows how foolish such attempts are. Games are bigger than that. With games' immersion through interactivity, they can abstractly take us anywhere, show us anything and allow us to do whatever we want.

So, where, precisely, is this brashly confident child of the arts going to take us in the twenty-first century?

I really don't know.

And **that's** exciting. [COMMENTS](#)

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



OMG GIRLZ DON'T EXIST ON TEH INTARWEB!!!!1

by Whitney Butts

I am a girl on the internet. Yes, I said it. A girl on the internet. There really are quite a few of us. I can type. I can play games with the best of you. And you, my friend, are about to get owned by a girl.

I've been watching and observing the internet for quite some time now. It's like a science project with the usual control and variables. The control is: I am a girl. The variables are the medium through which this fact is expressed. The results all point to the same paradoxical conclusion: I am a girl, but girls do not exist on the internet.

Case 1: Adventures in IRC

<boy1> Teleios is a girl.
<boy2> omg, r u serious?
<boy1> yup, i heard her on vent.
<boy2> omg pics, now.
<Teleios> No.
<boy1> c'mon. you're not a girl if u don't show us pics.
<Teleios> I am a girl.
<boy2> then show us a pic.
<Teleios> no.
<boy1> teleios is probably a guy using a voice thing cuz she won't show a pic.
<boy2> ya, there are no girls on the intarweb.



The above is an actual log from an IRC channel I frequent. This isn't just a regular run of the mill IRC channel, this is the channel where a large number of the players from my *World of Warcraft* server spend their time when at work, or during weekly maintenance, or just to complain to the other faction when they are dealing with gankage.

This is the story of my internet life. (I'm not quite sure if it's a good or bad thing that I have an internet life, but internet life it is.) I'm a girl, I play games and I exist on the internet. Or so you think. Time after time, I get told I'm not a girl and that I don't exist. It's happened so much that I'm beginning to think that it's true.

So, I spend some time getting to know them. Who are these mysterious creatures called girls if they don't exist on the internet? What does this mean for the men of the internet?

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<boy3> teleios you gurl, pix plz?  
<boy3> kthxxb ai
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It becomes more apparent to me that this is a real issue. Why is it I cannot be a girl if I don't show my picture? As time goes on, I get more confused. The idea of having guys obsess over the fact that a girl will not show her picture means one thing for men of the internet: They are desperate.

Case 2: In-Game Meanderings

I come home from work one night and I log into my drug of choice, *World of Warcraft*. It's late, and I want to kill. I try to maintain a low profile because sometimes being a girl on the internet gets a bit troublesome. The immature comments from the kids ("will u go out with me") and the "omg, she's an internet whore" from everyone else gets to be a bit too much. But having too many friends makes it impossible to keep the secret.

I receive an in-game tell. "Hey Teleios, would you like to run Stratholme with us, we need a priest." I reread it, scrutinizing every last detail. I'm a priest; I get a lot of group invites. Most of them get turned down. This guy, however, has proper grammar and asks

nically - well, he asked, period. It wasn't just a random group invite. I'm poor and could use a bit more coin, so I decided to give it a go. I respond to him, "Sure, why not?" We head to Stratholme.

Someone says something about Johnny Depp's character in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Captain Jack Sparrow, and I respond with "hehe Jack Sparrow is hot." The conversation in party chat follows:

[Warrior]: omg wtf dude are you gay or something?

[Rogue]: yeah dude, that's sick

[Teleios]: I'm a girl. I can think guys are hot.

[Nice Guy with Good Grammar]: Woah, you're a girl. That surprises me, you are actually a good priest. No one has died.

[Teleios]: Well yeah, girls can play games and be good you know.

[Shaman]: wow there's a girl playing horde. Most girls are so insecure they have to play alliance to make themselves pretty.

[Teleios]: Well obviously that's not a problem for me. I like my priest as



geek.



she is.

[Rogue]: can I see ur pic plz?

[Teleios]: no.

[Warrior]: come on why not?

[Teleios]: I don't show my pic to random people.

[Rogue]: ur not a girl.

[Teleios]: That's right, girls don't exist on the internet, or play games.

[Warrior]: at least not hot ones, they are all fat and stupid

[Teleios]: That's not very nice.

[Shaman]: If you are a girl, you're probably not hot either.

[Rogue]: can we go, teleios isn't a girl

I have gotten
free stuff
before, but
I don't
solicit it.

they won't show pic

[Nice Guy with Good Grammar]: Yeah, I don't believe it either. Probably someone just fishing for free stuff.

Again, a girl who doesn't show her picture on the internet is not a girl and the only girls on the internet are actually guys who are just trying to get free stuff. Don't get me wrong, I have gotten free stuff before, but I don't solicit it. Not like those "girls" who sit around dancing for tips in game. You know who you are, and you know you're not a real girl. Real girls don't exist on the internet.

Case 3: The Instant Message

I have befriended boys. We really just play the game together. It's nice to have someone I can always do something with, or bug if another person is needed in game, or even just someone to talk to when I don't have anything else I can do. Boy 4 and I are chatting about random nonsensical things. We talk about people in game and whether they look like expected upon seeing real life pictures. I show him my picture. The following conversation occurs:

Teleios: <link to my picture>

Boy 4: omg wtf

Teleios: uh....

Boy 4: Is that you?

Teleios: Um, yeah.

Boy 4: wtf. Really?

Teleios: Yeah.

Once the pictures actually come out, the result is shock followed by denial and disbelief. The boys have a tendency to think it's really someone's sister or a random picture found on the internet, but not who I really am. Remember, girls don't exist on the internet.

Case 4: Teamspeak and Ventrilo

Here's where the real test comes in. Teamspeak and Ventrilo are commonly used voice communication programs. I'm not afraid to get on one, but for the longest time I was afraid to talk.

A few months back, I joined a rather large raiding guild in *WoW*. Ventrilo was required for raiding, to allow for better organization and quicker communication. I didn't have a problem with logging on and listening, but I was very nervous about talking. There is one other girl in the guild who refuses to talk, and I very quickly learned why. A girl talking on a voice communication program results in the same accusation every time: It's a big facade.

I made the mistake of speaking one day, out of the blue. I didn't give any warning to anyone, and this was in the middle of a boss fight during the raid. The main

tank calls out, "Teleios, heal me," to which I responded, "Okay, I got you." I didn't even think about it, but what was to follow was perhaps one of the most comical online experiences I've ever had in my internet life.

"Who was that?"

"Was that Teleios?"

"No, it couldn't have been."

"Whose girlfriend was that?"

"Get your girlfriend off Vent!"

The voices were coming from all directions. People got loud, people were talking on top of each other, the channel got laggy from all the chaos. Raid members were dying because people stopped paying attention. No one was really sure who had spoken. I very suddenly got flooded with in game tells: "Was that you?" I didn't reply to any, I just kept my mouth shut, very quickly realizing my mistake. A few people took it to the next level, making some extremely harsh comments about girls, and girls playing the game. I didn't talk for the rest of the raid. It's not uncommon for guys to make their girlfriends speak when a lot of people are listening. I figured I could play it off, but I got confronted by the guild master.

"Was that you?" he asked.

"Yeah, it was," I replied.

"I'm really sorry everyone freaked out, I don't think they are very used to having a girl around."

"It's okay, I should have known better than to speak."

"Well, actually, I wanted to ask you something."

"Oh?" I asked with interest.

"Yeah, I was just wondering if you could speak on Ventrilo more often. I really think it would help everyone if they heard you talk more often. Then they could get used to the fact that you are a girl. Maybe then they will be a bit mature."

"I guess I can, but I'm not going to take any crap from anyone."

"It's okay, I understand."

I wasn't exactly sure how to respond to this request. The guild master was asking me to talk more so boys could get used to hearing a girl on Ventrilo. Since then, more "girls" have joined the guild, and I'm not the only girl that speaks anymore. The reactions still don't cease to amaze me, and whenever a new person joins and hears me speak, I can envision the double take they make,

indicated by the long silence after I speak.

Of course, most "girls" on Ventrilo are simply just guys using voice translators or having their sisters and girlfriends speak for them. Girls don't exist on the internet.

Case 5: Meeting In Person

I've met a boy from the internet in person before. The only problem was I don't think he was able to actually verify that I was a girl. Reason being, he never looked at me. It really bothers me when people don't give me eye contact while talking to them, and he spent the entire adventure staring at the ground. I like to talk; I could talk for hours. But I can't talk to the top of someone's head. Am I really that scary? Or was the boy just afraid to face the truth that I am a girl? Maybe he was just trying to perpetuate the notion that girls don't exist on the internet, and as long as he stared at his shoes, his zealous beliefs were justified. Well, the proof that I am a girl on the internet is long gone now. His inability to scientifically evaluate the situation invariably means he'll return to his friends with the all-so-popular



conclusion: Girls do not exist on the internet.

I also meet people at E3 and various other conferences. I go to these conferences and I enjoy myself, but I've noticed that very few people actually talk to me. It's almost as if there's a giant bubble around me or I'm completely invisible. Wherever I go, the crowd splits or I'm not seen at all, and someone comes running into me, knocking me over.

I'll try and wave at someone and get no recognition. I'll walk up to someone and say, "Hey, what's the PVP like in this game?" The presenter will look at me in shock for a minute, whisper to a friend and then attempt to explain to me what PVP is. I know what PVP is; otherwise I wouldn't have asked the question.

I live in a bubble where the internet does not exist and am invisible in places pertaining to the web. I do not know what PVP is and I've never touched a first person shooter before. Why must I be treated like I am ignorant to gaming and the internet? The answer is simply that girls do not exist on the internet.

The Summary

My adventures on the internet have led me to learn many things about myself. I'm not a girl and I do not exist on the internet. I do not play games and do not know how to turn on my computer. I did not build my own PC, nor did I buy a video game. I do not own a headset and do not play first person shooters and MMOGs. My life on the internet is an intricate, well planned lie.

When I look at myself, I see a girl on the internet and a girl with an internet life. I see a girl who loves to play games and kill the dirty Alliance faction in *WoW*. I see a girl who can bunny hop with the best of them and keep her kills higher than her deaths in *Counter Strike*. I can talk the talk and walk the walk. But I am not a girl on the internet, because as I've been told before, I do not exist.

Well, this is me telling you, I do exist. Owned. [COMMENTS](#)

Whitney Butts is the "woman behind the curtain" at The Escapist. Her existence revolves around the fact that Mathematics is the key to the universe, and that she alone is the square root of all evil.





THE LEFT BEHIND

by Joe Blancato

I'm a gaming hobo. While my bindle is digital, I'd still like to pretend it resembles a red and white handkerchief slung over my shoulder as I meander from game to game, from genre to genre, in search of "home." I've pondered the aspects of my nomadic rambling before, dueling fanboys and pragmatists, while defending my position that I'm not a picky whiner but someone in search of a gaming identity. Realization of my search came a few years ago, when it hit me that it just didn't make sense to play *Quake III* when *Quake II* was so much better. Good luck justifying that epiphany to the collective crowd that is mainstream gaming; according to the groupthink, "it's better because it's new, and you're a grognard if you can't adapt." I never really earned the "gamer" title because I couldn't fall in love with anything put in front of me.

I don't consider myself a gamer; I consider myself someone who does things, and sometimes plays games. I read and talk and write about them more than I actually play them; I'm a fan of the ideal, the hype, the **promise**. I've argued design theory with masters of code to the point of profanity, but when the games finally hit shelves, all I could do was read the box quotes, shrug my shoulders, and wait for the Next Big Thing.

I know I'm not alone. I've seen entire tribes of refugees during my travels, people fixated on one dead game or another. There are die-hard *Ultima Online* fans, *SubSpace* freaks and *Fallout* geeks. As the Great City of Gaming builds itself on top of its history, an undercurrent of homeless gamers wander between high-poly games, in search of their previous gaming peak. Rarely do they find it. The tribes converge from time to time, occasionally trading stories, their artifacts from ages past. The common theme is always the same: Where's home?

So many games are going by the wayside that even The Great Ones are starting to fall off the map. As with anything great, it's hard for us to say goodbye. The games become a strange version of home, a personal place into which people channel themselves. And the ones without crap on the walls are hard to let go, because you're never quite sure when the next one you'd show off to your friends is going to come around.

Some people have just given up. They're the disgruntled faction of "classic gamers" that peaked during an ancient

era and refuse to modernize, whether it's because of an objection to new commercialism, the new emphasis of graphics over content, or to a controller with more buttons than an arbitrary figure they've allotted in their heads. They're the old timers of gaming, the people who liked it better when "then" was "now," and make no bones about telling everyone why.

The online era has only made things worse. Other hobos can now congregate and lament over new games together, and even delve into those ultra-addictive MMOGs, only to be left wanting months later. A few lucky ones find what it is they're looking for; *World of Warcraft* (WoW) has garnered numbers like nothing else, which has injected hope into the ranks of a surprisingly optimistic crowd. Curmudgeons rule the community, but the majority of gamers are more than willing to give anything a chance. They were genuinely interested in Molyneux's *Fable*, even though it didn't meet anyone's expectations. You can't find home without searching, or so the vibe goes.

Finding a game to love is definitely not hopeless for anyone. Companies are

**I'm a fan of the ideal,
the hype, the promise.**



beginning to realize people had good ideas beyond, "Hey! Let's add polygons to that!" and are re-envisioning old classics in some form or another. Bethesda Softworks owns the rights to the *Fallout* license, which should elicit a collective deafening cry of joy from every fan community in the world. *The Bard's Tale* remake sent a wave of jubilation through many circles, rippling from deep within central communities. And while many of my fellow hobos might not want

to admit it, good games **have** been made since the late '90s. *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines* by the now-defunct developer Troika is guaranteed to bring some new refugees into the mix. *Katamari Damacy* has brought jaded gamers out in droves, all tittering over how much fun they're having.

Maybe *Katamari Damacy* is the secret. It's not all that deep – you run around with a giant ball of stuff which you convert into a bigger ball of stuff. It's simple, it's fun, and most importantly, it's new. We hobos understand it's hard to go home again, but finding a new place to dwell is almost as exciting as taking off your boots in familiar territory. Strange innovations from the Orient might just usher in a new era of gaming

for the old school. Maybe it's only because it's hard to have an old school mentality toward novelties previously untouched by Western hands. Or maybe those same novelties are created by groups who know how to instill **spirit** into games instead of just the standard "more is better" formula.

The revolving door of the gaming homeless never stops spinning, each generation of consoles and video cards sucking in new hopefuls and spitting out disoriented derelicts just looking for "not *Halo 2*, damn it!" The horde is finally getting big enough to collapse upon itself; sharp developers are beginning to listen to our beleaguered cries. As I continue shuffling around, I bump into other zombies like me, some of them

occasionally lighting up, snapping out of their melancholy like a coma victim emerging from the ether of the subconscious, discovering their latest place to squat for a time, or even taking up residence with a new lease on their gaming lives. These awakenings leave me wondering, when is it my turn?

Maybe tomorrow. [COMMENTS](#)

Joe Blancato is a Content Editor for The Escapist Magazine.

FROM '94 TO INFINITY: BEFORE HALO

by Pat Miller

Imagine, if you will, a first-person shooter game. Imagine it set in a science fiction world where humanity is on the verge of extinction from mysterious alien forces; imagine that it is beautifully rendered in the level design and complemented by a compelling storyline, and imagine that it is loaded with exotic alien weaponry that you can unleash on your friends and enemies in adversarial and cooperative multiplayer games alike. Not too hard to picture, right? Now - and here's the tricky part - imagine this game as having been released **eleven years ago**.

Is that a bit more difficult to envision? It shouldn't be, because you, as the kind of classy, educated gamer - you know, the kind who reads magazines that are distributed exclusively in PDF format - that you are, should have already played Bungie's *Marathon* trilogy back during the formative years of the FPS. Right now, Bungie's *Halo 2* is a phenomenon that has won critical acclaim, sold over \$125 million in its first day of sales, and perhaps most significantly, drawn in the Average Joe to the wonderful world of online multiplayer gaming via Xbox Live. Anyone who wishes to understand this success would do well to investigate its roots in *Marathon* on the Macintosh.



Marathon's game design has left its mark, not only in *Halo*, but also in the genre as a whole. While the rest of the industry was collectively soiling themselves over *Doom's* gritty texture maps and the **totally awesome BFG 9000**, the Bungie folks were quietly pioneering FPS development with things like secondary fire modes, objective-based missions instead of red keys and blue doors, plots that aren't mind-numbingly boring, and so on. The fact that *Marathon's* gameplay remains fresh and modern even now stands as a

The fact that *Marathon's* gameplay remains fresh and modern even now stands as a testament to its pioneering game design

testament to its pioneering game design (or a depressing indicator of the video game industry's stagnation, if your cup is half empty).

But beyond all this lies a very strong sense of character; the levels range from the dark, claustrophobic corridors of the colony ship *Marathon* to wide open, colorful alien landscapes, and the weapons have their own quirky personalities with names like the TOZT-7 Napalm Unit, the WSTE-M5 Combat

Shotgun, and the trusty old SPNKR rocket launcher (which lives on in *Halo*). The multiplayer action, with game modes like King of the Hill and Kill the Guy with the Ball instead of just boring old deathmatch, was the LAN party staple for Mac gamers well into the *Quake III Arena* era. And the plot, which put you in the shoes of a cybernetically enhanced Security Officer, left you at the mercy of a somewhat psychotic AI in a war between human and alien, and narrated everything to you by way of strategically placed computer terminals; *Marathon's*

storyline has a sublime perfection in its progress from straightforward alien-killing in *Marathon* and *Marathon 2* to a disturbing, disorienting tale of alternate realities, dreams, time travel, and godhood in *Marathon Infinity*, and establishes a narrative style that is faintly echoed in the plot twists of *Halo*. Yes, perhaps some bizarre sector of the gaming elite frown upon the populist *Halo 2* during their secret *Katamari*-and-caviar parties, but neither they nor anyone else can deny that the series'

...few modding groups will find themselves so inspired as to port the signature *Marathon* multiplayer gameplay to another game engine, a la the *Marathon: Rampancy* mod for *Unreal Tournament*.

simple elegance is a product of years and years of toiling in relative obscurity.

But where *Halo 2* brought the modern first-person shooter into the hands of the Everyman, *Marathon* inspired the exact opposite reaction. *Marathon* was Mac-only, and rather than opening doors for a new class of average gamers, *Marathon* instead drew in the few and the proud: namely, those who not only **owned** a Macintosh back in 1994, but **played games** on it. And so computer-illiterate creative types and the aging-hippie system administrators and the children of yuppie parents and all the other predecessors of today's mocha-frappuccino-and-PowerBook kids banded together out of love for perhaps the only Mac game that was their own - and in doing so, created one of the most tightly knit and zealously productive gaming communities ever.

The *Marathon* community has its roots in Usenet forums, befitting its age, and it

began as any gaming community would. There was something about *Marathon* - about making flawless one-shot kills with the rocket launcher across the Thunderdome, maybe about those last few seconds of a game of King of the Hill - that forged a common bond across the computer networks of the world. People would swap war stories and game replays, puzzle over the plotline, run their lunchtime tournaments on unsuspecting office networks, make a few new maps - such is the life of any gaming clique. But where, say, the serious *Doom II* players would remain happily with a few shared pursuits, the *Marathon* players pursued all of this with a ferocious dedication that would warm the hearts of any game developer.

One particularly poignant example: the current obsession with speed runs and technical proficiency, popularized by the classic "Quake Done Quick" films, could very well include *Marathon's* "Vidmaster" films in its hereditary tree. Not content

to merely play games better, the *Marathon* elite, inspired by Bungie's official Vidmaster Challenge, gave rise to a long-standing tradition of masochism by worshipping at the altar of the Vidmaster; that is, the players who would record their feats of mastery by not only beating levels as quickly and skillfully as they can, but also by adding a certain amount of cocky flair to them by killing all moving things (friends and enemies alike), using grenades for locomotive purposes, not using any weapons but the fists, and above all, never retreating - all, of course, on the hardest difficulty setting possible.

The community was composed of more than just dedicated players; while people will forever sing the praises of the *Half-Life* modification community for

Marathon's story uses computer terminal gibberish, numerology, Shakespeare, the Bible, ancient mythology, and complex mathematics, all within the context of its own rich backstory...

achievements like *Day of Defeat* and *Counter-Strike*, the *Marathon* modders are no less significant. *Marathon* has its share of well-done total conversions, as any decent modding group would; and indeed, many of the fan-made adventures are no less compelling and haunting than the actual series canon itself, thanks in part to the inclusion of Bungie's own mapmaking tools with *Infinity*. But once again, the fans' devotion carried them far above and beyond the call of duty; few modding groups will find themselves so inspired as to port the signature *Marathon* multiplayer gameplay to another game engine, a la the *Marathon: Rampancy* mod for *Unreal Tournament*. Even fewer modding groups will ever be able to coordinate the resources and manpower necessary to port all of the *Marathon* trilogy in its entirety to run on any modern computer - Macintosh or PC - in high-resolution graphics and support for true Internet play, neither of which were supported by Bungie's original product. Yes, that's right; currently, the entire *Marathon* trilogy is available for free download, and it's playable on your home computer with Aleph One, a labor of love produced by *Marathon's* faithful.

Perhaps the most impressive display of Marathon dedication resides in the group of people surrounding the *Marathon's* Story web site. Maintained by webmaster Hamish Sinclair, the site catalogs each terminal screen of plot exposition present in the *Marathon* trilogy, plus years of communal discussion and investigation. This plot discussion is no teenage "ZOMG AERIS IS ALIVE" fluff; *Marathon's* story uses computer terminal gibberish, numerology, Shakespeare, the Bible, ancient mythology, and complex mathematics, all within the context of its own rich backstory, and so it takes people literate in each subject to decipher each message. Many games might have a secret message, a developer's room, maybe a hidden level or two; not so many games will present the raw hexadecimal code of a secret level file in the game's own narrative text, and not so many communities have the raw ingenuity and talent necessary to spot it. For years, people tore apart and analyzed everything they could - the hex code of the data files, hidden messages in the manuals, even the bar codes on the game boxes - and found clues and easter eggs that helped them piece the story together bit-by-bit. To the fans, Bungie had made a literary



Marathon and Halo: Bungie's Connected Universe

by Nova Barlow

Bungie's storytelling introductions to upcoming games have become classic, with the most recent example being the Haunted Apiary alternate reality game (2004, funded by Microsoft, developed by 4orty2wo Entertainment, and approved by Bungie), also known as "ilovebees" (ILB).

Introduced in a movie trailer, "ilovebees.com" appeared to be a simple site about beekeeping that had been hacked. Players quickly determined that the site, and the messages that appeared on it, were connected to *Halo 2*. Story wise, the activation of a mysterious artifact in 2552 caused a military ship's A.I. to split into multiple personalities. One of these personalities traveled through space and time to land on a web server in the year 2004.

After landing, the A.I.'s mission to repair herself involved players worldwide, who answered payphones and searched websites to gain clues and, together, put these puzzle pieces together. This game culminated in a live event spread across four cities (San Francisco, New York, Chicago and Austin) - a chance to play *Halo 2* before the official release on November 9th.

One of the many links between *Marathon* and *Halo* is a common term called "rampancy," used in both series to signify when a computer A.I. goes "insane." Rampancy occurs when a computer A.I.'s self-awareness is enhanced to the point when it learns and develops greater mental abilities. In *Marathon*, all three A.I.s of the UESC Marathon become rampant. To announce *Halo*, the "Cortana Letters" featured a *Halo* character that talked about her reality. The A.I. in ILB - the "Operator" or "Melissa" (the name, incidentally, comes from the Greek bee nymph who nursed Zeus) - demonstrated the effects of rampancy in a "smart" A.I., after she continued to function after her theoretical lifespan of seven years. Regardless of the fact Bungie has not considered the ILB material to be Bungie/*Halo* canon to date (yet approved the ILB material), this recurring theme has proven to be solid enough to forge a connection between these games for hardcore fan and casual observer alike.

the Escapist

masterpiece, and they were determined to appreciate it, *Quake* and *Unreal* be damned.

And Bungie paid attention. One particularly notable anecdote from the *Marathon's* Story website details the mystery of the Lost Network Packets; at the site's inception, a few inconsistencies in the given dates and times of certain events arose that made the *Marathon* plot a little bit confusing. Rather than retroactively writing over the troublesome dates in the sequel, Bungie sent out a little tidbit side-story email to Sinclair entitled the "Lost Network Packets" that managed to rectify the dates - the date switching was intentional on the part of one of the story's AIs, said the protagonist of the Packets, as part of a defensive attempt to confuse alien hackers. Another tidbit came at the very beginning of *Halo's* development, where mysterious emails originating from Bungie office computers with cryptic writing styles made their way to the site by way of someone named Cortana (who would later be known as the *Halo* AI character). It wasn't enough for Bungie to create *Marathon*; they did their damndest to

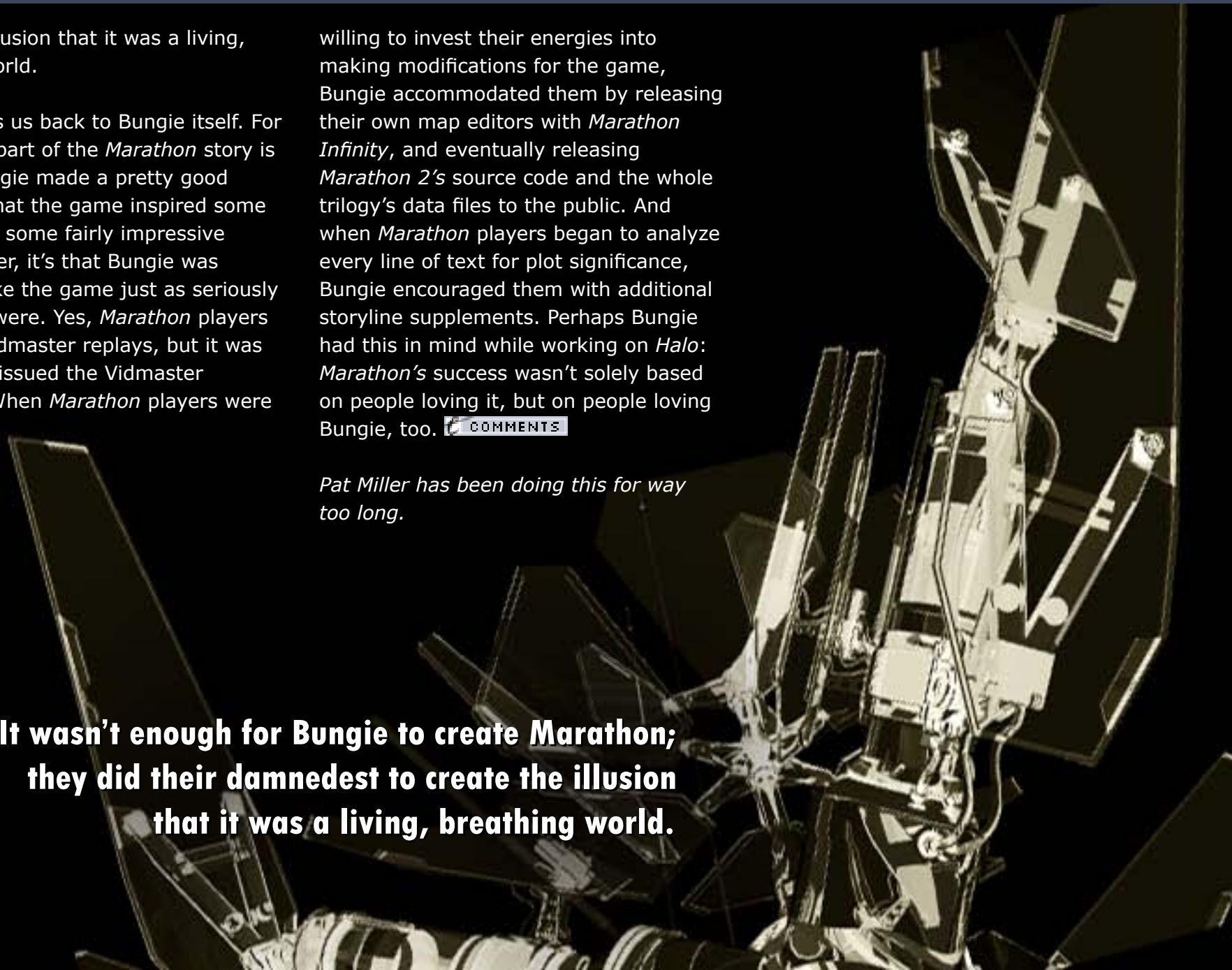
create the illusion that it was a living, breathing world.

Which brings us back to Bungie itself. For the notable part of the *Marathon* story is not that Bungie made a pretty good game, nor that the game inspired some people to do some fairly impressive things. Rather, it's that Bungie was willing to take the game just as seriously as the fans were. Yes, *Marathon* players made the Vidmaster replays, but it was Bungie who issued the Vidmaster Challenge. When *Marathon* players were

willing to invest their energies into making modifications for the game, Bungie accommodated them by releasing their own map editors with *Marathon Infinity*, and eventually releasing *Marathon 2's* source code and the whole trilogy's data files to the public. And when *Marathon* players began to analyze every line of text for plot significance, Bungie encouraged them with additional storyline supplements. Perhaps Bungie had this in mind while working on *Halo: Marathon's* success wasn't solely based on people loving it, but on people loving Bungie, too. [COMMENTS](#)

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long.

**It wasn't enough for Bungie to create *Marathon*;
they did their damndest to create the illusion
that it was a living, breathing world.**



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DON'T ROLEPLAY THE BUGS, And Other Lessons of *Neverwinter Nights*

By Max Steele

On screen, my module – the second I've created with the Aurora toolset for *Neverwinter Nights* – is finally proceeding smoothly. Jon is playing a fighter/sorcerer; Newton, a ranger; Brian, a paladin; and Scott has a rogue. They're in the groove, fighting smartly, working as a team, a dozen years of collective pen-and-paper experience brought into real time to dispatch the pack of Worgs I've just flung at them.

The fight is just wrapping up, with Newton slaying the last dire wolf, when he gets weird on us. "Woof," Newton suddenly texts. "Arooooooo!"

What's going on here? Newton is a consummate roleplayer, and always in character when he types in the public

channels. And unlike the other players, he's a computer game novice. The two – his earnest roleplay and his computer RPG virginity – are of course correlated.

"sup, newt?" texts Jon. "y u barkin?"

It annoys me every time Jon speaks. Jon used to be even better at staying in character than Newton, back in the days of face to face. That gift is long since gone, devoured by the gaping maw of MMORPGs.

MMORPGs are, in fact, what has led us here, to *Neverwinter Nights*, to my second module. Jon, Brian, Scott, Newton and I used to all game together, in high school and college. Now, this is back before *D&D* got dumbed down.

We had to keep track of weapon speed factors and “to hit versus armor” adjustments. There was an entirely separate rules system just for pummeling. I mean, you had to be *dedicated* to be a gamer back then. And we were.

Years later, some of the band gathered together on the PvP server of *Asheron’s Call* in a noble attempt to recapture these halcyon days. That experience was, shall we say, less than successful.

Jon still bears the scars, unable to speak in complete sentences or roleplay for more than five seconds. Scott refuses to play characters who aren’t chaotic-evil. Brian keeps the online strategy guides handy to ensure he always has the optimal build for his dual-wielding dark elf paladin/ninja. Newton is the only one of us who stayed whole, because he stayed away from MMORPGs.

Despite our scars, our desire for re-capturing that tabletop experience didn’t go away. When *Neverwinter Nights* came out, I investigated: Could *NWN* be the answer? I played through the campaign single player, and tested it out with

cooperative play. I downloaded modules designed by players like myself. I installed the Aurora toolset and learned about scripting. And I realized, with that deep, soul-searing inner knowledge that leads people to make the most foolish decisions of their lives, that this **was** the Holy Grail. Using Aurora, I could succeed where Turbine, Verant, and all others had failed. I could re-create the pen and paper experience.

I analyzed where the computer RPG (CRPG) experience had gone wrong and what I had to do to change it. Death—a slap on the wrist in CRPGs—would be restored to its full tabletop menace. “Friendly Fire” would be on, forcing players to think about tactics and position rather than just fireball everything they encountered. Restrictions on resting would keep wizards in check. Yes, yes!

I feverishly created a manifesto—a **mission statement**—of what my modules would be like, and emailed it to my friends. I wrote:

1. The adventures will have plots and puzzles, not just hack-and-slash. Items with glowing grey names (“half-eaten corpse”) should be examined for clues to the story.
2. There will be no respawning! Dead is dead.
3. There will be no resting in the dungeon proper. You’ll need to return to base or find a safe spot.
4. This will be a Full PVP server, meaning you can damage each other. This is for realism’s sake, not because I want you to slay each other.

Everyone read the manifesto and agreed that these rules were the greatest gift to computer roleplaying since *Ultima VII*. I puffed up with pride.

And I realized, with that deep, soul-searing inner knowledge that leads people to make the most foolish decisions of their lives, that this was the Holy Grail.



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The next day, we played my first masterpiece, a spelunking adventure in a maze of caves. The finale was handcrafted with care: The grim lair of giant spiders was dark, with special lighting effects. A chittering sound effect was set to go off as the party approached, and I had tiled the entry area with blood, webbing, and a highlighted “half-eaten corpse.” Examining the corpse revealed that it “has been gnawed by something with great and terrible fangs. The stain of venom corrupts the wounds.”

The time came for the party to approach. Scott, the rogue, was on point, but he had his sound turned off and wasn’t alerted by the chittering, and there was too much “junk” painted in the entryway for him to be warned by the body. Jon and Newton rushed in to help when Scott blundered into the spiders, but the paladin, Brian, was AFK getting a soda. By the time he arrived, the rest of the party was dead, and then a second later, so was Brian.

A few minutes later, after I had resurrected everyone (just this **one time** you understand), Jon managed to accidentally hit Scott with a spell and killed him again. Since player-inflicted deaths shouldn’t count as, you know, Real Deaths, I raised Scott again. The rest of the session played smoothly, and the group assured me that this module was The Best Module they’d ever played. Of course, they had suggestions for improvement...

I grudgingly turned off the PVP flag for the second module, but kept the permanent death rule from my manifesto. I didn’t want the party to think there were no consequences to battle. Just because **they** had played badly didn’t mean it was my job to coddle them. However, in a nod to the difficulty of last session, I increased the experience point award for killing monsters—*Neverwinter Nights* defaulted to a 10% reward, and I upped it to 25%. Since there was more risk in my module from fewer, more intelligent NPCs than in traditional hack and slash CRPGs, it made sense to amp up the reward, I explained to the party.

With these changes in place, I designed the second adventure in a mere 28 hours. The module called for the group to kill an orc chief in a faraway fort. I planned for them to travel overland through a vast 64-tile by 64-tile wilderness zone to meet a mysterious druid, Kostas, who would then give them the information they needed to get to an orc village and complete their mission of slaying the chieftain.

What a beauty my wilderness zone was! I lovingly handcrafted it with immersive content and encounters (a dryad with an ogre problem! A goblin hunting party! A brook running into a lake with nearby fawns and deer!) and I completely scripted the main encounter with Kostas, the druid. I created an NPC faction system which tied Kostas into the entire ecology of the region, enemy to the goblins and orcs, friend to the deer and dryad.

When they zoned in (it took only about twenty minutes on Newton’s dial-up), the party looked at the woodlands for about five seconds. Then they began



systematically killing every living thing they encountered in the zone that wasn't labeled "Kostas." Fawns drinking at the brook – dead. Deer bounding across the woods – dead. "Why are you slaying all the wildlife?" I demanded.

"dood... 2.5 x normal xp for killing," explained Jon.

"Need to level up to fight orcs," admitted Scott.

"I'm hunting to gather dried venison for our overland expedition," rationalized Newton.

After about thirty minutes of tile-by-tile slaughter, the party finally reached Kostas, the quest-giver, their only source for the directions to the hidden orc fort. It was after Kostas killed Brian that I realized that my faction script had now set Kostas to be the party's enemy. Too many deer had been killed, you see.

Scott, Jon, and Newton soon joined Brian and the deer in the land of the dead and the zone fell into a grim quiet. "You weren't **supposed** to kill the deer! Now I have to raise you from the dead and the module is **ruined!**" I typed as loudly as I could.

"If you didn't want us to kill the deer, why'd you put them there?" asked Scott.

"BECAUSE REAL FORESTS HAVE DEER! IT'S MORE IMMERSIVE THIS WAY!"

At that moment, I felt that the problem with computer roleplaying games wasn't the games. It was the players. They just didn't **get it**. Here I was with friends who were perfectly good tools for executing my storylines in the living room, but put them behind a keyboard and they simply couldn't be bothered to try and do what they were supposed to do.

After a few minutes of further hazing, the group glumly agreed to try harder to play right. I re-spawned them and told them where the orc fort was hidden. Play commenced. Finally, the module began to proceed smoothly. The rogue found and disarmed the cunning orcish traps. The heroes battled through the guard at the bridge. They dispatched the first band of orcs. And then they came to the worgs. (Like all hidden orc forts, this one was guarded by a fierce pack of worgs.)

This is the aftermath of the battle with the worgs: The worgs are dead. Newton is growling. Jon, Scott, and Brian are silently wondering what the hell is going on. The confusion goes on for literally forty-five minutes.

"Why are you howling like a wolf, Newton? Speak English!" I demand.

"Grrrr... I am lyncathropic! I have transformed into a wolf! Woof!"

"If you didn't want us to kill the deer, why'd you put them there?" asked Scott.



Even with a hands-on gamemaster and a small group who knew each other, the unpredictability of the computer environment wreaked havoc.

"Newton, why do you think your character has lycanthropy?" I text.

"OOC: My avatar has been replaced with a wolf. I must have gotten infected during the fight and transformed!"

"your lousy dialup connection sux. u got a lag-bug!" says Jon. He's right, I realize. Newton's modem connection is prone to terrible lag. Somehow during the fight his game client has replaced the avatar of his ranger with an image of one of the worgs. We're still seeing his ranger, but he's seeing a wolf. It's a bizarre bug.

And we've lost almost an hour because Newton has been roleplaying the bug.

"Newton, stop growling. Stop roleplaying! Log out and log back in and let's get this module going again."

That moment was the turning point when I began to realize: Even with a hands-on gamemaster and a small group who knew each other, the unpredictability of the computer environment wreaked havoc. How, I pondered, could I hope to capture the essence of immersive tabletop play when I couldn't even protect the players from bugs?

Everything went downhill from there. The escape route from the orc fort took the players into an underground tunnel swarming with fire beetles and an umber hulk. The tunnel was another favored area where I had lovingly spent hours crafting and designing. The beetles fed on mushrooms I had painted onto the tiles throughout the tunnel network. The umber hulk fed on the beetles. A special spawn script created the fire beetles and

caused them to trek through the tunnels, while the umber hulk (a very powerful monster) was set to a faction opposite the beetles. My thinking was the group would lead the beetles to the umber hulk and use them to distract the creature while they snuck out.

A few minutes after entering the tunnel, Brian, Scott, Jon, and Newton were all dead and it was my fault. The script I'd use to place the fire beetles caused them to endlessly re-spawn. That wasn't a problem when the beetles were just being led to the umber hulk, but the party had no idea there was an umber hulk in the dungeon. So they had just kept fighting... and fighting...

Now it was their turn to level the criticism on me. How were they **supposed** to know what to do? Was it

immersive to have a spawn on endless repeat? After sitting through their righteous anger, I raised them all from the dead and we went on to finish the module. But the joy was gone.

My manifesto was in shambles. My efforts at deep content and story-telling had been at best mediocre. Roleplaying had proven unworkable. What little immersion there was died at the hands of designer error, lag, client bugs, or player mistake. There was no fear of consequences – rather than be an impactful and tragic event, death was a comedy.

I went back to the drawing board, and re-worked everything for my next module using what I had learned. I replaced my sprawling 64x64 zones with smaller areas that would be easier to load. I eliminated subtle clues in favor of short, simple and direct messages that couldn't be missed, from NPCs that couldn't be fought. I got rid of "immersive" fauna and flora that were just for visual enhancement, and added random encounters with random spawns to give the players the experience points they craved. I added instant re-spawn on death at a cost of gold and experience. I let the players rest wherever and whenever they wanted, and let them pause the fights if they needed to. And I told the players not to worry about roleplaying and just

to have fun. In short, I created every other CRPG out there.

We played it the following week. It didn't have a damn thing to do with tabletop gaming but it was the one and only **successful** session we had. It was also the last session.

I couldn't go on. Each module had taken me twenty to thirty hours to create, and ultimately where I ended was nothing different from—and certainly no improvement on—what was already out there. Even with a hands-on gamemaster, and a crew of gamers who knew each other from their face-to-face days, I hadn't been successful in my quest to emulate the tabletop experience. The Holy Grail was forever outside my reach.

The gameplay of computer RPGs doesn't feel like *D&D* in the old days and it never will. Trying to design a computer game that plays like a tabletop RPG just makes for a broken computer game. It seems obvious now, but like so many designers before me, I had to learn it for myself.

I'm left with a new found respect for the craft of computer game design, and a strange sense of gratitude I didn't learn the lesson with a \$5 million budget and a team of twenty under my control.

And Newton—next time we play online together, please don't roleplay the bugs.

[COMMENTS](#)

Max Steele is an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. When not actively being mysterious, he passes his time manipulating time and space to fit his plans for world domination.

...I created every other CRPG out there.



Obscurity Below the Radar

by John Szczepaniak

I want to tell you something about gaming below the radar. I want to speak about an entire subculture that is so awe-inspiring it causes you to re-evaluate the concept of gaming.

Normal retail methods make you can feel limited by the videogame items displayed. Anyone can buy a copy of *Panzer Dragoon Saga*, *Metal Slug AES*, *Ginga Fukei Densetsu* or even the entire Fujitsu Marty collection. Throw enough money at eBay, and a myriad of apparently rare gaming items are yours. But these things are not unusual. It takes intense passion and hard work to get hold of truly obscure goods. There is a secret underground community of high-profile collectors who deal strictly in these most limited of oddities.

Oftentimes, such groups run the risk of the law, yet still dedicate their lives to the acquisition and recording of things. In trying to uncover this secret realm, I was graciously granted access to some

of the more high profile members, including the head of one such community. A renowned American gentleman who wishes to be known only as ASSEMBler, he tells us a little of himself and also the nature of such undocumented people, "Truth be told, I own large amounts of items, code, and tools that have never been released, are sometimes of legendary status, or are of singular extant. I also own the names and intellectual assets of several defunct studios. I own the masters and even the rights to some unreleased games. However they were not free, they were not easy goals to attain or items to acquire. It's not easy to track people down and coax them to sell items, to create a company to buy things, to take out loans and risk your financial future to acquire things. I've been sued, threatened and watched for what I do. Why do you think no one has ever seen a picture of me? And now, being part of the industry, working for a games company, it makes it even more

complex. I judge [a collector's status] by the amount of non retail items owned. If you have dev units, prototypes of consoles and games, or unreleased hardware. Those take effort to get, everything else is just throwing money at eBay."



...all of those I spoke to wished to remain anonymous throughout this article.

Unsurprisingly, all of those I spoke to wished to remain anonymous throughout this article.

Why go to such great lengths? Because it's forbidden fruit. Items that gamers shouldn't have, they inevitably want. It's cloak and dagger, certainly far more exciting than stepping into Wal-Mart, and in a way, replicating the role of Indiana Jones discovering that Holy Grail.

The entire videogame community is like a microcosm of society, with those at the top and the bottom, and also those hidden from view who control events. Let's take a look at the big game these prestigious hunters track.

Hard-line Hardware

Desired hardware takes many guises,

with unreleased prototypes, development and debug equipment, weird hack-jobs, and even commercially-released-but-poorly-marketed-failures all being focused on.

At the lowest end of the commercial spectrum, console bootlegs from places as far flung as central China and Brazil will pique people's interest. Many are Famicom clones, but go further afield and you'll find all manner of obscurities. How many varieties are there? As many as there are industrialized towns north of the Baltic. Yet people are determined to collect and document them all. For the cream of the commercial crop, your everyday 64DD, Bandai Pippin, and Marty systems will be vying for collectors' money. Released mainly in Japan with a limited audience and small selection of games, these are prized products for displaying.

For something with a little more flavor, check out Nintendo's top secret line of development equipment. Ever heard about the dark pink **cartridge** based Gamecubes that exist, the fabled NPDP systems? Some even come emblazoned with Nintendo Dolphin logos. For tastes a little more vanilla, seek the green boxed

NR Reader machines. Great for playing prototype games six months before they hit the streets. You can be sure Nintendo doesn't want you knowing this. Their court actions prove the point. But like moths to the flame, I can't help but be fascinated by what I'm not supposed to see, especially when I know the four figure prices. But not all dev equipment is valuable. Dev Jaguars can be bought for little more than retail models, it's the 4Mb Alpine II programming cards that push the value over \$1,000 a piece.

A little documented fact is that games journalists are actually a reliable source for underground goods. How do you think they manage to play gold copies of burned proprietary discs? Because the games companies supply them with specialist modified hardware.

The real action, though, is unreleased prototypes. We all know about 3DO, but what about it's cancelled M2 successor? Never made it public, though the technology was used in Japanese drink machines and Russian ATMs. So enamoured is the underground hardcore collective, there's jovial banter of trying to smuggle said ATMs across the border, just for the hardware.

the Escapist

As for modern dev kits and prototypes, ASSEMBler tells me: "Usually a developer does not own the console, and has to return all [proprietary] equipment when the lifespan is over. [They're] usually asked to be destroyed in the field. Unless more companies go bankrupt, you will see them either return the hardware or archive it for spares. You might see some on sale due to employee theft, but considering it took ten years for Saturn items to surface... They technically don't own it in some cases, just the right to make games on it."

Meaning Microsoft wants their recently stolen X360 development kits back. Merchandise so hot to handle, not even the underground traders are dealing? I'll wager the scene's best modders have these babies, trying to create X360 mod-chips.

And with owning such hardware, you will, of course, need games to play!

Scintillating Software

If such underground groups are like virtual societies, then unreleased software and rare data is their specialized currency. Games are often traded like-for-like. I spoke to one of the

scene's most generous dealers, a Mr. L from England, who explained why: "Some people will only trade [rare items] for unreleased games - money you can come by any time and is easily spent on junk, but unreleased games are harder to acquire. You can offer someone a million and they still wouldn't take it, but if you offered them an unreleased game then they're more willing to part with their [rare items]."

It's this refined attitude that elevates proceedings to levels comparable with wine and antique collectors. Considering games such as the PAL version of *Kizuna Encounter* reach \$12,000, the prices are also comparable. Lower down, the *Nintendo World Championship* cartridge still manages to clock over \$6,000 on auction. If you can manage to find someone willing to sell, that is. The willingness to sell is, due to the fact they're already available digitally, buying them is purely for completeness' sake. Singular items which have not been duplicated command greater reverence, since there is no other way to experience them.

Of note, here, are the unwritten rules traders live by. When unreleased games



“You think just any Japanese collector knows about this stuff? Rare in Japan means business, there are specific ‘people’ to go through.”

are used as trading currency, it’s accepted no one will leak them, unless everyone agrees. Some things are never allowed to be made public. A collector of unreleased PS1 titles, who amassed a **staggering** amount of games and dreams of collecting all such prototypes, offered to trade duplicates to further his goal. His rules were simple: trades only, strictly no community releases. He proved his ownership by showing watermarked images of his treasures, such as the fourth installment of *Star Control*. All attempts to contact him for further info proved fruitless; contact is obviously limited only to fellow aficionados. The lengths gone to acquiring these are immense. Said individual was later contemplating a trip to India to locate bootleg copies of the rare unreleased *Clayfighter Extreme* on the PS1.

Again, games journalists are a good source for unreleased games. They’re sent early review copies, and if a game gets cancelled, it’s instant money. Journalists live by a different code, and so once articles get published, there’s no problem selling merchandise. An Australian I know made obscene amounts of profit selling unreleased

review copies of DC games, while another from Belgium is holding onto his English Xbox copy of *Rent-A-Hero*, no matter how much money is rubbed in his face.

But Japan is still Mecca, with Yahoo! Japan closely monitored by the influential seeking precious goods. But not everything is so easy, one Mr. Kyu from Massachusetts reveals, “You think just any Japanese collector knows about this stuff? Rare in Japan means business, there are specific ‘people’ to go through.” Duly proven to me when investigating the upper echelons of the collector fraternities in Japan; virtually impenetrable due to the language barrier and sense of security. You need connections to move in their world, and sometimes it takes upwards of 10 years to convince and gain the trust of such recluses. People like ASSEMBler simultaneously own both a home in the U.S. and an apartment in Japan to further such activities.

Luckily a few generous people, such as Mr. L, enjoy buying prototypes purely in order to release them to the community. One such (unsuccessful) attempt was *Ochouchi Gengorou Ikka* on the N64,

the Escapist

selling online for \$500. The idea was to fund its release, rather than it disappearing into a collector's hands. Mr. L was eager to speak on such matters, "It's a chance to play stuff that most will never see. Smaller items can cost a few hundred, but purchases can often be in the thousands. Usually it takes a lot of time to acquire items - 6 to 12 months easily, some things take years to surface. Companies should provide more information, instead of leaving it to flimsy press releases, leaked documents and speculation - it would help clear up the facts and paint a better picture of gaming history." So popular is his generosity, there is constant discussion as to which title should be pursued next. Long may he succeed.

But many people abhor public releases, complaining it devalues things, and with CD media, allows people to sell duplications for profit. ASSEMBler is more concerned about the legal implications, "Software allows reverse engineering, and potentially, piracy. Everyone remembers the damage done by the code that became Dreamcast boot CDs. It would be foolish to openly distribute software for dev kits. I don't know if you have ever been sued [or]

threatened with legal action, but it's expensive and not fun."

I also spoke to the legendary Lost Levels founder and all around nice guy, Frank Cifaldi, about the reluctance to release publicly. "A lot of people have this elitist need to be the only person able to play a game, some have this weird belief that holding on to a one-of-a-kind game gives it 'legendary' status and makes it more 'historically valuable' than it would be if [publicly available], and still others just mouth off about how much they paid for the damned things. No one but the game's copyright holder is entitled to have a game never sold at retail level. The rest of us either rely on the kindness of strangers, or spend a hell of a lot of money dealing on the black market. To me, once I'm over the excitement of being Indiana Jones and discovering something special and new, I specifically want to see how other people react to it. Seeing people actively playing and discussing the game I found is much more gratifying to me than being able to brag about having something."

There have been two very big events in recent months. The first is that a short playable Saturn demo of *Sonic Xtreme*





Some unreleased games are legally so hot, corporations feverishly pursue those who have copies in order to stop their mere mentioning.

surfaced, the seller being an employee of Sega. It was done via proxy with the final bid coming at a cheap \$2,500, though only after a rather unpleasant fiasco involving betrayal and vindictive revenge. The community was shaken to its core. Thankfully, when the dust cleared, ASSEMBler assured us it was in the safe hands of a trusted collector. A piece of history was saved, though people wept because it wouldn't be publicly released.

The second event is, four blue 64DD development disks have appeared, and they may contain *Mother 3*. Speculation is intense, but there are problems getting the disks to load. It requires specialist equipment, which is in short supply. But many are pledging assistance. Collectors are also reported to have offered undisclosed five figure sums to own these disks, assuming they're genuine.

Some unreleased games are legally so hot, corporations feverishly pursue those who have copies in order to stop their mere mentioning. Mr. F from Florida elaborates, "There are a few wealthy collectors who have been generous and shared with the community, but

companies dislike such people, and have threatened and/or taken legal action against them. Because of this, people who want to contribute to the community, and help build the archives, need to do so discreetly. Until the day that companies realise that people are interested in these games and would love to see them, archiving such information and media will remain a relatively underground task." And so, I assure everyone I won't mention that people are playing *Shenmue* on the Saturn, *Robotech* on the N64, or running the halls of *Biohazard 1.5*.

Community Camaraderie

And there I was, thinking I'd hit the big time when getting hold of *Propeller Arena*. Like so many previously exalted commodities, it's now common amongst the ranks, becoming part of the great online data stores used for archiving. A treasure trove of illegal and oh-so-highly prized ones and zeros. I was granted only brief access to just one such secret and bountiful oasis of data, strictly for research purposes and validating people's claims. These watering holes are reserved specifically for loyal community participants, and is indicative

of the camaraderie present. If you want to take, you have to give as well.

“Some people have gushed over how amazing and wonderful it is for someone to amass these things and be willing to share them. I archived [such media] until a time when I had the means to share it with others who cared to see what the corporations [were hiding]. Much of the software collected has been submitted either by contacts I know, or anonymous individuals who for various reasons I have decided to trust. At one point, I was open to letting [everyone] have access, but it became a problem as everyone would come in, get what they wanted, and never contribute anything. After changing it so that I had to approve each person’s access, I saw a dramatic improvement in how people treat the service that I provide.” - Mr. F from Florida again, one of many illustrious data keepers.

And playing by the rules is certainly worth it, since within their bosom is kept things such as unreleased copies of Sega CD, Turbo Duo, PS1, Dreamcast and Saturn games. There are also NDA protected documents for all the latest hardware, not to mention an abundance

of exclusive video footage and images. Plus other data that would make a man’s blood run cold with awe.

How do communities acquire such hardware, software and data? Simple. Employee theft, company bankruptcy and liquidation, sheer luck, and anonymous contacts. Several set up dummy companies for the sole purpose of purchasing assets when others go into liquidation. It doesn’t cost much to set up a registered company, allowing you to transcend the black market. ASSEMBler explains, “I have started my own company devoted to such efforts. It allows me to legally buy items, to have an ability to preserve whole failed companies or at least some of their assets as complete.”

The close-knit community spirit is strong, while the group is also apprehensive of outsiders. These communities have no promotion, those who seek the rare find their own way. Readers seeking them out should avoid the social faux-pas of demanding free access to items, as ASSEMBler points out, “I would release all I have, but the result is that I can be held legally accountable. Information wants to be

A silhouette of a person wearing a hat, looking out a window. The person is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the image, with their back to the camera. The window behind them is brightly lit, creating a strong contrast with the dark silhouette. The overall mood is contemplative and mysterious.

The close-knit community spirit is strong, while the group is also apprehensive of outsiders.

free, and eventually it will be, but not with my name directly attached. I shouldn't be expected to give away the fruits of hard labor."

Even if you relentlessly pursue this underworld, some doors forever remain locked. There are secret, strictly guarded, members-only IRC channels and message boards. Like a maze within a labyrinth, in them resides a small group of maybe 20 of the most wealthy and powerful. If a floundering company has items they want, they simply buy said company and all its assets. In a

smoke-filled room with low lighting, one regales me about the time he privately shipped a Harley Motorcycle to Japan in exchange for a one-of-a-kind piece of hardware stolen by Indonesian sea pirates. While another muses about the time he had to call Korea and explain that a mysterious MSX labelled package did not in fact contain MSX missile parts.

When conversing among them, one notices familiar people. I've recognized several who frequent various other online communities, often holding moderator positions, or are prominent

speakers. Look at the forums where *The Escapist* is discussed. Within these you will find elite international collectors and dealers, moving like shadows amongst the loquacious debates. It would be too much to jest that they infiltrate these gaming communities to keep tabs on developments, rather comparisons should be made to groups such as the Freemasons. An underground secret society for the digital age, dealing in knowledge and acquisitions not meant for the masses. Like a secret hive that archives information that would

otherwise be lost, virtual book keepers so to speak, who are everywhere.

There is so little known about these things and so much to learn. I'm just through the looking glass. Just how far does the rabbit hole go? [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.

MEET THE TEAM

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

"What's the most off-the-wall title you've ever given something you've written?"

Allen Varney, "The Conquest of Origin"

Although the *PARANOIA* game I write for features many unorthodox titles - "Send in the Clones," "The Yellow Clearance Black Box Blues," "Vapors Don't Shoot Back" - the best (or worst) example in my career is non-*PARANOIA*. In the early '90s I wrote a pick-a-path adventure gamebook set in a fantasy world where undead monsters had taken over, and the player was an undead Paladin fighting to drive them out. I had the premise handed to me along with the title: "Knight of the Living Dead."

Kieron Gillen, "Culture Wargamer"

You may remember a few years ago when a major Sikh organization got annoyed with *Hitman 2* for its presentation of Sikhism. I was writing an article on it, and how they were taking legal action and so on. While we wimped out and ended up with a terribly formal "Sikh Hitman Outrage," for a few hours it was entitled "Desperately Sikhing Sues-Them." We got it into a side-bar mini-news story a few issues later.

John Szczepaniak, "Obscurity Below the Radar"

If we're talking homebrew games, then "Tramampolining Gunmen," definitely. No two websites ever spelled it the same. If we're talking articles ... Well, excusing the absurdly surreal "Mr Biffo Dialogues" I wrote in school (it's a U.K. thing), then probably "Doujin a Go Go, Baby!" for *The Escapist* (it's a *Viewtiful Joe* thing).

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

"The sworn affidavit of Gerald Peter Sutich, Jr. as witnessed by the Clerk of Superior Court, Cascade County, Montana."

Russ Pitts, Acquisitions Editor

"*Chibi-Robo: Zen and the Art of No-Wax Floor Maintenance.*"

Joe Blancato, "The Left Behind," Content Editor

"There and Back Again, or WHORES!" My first and last attempt at memoir.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor

"I Haff KEELT It." It was a short re-telling of my dog's and my adventures in spider extermination.

