

the Escapist

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by Simon Abramovitch

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

You know the scene in the movie Office Space where Peter, the hero, waltzes into the office midday in a Hawaiian shirt and new suntan, carrying a cooler with a fish in it? He then proceeds to gut his freshly caught fish on his desk in the middle of the office. Slacking at its finest, indeed a level to which we all, at some point, have aspired.

Some might say I have achieved this right now. I currently: am wearing a cowboy hat; have half a margarita from the office building `ritas and salsa mixer on my desk; am playing with a bouncy/squeezy ball from the piñata at said mixer; and between typing bursts, lean back and spin back and forth in my chair.

Yes, it's late Friday afternoon as I write this, and that could be to blame. Or it could be that today is Contributing Editor JR Sutich's birthday, and I keep getting interrupted by everyone running around the office on sugar high from his cake, oddly enough, shaped like my right great toe. (I didn't indulge, it didn't seem right.) It could be the half of the

margarita that is no longer in the cup on my desk. Who knows?

The weird part, though? This week's issue is about the tenuous relationship of work and play. And I can't stop the play in order to work on it. It's a weird meta ... moment of experiencing the subject of this week's issue.

Everyone out there, grab the nearest toy on your desk (come on, we're all into games, you have a toy on your desk), lean back and ponder that for a moment. Have your own "meta-moment" before indulging in the offerings of this week's authors. To whet your appetite, I'll give a preview of what to expect. Simon Abramovich discusses games in the workplace and the trouble with brain real estate. Corvus Elrod takes a fanciful trip down What If Lane, spinning the story of a day in the life of a loan officer ... as if work were a game. And Richard Aihoshi returns to discuss when games and work blur in the setting of online poker.

Work hard, play harder,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To The Editor: I was refreshed by the notion of a person who does not consider themselves a gamer, but happens to play a lot of games. This is me in a nut shell, and it resonated very clearly.

Thank you.

-Andrew

In Response to The Contrarian by:

John Tynes: Tynes writes in his article that Nintendo is slowly dying due to its innovation leading it too far from the accepted norm, and that no publisher would wish to invest in developing or modifying a game for one system out of the seven most popular.

How does this statement stand up against news that Sony, after losing a small legal battle over their Dual Shock rumble feature, has installed a motion tracking system to their controllers?

Would it be fair to speculate that publishers will choose to invest in motion

tracking? The technology only has a good reputation, and would make an excellent selling point. One could also speculate that Microsoft, in response to this, could release a patch to accept motion sensation from a new batch of controllers.

Although that would be only speculation.

- Dallas



the Escapist

To The Editor: In response to Brian's Letter about "Don't Roleplay the Bugs," I too rolled my eyes when I read this article. However, it wasn't because it was a beginner, trying to be a pro, but rather that he was trying to use the wrong tools for the job.

Contrary to what people believe, it is not possible to emulate the tabletop role-playing experience while we continue to force the issue of real-time environments on players.

An AI is there to aid the GM, not replace him, and this is important for emulating a table-top game. A GM can tell when the party is ready to move on, to point out any clues they mist, or stir the party back on track when they get lost. An AI doesn't do this - and a real-time environment negates the opportunity for the GM to do this.

-Chris

In Response to Wii Will Not Cost More Than \$250 from The Escapist Lounge: At that price, the Wii will soon be cheaper than hardwood, making it ideal for making quality furniture...

-cibbuano





Cubicle VISION

by Simon Abramovitch

Lauren works the late shift. In countries that span more than one time zone, the 9-5 of the daily business shuffle gets padded on either end. As an East Coast worker, Lauren's shift starts later and ends later, accommodating the 9-5 of her West Coast customers and colleagues.

One day, after putting in a solid half-day of work, Lauren pulled her lunch from her desk drawer and munched away for a full hour while playing a game at www.freearcade.com. Unable to install anything on her computer because of locks put in place by the system administrator (heck, her computer didn't even have a CD-ROM drive), online games were her salvation. When her hour was up, she went back to work, uninterrupted until late in the afternoon.

"Lauren, can you come by my office when you have a minute?" The classic line from her admittedly classic boss stopped her heart mid-beat.

"Sure."

A few minutes later, she walked into her boss' office and closed the door behind her.

"Hi, Lauren. Nothing big, don't worry. It's just that we had a senior manager here in from another department today, and, well ... it doesn't look good to have employees playing games in the middle of the afternoon. I know it was your lunch, but ... if you could not play anymore that'd be great."

My Bill Lumberg-esque paraphrasing aside, his point was clear: Playing was off limits because of the image (that of perennial symbiosis of gaming and goofing off) it conjured. The effect is similar to that of a dress code violation, whereby the mere visual presence of something seemingly unprofessional is perceived as detrimental to the company.

If your job involves continuous work where you chip away at what can be likened to a self-regenerating iceberg (perhaps a large call center), your time spent playing is time you could have spent taking calls, which overflow onto your colleagues. Yes, you're welcome to take breaks from time to time. But if there's any kind of rush, you know that your colleagues are suffering, and you can help, but you don't. The situation is

the same for any kind of break, but the guilt is that much more painful when you're **playing**.

One day at my old job I created a miniature version of my work station - out of office supplies - during my lunch break. I made my desk from a big white eraser, and constructed myself out of pushpins, scotch tape and paperclips. Most of the people who didn't explicitly say, "Boy, you really have too much free time here," showed it in their faces as they walked by. Interestingly, as much as your boss may be irritated by your fun, there's a good chance your colleagues will be, too. Put simply, if you're having a good time while they're working, it's hard to avoid friction.

But if your job is project-oriented, or your employer has decided that a certain result is worth a certain amount of money if achieved by a certain deadline, they may just allow you to play whenever you want - as long as you get the job done. Most jobs (and most employers) don't work this way though, believing work performed during work hours is more valuable, and what you're being paid for.

But is it? Theoretically, you are hired because a trickle down effect of your work generates enough money for the company to justify your salary. But for a given day's work, this trickle down effect isn't necessarily visible. As such, other, more practical measures are in place. So what, then are you actually paid for? In a sense, the company has bought your time. But then again, a project can exceed an allotted time-frame. Maybe, then, you are paid simply for results. But

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in that case, you should be able to spend as much time playing games as you like, as long as you produce. Maybe it's a question of effort. Maybe it's a combination of all of these, and more?

The definitions are fuzzy, and lead to misunderstanding. At the end of the day, the parameters are shifted in such a way that the company gets the most out of you. Case in point, many employment contracts include a company's right to

ownership over ideas you come up with on the job. But who really owns the rights to this "brain real estate"? In a multi-tasking day with a thousand connected thoughts, what is theirs, and what is yours? What about an idea you have for the company while lying in bed one night? Who owns that idea?

Setting the debate of appearances and brain real estate aside, there's still something special about Lauren's

situation. There was no claim to be made that these games were going to help or hurt her work. This was her unpaid lunch hour. Why would an hour of gaming at lunch at your desk not be permitted when going home for lunch and playing there is?

I decided speak to a senior manager at Lauren's company about this paradox. "Conversations around the cooler, smoke breaks, long lunches, personal phone calls, leaving early to pick up your kids:



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all ok.” he said stoically. “But two minutes of ‘beep beep’ at lunch time and you are a slacker.” His words confirmed my suspicions: None of those ‘acceptable’ practices make it **look** like you aren’t working. If you’re not there, you can’t look like you’re actively slacking; if you’re on the phone, it could very well be with a client; but playing a game is a clear visual sign that you’re doing something else.

Other problems associated with the five-minute and lunch time gamer were explained to me by our company’s system administrator. Despite being a gamer himself, he was obstinately against allowing games to be played at work. As much as he appreciates the idea of being able to have some fun, he’d rather not deal with repairing, formatting and re-installing PCs belonging to colleagues who accidentally installed spyware or viruses, or who botched the game installation itself. To him, people don’t know what they’re doing, and with too much freedom get themselves into trouble.

Not that I really blame him, but to me, banning all gaming at work because of

viruses is like banning cars because of drunk drivers. Although, for the limited time available for play, perhaps the benefits are minimal enough that allowing gaming might not be worth the hassle. Of course, this problem could be side-stepped entirely, with an employee bringing in a portable gaming system for lunch hour play, bringing the question back to appearance of gaming.

Irish clergyman and philosopher George Berkeley once wrote, “Esse est percipi,” or “to exist is to be perceived.” I would add that the nature of existence lies in the nature of perception. Lauren’s case displays how outsiders perceive gaming at work and how those perceptions actually define the act. But support or condemnation based on perception extends into worker-boss relationships and inter-colleague relationships, as well.

Lauren’s story rang familiar bells, reminding me of places where games are still barely accepted culturally, never mind in the work place. But there are exceptions. I currently work for a video game company, having shed my game-fearing ex-colleagues. Between 12:01 and 12:59 pm, most of my coworkers

don’t leave their desk. Instead, they put their company-provided headphones on and escape to an hour of networked MMOG or FPS gaming.

All to say, perhaps the perception of gaming at work is an extension of the perception of gaming in general. Gaming is play, and if anything is antithesis to play, it’s work. Perhaps, to many who populate the world’s cubicles, games are goofing off, wasting time or kids’ activities that in no way belong in an environment of professionalism. For Lauren and others like her, office-gaming will have to remain either non-existent, or at best covert. As for me ... I think I’ll use my lunch hour to get some sun and fresh air. [COMMENTS](#)

Simon Abramovitch is a philosophy graduate and freelance writer, and currently maintains a blog about the purpose of humankind at www.thehumanpurpose.com.

Office-gaming will have to remain either non-existent, or at best covert.



All Work and No Play?

by Richard Aihoshi

The full epigram from which the title of this article is derived says, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." But in the contemporary world of games, what's play for some **is** work for others.

Lee is a hardcore massively multiplayer gamer. For the past year and a half, her game of choice has been Blizzard's popular *World of Warcraft*. She logs in almost every day, usually for a couple of hours on weekdays and longer on weekends. These sessions typically add up to about 20 hours per week - a few more than the average player. She has two characters at the current level cap. One is a dwarf Hunter she has developed and equipped for solo adventuring, the other a night elf Priest for group play. In addition, she has a few "alts" (short for alternates, it's the slang term for secondary characters). Her Rogue and Mage are for variety, and she also has another Hunter and Priest she uses when playing with members of her guild who have lower-level characters on the same server.

For Lee, playing *World of Warcraft* is a hobby. She does it because it's fun.

Depending on her mood, she sometimes goes exploring or hunting on her own, but a lot of her enjoyment has a social component - joining up with friends, meeting new people, hanging out and chatting, etc. She's not especially fond of having to pay a monthly subscription fee, but deep down, she knows it's a great bargain for the many hours of enjoyment she receives.

Li also plays almost every day. He puts in even more hours, usually eight to 10 per day, frequently in a single, long session. In an average week, this means he plays two to three times as long as Lee. So, it may be a bit surprising to learn that he only has one level-capped character, a gnome Mage. However, there's an explanation: He has actually had several others, but he sold those accounts.

For Li, playing *World of Warcraft* is a full-time job. He does it to make a living. Most of the time, he "farms" gold; in the argot of online gaming, this means his main purpose is simply to maximize the amount he harvests per hour during his working day. Consequently, he does little

exploring, seldom meets anyone new, and never just hangs out. He almost always plays with the same people whose characters complement his in a party, and they invariably go to the same few locations and kill the same few enemies over and over - with no real challenge - since getting killed costs time. His sole focus is his yield. He sells his "crop" to an online brokerage, which takes delivery in the game and pays him real cash outside. This company then resells the gold to consumers after adding a healthy markup that can approach 500 percent. He sold his characters the same way.

Although not having anything to do with Li, another interesting type of sale involves power-leveled characters. You create a newbie of whatever race and class combination you like, pay about

\$250 and provide access to the account. Three weeks later, during which time you can't use the account, not even to play another character, your puny level 1 is now a powerful level 60. It's not as quick as buying someone else's level 60 character, but it's less expensive and a tiny bit more personal.


Many online gamers are vociferously disdainful about all the participants in such transactions: The original sellers, the middlemen and the final purchasers. Nonetheless, millions of people now play MMOGs. Even if only a small minority is

willing to pay cash for virtual gold and characters, they still represent a sizable market. It has been calculated that the size of the virtual economy in a popular title exceeds those of many small countries. Although only a portion actually gets monetized, it's certainly enough to support many individuals like Li, who lives in a part of the world where making a few dollars a day is enough to live on.

The line between work and play may be even fuzzier when it comes to poker, which has skyrocketed in popularity during the past few years. Most people who have started or returned to playing are like Lee. They play as a form of recreation. Naturally, everyone wants to win. Some even study to improve their chances. However, they don't depend on poker for their livelihoods. In fact, quite



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undoubtedly applies. Occasional rewards, especially when received on an irregular schedule, tend to perpetuate the associated behavior. Another consideration is that some people don't really mind losing, provided the amounts aren't particularly significant relative to the enjoyment and other subjective rewards they receive.

a few people continue to play even though they're losers over the long term. It's impossible not to win once in a while, so an element of reinforcement theory

For an example we can look at a Texan named Andy Beal. Several times over the past couple of years he has challenged a group of the world's very best players, collectively known as The Corporation. If you play poker or even just watch it on TV, you'll know names like Doyle and Todd Brunson, Phil Ivey, Ted Forrest, Jennifer Harman and Howard Lederer as being among the poker elite. Beal plays them heads-up, one at a time. The game is *Limit Hold 'Em*, a variation where the size of the bets is predetermined, not the better-known *No Limit* where you can bet all the money you have on the table at any time. Nonetheless, since they play with blinds (mandatory bets) as high as \$100,000, the amounts won and lost can

be substantial. Overall, the pros, who pool their funds and rotate different players in and out, are well ahead by perhaps \$10 to \$15 million. So far, that hasn't deterred the amateur Beal, whose net worth may exceed \$1 billion.

There are many other players like Andy Beal, although on far lower scales. Even though poker is a negative sum game (because the casino or online site takes a percentage), there is still room for plenty of people to be overall winners.

Accordingly, the boom has allowed thousands to play it full-time. You don't often see them on TV because most prefer to play online. The primary reason for this is the ability to play multiple tables or tournaments at one time, which actually offers two benefits: Obviously, more tables means more simultaneous sources of profit, but by playing multiple games against opponents a step or two below you, it's possible to make more money with less risk than by playing one game appropriate to your skill level.

Some top internet players have shown they're quite capable of holding their own in live tournaments and games. However, most online pros plug away far

outside the glare of the TV spotlights. After hundreds of thousands of hands, they know that they average a certain amount of profit per table, per hour. So, it's not unreasonable to compare them to Li. Like him, they play almost every day, often eight to 10 hours. Also like him, they can be regarded as farmers, just with cash as their direct crop.

Poker players who, like Li, live in areas of the world with low average incomes, even have an option that requires the investment of time but carries no monetary risk: "Freeroll" tournaments, which poker sites offer to attract and retain players, cost nothing to enter and pay cash prizes. The amounts are generally small, but a successful full-time freeroller can win hundreds of dollars per month; in some places, that's enough to live on.

I've even seen a number of believable (albeit unverified) reports of players making money by selling passwords to private tournaments. Such individuals are certainly held in disdain by most other players, but here, too, if there's potential for profit, someone is probably doing it.

So, what does it mean when the line between work and play becomes hazy, or even disappears altogether? Does Li enjoy playing *World of Warcraft* as much as Lee? And is poker still as much fun when you know you have to put in your 35 or 40 hours a week rather than only playing when you truly feel like it? In both cases, when play becomes work, can it still be play too? I'd like to think so, but am I sure? [COMMENTS](#)

Richard Aihoshi blurred the line between work and play in another way. Several years ago, his hobby, computer games, turned into a career writing about them, primarily the massively multiplayer and roleplaying genres. An online poker player for about a year, he claims to be ahead overall but admits he makes far too little even to dream about playing for a living.

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All Play and No Work, A Speculative Fiction

by Corvus Elrod

Sandra was a loan officer for a large bank who very much looked forward to Monday mornings. This Monday, in particular, was going to be exciting, and she was heading in early to make sure she was ready.

As she walked to her cubicle, Sandra scanned the rankings board. It was lit up like a Christmas tree, displaying the top 100 loan officers from all the major international banks. Today, Sandra was going to break the top 20. Looking over her nearest competition, she noticed that Frank, her main rival, had gained a number of points over the weekend. Now he, too, was poised to make the more exclusive list. A final loan payment must have cleared late Friday, or the interest rates on a foreign account had moved in his favor. Regardless, it would provide her with extra incentive today. Frank made it onto the board before her. He also made the top 50 first, and she wouldn't let Frank reach **this** goal ahead of her.

After sitting down at her desk, Sandra started up the Loan Loader and unchecked the boxes next to the pictures of the car and small house. Automobile and first time home loans were easy, but the

time they took could be spent staking out business and major real estate loans. As she did every Monday morning, she thought about the stories her mother told of her days as a loan officer. She knew if her job today was anything like Mom's, she wouldn't be so successful. Between keeping track of paperwork and taking time to meet with applicants, there's no way she'd have kept up.

When Sandra's parents realized that her dyslexia and preference for late night death matches over homework made her a less than ideal candidate for employment, they thought she'd never get a decent job. But thanks to advances in Job Design Theory and Work-Flow Engineering, she is now outperforming her mother by more than five to one, even accounting for inflation and other economic factors Sandra doesn't understand.

Sandra's system indicated readiness and she fired up the game as the system clock blinked 9:00 a.m. She clicked her left mouse button and zoomed in over a digital crowd of 150 applicants. Double clicking a woman in a brown suit automatically selected all applicants in brown suits. Sandra directed them to the

side. She ctrl-clicked the four tallest brown-suited avatars and sent them to her base, where she could look them over later. These were real estate speculators with decent portfolios, and were good for a few points; they tended to play it safe and make their payments on time. Noticing a short and shabby-looking avatar, Sandra zoomed in for a closer look. Ill-fitting gray suit – first time business loan; manila accordion stuffed with papers – poor credit history; unshaven face – no current loans; bloodshot eyes – behind on utility payments. Sandra wondered why this guy was even applying here.

Shaking her head in irritation over the time wasted, she clicked him and sent him heading for the bench, then quickly zoomed out to re-scan the now smaller crowd.

Then, she saw him: her Prince Charming. Tall, dark gray pinstripe suit; immaculate hair and complexion; briefcase of a lustrous leather that looked sturdy enough to withstand an explosion – this was her lucky day. Sandra quickly switched her avatar's outfit from the

conservatively-professional suit to something a little more daring and moved in for the kill.

He pulled out a cell phone. "Damn," she thought. That had to be Frank. She stepped up and said hello. Charming's eyes moved to her, lowering the phone slightly, and Sandra poured on the charm, using every emote available to her in expert succession.

She noticed his eyes kept flickering over her shoulder. She turned the camera so see what was attracting his attention, and moved applicants out of the way until she realized that he was looking at the bum she'd benched. Curious, she recalled the bum and invited him into a private room with Charming who, cell phone still half-raised to his ear, willingly followed. Sandra excused herself from the room and left a camera behind to watch what happened. It wasn't long before the prince and the bum started shaking hands and chatting. Gotcha! Those two were somehow related. The bum was meant to distract attention or make the prince look like a golden opportunity. She released them and

benched them both. Let Frank take the bait and make the top 20. Sandra would play it safe, and down the road when they took Frank for a ride, his rank would plummet while hers continued to rise. Sandra smiled. Nobody could beat her in this game, nobody. [COMMENTS](#)

Corvus Elrod is a storyteller and game designer who is working on bringing his 16 years experience into the digital realm. He has a habit of taking serious things lightly and frivolous things seriously, a personal quirk which can be witnessed on his blog, Man Bytes Blog.



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Sponsored by Microsoft and Apple

by Cat Rambo

"You don't have that much management experience," the Microsoft interviewer said from the other side of her desk. "Except – what is this online game you've listed on your resume?"

That item, which read, "Coordinated development of online game which averaged 60-70 users at a time with a volunteer staff of approximately 30 writers/coders," was a decade's worth of experience managing a team as large, high-powered and challenging as any I'd encounter at while working at Microsoft. Over the next few years, this overlapping of the game and business world recurred over and over. I'd apply lessons in conflict management or negotiation I learned in MUDs to work situations, and the next day find myself in a management class thinking how best to use the material on the flash cards in front of me to steer my coders down a particular path.

While some staff, like me, list *Armageddon*, the MUD on which we work, as professional credit, other staff members are more reticent about their online lives, feeling that listing a MUD on a resume would hurt them far more than it might help. Accordingly, several people preferred to not have their real names mentioned in this article. Nessalin noted, "I think few employers want employees who have hobbies that A) so closely mirror their jobs, and B) eat up so much time." Another staff member said, "I'd rather not have my real name associated with the game in any way, in case I get a client who thinks MUDs are evil or something."



Fear of being perceived as a geek also encouraged this silence. One staff member noted that when dealing with fellow employees, "I want to be taken seriously, and not seen as that middle-aged guy that plays games." Another said, "There's a social stigma attached to people who play any kind of RPG, especially *Dungeons & Dragons*." A third said, "Most of my work is for Fortune

Those who have mentioned games in interviews have no disaster stories to tell, funnily enough.

500 Corporations or the government, and the people conducting interviews tend to be conservative and non-technical. A mudding reference might raise questions as to my suitability to someone who doesn't understand the MUD culture."

Although he chooses to list games on his resume, David Lipa (Dyrinis) said, "I try to keep the two worlds totally separate, even more than most mudders. For example, I've never attended any real

life events from my MUD, and even talking on the phone to someone to get an account password was difficult for me." He continued, "When I was younger I tended to deride mudding as just a game or pastime; in hindsight, it has done more for my professional development than just about anything."

Those who have mentioned games in interviews have no disaster stories to tell, funnily enough. Raesanos said, "I'm a software engineer, so it's just straight up good resume material," while Xygax said, "Having worked on MUDs before I interviewed at Origin almost certainly helped my case."

Lipa related how he "was actually interviewed by an *Armageddon* player when I was applying for a position at Merrill Lynch. She was surprised to share this interest with me and passed me on to the next round ... It was definitely a geek-to-geek moment. It helped to break the ice." Even one of the staff members most private about his mudding admitted that his last two jobs were a direct result of mudding connections.

Listing a MUD on a resume is often a way to showcase skills or experience that

one hasn't had a chance to exercise on the job yet. Mentioning the MUD I work on lets me list expertise I developed working with the game. In fact, when the buzzword, "online community," started going around Microsoft, I already knew much of the associated vocabulary: By then, *Armageddon* had experimented with several discussion boards, online chat, a Livejournal for collaborative game history, a staff wiki, staff member blogs and other forms of community-generated content.

People skills are the area of development most cited by MUD staff members. Lipa said, "Being a [GM] on a serious MUD like *Armageddon* put me in an environment where I had to reconcile my own idea about how things should be done with the team's. At first, this was difficult ... because I had not been exposed to such a challenge before."

Tiernan, an IT Program Manager, felt his customer service skills were fine-tuned by his experience as a game admin. "Dealing with player requests, etc. is very much along the same lines as what I do in the IT realm with my corporate customers."

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Neal Haggard (Morgenes), a Java programmer, said that the lure of MUDs cemented his choice of career. "My need to get back on the internet (in 1993) made me go back to college ... I love solving puzzles and figuring out how to do things, so mudding fit."

For some staff members, the networking possibilities offered by MUDs are useful. Naiona, a database specialist, said, "As a computer programmer, it is nice to be able to talk with the others on [the *Armageddon*] staff who have similar occupations when I'm thinking through an issue that I prefer not to discuss in front of a client. There are also times that other staff members have suggested resources or techniques that have worked well for me on the job. In addition, I've referred another staff member to a job and references from others have helped fill open positions at my job sites."

Xygax, a game programmer, noted that "I do ... experiment with new technologies on *Armageddon*, like the newer C/C++ compilers, profiling and performance improvement tools, etc. ... Another advantage I draw from working on *Armageddon* is more intimate

knowledge of how [communities work]. At my company, community interaction and support issues are usually filtered through other individuals, and so I am sheltered from things that *Armageddon* exposes me to. "


Among the main proficiencies he gained from mudding, Lipa felt, were writing skills. "Before mudding, I was a sloppy writer and did not care much about my work. When I began building a zone, I realized just how difficult and important clear writing is." For me, training as a documentation manager ended up shaping my approach to revamping my company's public and staff websites. I used skills I picked up when I arranged online help files in *Armageddon*.

Nessalin felt MUDs have most strongly developed his ability to debug code and given him "a better understanding of what a customer actually wants when they are explaining what they think they want, due to years of seeing what players ask for versus what they actually use."

Members of the *Armageddon* staff have worked for Microsoft, Security Dynamics, an investment firm, *Ultima Online*, Apple, IBM and the U.S. government,

and just as the MUD has shaped approaches to these jobs, corporate experiences have, in turn, shaped administration and processes in the MUD.

As the result of one management lecture I attended, the game may well be the only nonprofit with an actual mission statement, which discusses administrators' accountability to the game, the players and fellow staff, as well as the game's priorities: stability, game balance, consistency, and something labeled the "Gee-Whiz Factor." Other professional tools make up the staff webpage; items like a list of job descriptions and a tool for updating responsibilities and indicating one's current workload were implemented after seeing their usefulness in the real world first.



"Before mudding, I was a sloppy writer and did not care much about my work. When I began building a zone, I realized just how difficult and important clear writing is."

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An *Armageddon* tradition for the last six or seven years is a yearly "management retreat"; the staff members who can attend split the cost of renting a beach house on the Outer Banks in North Carolina. The week is one of debauched geekery: An Xbox is usually going non-stop, the table is spread with board games, and people sit around hashing out and writing up lists of ideas for the game. One year, we took the server apart and reassembled it on the dining room table while people sat around it, fixing problems and checking off printouts. At the same time, others were planning the rise of the in-game city-state, Tuluk, which had recently been taken over by its southern rival, Allanak.

One important difference between management in *Armageddon* and in the real world is the volunteer nature of the former. Tiernan, the in-game equivalent of a middle-manager, said it's important to ask junior staff the questions that make them go "hmmm" and to give them the advice that helps them find out where they want to go, rather than just assigning them tasks.

In *Armageddon*, as at work, he sees the most important job is helping other

people flesh out what they need to do for the task at hand. "I get them to really think in earnest about the project. That moves things along easier if they do that, 'cause it gives us a sense of size/scope. It also helps foster a sense of ownership with the project ... [and] helps me see how committed they are. If they haven't bought into it fully, then it's another conversation that kind of drifts away."

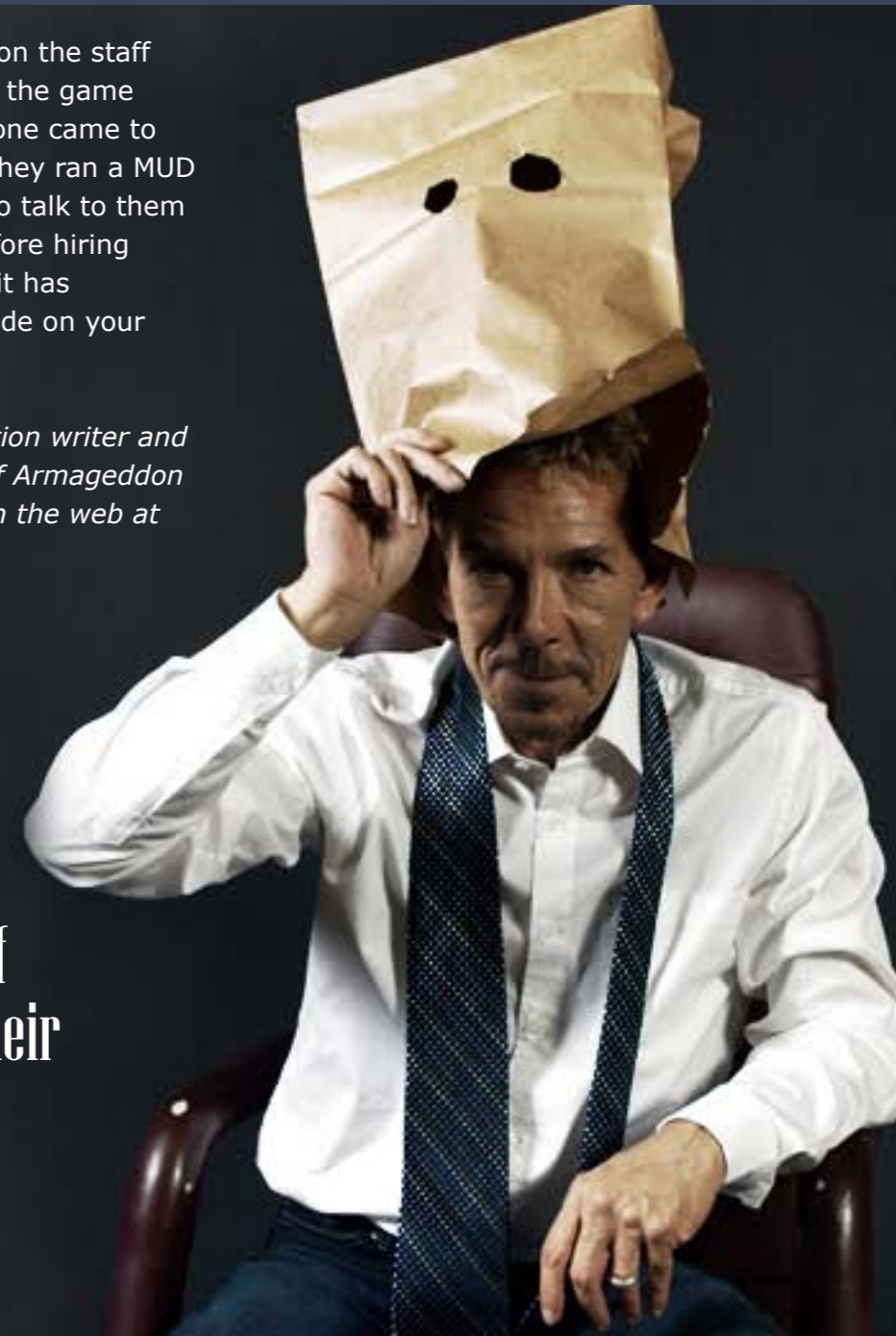
Admittedly, the implementation of some corporate strategies and approaches has exacted its price: *Armageddon* is much more bureaucratic than it used to be. While the days are gone when a maverick programmer could rewrite a major section of code and watch the sever crash for a month before another exasperated coder yanked it out, even small projects take longer to implement. Ideas are posted on the staff discussion board and thrashed out by committee, taking at least a week to resolve. But the size of the staff as well as the player base is substantially larger than it was 10 years ago. Formality and processes have been introduced, intended to make things fairer to both players and staff.

Whether the game has had the same degree of effect on the corporate world

remains to be seen. Many on the staff intend to keep their ties to the game secret. One said, "If someone came to me with a resume saying they ran a MUD as a hobby, I would have to talk to them at length about the job before hiring them. It's a time sink and it has emergencies that can intrude on your day job." [COMMENTS](#)

Cat Rambo is a science fiction writer and one of the implementors of Armageddon MUD. She can be found on the web at kittywumpus.net.

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Content Editor

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Russ Pitts

Contributing Editor

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Contributors

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Corvus Elrod

Richard Aihoshi

Cat Rambo

Taco Schenkhuizen

Greg Tito

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Producer

Jonathan Hayter

Layout Artist

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Lead Web Developer

Whitney Butts

Web Developer

Erik Jacobson

IT Director

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Cubicle Savannah

by Greg Tito

It begins like any other day: I snooze five times before throwing the alarm clock against the wall. Shouldn't have decided to start that Blackrock Depths run at 1:14 a.m. last night. The shower does little to revive me. I cobble together the least wrinkled shirt-and-tie combo from the closet and shuffle out onto the streets of Brooklyn.

Mass transit spits me out in midtown Manhattan and I walk briskly along the street canyons to my own private cubicle. You see, a few years ago, I sold out and started working in Corporate America. I shed my creative dignity for a few extra bucks and I now spend seven hours a day, five days a week working for The Man. Ostensibly I answer phones, make copies and do other mundane tasks, but in practice, most of my time is spent trying to play videogames without getting caught.

But pimping ain't easy. The company I work for has strict controls on what its employees do in cyberspace. When I was a temp, it was impossible to even access the internet at all, which kind of goes against everything that temping stands for. Even though I now have a password which allows me to surf the internet, my access is restricted. I can't look at porn sites (which is understandable), but I also can't access Yahoo!, Gmail or any other web-based email. Streaming video is a crapshoot, and a lot of forums are blocked.

After sitting down at my cube, I sign in to my workstation. I briefly scan my inbox for anything juicy, pop up Firefox and check the net for anything new. I have several go-to sites, but today I decide to call up Thottbot's forum parser, which pulls all the latest Blue posts (by moderators and developers) and formats them into a single page. Since the official WoW forums are offline to me during "work" hours, my only link to up-to-the-minute news is from third party sites, of which Thott is my favorite.

Like a lone gazelle drinking from a water hole, my ears are finely tuned to the sound of any predators. From behind me, I detect the faint rumblings of footsteps coming my way; my swarthy boss walking by, breathing too heavily through his nose. No need for him to see what I'm actually doing, I responsibly minimize Firefox.



"Did Mr. Bergenstein call?" he asks me from the doorjamb of his office.

"Not today."

"Hmmpf."

When he turns the corner, I maximize and head over to wowinterface.com to see if there are any new add-ons worth grabbing. One of my greatest joys in

playing WoW is creating the cleanest, most functional user interface possible. I look up from scanning the new Ace add-on database and notice that three hours of "work" have passed. Nicely done - it's almost time for lunch.

I check my inbox again and see that it's my move. Clicking a link brings up a chess board with pieces in various positions. After taking a few moments to

reorient myself with what's already gone down, I move my black queen to g5, avoiding that nasty-looking bishop. I press submit and close the window. My opponent now has three days in which to move.

While I don't think I could get away with playing real-time chess (too much of a chance for the dreaded boss walk-by while engrossed in the board), Gameknot.com allows me to play in 30-second intervals spread out over quite a long time. The last game I finished took over three weeks to play, and it was only 30 moves. Right now, I have five games going on simultaneously. If you're nice, I'll answer your challenge.


It's 12:36 p.m. and my stomach's growling. I leave for lunch and return an hour later with lips and stomach burning from an extra spicy chicken udon. "Ah, look, how quaint." Someone has left a stack of papers on my desk with a little note asking me to make five copies. "Yeah, I'll get right on that," I say to myself, sliding the stack to my left. "Tomorrow."

Time to play some games. I click open my All-in-One sidebar in Firefox and

open the Games folder. There are tons of web-based games on the list, but I click on Mafia Boss, a little turn-based gem that lets me recruit whores and bootleggers, hitmen and thugs. If I keep 'em happy with guns and dope, they make me money and defend my turf if another player tries to steal my cash. But last night, they lost a vicious gang war. I've been Zeroed. All my tough guys are dead, but I see the perp left me with a few whores and card sharks and a cute digital note which reads, "I made you an offer you couldn't refuse." Time to recruit some more big guns and stick it to the wannabe godfather who messed up my crew. La Cosa Nostra - It's not pretty.

Encouraged by the relative quietness of the cubicle savannah, I decide to kick it up a notch and bring on some action. Flash has given amateur game designers the tools needed to create some pretty intense side-scrollers, RPGs or shooters.

Newgrounds.com, AddictingGames.com and miniclip.com all have huge (sometimes overlapping) libraries of free games that have better graphics than most designed in 1993. You have to battle through ads and blinking banners, but the games are there, and they are



The last game I finished took over three weeks to play, and it was only 30 moves. Right now, I have five games going on simultaneously.

really good at grabbing and holding onto your attention - for about five minutes. It's akin to how I feel about strip clubs: The idea is preferential to the reality of the situation.

My boss drops by my cube to let me know he's going home, but that I should stay until 6:00 to cover for him in case his boss calls. I could just wait five minutes after he's gone and take off myself, but his absence gives me courage. Why go home when I have a working computer right in front of me? Can I achieve the four-minute mile of videogaming at work and install a commercial game client on my PC? There is only one way to find out.

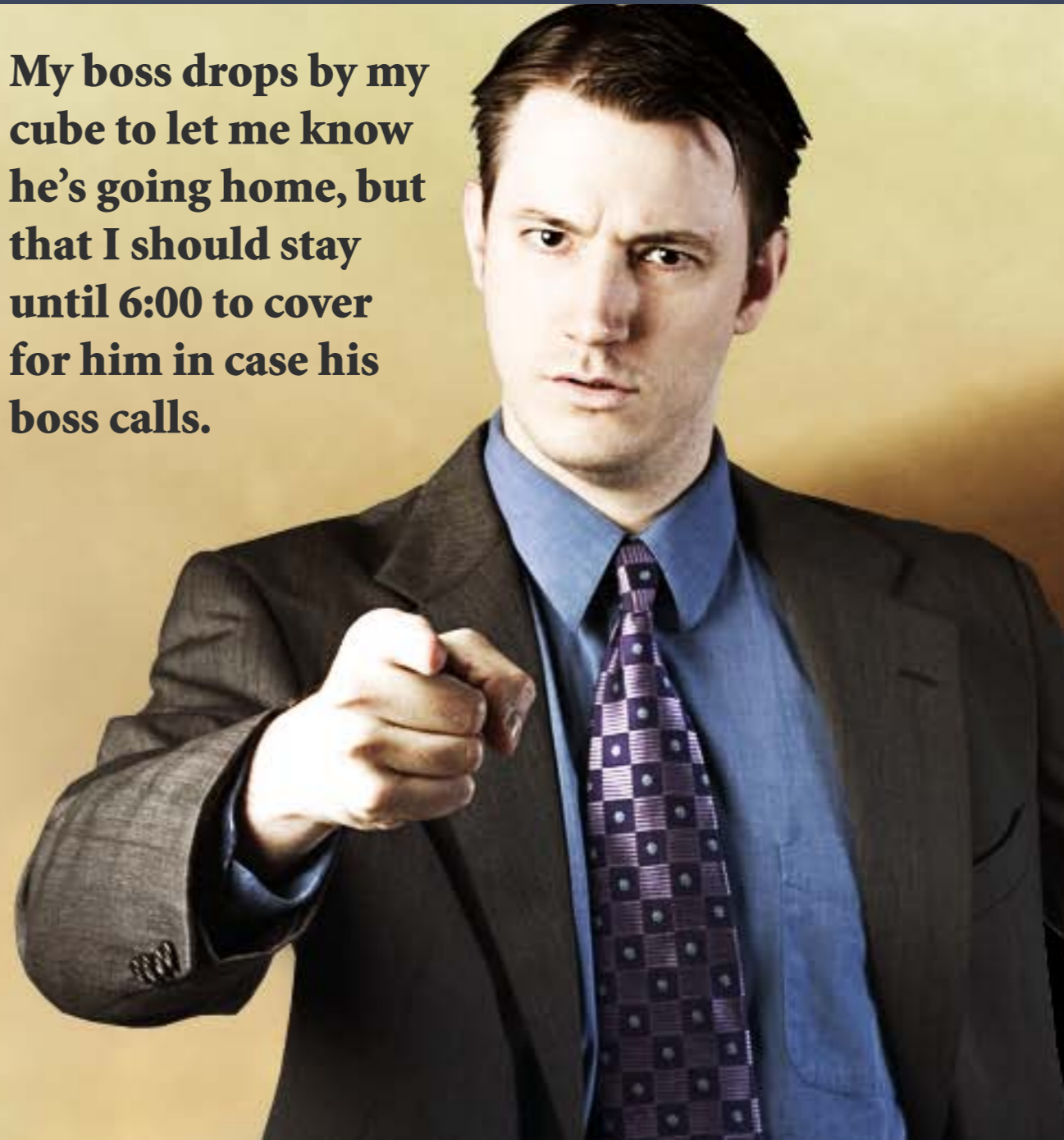
What game should I install? Anything that came out in the last year is probably going to crunch a little bit too much on my Dell-piece-of-crap-not-so-great-for-gaming rig. As much as I'd love to be playing WoW at work, I'd rather not be looking at a new frame every five minutes as I check my mail in Ironforge. I settle on Civ 3. It's a great game with endless possibilities of time-suckage, and it's not so flashy that the onboard graphics chip will explode every time I move.

With a furtive glance over my shoulder, I press the shiny red button to open the CD drive and gingerly slip the disc onto the tray. I wait for the autoplay splash screen to load with a combination of glee and anxiety. "Install Civilization?" Hell yeah. Time to test this mother: I double click the icon and fire it up. Splash screen seems peachy, the intro movie chugs, but, hey, it does that at home. I select "New Game," pick a random civ and wait for the gaming magic to unfold. I can't believe I didn't try this before. My boss leaves early almost every day during the summer. I could have been gaming for at least two or three hours in the afternoons all last year. This year, I'm gonna get my game on. The game has finished loading and there I am with my flashing pink settler unit, ready to found a nation of (damn it) Franks.

"Mr. Tito?"

I whirl around in my swivel chair to confront the gruff voice. There he is. In the flesh. All five-foot-six of him, dressed immaculately in a pressed, black suit. Mr. Robert Bergenstein. My boss' boss. "Yes?"

My boss drops by my cube to let me know he's going home, but that I should stay until 6:00 to cover for him in case his boss calls.





“And for God's sake man, *Civilization 4* came out months ago. It's time to upgrade.”

“Is Tommy around? No, I guess not, the lights are off.” He squints his eyes looking into my boss’ office. “I just had a meeting here, thought I’d drop in and ask him something. Tell him to call me first thing tomorrow.”

“Will do, sir.” I scramble to find a pen and jot down his name on a Post-It note.

“Good man. Say, what’s that you’ve got there?” He nods at my screen. I am mortified. I’d forgotten to minimize Civ 3 or even quit out. I should have turned off my monitor, told him it was broken, anything.

“It’s, umhh.”

“Is that what I think it is?” He eyes ratchet between me and the game.

“Yes, sir.”

“You know, this company has a strict policy against playing games like that on our computers. It’s a violation of so many rules and regulations I can’t even begin to list them all.” After he drives that home by boring holes in my face with his eyes, he looks at my screen again and seems to focus on what is

being displayed there for the first time. “And for God’s sake man, *Civilization 4* came out months ago. It’s time to upgrade. See that Tommy gets that message.”

With that, he turns away and leaves me incredulously watching him walk away. I shake my head and quit Civ. Packing up my things, I casually wonder if Bergenstein is going to blow the whistle on me or not. I’ve heard talk from his assistant that he’s actually pretty lenient about most things, but I never pegged him as a gamer. My money’s on him letting me off with a warning, but I figure he’ll throw the book at me if he catches me again. Unless I’m playing Civ 4, that is. I make a mental note to come up with some way to minimize out of a game quickly if he ever comes around again, or smuggle in an nVidia card.

COMMENTS

Greg Tito is a playwright and standup comic residing in Brooklyn, NY. He is currently splitting time between World of Warcraft, a new D&D 3rd edition campaign and finishing one of his many uncompleted writing projects. He also blogs semi-regularly at <http://onlyzuul.blogspot.com>.

Fix the Fixation

by Taco Schenkhuizen

Aaaiee! On a beautiful day, a horrible situation occurs. The sunrays passing through the leaves cast a fragmented real-time shadow of The Hero. There's a real-time reflection of his sword that dances around the screen, occasionally blinding you! There's a grasshopper with its own shadow in The Hero's long hair - isn't that exciting? Oh, and I think The Evil Wizard said something before flying away with The Hero's girlfriend. But who cares? Didn't you see the wizard's robe? So realistic!

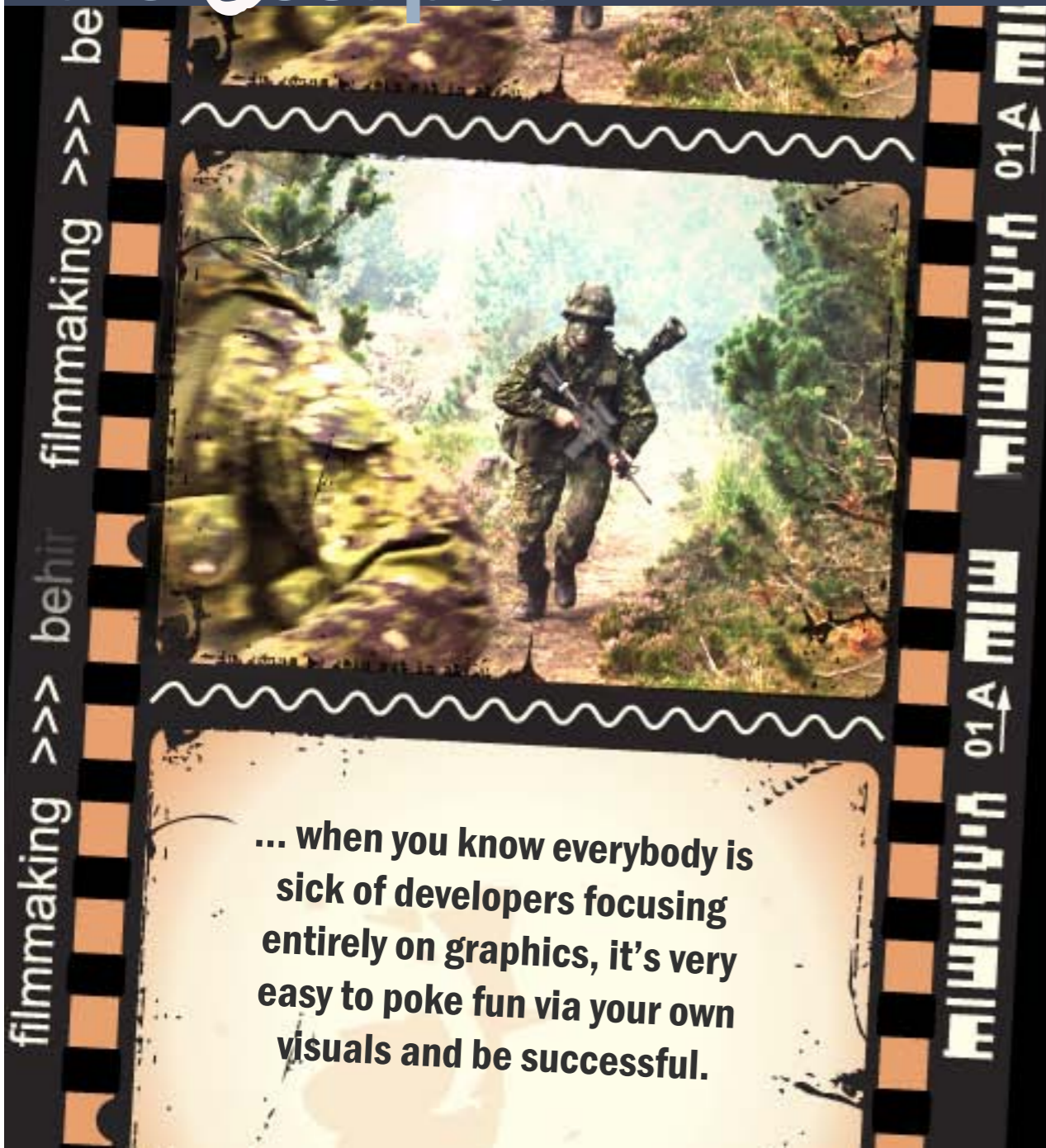
The whole graphics vs. gameplay discussion requires little introduction. Game creators are fixated on improving graphics rather than, well, anything else. Don't get me wrong, I think it's great that there are developers out there trying to push the graphical envelope. When this fixation takes over collectively, however, games as an entertainment and art form are not being taken to their full potential. Is that necessarily a bad thing?

I work in theater as a martial artist, dancer and actor. In a discussion with some colleagues, someone suggested that Capoeira (a young Brazilian martial art) was an offshoot of break-dancing. This is ridiculous, as Capoeira, although young for a martial art, originated around 1780. I'll admit it's indisputable that break-dance and Capoeira share fundamental movements - this is where inspiration struck.

In martial arts, teachers can become so focused on rehearsing moves that students failed to learn to react to unpredictable opponents. The problem is, everybody who didn't follow the exact same lesson plan is an unpredictable opponent. Both creators and consumers get fixated on an illusion of substance.

This fixation is not a bad thing. In fact, it can be an opportunity. What happens when explosions can't get bigger in an action movie; when games look so real that the world starts looking fake? Innovation withers. At that point, consumers are forced to chew and re-chew the same material. Some would say if consumers were bored, they wouldn't keep consuming, but that's a mistake. When no one offers any alternatives, consumers have no choice.





... when you know everybody is sick of developers focusing entirely on graphics, it's very easy to poke fun via your own visuals and be successful.

Very few consumers realize they find action movies boring. Actually, they are fixated on believing they really love action movies. They just believe that they don't enjoy movies as much as they used to. If only consumers could answer the questions, "What would you buy?" and, "What do you want me to make?" Very few people possess that kind of self-knowledge.

In fact, uncovering this knowledge is what makes an entertainer what he is. It's an entertainer's job to play up to what people love. When you tell a stand-up comedian his entire audience is getting bored of new action movies, it's a goldmine of material to him. An industry's fixation is his opportunity. In the gaming world, when you know everybody is sick of developers focusing entirely on graphics, it's very easy to poke fun via your own visuals and be successful. That's why a game like *Katamari Damacy* was such a cult hit. It wasn't beautifully realistic; it wasn't cardboard cut-out cute. It said, "We can make bad look good," and everyone loved the joke.

There is a history of parodies destroying popular fixations. Knight errantry stories

were killed dead in their tracks when *Don Quixote* hit the world. After Isaac Asimov's robot stories and his "laws of robotics," the killer robot premise became unconvincing.

Where are these examples in computer gaming history? The high production costs of games and their relatively short history doesn't make it easy to shatter molds. *The Sims* should have broken open the non-competitive game market. It's one of the greatest successes in gaming history. How did other developers respond? *Playboy: The Mansion* and *The Singles*. It's no wonder that EA has been able to churn out so many expansions for *The Sims*: There is no competition in that area at all!

Given the fastness of gaming's potential universe, we've only just begun to flex our creative muscles. It will be a very long time indeed before we have done everything with this medium, despite the fact that every few years, a technological "end all, be all" comes and goes. An artistic fixation on innovation will always shatter passing notions. [COMMENTS](#)

Taco Schenkhuizen is a freelance writer for The Escapist.

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:

"In your office, how much gaming can you get away with?"

Simon Abramovitch, "Cubicle Vision"

Where I work, it's more of a question of "how much not-gaming can you get away with?" Now, at a videogame company, I get MSN messages, Post-Its and e-mails encouraging everything from playing in a *Guitar Hero* tournament to joining lunch-time deathmatch FPS to signing up for *Ragnarok Online*. Peer pressure!

Cat Rambo, "Sponsored by Microsoft and Apple"

I work for myself, so my boss is pretty tough on gaming before getting everything done. Every once in a while, though, she insists that I go finish a couple of quests in *World of Warcraft*.

Corvus Elrod, "All Play and No Work, A Speculative Fiction"

My office is at home, I write a gaming blog, and I'm designing a game. It's practically **mandatory** that I get in as much gaming as possible! I need to get paid for it so I can stop going in to that **other** place which has no opportunities for gaming at all.

Taco Schenkhuizen, "Fix the Fixation"

I can game as much as I want, as long as that game is *Progress Quest*. I wonder how my programming brother would answer this. I think he gets away with it as long as he games at least 5 hours a day.

Greg Tito, "Cubicle Savannah"

It depends, do you consider writing for *The Escapist* as gaming?

Richard Aihoshi, "All Work and No Play?"

My job as editor of a website about games requires that I play them, so the concept of "getting away" with doing so at work doesn't really exist for me, although this does mean I almost never play anything solely for my own enjoyment.

Jon Hayter, Producer

Absolutely none at all, gaming on office machines is strictly forbidden and I'm appalled that you'd even ask me this question. Get out! Get out of my office! ... And close the door on the way, please. Thank you.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

A lot. I'm gaming right now!

Russ Pitts, Associate Editor

More than I have time for. Woe is me. Woe, I say. Woe.

Joe Blancato, Associate Editor

Aside from the occasional review play-through, I try to limit my gaming for fun at work. It's dangerous to blend worlds like that, man.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor

I occasionally will play a little *Tetris* or Mah Jongg while thinking through an Editor's Note, a site plan or the like, but that stops as soon as I work out what I was thinking about. I'm often too busy during the day to actually **play** games much, so it's really a self-imposed rule.

