the Escapist

Casual Friday

Twenty-seven Hours Later

BAG FULL OF EARS

MEET THE TEAM!

SECRET SAUCE:

The Rise of Blizzard

by Russ Pitts

exodus

by Shannon Drake

Ripples in the Pond

- The Impact of World of Warcraft on the Massive Genre

by Michael Zenke

ALSO:

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

For over a decade, Blizzard has produced top quality games and found a spot in the heart of a vast majority of gamers. Whether they're creating a trek deep into the ground to fight of the demons of *Diablo*, or a struggle for resources among three galactic species in *StarCraft*, Blizzard is known for the shine and depth with which they infuse each product. This is what Blizzard brings to the table.

I sat here for a long while, thinking of all the offerings Blizzard has bestowed upon the grateful gaming public, pondering what to write in summation/introduction to our profile issue on Blizzard. I could talk about Blizzard's "When it is finished!" attitude toward game development. I could talk about how *StarCraft* impacted Korean culture. I could even talk about my own wonderful adventures in Azeroth with my human priest and Tauren druid in *World of WarCraft*.

A short Editor's Note doesn't suffice to explain it all. But then, isn't that why we've devoted a whole issue to the Blizzard team? Our writers this week have filled out the reasons for Blizzard's success. Russ Pitts gives a detailed account of how Blizzard the company came to be what they are today, and in so doing, reveals a bit about their Secret Sauce. Shannon Drake speaks with several ex-Blizzard employees about their tenures at the studio. And Michael Zenke returns this week to discuss the importance of *World of WarCraft*.

Cheers,

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Response to "Korean court jails distributors of MMO bot program," from *The Escapist Lounge*: The situation is worse still in games where the exchange of in-game money for real is encouraged. Above that there's always the enjoyment of others, too. Robots grinding away every hour of every day on the same task that the human traders are doing really takes the enjoyment out of it. Why pay an MMO subscription if you are merely competing with AI?

-Tom

In Response to Korean court jails distributors of MMO bot program, from *The Escapist Lounge*: Why pay a subscription if you are merely competing with children who don't have responsibilities beyond themselves and can spend 12 hours or more each and every day to the game?

I still don't see the problem with bots, but then again, I think any "problems" created from bots are largely due to poor game design.

If bots create an unfair (illegal) advantage… so does availability of time.

I'm all for fairness in games and competition, but typical MMORPGS are not designed to be fair so I only treat them as interesting social environments and try to refrain from competing because… I simply cannot compete in a game that requires insane amounts of time to progress.

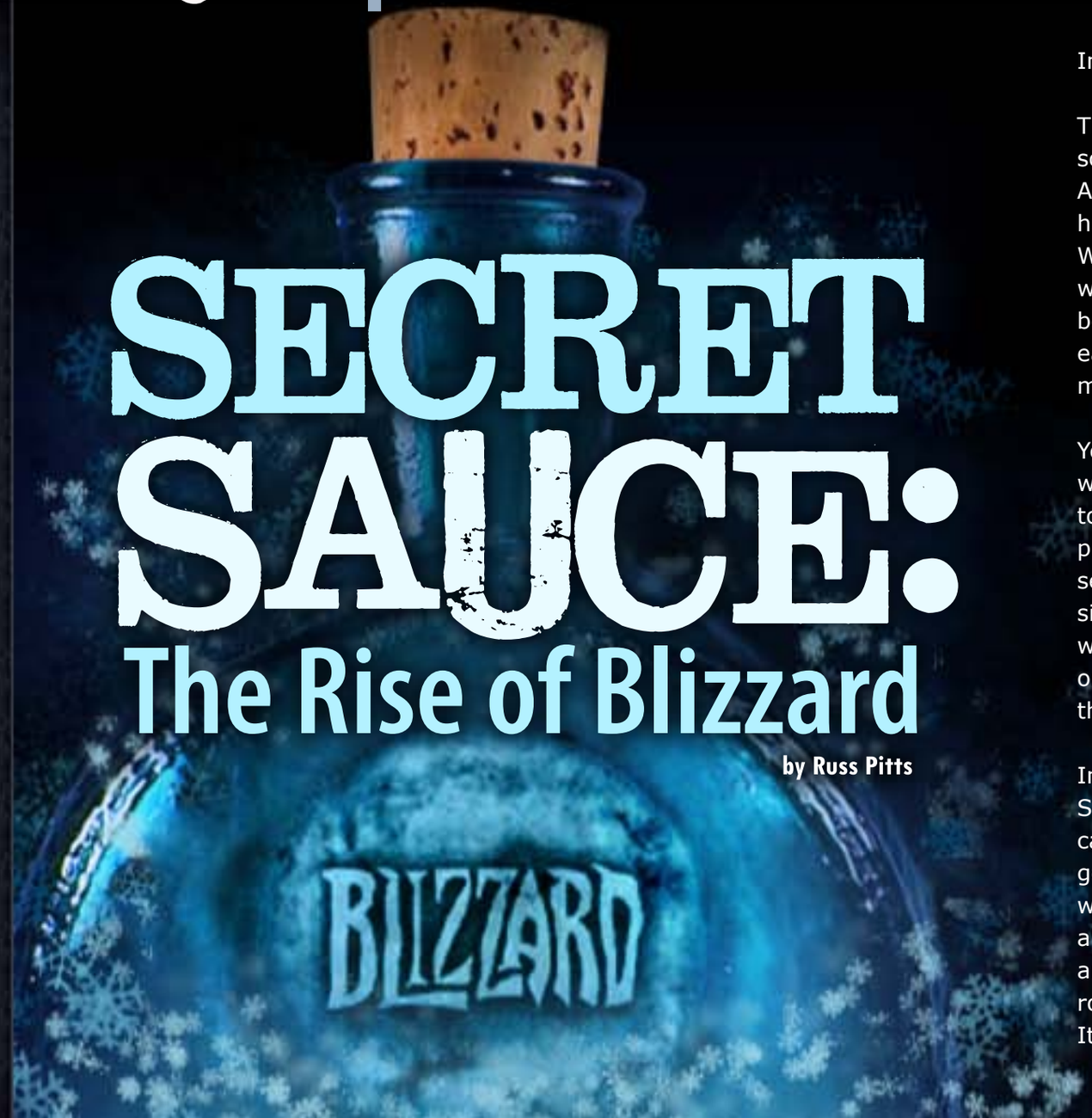
-Cody K.

In Response to "Cubicle Vision" from *The Escapist Lounge*: Okay, so don't play games on the company's equipment. Not a problem. Go get yourself a Game Boy, DS, PSP, hell, even an old Atari Lynx, and have your relaxing game of Tetris or whatever during your federally mandated lunch break. Since the game unit is portable, why not take that hour away from your desk? The cubicle world - with all its email, voice mail, and memos - will still be there when you return.

-Wizard of Wor

In Response to "All Work and No Play" from *The Escapist Lounge*: I listened to this fantastic presentation by Merlin Mann, about how technology and the internet is making our lives even more tedious that in the past. He said that children's books 20, 30 years ago, often showed firemen, mechanics, police officers, chefs as people's jobs... in the future, all the jobs will just be a person at a desk, looking at a computer.

-cibbuano



SECRET SAUCE:
The Rise of Blizzard

by Russ Pitts

In 1991, the internet didn't exist.

That is to say, it did exist (and had for some time), but to the majority of Americans it might as well have been a huffalump until the creation of the World Wide Web in (approximately) 1992, when the internet would begin to become both widely understood, and easy-to-use (therefore "of interest" to most people).

Yet in 1991, the internet (such as it was) was neither widely understood nor easy-to-use, which is why the prospect of playing games on the internet may have seemed like a good and bad idea simultaneously. On one hand, nobody was doing it yet - it was a virgin market; on the other, nobody was doing it yet - the risks were terrible.

In 1991, videogame industry leader Sierra launched the Sierra Network (later called the ImagiNation Network). It was geared more-or-less toward children, with cartoon-ish art and themes, but it allowed users to play a variety of games and chat with friends in online chat rooms - all for an hourly fee, of course. It was, in every way, ahead of its time.

Particularly in terms of what users were willing to pay. At one point, the hourly rate for access to Sierra's network had climbed as high as $6 per hour. This was in addition to the subscription fees users were already paying for dial-up access to the internet itself and (in some extreme cases) long distance telephone charges levied by the telephone company. By contrast, many telephone sex chat services charged less than half that amount.

The Sierra Network, not surprisingly, failed and was shut down in 1996 by AOL, who had acquired it from AT&T. Ironically, this was not too long after the internet had become both widely understood and easy-to-use, and right around the same time that several other online gaming services had begun to flourish. Among them, an exciting new service offered by a company called Blizzard.

The Sleeper Has Awakened

In 1992, a revolutionary videogame was released that captured the imaginations of gamers the world over, almost immediately selling half a million copies. One of the first "real-time strategy" games ever made, it tasked the player with building a virtual army by collecting

resources and then constructing buildings that would produce their machines of war - all in "real time." While the player was at it, their "enemy" was doing the same, building up to an eventual showdown between the competing armies, after which one side would claim total victory. Whoever had the most machines or the best strategy would win the day. It was like chess combined with backgammon wrapped up in an erector set, and gamers loved it.

That game was not *Warcraft*.

Westwood Studios' *Dune II*, predating *Warcraft* by at least two years, was based on the science fiction books by Frank Herbert, and cast the player as one of three races bent on controlling the spice-infested planet of Arrakis. It has been described as among the best PC games ever made, and many still consider it the best example of its genre ever made. Yet, it was not without its share of problems.

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That game was not *Warcraft*.

As with any game based on a license, *Dune II* relied on the players' familiarity with the premise of the original works. The *Dune* series had sold millions of copies of books world-wide, and had been made into a feature-length film in 1984, but to many people, the story was simply too dense to get their heads around. Case in point: The resource *Dune II* players were tasked with mining, the spice "Melange," took Herbert an entire novel to attempt to explain. Called "the spice of spices" in his appendices, the fictional Melange has been attributed with prolonging life, allowing users to foresee the future, astrally project objects through time and space, turn people's eyes blue and make giant worms try to kill you. "Catchy" is not the first word which comes to mind here.

Still, the game was among the first of its kind, and as such is fondly remembered and universally considered the grandfather of the RTS genre. The criticism of its universe did not prevent Westwood from controlling RTS production for almost a decade, but combined with the soon-to-be glaring lack of multiplayer capability, did leave a hole large enough for rival Blizzard to drive an entire franchise through.

How the West Was Won

Officially founded in 1991 as Silicon & Synapse, Blizzard Entertainment had been making their bones producing console titles and second-rate DOS games like *Battle Chess II* (1990) and *The Death and Return of Superman* (1994). As with any business, their goal in the first few years was to simply survive. Condor Software co-founder Dave Brevik explains early corporate life by saying "console games were paying the bills."

He would know - Condor was doing the same. Founded by Brevik in 1993 with Max and Erich Schaefer, Condor had been making ends meet by developing low-budget console titles. Then, they got a call from publisher Sunsoft to develop a comic book franchise title for the Sega Genesis.

Dave Brevik tells the story: "We were developing a fighting game (like *Street Fighter*) using [DC's] *Justice League* characters ... [Part-way] through development, we got approval to show the game off at CES. This was before E3 existed."

What the designers at Condor didn't know, however, was that another

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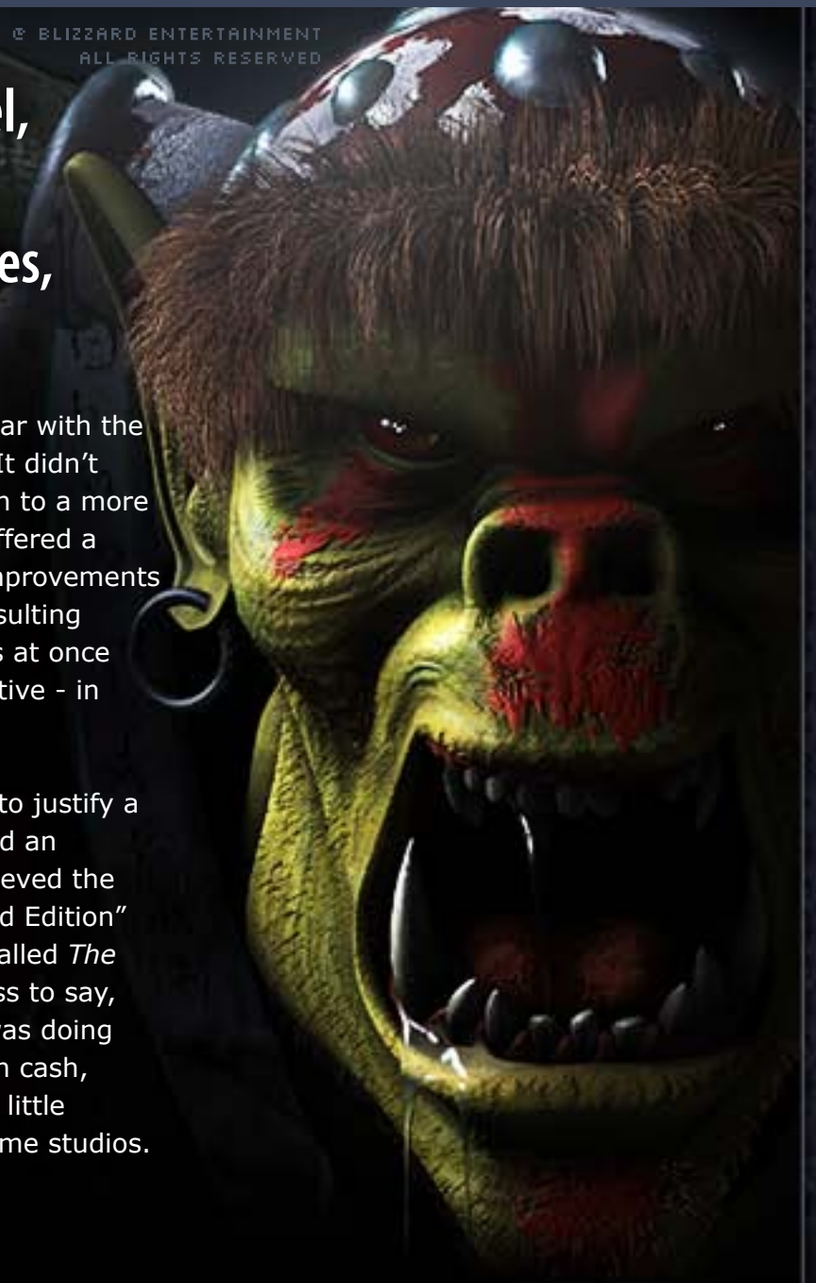
company, over 300 miles away, was developing the exact same game for a competing console. The two development teams met for the first time at the Consumer Electronics Show.

"Much to our surprise," says Brevik, "[Blizzard] was making the same game for the Super Nintendo system. We had never talked or shared any assets or ideas, and it was supposed to be the same game! Anyhow, this leads me to talking to Allen Adham, who was their President."

It would be a fateful chance encounter for both men and their studios. In addition to the SNES version of *Justice League*, Blizzard's Adham was working on the first installment of what would soon become one of the best-selling videogame franchises of all time. Adham showed his new game to Brevik behind closed doors. That game was *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*.

"I loved it," said Brevik, "and thought it was a great idea. A few months later, I called Allen and asked if they needed any beta testers."

Warcraft sold enough copies to justify a sequel, which in turn spawned an expansion. Blizzard then achieved the trifecta of game sales, a "Gold Edition" re-release of all three titles.



Warcraft, like *Dune II*, was an RTS game, in which the player mined resources in order to build an army. The difference, however, was in the details. *Warcraft* was set in the fictional world of Azeroth, a land which borrowed heavily from the fantasy universe created by J. R.R. Tolkien. In *Warcraft*, a horde of orcs have invaded the world of humans and must be pushed back (by the player) to the world from whence they've come. Or, alternately, the player must guide the invading orcs onward to victory against the hapless, medieval humans.

Naturally, the story was very familiar to an audience of young, computer-literate gamers. The same could be said of practically every other fantasy tale created since Mr. Tolkien's epic trilogy was written, but the premise was simple enough for someone unfamiliar with the Tolkien books to appreciate. It didn't hurt that *Warcraft*, in addition to a more compellingly familiar story, offered a handful of other gameplay improvements over *Dune II*, as well. The resulting product was a game that was at once familiar, accessible and addictive - in other words, a breakout hit.

Warcraft sold enough copies to justify a sequel, which in turn spawned an expansion. Blizzard then achieved the trifecta of game sales, a "Gold Edition" re-release of all three titles called *The Warcraft Battlechest*. Needless to say, the little company in Irvine was doing quite well for itself. Flush with cash, Blizzard then decided to do a little shopping – for third-party game studios.

First up: Dave Brevik's Condor Software.

Days of the Condor

Condor's first effort, *Planet Soccer*, was a less-than-stellar 2-D offering that nonetheless showed some promise. Enough, anyway, to earn them the *Justice League Task Force* contract from Sunsoft.

"We were making console games," says Brevik, "in hopes of someday obtaining the clout to develop our own title. Turns out it happened much more quickly than we had anticipated."

Having met Blizzard's Allen Adham at CES, Brevik took advantage of the opportunity to plug his own idea for a PC game: "I came up with the idea for *Diablo* when I was in high-school," says Brevik. "It was modified over and over until it solidified when I was in college and got hooked on an ASCII game called *Moria/Angband*. When we pitched *Diablo* to Blizzard, we pitched a turn-based, single-player DOS game."

"[*Diablo*] was radically different then," Says Mark Kern, former Team Lead for *World of Warcraft* (who joined Blizzard shortly before *Diablo* was released). "I've heard 'turn-based Claymation,' but I'm not sure."

Whether it was the Claymation or something else, Adham's company obviously saw something intriguing in Brevik's high school dream-game.

Blizzard green-lighted the project - with a few, small changes. At Blizzard's urging, Condor changed both the genre and platform of *Diablo*, re-designing it as a real-time, Windows 95 game, and in the process created a game that would help Blizzard Entertainment take over the world.

"The interface was originally developed by Erich Schaefer and myself," says Brevik, "when we tried to imitate the look and 'camera' view of our favorite game at the time, *X-Com*. The final interface had been iterated so many times, with so many suggestions from so many people, that it is impossible to attribute it to one person."

That is, until veteran game designer Stieg Hedlund came along.

Hedlund had been working on games since the late 1980s, most-notably on a much-hyped *Lord of the Rings* game which was eventually canned by Electronic Arts. One day in the early '90s, Hedlund walked into Condor's Bay Area office for an interview.

"It was a small office in a B-grade complex," says Hedlund. "I liked them at once, but it seemed pretty risky and the

title they were working on at the time was *Justice League*, which wasn't very appealing to me. I went to work at Sega instead."

Three years and a few games later, Hedlund returned, "just to say 'hi.'" He was intrigued by Condor's latest project and decided to give them a second chance.

"They ... showed me what they were working on," says Hedlund, "which was *Diablo*, and that did impress me."

Hedlund joined Condor almost immediately and set about streamlining the design process. "To that point, various people worked on the design, but no one person was responsible for it and they knew that had to change. We were able to work things out pretty quickly." He would go on to serve as Lead Designer for *Diablo 2* before leaving the company to work on a variety of Tom Clancy games.

"Even though it was rough and I'd never heard of it," says Hedlund, "I could see the game that [*Diablo*] could become, and I was very interested in getting in on that ... [it] instantly clicked with me."

It apparently "instantly clicked" with a lot of other people, as well. Released in 1996, *Diablo* sold more than half a million copies in six months, with more than 2.5 million copies having sold to-date.

Quality Assurance

The partnership between Blizzard and Condor progressed swimmingly. So much so, that in 1996 - mere months before *Diablo* was ready to ship - Blizzard acquired Condor outright and renamed the company "Blizzard North."

"I wasn't with Blizzard at the time," says Mark Kern, "but I recall that it seemed an exciting acquisition for both parties."

Diablo's development was guided by visiting quality assurance teams called "Strike Teams," explained by Dave Brevik as "a group of developers from the opposite development location that would filter the comments from all of the developers at that location and come up with lists of suggestions and changes. The teams would meet with these strike teams monthly and then more often (even every day) as the project approached completion. This would

assure that everyone in each company had a voice and a hand in each game."

"I led a few of these," says Mark Kern, "and the duties are open ended: from helping balance levels and tweak UI to raising red flags that the dev teams might not be able to see because they are so close to the project."

Kern attributes Blizzard's uncanny ability to ensure quality control across an entire organization spanning two separate physical locations to the Strike Team concept. "They help carry that 'Blizzard Vision' through all projects," he says. "It is but a humble instrument of **The Will**."

Taking It Online

"Battle.net was an idea that was proposed about six months before the end of [*Diablo*]," says Dave Brevik. "It spawned from the basic idea of taking the open LAN games for *Warcraft 2* and giving [the players] a place where everyone could hook up and play together. This idea was so cool we went back and remade [*Diablo*] to be multiplayer, though it was never coded to be. There were a few companies at the time ... where they would do the same thing as Battle.net, but would charge people $10 a month. We decided to make the same service but for free ... "

Ironically, Blizzard's free service would succeed where every other online gaming service had failed. As of 1999, Battle.net was "the only profitable online gaming service in existence," according to Greg Costikyan in an article for Salon.com. "How? Advertising. 30+ million ad impressions in one month alone."

"Most people don't realize it," says Mark Kern, "but Blizzard has been running servers in datacenters since *Diablo*. *Diablo 2* was also Blizzard's first true client/server game. We learned a lot of lessons that I was eager to apply to *WoW*."

Blizzard, having essentially turned the wave of the future into a tsunami, then set about using their momentum to wipe all competition from the face of the map. With a proven online service and no fewer than two successful fantasy franchises under their belts, the company decided that it was time to revisit the idea of subscription-based games.

"We had to build an entire company around [*World of Warcraft*]," says Kern. "This included tweaking everything from PR and QA to establishing entirely new departments like operations, customer service, GMs and billing - it literally transformed Blizzard."

As well as the entire landscape of online gaming. It was the final move in a decade-long coup d'etat by Blizzard, against the entire gaming industry.

To date, *WoW* boasts more than 6 million total subscribers, bringing in an estimated $75 million dollars *per month*.

Secret Sauce

"Creation of a company or a game is a sheer act of will borne from an idea," says Mark Kern, now President of Red 5 Studios, which is currently developing its own online game (with the help of several former members of Blizzard Entertainment). "But then, you add really creative, talented people to the mix and the vision changes, it becomes collective. It has to be to sweep everyone along."

people, set our own schedules, and made the game we wanted to make. There was and still exists a ton of mutual respect. I think it really worked."

So, how does a maker of B-quality DOS and console games go on to become the single most successful videogame company in the history of the world?

Blizzard has succeeded largely by consistently identifying what it is that makes gamers want to play a game, and then amplifying that all the way to 11.

"It was a very cooperative and non-authoritarian relationship," says Dave Brevik of his time at Blizzard North. Brevik is now the Chief Visionary Officer of Flagship Studios, developer of *Hellgate: London* (and employer of its own small army of former-Blizzard employees). "[Blizzard North] had complete autonomy from Blizzard in Irvine. We had all our own development

Even accounting for good luck and talented employees, there has to be some other key ingredient in Blizzard's larder to account for their seemingly golden touch.

In 1994, Blizzard took the Chaim Klein Witz of RTS gaming, slapped some makeup on him, gave him a few blood capsules and turned him into Gene Simmons, the fire-breathing, spike-encrusted rock star game known as *Warcraft*. And then they did it again with *Diablo*.

Blizzard has succeeded largely by consistently identifying what it is that makes gamers want to play a game, and then amplifying that all the way to 11. But there has to be more to it than that. Millions of gamers around the world can point to a game that works and compare it to a game that doesn't, identifying ways to tweak or refine the formula of either along the way. It happens every day, all over the internet.

I asked Mark Kern, one of the men most directly responsible for transforming the company into what it is today, to attempt to define what it is about Blizzard that gives it its "Star Power." His reply? "Ah, now that's the 'Secret Sauce,' isn't it?"

Secret Sauce indeed. COMMENTS

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He likes deadlines and long walks on the beach.

Sidebar

by Shannon Drake

It used to be the stuff of blues legend: Sign a contract at the Crossroads, lose a little bit of your soul, and get wealth and success until Ol' Scratch called in the contract at the end of time. Blizzard Entertainment may not have much in common with a poor man out of Mississippi, but both attained the stature of legend, and both may have lost a little piece of their souls. Blizzard made games so incredibly popular (*World of Warcraft*, *StarCraft, Diablo*), their success transformed the company culture and managed to burn out the creative team that made them a household name.

Stieg Hedlund was a former lead designer at Blizzard North, as well as one of the minds behind *Diablo II*. He describes his arrival at Blizzard as a "total culture shock. I had been working in games for over nine years, mainly with Japanese companies, and they had pretty rigorous atmospheres, particularly where design was concerned. These places dictated that a lot of stuff be on paper before anyone started any actual work. At Blizzard, they wanted the broad strokes, and then wanted to just 'explore' within those parameters.

"The great thing was that I had a lot of autonomy," he said, describing a free-wheeling culture of creativity that just about anyone would envy. "There was no corporate layer as there is in most other companies, and even at the studio level, I didn't need approval for any idea I wanted to pursue, I just made it happen. The downside was that there was a whole lot resting on my shoulders alone. I drew heavily on my experience in more disciplined environments to be self-directed and coordinate the many tasks that I was responsible for.

"Blizzard was very collaborative; I could go directly to the programmer or whoever I'd need help from to get something implemented, and talk about the best approaches," and he himself got immersed into this culture of openness. "Similarly, my door was always open to anyone who had a design idea — and I guess I was a lot more open to ideas than a lot of designers they'd worked with as well: One guy thought I was ignoring him because I was typing while he was talking, until I told him I was writing down what he was saying!"

Another Blizzard alum, Stefan Scandizzo, gives a similar assessment of Blizzard North's work environment, "I was hired when Blizzard North was about 30 people. This had a significant impact on both the work environment and the game development process. Everyone from the president to the IT technician was on a first name basis. We could almost all eat lunch around the same table and discuss games in a very open manner. Everyone was able to participate in various aspects of the game, even if it wasn't their specialty or department."

This small company culture was hard to sustain, as Blizzard grew on the strength of its previous titles and went through the rocket-powered launch of *World of Warcraft*. Up in San Mateo, Blizzard North headed toward its demise and subsequent shuttering, the departures began en masse. Some employees declined generous relocation packages in the Irvine Mothership to head off on their own, or to join already-established companies like NCsoft. As Blizzard North disappeared into fond memories, her alumni scattered to the winds, starting or taking prominent positions with companies like ArenaNet, Red 5 Studios, Flagship Studios, Perpetual Entertainment and Hyboreal Games. Some devoted themselves to single-player games, while others stepped up to challenge their former employer in the realm of MMOGs. Stieg worked with Ubisoft for a while, before joining Perpetual Entertainment in 2004 to help craft *Gods and Heroes*. Stefan and a band of former Blizzard North employees started Castaway Entertainment, where they're working on a number of projects. ArenaNet went on to release *Guild Wars*; the guys who went to NCsoft are working on *Dungeon Runners*; and Flagship Studios came up with *Hellgate: London.*

They went to many different companies with many different goals, but when discussing their reasons for leaving, there is a single common thread that can be summed up as "We wanted to do something that wasn't *Diablo* or *World of Warcraft*." If Robert Johnson is stuck playing the blues in Hell for all eternity, the after-game facing the Blizzard team was constantly churning out *World of Warcraft* expansions and enhancements to feed a ravenous mass of players that'll pounce on whatever they create, analyze it, chop it to shreds, exploit it, camp it, and then insult them by name for not churning out more content. And that's just on the first day it's out. So, what's a designer to do? Sign at the Crossroads and ride the wave of success, or turn around and start their own company?

Stieg put it to me like this: "Internally, Blizzard runs like an indie studio: Each individual can do a lot to affect the outcome of each game and people step up and do some pretty heroic things to make games turn out as well as they do. The timeframes run long and there's a lot of crunch time. It's a draining experience and it's hard to feel like you could do it again right away working in the same franchise." The other option for the former *Diablo* developer was the never-ending creative hamster wheel of *World of Warcraft.*

While the company was moving to new heights and shaking up the MMOG industry, the culture itself was changing. The small team atmosphere, where everyone could sit around a table and talk about games, was fading away as the company grew larger and larger.

"I believe very strongly that both leaving Blizzard and starting a new company are very much related," said Stefan, though he emphasized he was speaking only for himself. "I enjoy the small assertive team with which I work. Decisions are made quickly and with confidence because everyone here not only respects one another but also **depends** on each other. This is the way Blizzard North was in its younger years. So many games that are

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currently being developed are based solely on their potential marketability by being tied to films or other established franchises. As a designer, I enjoy the challenge of working on new worlds, concepts and characters. An independent developer is far more agile in terms adapting to new ideas and trends. I'd rather lead than follow."

In creating one of the most successful MMOGs ever - as well as some of the most enduring franchises - Blizzard created an all-consuming monster and faced the classic blues-man's dilemma: You will be incredibly successful and wealthy, but you will never be able to do anything else again. No matter how cool the idea you might have, there is a gaping maw of content waiting to be filled. Dare to mention working on other projects, and six million very angry people will instantly write in, demanding to know why you can't keep a f---ing server online.

One of my sources from the *World of Warcraft* team said, "*WoW* was such a marathon that it took quite a bit out of me. Five years is a long time on a project, and this one spanned the entire company. After *WoW*, I wanted to focus on content, especially original content. There were many people, like myself, who had been there eight or 10 years and really wanted a change." Therein lies the problem. The business logic is easy to see: With a game providing millions of dollars a month in revenues, and with assured sales in the millions for any expansions, why divert the attention of the content team anywhere else, especially on a project that may not be successful? If you want to spread your creative wings a bit, the logical place to turn is to *StarCraft* and *Diablo*, not a new, untested game or genre with risk involved.

In creating three of the best-recognized franchises in the history of PC gaming, Blizzard turned itself into a fantastically successful company, and simultaneously burned out or drove away the very people who contributed to its ascent. They're standing at the crossroads, in other words, and it remains to be seen if, like the blues man, they'll start sinking down. COMMENTS

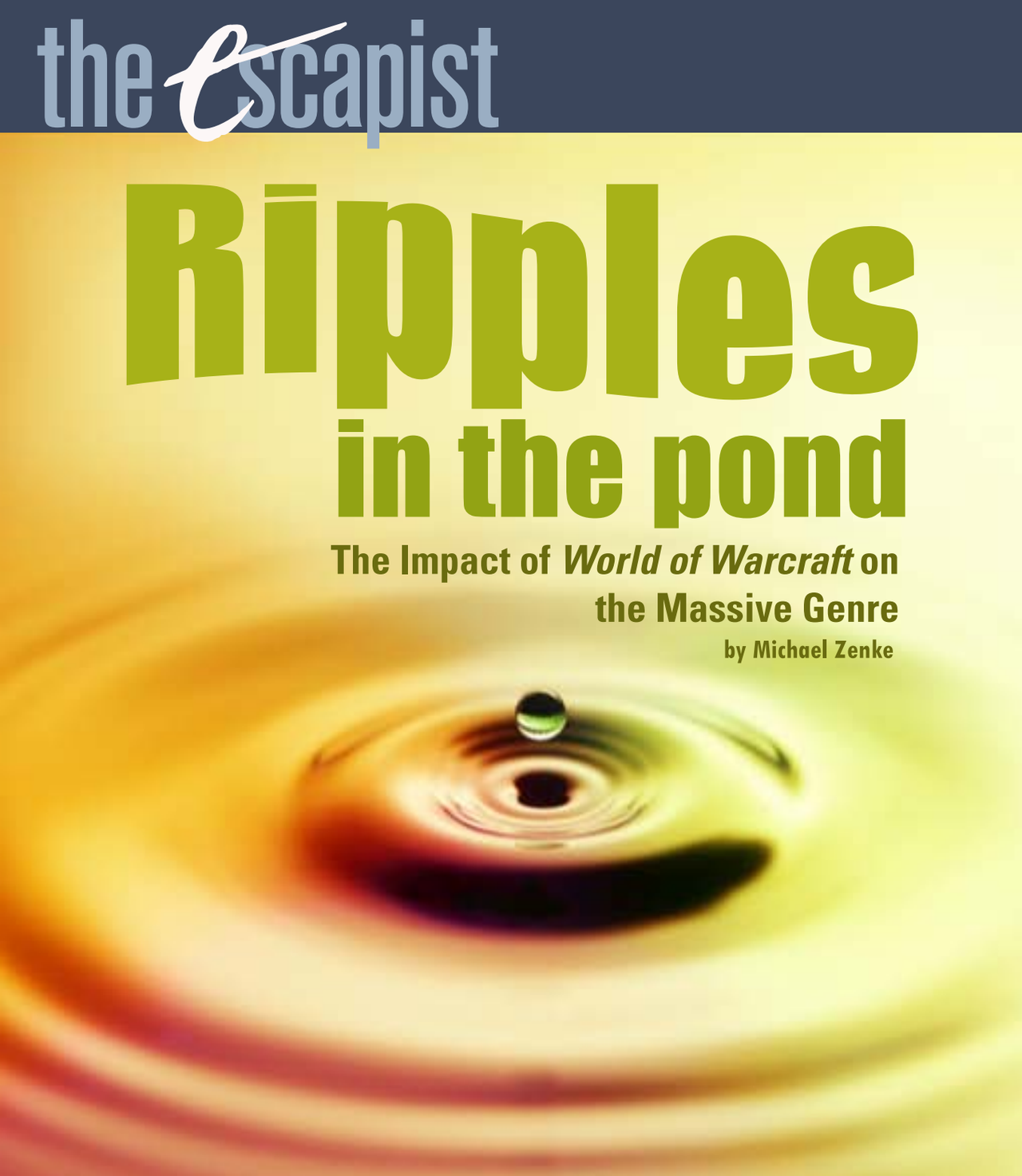
Shannon Drake likes commas and standing out in the rain.

With a game providing millions of dollars a month in revenues, and with assured sales in the millions for any expansions, why divert the attention of the content team anywhere else, especially on a project that may not be successful?

Ripples in the pond

The Impact of *World of Warcraft* on the Massive Genre

by Michael Zenke



Some things take the world by surprise. The popularity of *Katamari Damacy* came as quite a shock to Namco. Prior to 1997, no one had ever heard of *Harry Potter* or J.K. Rowling. *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) didn't just catch the world off-guard, it knocked it flat to the canvas. In early 2004, the game's well publicized beta had fans slavering at the mouth. When the game launched in November of that year, retail outlets couldn't stock their shelves quickly enough. Since then, *WoW* has remained at or near the top of PC game sales in the U.S. and abroad. Today, over six million souls inhabit the fictional realm of Azeroth. Everyone, at least according to Blizzard, is playing *World of Warcraft*.

Those of us (and I have plenty of company here) who spend time thinking about massive games in a larger context have now had two years to see the effects of *WoW* on the marketplace as a whole. Some commentators have argued that *WoW*'s success is a flash in the pan, while others have said every successful MMOG to come will be a refined version of Blizzard's title. Either way, Blizzard and *World of Warcraft* are trendsetting phenomena impacting the entire gaming industry. In terms of subscribers, six million is a really hard number to argue with; if you want to make money in a crowded marketplace, you're going to have to take some cues from the market leader. This has resulted in several interesting general trends in the MMOG scene.

WoW's popularity has attracted a number of people to the online gaming genre. This is a statement based as much on guesswork as on fact, unfortunately. Whenever discussing player populations in MMOGs, you run into a number of hurdles. Some companies are reluctant to share any statistics, while others prefer to crow about the number of characters that have been created across all of their servers. Neither of these stances is helpful for understanding population growth and trends.

Thankfully, by hook or by crook, Bruce Woodcock gets the important numbers and posts them as often as he can to www.mmogchart.com. Many of the graphs he's made available are informative, but the chart detailing the

number of total active subscribers across the entire genre is particularly eye-opening.

Despite reports of churn in the ranks of *World of Warcraft* players, the total number of subscribers continues to rise. What the dramatic upward swoop says to me is folks are entering the massive genre and not leaving. While some may quit *World of Warcraft* and no longer play online games, Woodcock's chart suggests that there are a number of players who enter the massive space and, upon canceling their *WoW* account, move on to another title in the genre.

As the massive field has grown, worlds like Azeroth have begun to spill out of their own virtuality. *World of Warcraft* has become more visible to the public, gamer and non-gamer alike. In 2000, this was an industry whose players were generally believed to carry the "pungency of cat urine." In 2006, one of the genre's fans has written articles about *WoW* in the *New York Times*.

It's not just smelly teenagers who are playing MMOGs anymore. Nick Yee's Daedalus Project reports that the average player age is 26, with almost 36% of players married and 22% of them parents.

Of course, given *WoW*'s success, a number of stuffy debates have cropped up among commentators. The most popular among gaming academia is an argument over the merit of game worlds vs. those of sandbox-style virtual spaces. This boils down to trying to decide if less serious, gameplay-driven games are "better" than sandbox worlds, where the actual game is secondary to the society that develops. For example, *WoW* is a game, while *Star Wars Galaxies* and *EVE Online* are sandboxes. Of course, even though *WoW* is considered "just" a game, the sheer number of people participating has spawned a virtual society that is breathtaking to behold. Players communicate with each other via websites, a number of podcasts and through machinima. They talk about strategies for high-end raids, complain about game changes and (most often) talk about their lives. College kids slay dragons alongside stockbrokers, mothers and teenagers. *WoW*'s huge population not only means there is never a lack of other people to play with, but the playerbase is a far more accurate representative of real life demographics than any other game.

What's been interesting to see over the last two years is how other games have adapted to the presence of the proverbial 300-pound gorilla. Some existing titles have openly adopted features offered by *World of Warcraft*. *EverQuest II* has introduced several UI improvements that seem very familiar, the most obvious example being the "available quest" notifications above the heads of PCs. With millions of people playing one title, it's tempting to borrow what works for your own game. It's

Worlds like Azeroth have begun to spill out of their own virtuality.

probable that some players have migrated to *EQ2* from *WoW*, and anything that can make those players feel at home in their new game is likely to be considered by the developers.

On the other hand, many games still in the works have deliberately taken up a contrarian design. *World of Warcraft*'s fantasy elements, solo-friendly gameplay and elaborate endgame raiding are all just one approach to MMOG development. *Tabula Rasa*, for example, has taken the fantasy element out of the equation, going for a sci-fi military feel. *Vanguard* is intended to be a hardcore title in that many gameplay elements will require a group in order to complete them. By aiming for niches in the marketplace, games like these hope to attract players already bored of *WoW*'s style of play.

I've even heard anecdotal evidence that *WoW*'s success is shaking the money tree. With so many people interested in online play, it will be easier for future developers to raise venture capital. This comes at a cost, of course, as venture capitalists begin conversations with, "So, how is this going to be like *World of Warcraft*?" If you're aiming away from the fantasy genre, that's got to be frustrating to hear.

In the big picture, I believe Blizzard and *WoW*'s impact on the massive genre has been overwhelmingly positive. More people playing can only mean good things for players, for communities and for developers. More players in the genre means a higher demand for games, resulting in a greater diversity of titles and experiences. This critical mass creates real virtual worlds from mere virtual spaces, promoting communication and self-expression via the MMOG medium.

For better or worse, *WoW* is the face of the massive genre. In a very small part of the galaxy, it's a gravity well bending light that passes anywhere near it. When discussing PvP, questing, guilds or class balance, commentators now have a lingua franca: the common tongue of *World of Warcraft*. COMMENTS

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Twenty-seven Hours Later

by J.R. Sutich

I purchased *StarCraft* a week after it was released with no intention of ever playing it. At the time, I was enthralled by Blizzard's highly successful *Diablo*. *Diablo* had introduced the world to Battle.net (b.net), and was the first experience with IRC-type chat channels for many, including myself. It was these channels that prompted me to shell out 50 bucks for something I didn't really need or want.

Diablo's online play was hacked to hell and back, meaning no one could legitimately defeat another person in a PvP battle. So, most of the PvP/PK guilds had resorted to IRC channel wars to exert their will over their enemies. Channel "bots," unmanned secondary accounts, were widely used to defend a guild's channel by keeping the channel's operator position in friendly hands, but getting two connections to Battle.net during the days of dial-up was often an exercise in futility. Until *StarCraft* came out. Using the *StarCraft* client to login a bot account allowed the player to still use his *Diablo* client to play. And so, I did just that, day after day, until something happened that would change my gaming habits forever: Battle.net was taken down for extended maintenance.

Left without a reason to be online, and having already killed the Lord of Terror on every difficulty level with every character class repeatedly, I double-clicked *StarCraft*'s little spaceship icon, this time willing to give the game a chance and play through the single-player campaign. Twenty-seven hours later, with my right hand tightening up from mouseclaw, I finally shut down the game. I was addicted. It was the first game that not only completely overtook my will to do anything else; it also made me feel emotions that no other game had. I was truly enraged when Kerrigan was

abandoned to her fate of being captured by the zerg. I felt a deep sense of loss, like a friend had been taken from me. The fact that this was caused by an RTS title, a game genre I had previously thought shallow, truly surprised me.

Over the next few weeks, my addiction became an obsession. I rarely logged into b.net using *Diablo*, and eventually stopped playing altogether. I was too enthralled with terrans, the protoss and the zerg. I gave names to my individual units. I found the recipe for Chinese Lemon Chicken hidden in the game. I played Ladder Matches on b.net constantly, keeping a close eye on my win/loss ratio, striving to get the 5-star chat icon.

It was during this time that I began to notice a trend in my losses. Asian players were defeating me with an alarming frequency. I tried new strategies, set up elaborately designed defenses, and used a number of different unit type groups, all to no avail.

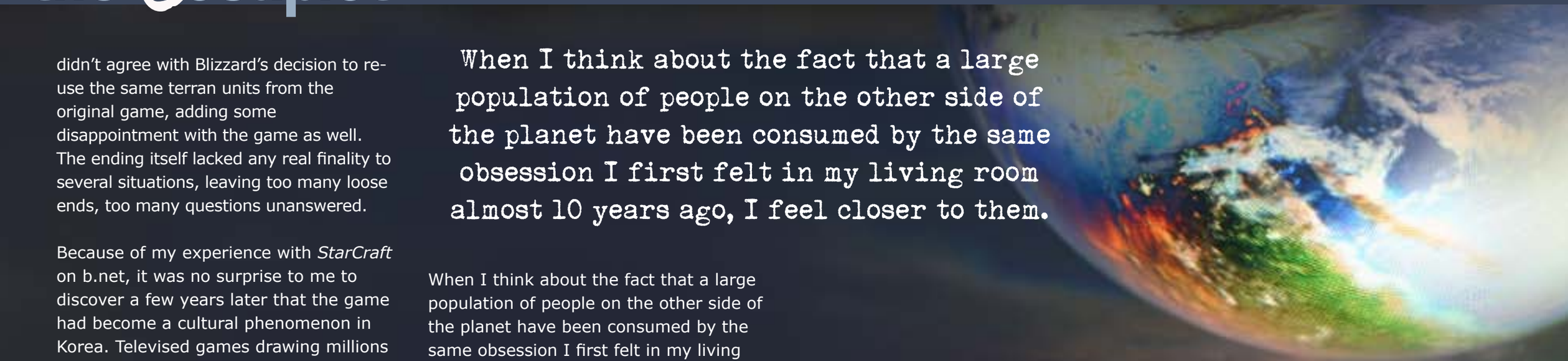
I was no stranger to the highly competitive nature and competence of gamers from the Far East, having cut my hardcore MMOG teeth in *Lineage*'s Korean beta, but some of these guys were taking it to a new level. Getting swarmed with a couple hundred Zerglings, or hearing "Nuclear launch detected" within the first five or 10 minutes of a match was becoming the extent of my experience on b.net, and it was frustrating; so much so that I considered using some of the cheat programs that were becoming more and more prevalent. I resisted, but eventually, the constant struggle to keep up my ever-dwindling win ratio wore me down to the point of dreading to play online. I spent most of my time playing against AI opponents and finally moved on completely.

Then *StarCraft: Brood War* (singular, no "S," newbie!) was released. It brought back all my old habits, and reunited me with my old friend who I thought was lost forever. But she was no longer the same, having been crowned the Queen of Blades. I'm saddened to admit this, but the expansion just didn't instill that same sense of connection I had with the original game. Maybe being manipulated by Sarah Kerrigan rather than fighting alongside her contributed to that feeling. I

didn't agree with Blizzard's decision to re-use the same terran units from the original game, adding some disappointment with the game as well. The ending itself lacked any real finality to several situations, leaving too many loose ends, too many questions unanswered.

Because of my experience with *StarCraft* on b.net, it was no surprise to me to discover a few years later that the game had become a cultural phenomenon in Korea. Televised games drawing millions of viewers and professional *StarCraft* players making six-figure salaries; it could only happen in a country where online gaming is taken so seriously, players have killed each other over in-game transgressions. *StarCraft* is to Korea as baseball is to the United States. It is a national pastime, and becoming more popular everyday. The difference in cultures is evident when you consider that gamers in America are vilified and treated as pariahs by those who are chosen to represent the populace in the government. In Korea, they give their favorite gamers the adoration and respect that is usually reserved for celebrities and sports heroes in the West.

When I think about the fact that a large population of people on the other side of the planet have been consumed by the same obsession I first felt in my living room almost 10 years ago, I feel closer to them.



When I think about the fact that a large population of people on the other side of the planet have been consumed by the same obsession I first felt in my living room almost 10 years ago, I feel closer to them. I can relate to them when I read stories like the one about the young man who died after playing *StarCraft* for 49 hours without a break. I was only 22 hours from equaling that and possibly sharing his fate. Then, I remember that these are the same people that were kicking my ass all over the game map, and I want to log in again and lay the smack down. As if I could.

Currently, *StarCraft* is still one of the best-selling PC titles, with the *StarCraft Battlechest* collection breaking into the Top 20 sales list every so often, largely in part to being stocked at every Wal-Mart in existence. Fans of the game eagerly await any scrap of information concerning a sequel. Rumors and speculation about the announcement of *StarCraft II* at this year's E3 were laid to rest when Blizzard unveiled another blue-skinned race in a different "Craft" universe. But the last official news concerning *StarCraft* was not something that many wanted to hear. *Ghost*, the console-only game based on the franchise, was placed on "indefinite hold" in March of this year.

For now, millions of players worldwide are still content with the game, despite its age. As for me, over the years, I have bought four more copies of the game I never intended to play in the first place, one of which was to replace the copy that was taken by the ex-wife as part of our divorce settlement. What can I say? My life for Aiur! COMMENTS

JR Sutich is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist and is rumored to have been banned from an online game during its initial design stage.

BAG FULL of ears

by Joe Blancato

I'm probably the only person in the world who aggressively dislikes *Diablo II*. That's not to say it's a bad game; far from it. I even beat it twice. The story was better than most you'll find in a videogame, as was the music - and the atmosphere was dark and brooding, just how I like it. But I still hate it. And I hate it because it didn't change my life in any discernable way.

Let's return to the spring of 1997. I was in eighth grade, and just getting my gamer wings. Some friends turned me onto *Warcraft II*, which I managed to make my way through earlier in the year, and I'd discovered *Civilization II* in the software Radio Shack bundled with my family's Pentium 75; but I hadn't yet given up sleep, food or love for the siren song of digital entertainment.

But then, on a bus ride home, I overheard a few acquaintances talking about demons and dungeons and "trainers" and "PKs." Interested, I forced my way into the conversation - they were talking about Blizzard's *Diablo*, and the picture they painted of a dark, gritty fantasy world ensnared by a Satan-like Lord of Terror had me picking up a copy at my local Best Buy by the end of the day.

Based on my bus-riding friends' suggestions, I bypassed the single-player portion of the game completely and hopped right into Blizzard's online service, Battle.net. I created a Warrior and lost myself inside Tristram for the first of many nights. Before I knew it, it was 6:00 a.m. and time to get ready for school.

There was something special about the game. Everything just seemed to fit. It came at a time in my life where the world was opening up in new ways. I was 14, in the midst of puberty and thinking about girls; waiting to turn 16 so I could get a car and act on those thoughts, and figuring out what I wanted to do if I managed to survive high school. But in Tristram, there was no question about who I was or what I was supposed to do. Struggling with a nagging teenage agnosticism (one that's yet to go away), *Diablo*'s moral directive was a comforting one: I'm good, hell spawn are bad - it's up to me to save

everyone. Boy meets world. Boy saves world. Teenage escapism at its finest brought to you by the good people at Blizzard Entertainment.

And being connected to thousands of kids sharing the exact same thoughts and notions made my time with *Diablo* all the more special. My family was always connected to something digital; we were "online" before there was an internet. I literally grew up on the notion that when my computer made hissing sounds, I was entering a new, intangible world. But until *Diablo* and Battle.net, that world consisted of post-graduate papers and weather reports.

Suddenly, I was in a world with a unified purpose, and it was glorious. If I wanted to kill Diablo, I'd just toss out a few lines of chat inviting people along, and I'd suddenly have three buddies willing to lend their swords. If I just felt like chatting, I could bitch about school or girlfriends to people who, by and large, were in the same boat. I expanded my circle of friends into the five-digits. The world opened up in a way similar to when I first learned to read: There was so much communication I'd previously been without, and then, something clicked, and everything imaginable was on offer. Even jerks. And my God, were they a dime a dozen.

I adopted a crusade to defend my new universe from people who seemed hell-bent on destroying it. I thought of myself as a white blood cell, fighting off "Battle.net diseases" like semi-literate pricks and people who'd spam chat rooms trying to recruit guild members. Most arguments spilled over into the game world, where my opponent and I would duke it out to see who would shut up when we got back to the chat room where the fight originated. In my early days, I'd win quite a bit more than I'd lose, but as time went on (and the duration between game patches increased), I found myself getting one-shotted by characters using spells they shouldn't have. Something was rotten, and my lack of gaming experience meant I had to play detective to uncover what everyone else already seemed to know: Everyone was cheating. Even me, despite the fact I didn't know it.

As it turned out, character hacking, item manipulation and item duplication were so prevalent, the majority of "high end" items that were traded around for other in-game items and money didn't actually exist in the game's drop tables. My "Godly

I adopted a crusade to defend my new universe from people who seemed hell-bent on destroying it.

Plate of the Whale," a piece of armor that I paid top dollar for, was dreamed up by some kid with an item editor.

I was crushed. Me, a white blood cell, tainted by the very people who I was trying to keep out of my world; I turned into a bad T-cell. But then again, that Godly Plate was some pretty swank armor. In fact, I thought, I could probably make something better; just to help me fight off more cheaters …

And so I fell. And I fell hard. I became the yin to my previous yang. If *Diablo* and Battle.net were a world I couldn't protect, I was going to do the next best thing: destroy them. The internet is a very black and white place, and so is the teenage psyche. In my mind, if I couldn't have my community the way I wanted it, no one could.

By the end, if there was a way to cheat, I probably knew about it. If I couldn't talk trash better than you, I'd chop your ear off in game. If I couldn't beat you in game, I'd sniff your IP address and "nuke" you so your computer would spontaneously reboot.

All of this, just because the world I loved was so terribly flawed. I was in deep, foregoing the Holy Trifecta of teendom (food, sleep and girls) and it took the same guys who got me into *Diablo* to get me out.

It was the middle of summer, and we'd spent most of our time together on Battle.net, because we lived pretty far away. One of them had a birthday coming up, so we decided we'd actually get together in person and hang out. We ended up burning a weekend at one guy's house, playing N64 and venturing outdoors in search of girls. Much to my surprise, I was having more fun just being a normal kid than I was being an online service's nemesis. This was my intervention, one that would snap me out of a dangerous fixation that had become all too comfortable. And all it took was a weekend of normalcy.

When I got home, I uninstalled all my cheating programs and gave *Diablo* one last look, waffling on whether or not to remove it from my hard drive and bury the CD in my back yard like a cursed object. Here it was, the game that stole my personality and replaced it with an internet asshole, staring me in the face, daring me to wipe it from memory. I hit the power button on my PC and went outside, leaving the game in its place. Ultimately, it didn't turn me into anything. I did it to myself and used *Diablo* as a focal point. Getting rid of the game would be a dangerous catharsis, one that might let me forget what I could let happen to myself.

So, you'll have to forgive me when, three years later, I installed *Diablo II* and was underwhelmed. I was expecting another experience that would intertwine itself with another personal journey. But it was just a game. Our arcs didn't intersect like before. It might be too much to expect, but I'm waiting for another *Diablo* to come, no matter what form it may take, just to see what I'll turn into next. COMMENTS

Joe Blancato is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He enjoys procrastination and thinks he's a good listener.

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 was the first Blizzard game you ever played?"

Michael Zenke, "Ripples in the Pond"
I received *Diablo* for Christmas in 1996. I vividly recall my informative first experience with "The Butcher," the demonic hatchet man encountered early in the game. There was lots of squishing. I learned a lot that day about allowing a spell casting PC to enter melee combat.

Shannon Drake, "Exodus"
Rock & Roll Racing. I was born, born to be wild.

Jon Hayter, Producer
The original *Warcraft*, actually. I think it was my first RTS experience too. I honestly never cared for the *Warcraft* lore, but Blizzard made solid games, and still does.

JR Sutich, "Twenty-seven Hours Later," Contributing Editor
Diablo. I got it the first day it came out.

Russ Pitts, "Secret Sauce: The Rise of Blizzard," Associate Editor
Warcraft. "Work, work, work."

Joe Blancato, "Bag Full of Ears," Associate Editor
Warcraft: Orcs and Humans - I managed to get all **16 megabytes** of it onto my hard drive, only to give up and go back to my Super Nintendo because the game was so unimpressive, at least compared to *Populous*.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor
Well, I watched friends play *Diablo* in college, as my Compaq Presario was a bit lacking in its ability to run games. But, the first one I actively played for many hours is *World of Warcraft*.