

the Escapist



Casual Friday
The Little Things
Drudgery

MEET THE TEAM!

BUT I THOUGHT
GAMES WERE
SUPPOSED
TO BE FUN!

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Combating the drudgery – the constant battle of ... well pretty much everyone. We have varying degrees of drudge, and varying options by which we can go about defeating it. Whether it's a slow day at work, a long, hot summer day, too hot to move, or a much needed study break, diversion, something to break monotony, is key.

But what happens when that which is supposed to break boredom becomes boring itself? What do we do when the activities we used to enjoy become yawn-inducing? And why does it always seem to happen?

We all have our favorite movies or books or TV shows. And each one of these, I'll bet money, has a scene or a chapter that you just "gloss over" when you re-read or re-watch it now. You know that scene where they have this long, drawn-out discussion that just should have been edited out, but the editor probably got sleepy and "glossed over" it, too. Hey, it happens.

Is it any surprise then, that games would also have these particular sections of slowness? Of course not. That is why we have endless cheats, walk-throughs, mods, house rules and other such gamer-created accoutrement to the gameplay experience.

And so we're discussing this phenomenon of drudgery in games and the on-going battle against it this week in "Where There's a Whip." Peter Robinett discusses the psychology behind boredom and puts it in the context of games. Russ Pitts talks about his own experience with variants of one of the most popular console games, *Halo 2*. Allen Varney discusses another player-created mode of freshening up an old favorite, speedrunning games. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to Pleasurable Genres from The Escapist Lounge: Sooner or later it had to happen. Sooner or later The Escapist was going to publish something that sucked.

- Michael Eaton

In response to Afraid of the Dark from The Escapist Lounge: Wow, what a great feeling to know that you're not the only one out there living their lives as a SHP. I've spent many hours obsessed over the creepy goings on in Silent Hill, yet I couldn't make it past the first scene in Silent Hill 1.

- Tad

In response to Afraid of the Dark from The Escapist Lounge: Fantastic! I always wondered if I was the only person cowardly enough to read FAQs and guides for horror games that I couldn't bring myself to actually play! And yes, the feeling when you actually do finish a game is fantastic, like you

braved the worst kind of challenge.

I had never thought much about why it might be this way, but you described the entire thing perfectly. Thanks for the read!

- Nathan

In response to Breaking the Fourth Wall from The Escapist Lounge: I am very deeply involved with *Perplex City* (the Alternate Reality Game mentioned



in the article - Ed.) - I am the one referred to as "Paul" in the killer's recording. That spooked me to no end - we did in effect "compose" the murder. But not everything is quite what it seems in *Perplex City* - music files can have hidden tracks, documents have hidden messages, images have hidden data, and we never know what to expect next. It really is quite an experience.

- **skenmy**

In response to Escapist Anniversary from The Escapist Lounge: Great news! I've been reading the magazine since issue #1 and I haven't missed one yet. The quality and integrity of the publication haven't wavered since that first issue many moons ago, and I look forward to those new goodies you've mentioned.

- **Benoit**

In response to Return to Ravenholm from The Escapist Lounge: When I replayed [the Ravenholm level in *Half-Life 2*] recently I found myself repeatedly hitting the pause button and backing away when it all got too much. I don't

know why but some sort of venom-crab-phobia must have been building since I completed the game - in the end I cured it by standing still and letting one of them bite me repeatedly to try and desensitize myself. Great level.

- **Zuben**

In response to Sony vs. Ronald Regan from The Escapist Lounge: Sell your stock in Sony Corp as soon as possible.

- **Patrick**





**BUT I THOUGHT
GAMES WERE
SUPPOSED
TO BE FUN!**

by Peter Robinett

There I was, blasting through corridors full of mercenaries and rampaging mutants, almost to the exit of the complex, when I hit a tricky spot in *Far Cry*. After repeated failures, I resorted to cheating in order to press on, only to soon realize that the gameplay I had liked was long over, and the game was no longer interesting — I was bored. I have found myself getting bored in the middle of many games and finishing few. Am I alone in my plight? What does it all mean? Is this a sign of mild attention deficit disorder on my part, or is it something in the games, in their respective designs? Could you even say games are (inadvertently) inherently boring in parts of their design?

It seems counter-intuitive to say an entertainment form can be boring, yet it obviously happens, because everyone's tastes are different. But do we have an epidemic on our hands? This is obviously a difficult thing to quantify, but an economics-influenced approach should point us in the right direction. First, games are an investment of time, effort and money, and people want a return on their investments. Thus, it's safe to assume that people will seek to change

the situation when they stop having fun with their investment. Obviously, people can return or sell games they don't enjoy, but there are a variety of other methods, like purchasing products to make the game experience more fun. One option is to use strategy guides and walkthroughs to solve difficult challenges or find the most efficient way through a game. While players use strategy guides to make a game less difficult rather than less boring, boredom enters into strategy guides' appeal; getting stuck in a game for hours isn't fun. And with sales figures of \$90 million in 2004 and \$67 million in 2005, it's hard to deny that strategy guides are an industry serving a real demand.

Cheat codes are a time-honored component of single-player games, but the demand goes beyond that. Witness the long-running success of products that modify console games' memory — in effect, hardware-based cheating. The Action Replay was the first of such devices, first on the Commodore 64 and then on most subsequent game consoles. Similar products include Game Genie, now defunct, and GameShark. While these devices can help a player deal with a boring game, this is just one

of their uses, according to Action Replay's maker, Datel.

Ian Osborne, a Datel PR representative, said they view their product as one that allows users to unlock content (such as new characters or racetracks), in addition to something that lets people cheat. If hardcore players tend to find games less challenging, the fact that most of Datel's customers are hardcore gamers would imply that exploration and re-playability are the main reasons for purchasing the Action Replay, not boredom. As Osborne put it, "Consequently, demand is spread across genres, but focused on the games hardcore gamers buy. For example, there's more demand for cheats for a *GTA* or *Tomb Raider* game than a Disney title."

So, perhaps people are cheating and unlocking features, not because they're bored but because they're enjoying the game and want to extend the experience. But if players are not content to play through a racing game to gradually unlock racetracks, isn't that a sign that there is something boring or frustrating in the basic game design? One would think unlocking tracks would give players enjoyable objectives that

represent progress in the game. However, there is a significant group of people who disagree.

How could this be addressed by game designers? One idea would be to alter opponents' difficulty levels (a much-touted feature of the recently released *SiN Episodes* game). Additionally, changing the prerequisites to advance such that the goals don't become unattainable and the process isn't frustrating would keep people interested in playing the unmolested game longer. But this doesn't help players who dislike the unlocking pretense at its core. Many games alleviate this problem by offering two modes of play, one that lets people bypass stated progression goals to play the bulk of the game immediately and one that gives them the opportunity to advance more traditionally.

But what about the massively online space? The unique situation of MMOGs makes it difficult to address player boredom in the same way, as developers must balance player achievement in the name of fairness and technical limitations, thus limiting the number of play-styles that can be reasonably supported. For instance, time spent

playing is often the primary determinant of player level. The most striking example of player boredom in gaming must surely be the secondary markets in MMOGs, in which in-game characters, items and currencies are bought and sold for cold, hard cash. IGE, one of the main players in the field, valued the marketplace at \$880 million in 2004. With the explosive growth of *World of Warcraft*, it's surely much larger than that, now.

The system of goals and rewards holds little interest for a large group of players. While a significant portion of this can be attributed to players buying rare in-game items, the fact that players are spending money on in-game currency suggests that there is a meta-commodity here: the time players are willing to spend in order to advance. It's fair to say that many players using these services find the time commitments required of them to be distasteful — in a word, these games are boring.

MMOGs tend to provide players with repetitive tasks - killing rats, whacking moles, etc. The nature of the genre itself is partially to blame: With limited resources (both time and money), developers are unable to provide a



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the *Escapist*



the *Escapist* lounge

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limitless supply of objectives for the player, despite the fact the games are marketed as infinite. It is for this reason (and to make more money) that every successful MMOG will eventually have expansion packs, often providing new content in the form of new locations and new items to acquire and an increase in level caps, keeping players occupied with more carrots to chase. All this can be seen as to prevent players from getting bored from lack of anything to do and moving on to the next game. One logical way to deal with this “late game” challenge is enable players to create their own goals. PvP and guild feuds are obvious ways, as is the object creation seen in *Second Life*. The latter has much potential, as this enables players to create the objects to acquire and places to explore, though obviously it runs into huge issues of balance and (in)appropriate content.

But what is the psychology behind boredom? I put this very question to Steven Kass, Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of West Florida. He explained boredom as an emotional state that arises from either internal or external sources. It is a state characterized by low arousal — that is,

of low activity or excitement — but also of negative mood. This combination of factors is what distinguishes boredom from relaxation (low arousal but positive mood) or anger (negative mood but high arousal). Boredom is also characterized by an inability to pay attention at the present moment. The psychoanalyst Otto Fenichel saw boredom to be the result of a situation where “we must not do what we want to do, or must do what we do not want to do.” Perhaps most common in a gaming context is being asked to devote significant playing time to tasks that players don’t feel are important or otherwise fun. While boredom has different causes for each person, Kass notes that “monotony will certainly lead to boredom in a majority of people.”

The game designer Chris Crawford explains in his 1983 book, *The Art of Computer Game Design*, “The game designer simplifies deliberately in order to focus the player’s attention on those factors the designer judges to be important.” The classic problem, of course, is when the game designer is trying to force you to pay attention to something and you would rather pay attention to something in the game that they care less about. At this point,

frustration often sets in. But how is frustration different from boredom? Often, frustration is understood to lead to aggression, but it can also lead to boredom. Presumably, this comes about when the player decides that the game is not worth becoming angry over, and thus chooses to lose interest and bypasses the high arousal associated with anger — the comment “It’s just a game” in response to frustration illustrates this line of reasoning well. While constraint, or lack of desirable actions, can lead to frustration and eventually boredom, the opposite may also be true.

Goal-setting theory holds that people seek to attain goals, and Kass notes that “the best goals are those that are specific, provide feedback and are challenging, but attainable and accepted.” Is it no surprise that quests, checkpoints and score counters are common in games? All these things serve as easily understood and achievable goals. In fact, Kass uses videogames as his example of goal-setting theory in his industrial psychology course.

Returning to the idea of attention, if the game demands attention to an

undesirable goal, particularly one that is incomprehensible or almost impossible to achieve, frustration is bound to set in. So, it appears that goals are important for players, but they must be the right ones. What about games that have (practically) limitless possibilities? By not focusing the player’s attention, as Crawford stresses, the player is left with a seemingly contradictory situation: having no goals, yet at the same time, having the potential to pursue any possible goal. Kass suggests that while boredom would not occur, players could easily become overwhelmed and lack motivation to play. This may be one reason why sandbox games such as *The Sims* and *Second Life* are deeply disliked by some people, yet are loved by many others. The latter group has essentially resolved the goal problem by creating their own objectives, such as creating the richest Sim possible or designing the coolest hair style. Other players may decide to jump off the tops of mountains, which I spent my time doing while participating in the *Asheron’s Call 2* beta. (There was even a skydiving animation!)

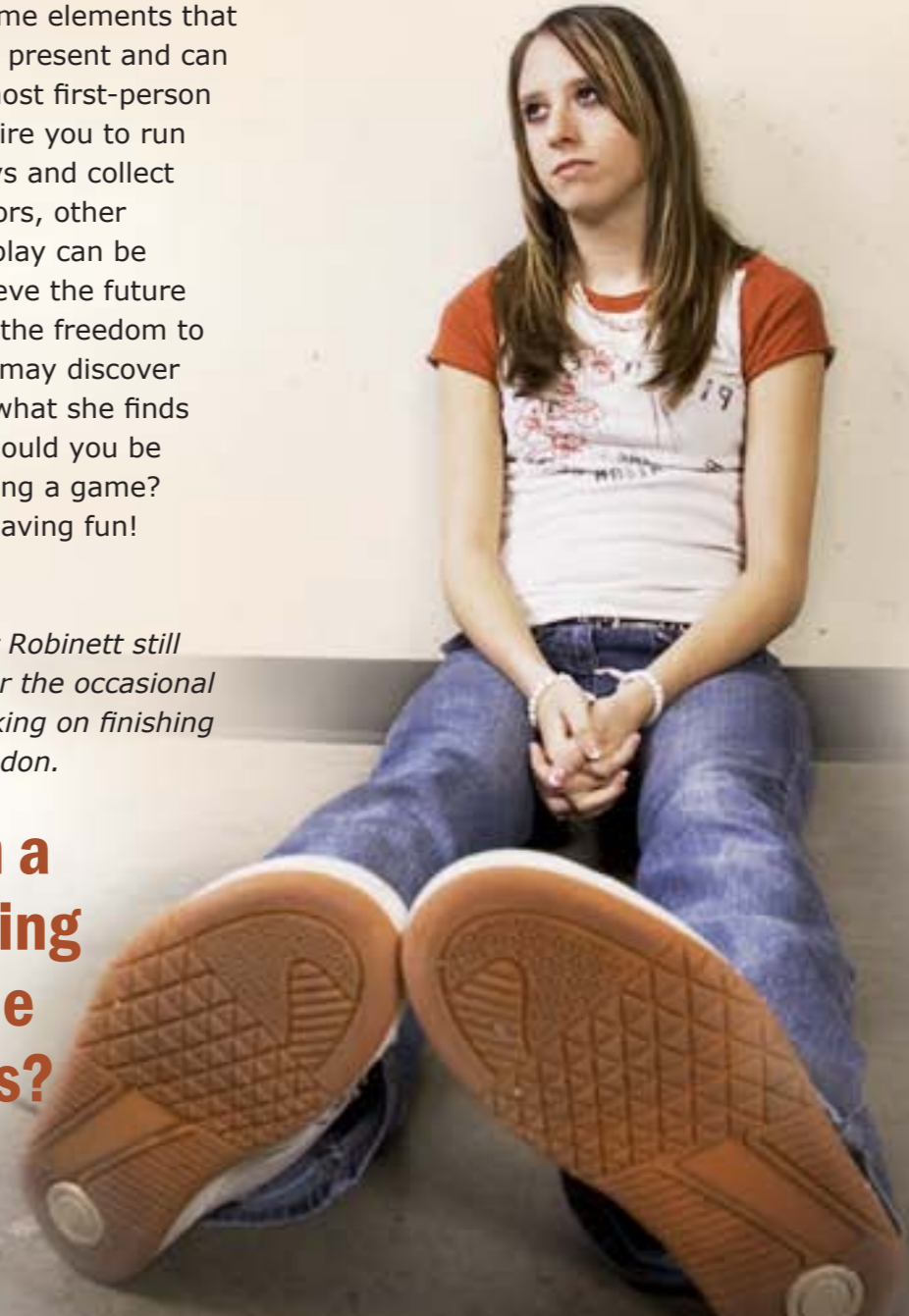
So, is boredom a plague running through the videogames? Surely not, as games remain both popular and financially

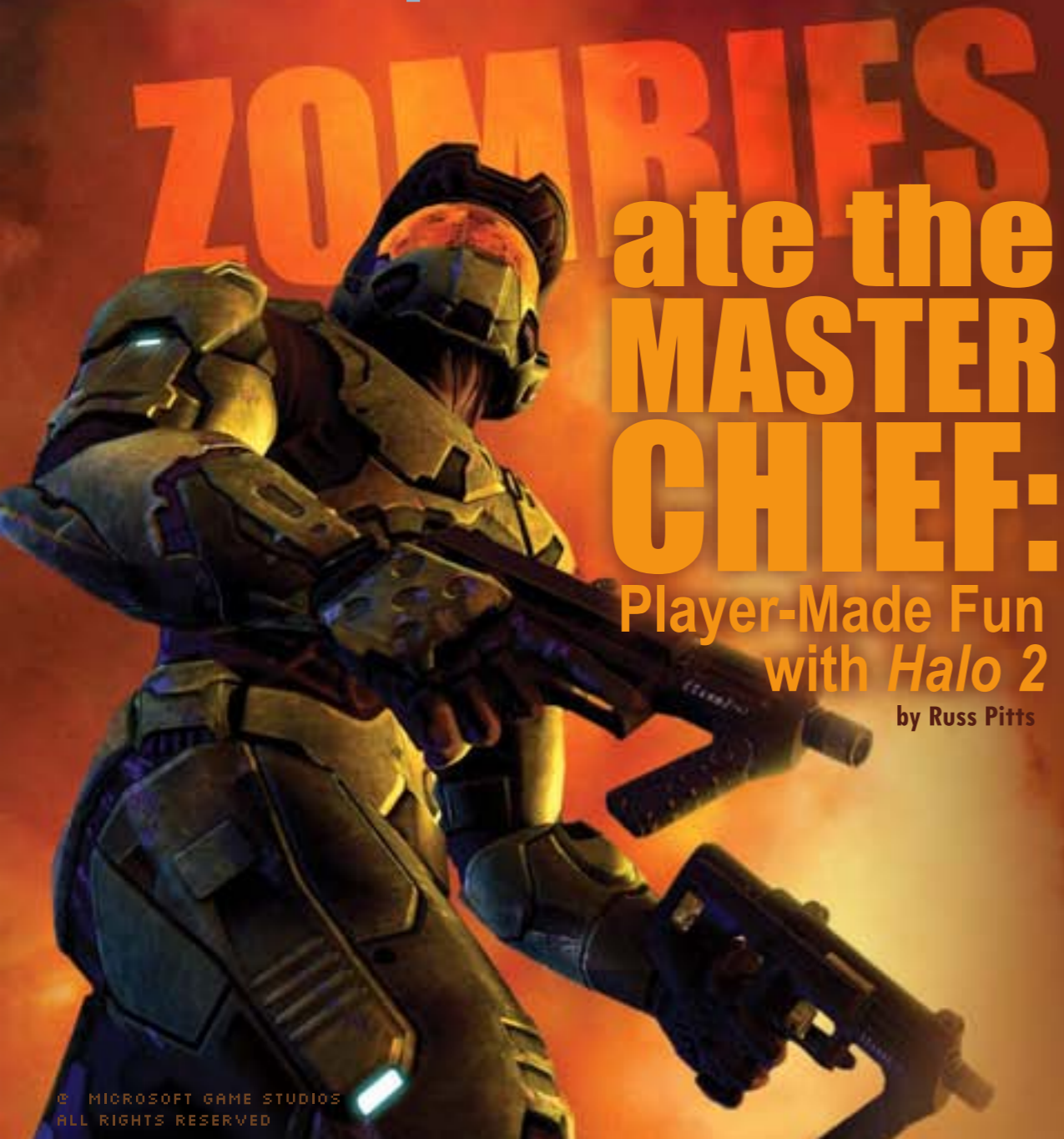
successful. However, some elements that encourage boredom are present and can be prevented. Just as most first-person shooters no longer require you to run through endless hallways and collect hidden keys to open doors, other improvements to gameplay can be made. Ultimately, I believe the future lies in giving the player the freedom to experiment so that she may discover what interests her and what she finds boring. After all, why should you be bored when you’re playing a game? You’re supposed to be having fun!

COMMENTS

A life-long gamer, Peter Robinett still manages to find time for the occasional videogame despite working on finishing a Masters degree in London.

Is boredom a plague running through the videogames?





ate the MASTER CHIEF: Player-Made Fun with *Halo 2*

by Russ Pitts

It is every man's nightmare: The dead have awoken, crawled out of their graves and ruined your favorite game.

The easy questions (How did they get here? How do I work this? Is that my beautiful wife?) are irrelevant - the undead are here, and they must be dealt with swiftly. Thankfully, you are not alone. A squad of up to 14 of your brothers in arms walks beside you, and you are all armed to the teeth. A shotgun may not be the best tool for the job, but it's what you've got, and one or two shots to the head will usually bring down anything - even a zombie. It's a good thing, too, because one or two shots is all you're going to get.

Forget what you've seen on TV. These zombies are fast. Really fast. And they've got swords. They can sweep in over your barricades, "lock on" to one human target at a time, and wipe out an entire squad before you even know they're there. And that's just the beginning: These zombies don't just kill their human foes, they infect them with their insidious ailment, zombifying them instantly. Your fellow warriors - men who had once stood bravely by your side,

repelling the undead swarm and telling dirty jokes about your mother - can turn to foes in a heartbeat. You like to think this keeps you on your toes, but in truth it terrifies you; mainly because you could be the next to go.

The beginning is always the same: A lone zombie appears on the horizon, hungry, mean and ready to ruin your day. It takes him a minute to get his bearings, but after that he's all about the killing. You can use that precious moment to your advantage by finding a place to hide and barricading yourself in, or you can stand out in the open, gun at the ready, hoping you'll spot him before he spots you. You've seen what happens to the guys who choose the second tactic. They usually realize their mistake just before it's too late, and then there are two zombies. That way isn't for you. You're smarter than that - this time. Instead, you book it to join the rest of the squad in Room 4, where they're already hard at work erecting a barricade. Having seen the zombies in action, you're not as confident as they are about its effectiveness, but you lend a hand anyway. It's all you can do.

the Escapist

The zombies hit the barricade before your line is fully formed, but a handful of shotgun blasts take them down pretty quickly. You start to feel confident, like you might actually make it out alive this time.

The first few times the zombies hit the wall. They're careless, charging headlong into a solid wall of buckshot. After a while, though, you realize that they've been testing you - searching for your blind spot. "Cover the left hallway!" you start to shout, but it's too late. A zombie has locked on to one of your squad mates who was looking right when he should have been looking left. It's a mistake he'll never make again. You can't tell who it was, but now he's one of them.

The two zombies then begin a systematic execution of your squad, picking them off one-by-one as they make simple mistakes or grow impatient, charging out from behind the safety of the barricade to engage the beasts in melee. Within minutes, your squad is down to three men, facing off against more than a dozen of the undead. They could easily burst through the barricade before you'd even have a chance to kill half of them, but they don't. They bide their time, waiting.

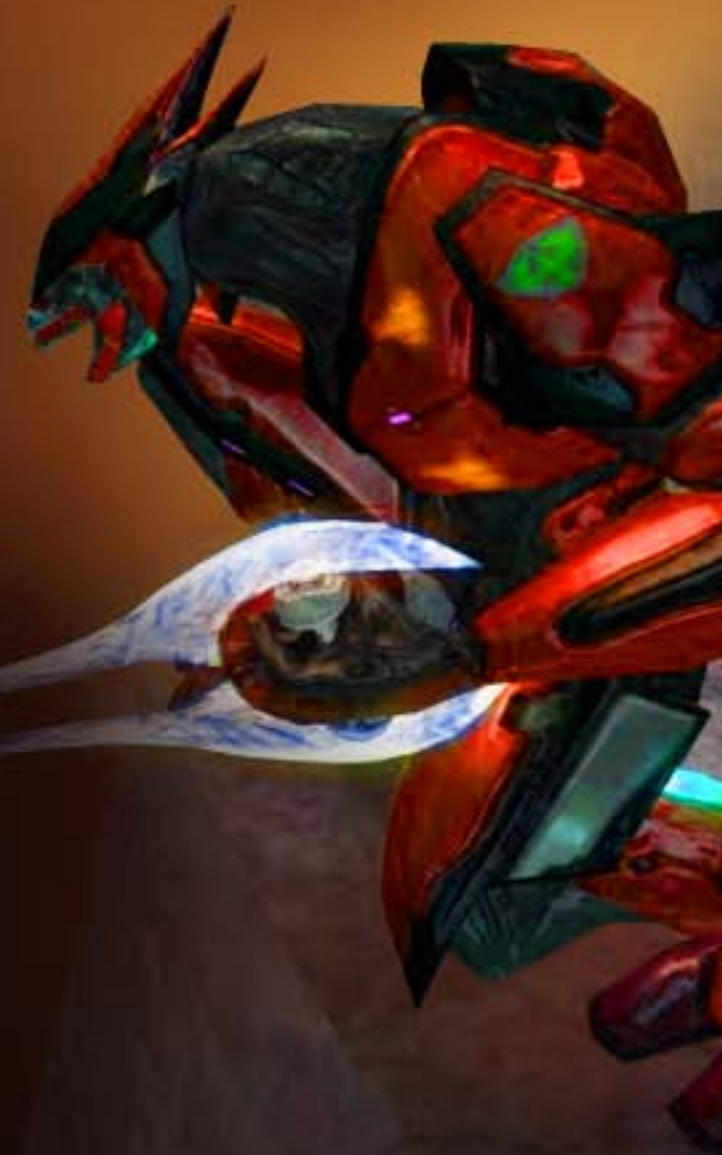
As the minutes tick by, you slowly start to go insane. You can usually hear them moaning or taunting you, but now it's quiet - too quiet. "They're up to something," you think. But what? Suddenly, it becomes clear, the zombies, using their swords as tools, have uprooted an energy container and rolled it in front of your barricade. One of the walking dead slices the container open with his sword, sacrificing himself, and blowing your barricade to pieces. The rest of them are laughing as they charge through the breach and begin hacking away your limbs. Your squad falls in seconds. Your vision starts to fade. Just before it all goes to black, you watch the last man fall to the ground to be eaten, or, depending on the night, teabagged.

The end, like the beginning, is always the same. The Alpha and Omega of an invasion of the undead: The zombies are relentless and no matter how many times they fall, they will always get back up to come after you again. You, being human, do not share this resilience. You will, therefore, perish. But it's OK. That's the way the game was designed. First you lose, then you win. It's a classic "break you down, build you back up"

scenario, and it's a hell of a way to spend an evening. Besides, the zombies are your friends.

There are many reasons for the popularity of Bungie's *Halo 2*, and I will not attempt to capture them all here. Released in November of 2004, the game sold almost 5 million copies by the end of that year alone; essentially, one copy of *Halo 2* for every three Xboxes on the market. A year and a half later, the game still rests at or near the top of nearly every sales and rental chart in existence, and has been widely credited with single-handedly saving the Xbox brand from an early grave. With so many copies in so many hands, it's been no surprise that enterprising gamers have taken to creating their own multiplayer variants.

Halo 2 ships with seven basic multiplayer game modes, each of which sport a dizzying number of configurable options. This makes creating and saving a new *Halo 2* game mode easier than getting off of the couch and buying another game. A player hosting a *Halo 2* multiplayer game on Xbox Live can then share his new variant with his entire party simply by selecting it from a list. It



would be hard to track the spread of custom game variants from the game's release date through today, but having purchased the game in November of 2004, and begun playing customized multiplayer variants the very same day, I for one can attest that it didn't take long for them to propagate.

The zombie vs. humans variant was one of the first to spring up. It's been called "Day of the Dead" or "Zombie," but my friends and I in the Gamers With Jobs clan call it "Zombie Skate," which, like "Adult Swim," is a reference to the good old days when adults were entitled to a few brief moments of kid-free access to the skating rink while the kids were asked to cool their heels and watch how it was done. Having been there, I can attest that it sucked. Thank (insert preferred deity) there were videogames. *Moon Patrol* alone saved me from countless hours of "adult skate" boredom.

Now, we're the adults, and having adopted the wisdom of our forebears, we've reserved a tiny corner of the Xbox Live skating rink for ourselves, away from the general asshattery of the anonymous online hordes. We play lots of *Zombie Skate*, and a few other

variants, most involving some bending or modification of the game's rule set. Called "house rules," these stipulations state which weapons players can and can't use in certain variants of *Halo 2*.

One house-rule-heavy *Halo 2* variant, for example, is called "JFK." Played on the "Coagulation" or "Blood Gulch" map, JFK pits two teams of any size against one another using the single bomb Assault game mode. One team, "The Assassins," plays defense, guarding their base against destruction from the offensive team, "The Secret Service." The Assassins are armed with sniper rifles, The Secret Service with pistols. The

Warthog. The player holding the bomb must sit in the passenger side of the Warthog (which is like a large jeep) - he's JFK - and any other team members who aren't inside the vehicle must walk alongside. It's practically a no-win scenario for The Secret Service, which, ironically, is what makes it so much fun.

When a single-player game is too hard to beat, it can be a terribly frustrating experience, and one the player is not likely to want to repeat (see: *Ninja Gaiden Black*, or *Aliens Vs. Predator*), but online, with friends, a challenging scenario like JFK spurs creativity and excitement. If you can figure out how to

beat the no-win-scenario, it's not some nameless level designers you've stuck it to, it's your friends and you can rib them about it all night long. [COMMENTS](#)

Author's Note: For a nearly-comprehensive list of the most popular Halo 2 player-made variants, check the [GWJ Halo Variant Book Page](#), [Broken Thumbs](#) and [Halo 2 Game Types](#).

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

If you can figure out how to beat the no-win-scenario, it's not some nameless level designers you've stuck it to, it's your friends.

Secret Service must take the bomb from one end of one of *Halo 2*'s largest maps to the other, all the while attempting to not get shot by the long-distance weapons of their opponents. As if that weren't challenging enough, they must do it while driving as slow as possible in one of the game's ground vehicles, the



THE FORGOTTEN GAMERS: How Complexity Killed the Audience

by Dana Massey

As a child of the '80s, I hear one comment over and over among my non-gamer peers. "Videogames are just too complicated now," they tell me whenever my job comes up. They miss the simplicity of *Mario* and *Duck Hunt*. Sure, advances in technology have let game designers accomplish amazing new things, but have these advances overshadowed our roots in making fun games?

Chess is thought to have been invented in sixth century India. The rules have been tweaked, and it underwent an intense localization process in the middle ages, but for the most part the game has endured for a millennia-and-a-half. I can guarantee *World of Warcraft* doesn't have that kind of re-playability.

The longevity of chess and other games like it is an example that cannot be - but often is - ignored. I want games I can play to win. I want games I can play over and over. Losing should mean I've learned something for next time, not that I start over from a save point.

Games today owe far more to books and movies than to board games. They're all

about the journey, and like a book, you put them down once they're done.

The beauty and longevity of chess lies in its sheer simplicity. It is 16 pieces per side on an eight-by-eight board. From that very simple premise are near infinite possibilities. There is an entire publishing industry centered on chess strategy, good players are internationally famous and with a short lesson, anyone can try it for himself.

Modern game designers have everything they need to invent products that will endure when chess is a distant memory. With the internet available on every console, people can always find someone to play with. Sure, it is fun to beat the AI, but a game is not a game until you've beaten someone else.

Sports games touch on this chord. They have basic rule systems and pit players against each other or the AI. Their very premise, though, is their undoing. The old cliché is, "Why play some computer game when I can go outside and play the real thing?" But in *Fight Night Round 3* for the Xbox 360, I spent weeks gleefully boxing my way to the

championship. That wasn't something I was going to try in real life.

Then, one day, it all crumbled. As the game got harder, I adapted and identified a hole in the AI. I could win every fight in round one and I set the game aside. Inevitably, there is always some trick or exploit, and suddenly – like getting three corners in tic-tac-toe – the game is useless.

That's the key: A truly great game needs to be simple enough that there is no inevitable path to victory. Once this is achieved, a game's shelf-life becomes immeasurable.

StarCraft proves this. Likely the most enduring game of our generation, *StarCraft* is played by millions, and even has professional leagues. Like chess, it pits players against each other and no single strategy guarantees victory.

But is *StarCraft* really like chess? To me, the enduring artifact of videogaming is the RTS, not *StarCraft* itself. Think of chess as the genre. Over the years, the pieces have changed and rules been

tweaked, but the core game endures. The same can be said of the RTS.

We will still play RTS games in a hundred years. They're fun, they have a complex but understandable goal and there are plenty of ways to win. The FPS will live on, too. It is competition at its most simple: Kill or be killed.

We need to start looking at the genre as the game and then come up with some new ones. I'm not talking about genre-blurring games. While great ideas, they largely appeal to people who liked the original genres in the first place. More people will adopt the gamer moniker as the list of genres expands and new games are invented.

Right now, these types of games are marginalized as "casual games." They even get their own conference, and for the most part, they're ignored by the mainstream gaming media and developers. But it's these guys who will ride the next wave.

My father is not the target audience for any gaming company. He's 55 years old



**We will still play
RTS games in a
hundred years.**

and has only the lowest level of computer knowledge. He looks at a screen; where I see armies marching, he sees chaos. The contradiction here is that my father is a gamer. He probably spends more time than I do playing games, and videogames are my livelihood.

His computer knowledge consists of navigating to the Zone, where he'll routinely whip my ass in chess, go,



crokinole, checkers, cat and mouse, scrabble, cribbage, etc. Some of these games require strategy, some luck and even coordination; all essential elements of a videogame. Yet, despite this love of gaming and clear willingness, if not preference, to play online, my father will never buy a videogame.

That is a problem.

Why don't we target anyone over the age of 30?

There is no principal holding him back, there just isn't a game he'd ever enjoy. This cannot be blamed on money either. My father will never play an MMOG, and it's not because it costs \$15 a month. He pays more to join his chess club.

We just don't make games for him.

As an industry, there are two solutions to this problem. We can follow the current path and try and wait them out. In about 50 years, I'll be in my 70s and virtually everyone on the market will have been brought up with videogames. I'm sure by then we'll be able to put a gaming console in every home. Or we can expand our focus and make some games that will endure. Experts always say that software drives console sales, and it's true. So why don't we target anyone over the age of 30?

We've begun to show that non-traditional segments of the population can be brought into the market if they're just given something to enjoy. Women now make up a good chunk of the gaming market, and while there is a long way to go on that front, it is never too soon to consider the next one.

Pundits often lament that the garage game is dead. Who can afford the millions it requires for even the smallest games? This is their opening. The AAA developers are building on what's already been invented and indie developers simply cannot keep up. Stop trying. It's time to build new branches off the tree. The person who invents the next Sudoku will have a much easier time making rent than the designer who comes up with the next innovation in the RTS genre.

The evolution of gaming technology alienates more people every year. A huge number of my peers would rather play *Mario 3* than any Xbox 360 title. Born earlier? Odds are that you prefer board games to anything built for the PC. I do not advocate stunting technological advances; there is a very proven market for the latest and greatest thing, but we need someone to come behind and pick up those lost along the way. [COMMENTS](#)

Dana "Lepidus" Massey is the Lead Content Editor for MMORPG.com and former Co-Lead Game Designer for Wish.



Speed THRILLS

Speedrunners test the limits of games and game design

by Allen Varney

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Bethesda Softworks' *Morrowind* roleplaying game has a main quest storyline intended to last 60 to 80 leisurely hours. But if you play *Morrowind* as fast as you can, how long does the main quest actually take, start to finish? Go on, guess. Guess low.

Seven minutes, 30 seconds.

How? Using the 35-step method detailed in July 2005 by Vladimir "Knu" Semenov on the Speed Demos Archive, create an orc Barbarian with the Steed birth sign. At the game's start, steal a limeware platter, complete the Sellius Gravus ring quest, buy an ax and two Scrolls of Almsivi Intervention, get three Scrolls Of Icarian Flight – actually, you need 25 scrolls and a bunch of other junk, so let's skip a bit – head to the Red Mountain and the citadel of Dagoth Ur, sleep for 24 hours, go berserk, kill the god using seven Scrolls of Elemental Burst, and hit the Heart of Lorkhan five times with Keening.

Really, it seems so obvious once you hear it.

This is a **speedrun**, a full-on dash through all or part of an electronic game

as fast as possible. The Speed Demos Archive documents jaw-dropping speedruns for hundreds of games, including *Half-Life 2* (1 hour, 36 minutes, 57 seconds), *Deus Ex* (1:29:02), *Baldur's Gate 2* (1:11:37), *Diablo* (0:53:13), *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces 2* (0:34:03), *Quake II* (0:20:33), *Super Mario 64* (0:19:47), *Metroid* (0:18:35) and *Fallout* (0:09:19).

Read these times aloud to someone who knows the games, and get ready for a loud "Nuh-uh!" But there's proof for all of them: saved games and AVI movies presented by proud runners at the top of their game.

The comprehensive Wikipedia speedrunning entry describes the formidable techniques runners use to push these games to their limits: sequence breaking (finding necessary items earlier than the designers intended), glitches (exploiting errors in a game's physics or level design), emulators (programs used for controversial "tool-assisted" runs), staggering skill and tremendous ingenuity and persistence.

Using this toolbox, these game mechanics tear apart published games to uncover secrets not even the designers knew were there. Their efforts have propelled the field in new and unexpected directions at (it need hardly be said) top speed.

The Starting Gun

The precursors of speedrunning include blitz chess and speed checkers.

Competitive videogame play dates back to the first computer game, *Spacewar*; Stanford University held “*Spacewar* Olympics” in the 1970s. But the first recognized speedrunners were commercial game publishers’ own Quality Assurance testers, employees who played the games from their earliest stages of development. By the time the games became final release candidates, testers could race through the games practically on automatic.

The 1992 Origin RPG *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* was designed to take at least 60 hours to complete. The lead tester could finish the entire game in 47 minutes. He found shortcuts the designers had never imagined. For instance, at one point the player must

climb a tall mountain, and then return to the bottom; the Origin tester saved time by committing suicide at the summit, knowing he’d be reincarnated at the mountain’s base. He never paused to upgrade his weapons or armor, because he could dispatch all foes with his humble standard sword. One *Underworld* designer said of him, “It was like watching a samurai.”

In 1993, *DOOM* brought speedrunning to the net. *DOOM* players could record their runs as small LMP files (“demos”) for others to replay. In 1994, Christina “Strunoph” Norman, a math student at the University of Waterloo, enshrined the best demos on her LMP Hall of Fame website (now defunct). Frank Stajano established *DOOM* Honorific Titles to recognize different achievements, such as Tyson (completing any level at UltraViolence difficulty with 100% kills using only fists, chainsaw and pistol) and Pacifist (completing a level without harming any monsters). A community of DHT competitors arose on English player Simon Widlake’s site COMPET-N. The site tracked demo records for the *DOOM* and *Quake* series for over a decade, and it remains up (if neglected) today.


It takes little reading on these sites to realize the runners’ seriousness. “A Brief *DOOM* Demo History,” an article by “Opulent” published in December 2003 on the venerable Doomworld, reverently commemorates an epochal DHT event: “In 1997, Thomas ‘Panter’ Pilger spread throughout the COMPET-N tables like a plague. By August, he was the first to do the third *DOOM 2* episode (Map 21-30) on Nightmare skill and was primed for the ultimate *DOOM 2* honor, *DOOM 2* Schwarzenegger. Almost a year in the making, Thomas ‘Panter’ Pilger finally achieved the impossible by recording all 32 maps of *DOOM 2* on Nightmare skill in one demo in 49:49.”

Speed Effects

Is there some deep psychological reason players speedrun? To the speedrunners themselves, their motives are obvious beyond discussion; they’re as transparent, as universal as any desire to excel.

Mike “TSA” Damiani, on his site The Hylia, writes, “The most common question or remark I personally see or am told about speedrunning is, ‘That’s great, but I don’t care because this





game should be played slowly and thoroughly to be enjoyed!’ Well, I’ve always sort of laughed at this ... Most speedrunners chose a game they know extremely well and enjoy. That means they played the game through normally, explored it and enjoyed it thoroughly. ... This is usually how most competitive gaming in single-player games is born – the ambition to do challenges in order to add replay value to a title.”

The joy of speedrunning is interesting, especially in light of designer Raph Koster’s 2005 book *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. Koster conceptualizes fun as the act of learning, of ever-growing mastery over a game’s environment. We conventionally think of this mastery as an encounter with the obstacles devised and set by the game’s designer(s), a tour as structured as a theme park ride. But speedrunners push beyond the designers’ own intentions and understanding. They elevate mastery to a new level. And, many times, they pull the field along in their wake.

In exploiting the holes in game physics engines, speedrunners function as extremely sophisticated bug testers. *DOOM*

was built on a polar coordinate system that let the player move faster along coordinate axes and pass through diagonal openings that would ordinarily be too narrow. Running diagonally (“strafe-running”) was 1.4 times faster than running straight, and firing a rocket at a nearby object would cause you to zoom in the opposite direction. Later shooter games corrected the coordinate and strafe-running errors, but rocket jumping (though originally a bug) proved so fun and popular it remains in many shooters even today.

Over the long term, perhaps the speedrunners’ most valuable contribution will turn out to be their pivotal early role in the development of machinima. Machinima (“machine cinema”) is the art of creating movies in the virtual reality of game engines. The best-known example today is Rooster Teeth Productions’ *Red vs. Blue*, a comedy series created using the *Halo* engine.

Some of the earliest machinima consisted of *Quake* speedruns. Stanford curator and lecturer Dr. Henry Lowood, a historian of machinima and computer game design, writes in “High Performance Play: The Making of

Machinima”, “When it was released in June 1997, ‘*Quake done Quick*’ demonstrated more than impressive playing skills or the technical wizardry of its makers. It signaled a shift from cyberathleticism to making movies and the emergence of a new form of play.”

“As if to underscore the transition, the Team released two versions of the complete set of speedruns, which lasted nearly 20 minutes after stitching together the individual runs for each level of the game. The first was visually a conventional demo movie viewed from the first-person perspective of the player; the second was the re-cammed movie. The technical performance involved in recording separate demos and patching them together to make either version, all while preserving a smoothly integrated whole, was of course non-trivial. So was the performance itself. As (QDQ team member Anthony) Bailey put it when describing his work on the project, preparation for a perfect speedrun meant ‘trying to understand more about how the engine underlying the game works so that we can turn its little nooks and crannies to our advantage.’”

Racing Ahead

Today, runners in some games have grown so proficient it is hard to appreciate their skills. Watching *Quake Done Quick With a Vengeance* (the entirety of *Quake* at Nightmare difficulty in 12 minutes, 23 seconds), you find it difficult just to process what's happening on screen, let alone understand the cleverness and fabulous precision involved.

But speedrunners still race ahead. There are 9,000 *Quake* demos on Speed Demos Archive; it would take six weeks to watch them. The pinball and videogame record-keeping site Twin Galaxies tracks championship events nationwide. Runners are exploring new games such as Bungie's *Halo*; check out High Speed *Halo* for a chronicle of obsession. ("Tartarus Battle 2:23: Cody Miller's Tartarus Battle is taken from his Full Game Legendary No Death run. This is the last few minutes of three and a quarter hours of non-stop Legendary play.") One running team, DivZero, is even writing a new 3-D game engine specifically intended for speedruns; it's called HASTE.

Players argue over the merits of emulators and programming tools in

speedrunning. Some impressive runs have been revealed as tool-assisted frauds. Finnish runner Joel "Bisqwit" Yliluoma has partly defused the issue with his site TASvideos. (TAS: "tool-assisted speedruns.") The site, which enshrines tool assists, establishes an unexpectedly arty aesthetic: "Although most of our movies intend to play games as fast as possible (tool assisted speedruns, if you will), with respect to art, our main goal is to create movies that are beautiful to watch."

The stern and cranky TAS guidelines emphasize entertainment value and self-awareness: "If you have to wait for something to happen (like a boss waking up), you do not need to just stand still. Jump around, do special moves, dance to the music, anything to make the delay less boring. ... Do not sleep. You are supposed to be the master of the game, not the slave of the game. Aim for the impossible."

Meanwhile, some zealots are exploring the newest speedrunning frontier: MMOGs. In late January 2006, after four attempts, a 25-year-old American runner named Bob "Mancow" Norris achieved his goal of advancing a *World of Warcraft*

character from level 1 to level 60 in under five days of online play. He recorded the entire 115-hour marathon; the 65-gigabyte movie fills nine DVDs. On eBay, Norris sells an edited version of the movie, along with an eight-page strategy guide.

In a February 18 Kotaku post, commenters expressed distinctly mixed views of Norris's achievement.

But speedrunners laugh. The run is the thing. And they keep going, ever faster.

[COMMENTS](#)

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

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The Little Things by Whitney Butts

Dear Ennui,

This is my letter to you.

There are days when you inhabit my mind. When I wanted to explore, you took me to Atys in the *The Saga of Ryzom*. When I wanted to stay up all night hiding under the covers, you gave me *F.E.A.R.* When I needed romance, you gave me *Final Fantasy*. But you never quite go away.

You are the nagging feeling that takes over after a long day at work. You give me inspiration to relax, and yet, you give me pain. You're everything that makes me think, laugh, hate and love all at the same time. You are my boredom, and you try and win me over.

Your presence will point me in the direction of something to do. However, the problem remains: Wherever you may take me, you invite yourself along. At first, it's OK. You stay in the back of my mind, telling me I could always go and do something else, but eventually you come to light, and I have to do little things to make you go away.

Remember that time you took me to Atys? We were running around in no general direction admiring the beautiful landscape. Then, blood lust set in, so we found a comfortable spot and started to kill stuff.

"Your skill in magic has increased." Once, twice, three times the yellow text flashed across my screen. We could have kept going, but that was all I could do. Over and over again my hands began to move in a pattern, hitting hotkeys. 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3 ... It became a dance: A dance of skills and effects. The clicking of the keyboard becomes a rhythm; to break the beat would be to lose the game. How much can we do before we run into a respawn? Can I go faster? Can I gain 20 skill levels in two hours? The same monotonous task, the same three buttons, and then the same creature became a self-imposed game of its own. I came to Atys to escape you, yet in the escape we crossed paths again.

No matter what, I return again and again. One day, I decided to go on an adventure to another land. For hours, I traveled through dangerous, unknown territory while trying to sneak to the distant Tryker lands. It was a fun adventure. I laughed, I smiled and I made light of all the times I died attempting to cross the path of a creature over 100 levels higher than me. But when I finally got to the other side, there was nothing there. I asked myself, "What do I do?" I turned to look into a pool of beautiful water. I opened the map and realized I could swim! I could swim across the water and find other beautiful places. Like a carrot on a stick, I gave myself something to keep me going.

But after a while, you took over. I couldn't enter the world anymore without feeling your presence. My time in Atys had long since ended, yet when I think about my adventures there, you never come up.

Where will you lead me next? Perhaps I'll give *F.E.A.R.* another shot. Maybe now I can play through the entire game without jumping out of my chair. Why don't I give *Final Fantasy VI* an 11th chance? This time, I'll try to get every character to their max level before I fight the last boss. In *Oblivion*, I'll do all of the side quests before I even attempt the main quest line, but the next time I play I won't do any side quests and see what the differences are.

In the end, no matter how much you try and torture me, I will win. No matter how much you enter my world, I can make you go away. It's the little things that keep me going and the little things that make even the most tedious activities fun. Whatever frustration you may cause, something small can make me laugh, something small can happen to make me cry, something small will catch my interest yet again, and you'll be lost ... for a moment. [COMMENTS](#)

“It's the little things that keep me going and the little things that make even the most tedious activities fun.”

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

Yours truly,
Whitney



Drudgery

by Laura Genender

It's 6:14 p.m. on a Monday. I have a fully stocked freezer, a bag of Doritos and a wide open evening ahead of me. Settling down in front of my computer, I log into *Lineage II*, a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG).

I play a level 64 Elven Elder, a healing-centric class in *Lineage II*. My job is to watch the health bars on the right side of my screen. When one drops below 3/4 full, I hit F12 to stand up, F8 to heal and F12 to sit back down. I have no reason to ever look past the user interface to the actual game, with its breathtaking graphics and scenery.

I can't just play an MMOG anymore. It is imperative that I multitask; watching television or surfing the web. The only challenge left is staying awake through hours and hours of leveling. We call it "The Grind." It is the signature of MMOGs, the uphill battle against boredom. But why do we suffer through this? Why play an MMOG instead of a single-player game?

It's all about the people. Players are driven to progress via competition with their peers. Flashy swords and high-level

skills are the sports cars and penthouses of the online world. Success is measured in skill and assets, and just like in real life, we are driven to show that we can attain more than our neighbors. These drives for progression make The Grind more tolerable: It becomes a necessary evil on the path to success.

Yet, this still doesn't explain why MMOGs are fun, only why we play them. After all, many players will continue playing an MMOG for months after they've tired of it, only so that they do not fall behind. MMOGs enable players to create and participate in a political layer in their worlds. Single-player games may have commanders and kings, but even in the most open-ended of worlds, the entire environment lacks dynamism. Adding hundreds - if not thousands - more variables, MMOG political systems are vastly complicated, whether or not they are built into the world. Friendships and alliances form, bitter enemies will exchange words, and wars - PvP, verbal, griefing or otherwise - will be declared.

It is entirely impossible to create a competition-free MMOG. Even creating a non-PvP game is difficult - players will

find ways to exploit NPCs to kill each other, training monsters with quick run speeds, charm spells and fake death. Even if players are trying to unlock something for the good of the community, there is a race to see who unlocks it first. The recently opened *EverQuest* progression servers are good examples of this: When a new expansion is unlocked, everyone reaps the benefits, yet players are competing and racing to see who can get there before everyone else. Similarly, *A Tale in the Desert's* technologies are unlocked by donations of players. One would expect the most rewarding behavior to be to wait for other guilds or regions to unlock the technology, to avoid spending your own resources, but there are constant competitions among various regions between people trying to get ahead in the technology fight.

This creates a drive to progress, and a huge sense of pride when you succeed – or righteous fury when you don't. While only one person can be at the top, nearly everyone is better at something than someone. Even players who aren't striving for the top spot on the ladder have something they're working toward,

whether it is helping a friend, defeating a certain monster or exploring an untouched area after a new expansion. Why else would they play the game?

Back to my *Lineage II* character: I recently acquired a new set of armor, which cost three times as much as my old set, but gives me a decent boost to my stats and armor class. Yet, I didn't buy this armor for the extra armor. I just wanted it; to own it; to wear it and show it off.

I didn't create my character to sit in dungeons tapping F12 and F8, but doing so is a necessary step for me on a separate path. I have aspirations of participating in Castle Sieges, part of *Lineage II's* built-in political system, and I already do battle with personal and clan enemies.

I didn't create my character to sit in dungeons tapping F12 and F8.

While no one player can be the hero, every player has an effect on a community, more so than you could ever have on a single-player game. Every

person who plays as Tidus or Cloud in the *Final Fantasy* series will meet the same people, make the same friendships and discover the same shocking secrets. Yet, in an MMOG, these restrictions are lifted: You never know who you will meet, who will be the love interest, the best friend, the traitor. You choose your own enemies and have no trouble hating them. And for each player, the world is enormously different and experienced in a wholly different way. [COMMENTS](#)

Laura Genender is a Staff Writer for MMORPG.com, and is also an Editor for Prima Strategy Guides.



MEET THE TEAM

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

"What's your favorite thing to do to alleviate boredom?"

Peter Robinett, "But I Thought Games Were Supposed to Be Fun!"

I try to find a new perspective, either by finding a new approach to the activity at hand or by finding something more interesting.

Allen Varney, "Speed Thrills"

I just love answering "Meet the Team" questions.

Laura Genender, "Drudgery"

I'll usually be looking up game-related stuff, such as crafting information, monster drops, etc. Sometimes I'll plan

out my character progression, or check out maps of new zones and dungeons that I'll soon be visiting. And eating. I'm always eating.

Whitney Butts, "The Little Things"

Usually I spend time reading. If I get bored with reading I see what other kind of weird stuff I can come up with, like doing math puzzles or pretending I know how to cook.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

Set up situations where I can get the greatest amount of Schadenfreude.

Russ Pitts, "Zombies Ate the Master Chief," Associate Editor

Porn.

Joe Blancato, Associate Editor

Your mom.

Jon Hayter, Producer

I fish. In *Animal Crossing*. I also pick JR's cherries when he isn't looking. And steal his fossils.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor

Over-caffeinate and eat Watermelon Sour Jacks candies. Somehow, after that, I'm no longer bored and my home is spic and span. Funny, that.

