

# the Escapist

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Welcome to *The Escapist*! ... again. It was but a year ago that we all first met, that I first welcomed you. It was at that point that I explained the "Bar Napkin Moment," the very one that birthed *The Escapist* in its original form.

And so, when thinking what to write here, for this momentous, at least in our lives, occasion, I felt it appropriate to tell you, again, about the Bar Napkin Moment. Well, this time, really, it was more of a Whiteboard Several Months. Yes, we've moved up in the world.

I believe it all began with ... yes, our first issue. The letters came in with praise for the content, praise for the layout, praise for the ideals behind the magazine. And for every two of those, we got another one lambasting the same. While we were frustrated we weren't able to please everyone, it was that same dichotomy that told us we had something special that we were able to so deeply strike a chord.

And that's where the whiteboarding began – we discussed, pondered and

argued what was the **essence** of *The Escapist*. We did this so that when we attempted to recapture some of those who found fault with our offerings, we would not change the things that brought us our first, and most loyal, friends. And after much deliberation and throwing of objects at each others' heads, we think we've hit upon something.

So, without further ado, we bring you *The Escapist* Portal. Herein, you shall find the same old *The Escapist* offerings – the weekly magazine, *The Lounge*, the same content. But you will find more. *The News Room* has been added to bring you daily news from the source you have come to trust, and will be manned by contributor N. Evan Van Zelfden. Also, notably, we have added *The Forum*, the official discussion board for *The Escapist*. This will be a location for our readers and our staff to interact in a more open way than we have been able before, and we're pretty excited about that.

And that's not all. There will be more to come over the next few weeks. Yeah, we went all out - we got pretty excited about our birthday. We hope that

you'll find something new to love about *The Escapist*!

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**To The Editor:** You've nailed it, Escapees. Thoughtful articles, slick design, polished copy. This is just what games journalism needs.

Hope you keep it up.

- **Dave**

**In Response to "Speed Thrills" from the Escapist Lounge:** I just read your article in 3 minutes 25 seconds. Beat that!

- **Andrew**

**In Response to "Speed Thrills" from the Escapist Lounge:** I have been in QA for the game industry for a few years now. Exploits described in the article are what we call "Aggressive User" bugs. For the most part we decide not to fix these bugs as they can be time consuming to fix and what do you really accomplish? If



a player gets their enjoyment from finding glitches, hidden paths, and shortcuts through the levels then what is the harm if there are some in there?

- Jason

**To The Editor:** In the article "The Forgotten Gamers", Dana Massey touches on a number of interesting and important issues for the world of gaming. Unfortunately, he doesn't ask the big question which her introduction begs: is Chess really a good game?

It seems like outrageous hubris in some ways, but I'd be quite confident in answering: no. By modern standards Chess fails to deliver much of what a game needs. If "released" today it would make no impact on even the world of board games, never mind computer games.

-Dom

**In Response to "I Thought Games Were Supposed to Be Fun" from the Escapist Lounge:** I suppose the big question I have with regard to grind in MMORPGs is -- why are MMORPGs stuck

in the "roll-player"/Monty Haul mindset that spawned this trend in pen and paper RPGs so long ago? Is there a reason there has to be equipment that is just plain better? Why is some orc that lives in a grass hut in the middle of barbarian lands carrying a sword that's 40 times better than the one you got from the blacksmith at the castle, who makes them day and night and has for the last 10 years? And why in god's name is the orc back there 3 hours after he's killed? That's not a "persistent world", that's a world where someone is hitting reset button every few hours, and no one notices (or cares).

- Chas

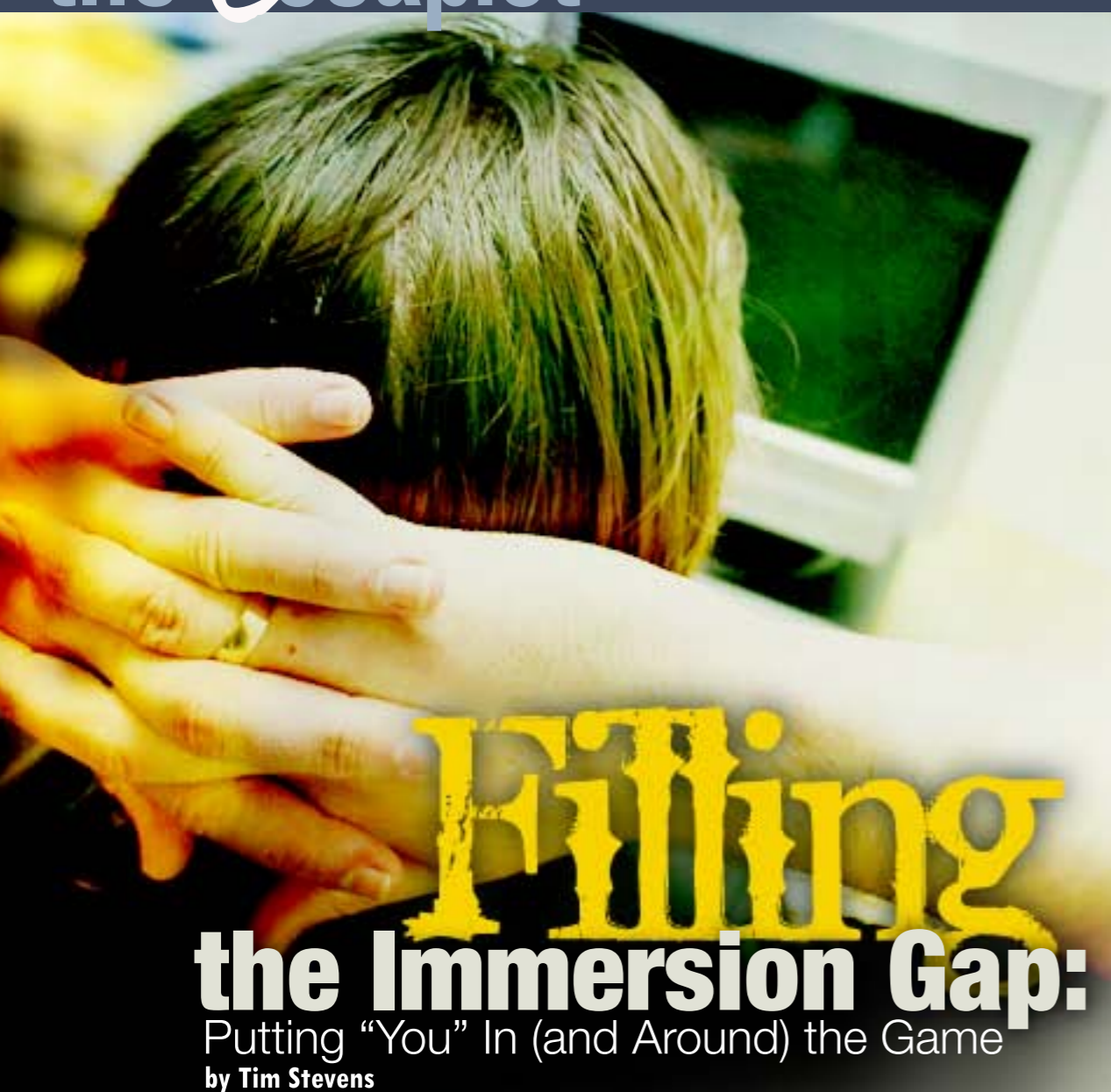
**In Response to "Drudgery" from the Escapist Lounge:** I'd say that most (if not all) MMOs have 3 phases: The Dating Phase, where everything is new and the possibilities are endless, The Honeymoon Is Over Phase, where the grind sets in, and The Twilight Years, where you've progressed far enough to enjoy the fruits of your labors.

- Chris

**In Response to "Lester Who?" from the Escapist Lounge:** That was the lamest thing I've ever read on The Escapist. How about you avoid self-analysis and stick to writing about games.

- a





If you had asked me in 1992 to guess what videogames would be like in 2006, I'd have chewed your ear for hours about all sorts of cool new stuff that was just over the horizon. Back then, I was a chubby 14-year-old kid who'd immigrated from the back woods of Vermont to the big city of Albany, NY. (It looked pretty big back then, anyway.) My eyes had been opened to the endless possibility of "modern" technology; it seemed anything was possible. Sadly, what we have today is far less impressive than what I'd expected.

If you don't remember 1992, it was the golden age of Virtual Reality. *The Lawnmower Man* was in theaters, and everybody who saw it wanted to have cybersex with a polygonal babe (or dude). Sega had just announced their Sega VR headset, which not only looked totally badass but seemed poised to bring affordable VR to the masses. That, combined with their amazing line of *Virtua* games, had me convinced the future of wholly immersive gaming was right around the corner.

I can't imagine how disappointed I would have been if I could have looked into the

future and glimpsed today's slate of pretty but predictable sequels.

Back then, *Super Mario Kart* was hugely popular, CD-ROM games were all the rage, *Dune II* defined the RTS-genre and Joseph Lieberman was getting uppity about *Mortal Kombat*. Today, *Mario Kart* is more popular than ever, most PC games **still** ship on CD-ROM, RTS titles look and play just like *Dune II* did, and Lieberman's still trying to convince parents that games are corrupting the minds of their children, even though many of those parents today were avid gamers back in 1992.

Sure, today's graphics look pretty hot, and our videogame systems do some impressive stuff, but we're still playing the same games in the same detached way. It's rare that a game genuinely sucks you in or makes you genuinely immersed. This is where the games of 2020 will make today's offerings seem primitive by comparison.

I wish I were talking about VR headsets and force-feedback body suits and teledildonics. Sadly, it seems those devices are destined to remain just as

obscure tomorrow as they are today. I'm instead referring to an entirely different sense of immersion: putting yourself in the game by creating a persistent in-game version of you that exists across titles, providing a seamless transition from *Guild Wars* to *Dungeons & Dragons Online*, or, more interestingly, from *World of Warcraft* to *Warcraft III*.

Even now, before you pop any disc into your Xbox 360, you can set some default options that apply to any game you play. You can always be rocking out to Sonic Youth whether you're being fragged in *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* or lapped in *Project Gotham Racing 3*, and the game will always know whether to invert your Y-axis or disable controller vibration. This is far from groundbreaking, but think about where things might go in 14 years. When we can jump from one game to the next and have our control-scheme and soundtrack move with us, just how far are we from having our hair styles and eye colors carry over, too?

Right now, the only way to recognize your friends in games is by reading the names floating over their heads. That's like wearing a name tag to your soccer

league every Tuesday night. When you play a community-based game in 2020, your friends will recognize you because of the *Pac-Man* tattoo on your digital cheek whether you're casting a fishing reel or gripping a plasma rifle. This avatar will be someone they will identify as "you," and you, of course, will recognize them in the same way.

Modern RPGs and sports titles have endless character creations, enabling you to spend hours tweaking this and that to create the perfect representation of your ideal virtual self. After all that, it's rare that you create a character you actually feel attached to, because when you move on to the next game, your character stays behind. Even if you spend hours re-sculpting your earlier creation, it will never be the same. In

Those complex character creation utilities we see today will be made independent of individual games, as will the characters they create.

order to really feel immersed in a game, you have to care about the characters within it, and the best way to do that is to make them familiar to you.

Part of this relies on you being "you" whenever you're online, whether you're capturing the flag in a fast-paced shooter or are whispering sweet nothings to a hot polygonal babe (or dude) in a dark corner. Those complex character creation utilities we see today will be made independent of individual games, as will the characters they create. And, once a character can exist in more than one game, it's a small step to bring them to life in the space between games, too.

That space is in large part created by the way we access our games. Today when you want a new game, you go to a store and buy it. When you want to play the game, you put in the disc. When you want to change games, you take out the disc and put in another one. Regardless of how immersive those two games are,



the *Escapist*



the *Escapist* lounge

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any sense of “being there” is shattered by pushing buttons and opening jewel cases. When you take advantage of a service like GameTap, that dividing line between games starts to blur a bit: There, you pick which game to play in the same way you select a fighter in *Tekken*. Instead of swapping plastic platters or clicking through drab menus, you scroll past colorful pictures. Even though you may be moving from *Reader Rabbit* to *Rampage*, the process is fluid.

That fluidity will only increase. Eventually, we’ll reach a point where there won’t be any dividing lines between games at all. Picture gaming in 2020 as *Second Life* meets Disney World. Instead of downloading or installing a copy of *Madden 2021*, you and your persistent character will wander to the EA Sports Stadiums and see who’s playing what. You can watch a few plays from up on the bleachers and throw on your gear to join in if you like, or mosey on over to the *Streets of Rage* and beat up on a few nameless thugs instead.

If you’re attracted to a medieval-themed RPG, you’ll want to stop by the costume shop before heading in, donning some sexy armor or a big mysterious robe, maybe even sucking down a digital protein shake to bulk up a bit before grabbing your sword and diving in. Your first short sword will, of course, be free, along with some ugly purple leggings and a tunic for decency’s sake. But, if you want your character to look good, you’ll have to pay for it, and not with play money.

Gaming in 2020 won’t be about buying individual games; it’ll be about paying monthly fees for access to gaming areas, then getting hit with extra fees for new goodies. Stop to visit the *Gran Turismo Speed Complex* on the outside of town, and a grinning virtual representation of Kazunori Yamauchi will hand you a set of keys to your very own virtual Toyota Vitz. The Vitz, of course, will be slow and painted some ugly green color with a stupid license plate that reads “SLOPOKE.” A new plate will be \$1, a new paint job

and some vinyl will be \$5, and that sexy Porsche parked over in the German concourse (with the drum and bass thumping in the background) will be \$20.

Ideally, you’d be able to take that free Vitz and drive it wherever you want through a massive and wide open gaming cyberspace. However, given that we live in a (mostly) capitalist society, that’s awfully unlikely. If today’s “big three” are still around in 2020, you can expect Microsoft’s Xpark, Sony’s Club Playstation, and Nintendo’s Mushroom Kingdom to offer competing services. As people in *Second Life* buy virtual property and build digital houses today, videogame publishers will morph into property developers tomorrow, buying sections of cyberspace in these destinations where they can insert their attractions. The big boys like EA and Ubisoft will litter the main drags with glitzy attractions, while you’ll have to wander off the beaten path to find the smaller, less popular ones.

The move to this sort of model has already begun with GameTap and Sony’s Station Access, each offering ala-carte gaming for a fee. NCsoft has a whole

If you want your character to look good, you’ll have to pay for it, and not with play money.

lineup of simple yet fun online games planned that will be free to download and play, each funded entirely by in-game purchases. And while people might get curmudgeonly about paying for the right to access a game rather than paying to own one, that's really what we've been doing all along. The pretty box and shiny disc have given us a false sense of ownership; read a game's EULA, and you'll realize how little you actually own.

Instead of owning useless boxes and discs, you'll own cars and costumes, wigs and one-click makeup kits, each a virtual totchke with a real price tag attached. Collecting stuff has always been a hugely important part of gaming, but whatever you collect almost always stays locked within the game in which you did the collecting. This is epitomized in *Animal Crossing*, which made hoarding junk a fiendishly addictive pastime. However, when its portable follow-up, *Wild World*, came along, for many gamers the futility of its GameCube predecessor came to light: What good is a massive collection of pretty things if it

all disappears and you can't show it off to everyone?


When you create a world between the games and allow your character to live there, those collectables can live there, too. Surrounding and adorning your in-game self with goodies will help these gaming destinations feel a little more like a home away from home. Like a hunter might adorn the walls of his weekend cabin with the stuffed heads of his conquests, racers will be able to decorate the walls of their pads with digital shots of victories and place reflective trophies on shelves wrapped in wooden textures.

When you visit a friend's apartment to chat, they might lovingly show you the

chipped and scarred chest plate they wore to win a gladiatorial tournament, armor hanging on the wall next to their prized BFG-18K rifle and the 22-pound trophy bass they caught last week. It'll be like *Animal Crossing* all over again, except you won't be digging up fossils and organizing furniture in a little cocoon, you'll be winning awards and showing off the fruits of your labor to the world at large.

Having a constant presence and continuity within and between games will make for a very different and very immersive gameplay experience. Gaming will be more compelling and more addicting than ever, but despite all that, you can be sure we'll still be playing the

same basic games. In 2020, you can look for me in Mushroom Kingdom cruising around *Mario's Xtreme Putt-Putt and Go-Kart Experience*. I'll be the one wearing the Lieberman mask and talking with the funny Vermonter accent.

 COMMENTS

*Tim Stevens is a freelance writer who covers videogames and software engineering. His work can be seen at a variety of interesting places like G4's X-Play and Yahoo! Videogames, along with his blog, DigitalDisplacement.com.*

What good is a massive collection of pretty things if it all disappears and you can't show it off to everyone?





## THE NEW GAMING SOCIETY

by Shannon Drake



Greetings from 2020. Much has been written about the cultural shift as the middle-class destroyed itself. The white collar worker died on a pyre of interest-only mortgages and faster-cheaper demands from management and shareholders. As the banks closed in, capitalism's refugees took to the roads, because the bank might own the car, but there's 50,000 miles of interstate out there to get lost on. The economy adjusted as "Just in Time Staffing" became the management mantra du jour, convincing the ruling class that a worker brought in and pushed hard for three weeks was far cheaper than keeping him on staff for 52. The rise of short-term contracts and a new American mobility lead to a new social order: Dangle the new nomads a carrot, and they will come.

Despite the harsh words of some - "those without jobs aren't human, they are leeches" - the newly mobile class has human needs. One of those is entertainment, and rising from the Wal-Marts, rest stops and automobiles is a booming culture of the arts. Movies, music and literature have emerged with a whole new sensibility, a trading culture

that owes more to the fireside storytellers of the long-dead past than to the electronic geegaws that powered the previous 50 years. That's not to say electronic entertainment is dead; it's just been changed completely.

They call it Sneakernet, hearkening back to a time when monitors showed only shades of green and games came via social webs rather than retail outlets. Back then, a friend had a game, copied it to a floppy for you to try, and you shared with them when you had a game. Maybe it was a full bells-and-whistles (or in those times, "bleeps and bleeps") retail game from an established firm, or maybe it was a bunch of half-completed games from a crazed closet programmer making another *Defender* clone, but it was free and it was a game. Those two essential facts were what mattered.

The new Sneakernet began with an under-employed creative class in search of an outlet. Programmers and artists work on their lunch breaks or waste a bit of company time and put some assets together, be it a basic engine, a few levels, a few nifty sprites or a cool song for the title track. They get it on a drive

before the boss finds out and pass it off to a friend or passing colleague to do more work on.


The chain continues, the game bouncing from drive to drive, from player to player, from creator to creator, picking up everything from new levels to new monsters. Then, a 5-year-old wunderkind hacks the data files and renames all the characters "Butts." (How funny is **that?** Butts!) And the game grows.

Some go through multiple genres, becoming a platform jumper, a hacked-together-RPG and an old-school click-based adventure game across the same level, depending on the particular inclination of the level designer. Half-completed puzzle games share drive space with elaborate RPGs that are all code, just waiting for someone with the compiler and time to slap it all together. Granted, snobs — people who can afford \$1,000 consoles and don't live in their cars — call them primitive; a fair critique, but it's for a simple reason: The budget is nil. Production time is "a few lunch breaks before I leave for Arizona." And then, there's the matter of the hardware, which may be anything from the latest Lenovo Wonderbox 8,000 to

the old Toshiba you gave to Mom when you were on top of the world.

The games themselves, in all their lovely iterations, are leaves on the wind, bouncing from coast to coast and back again. Let's follow one game in particular, *Phoenix Strike*, across America via its .INFO file — a traditional way of tagging who worked on a game and where - and credits. The game began as a three-level demo, an *Ikaruga*-style space shooter that was simply swarms and swarms of enemies heading toward a vastly outnumbered spaceship at the bottom, developed as an experiment by a Ryan Spector outside Baltimore. He passed it off to his friend, Greg, who added in 10 more levels and began the boss design before his contract was terminated for — of course — working on the game on company time. Greg tossed the game onto a shared hard drive and disappeared.

From there, it went through a couple high-score setting players in Washington, D.C., before it traveled to Seattle via a sound designer calling himself DJ Spike. He whipped up three high-energy techno tracks ("on the boss' equipment, lol!" per the notes) and copied it onto a couple



**The games themselves, in all their lovely iterations, are leaves on the wind, bouncing from coast to coast and back again.**


drives he had lying around. Obviously, the path splits up from there. The copy I have moved down the West Coast, high-scored by a Dangermouse in Portland before finally arriving in Los Angeles, where the final boss was finished, an epic battle involving five entire screens of the game, rumored to be un-defeatable by normal people. From there, a succession of programmers added little tweaks here and there, debugging the game and adding in new levels and enemies, until it arrived on my desk with 57 levels, a soundtrack that's pretty good for a game that fits in your pocket, and a jaw-dropping high score chart from players around the country.

Playing is an integral part of the process, as it's impossible to judge who wants to contribute to a project and who just wants to kill a few hours on their stolen laptop while taking the train into Portland in the morning. Each game has a dedicated comment file in its folder, and to peruse one is to peruse a cross-section of the new gaming society. You'll find everything from the classic "This game sucks" to Ph.D. quality theses on what the evil aliens spewing fire means

vis-à-vis modern American attitudes on immigration. Some collectors grab the comment files just for something interesting to read.

Reading through the comment file is like crossing paths with a thousand people. "Thanks for the game, guys," says Mark. "Needed something to take my mind off things!" One of the programmers says, "Spent my whole day scripting 10 levels. Boss didn't like it, but what's he gonna do, fire me? My contract is up today!" Denise Jacobs' 10-year-old boy "really enjoyed the game, took his mind off the drive for a while and he wouldn't stop talking about the bad guy at the end!" There's a five page rant by someone named The Prophet, chronicling the actual battle that took place in the game and what it means for the world; a mishmash of odd fan-fiction and end-time prophecy that's fascinating and rather disconcerting to read.

The blue-sky predictions we made in the past were wrong. The future wasn't immersion or robots or mind-blowing graphics, and it wasn't a dystopian cyberpunk future (despite my best



## The blue-sky predictions we made in the past were wrong.

efforts). The crash of the buyer crashed the industry and drove it back into an older state, with a modern twist on it. The floppy is now the jump drive. Development teams may number in the hundreds spread across the country, rather than one talented programmer working out of his garage. But the culture of sharing, collaboration and innovation has returned. Sneakernet was dead. Long live Sneakernet. [COMMENTS](#)

*Shannon Drake likes commas and standing out in the rain.*



## kill your darlings:

The Gaming Elements that Must Die so the Genre Can Live

by Gearoid Reidy

Evolve or die. It's the basic lesson of life. Those that can adapt survive and thrive; those that can't wither and fade and eventually pass on. Gaming is no different.

Shigeru Miyamoto recently said that "it is time to break free from the stereotypical definition of what a gamer is, because until we do, we'll never be part of the national or worldwide culture."

But that's only part of it. If gaming in 2020 is still to have relevance, it must break free of the stereotypical image of what a **game** is.

In a genre that should be limitless, too many games are mere imitations of each other. The following are just a few common gaming elements - beloved traditions or lazy solutions - that, for the sake of gaming, must all die.

### **Undead pirates and the meaning of "realism"**

The venue: *Soul Calibur*. The scene: a decaying church in Medieval Germany. Siegfried, a half-human monster with a demon eye in his sword, is locked in combat with Cervantes, an undead

magic pirate zombie who can **fly**. At stake: nothing less than their immortal souls. Both are near their breaking point. On the ground after one vicious attack, the sun glints off Siegfried's armor, and as Cervantes approaches for the killing blow, Siegfried lashes out with his secret move: **lamely kicking Cervantes very weakly in the ankles**.

Cursing Siegfried's name, Cervantes collapses. How did he lose? Poisoned shoes? Cervantes' Achilles ankle? No, he discovered something even more fatal: the health bar.

In the topsy-turvy world of videogame logic, if a half-dead baby kitten weakly slapped Mike Tyson on the knees two dozen times, he'd eventually fall down. This was acceptable once upon a time - when all we had were a clump of pixels tossing poorly-animated fireballs at each other.

While fighting graphics have evolved to a state of near photo-realism (perhaps more so than any other genre), the gameplay has stagnated, and sales have dropped. The one-on-one fighter as a top-drawer genre is dying.

The skewed graphics-to-gameplay balance of fighters ultimately begs the question: Just what are developers trying to achieve by aiming for super-realism in their breasts and backgrounds, when what their avatars are doing is so unrealistic? When a giant German crushes your leg with a sword, isn't there a good chance that your leg might be, you know, sore?

Just as shooters have advanced from a basic system with no pinpoint aiming to the sniper rifle and headshot of today, it's well past the time the fighter looked seriously at itself and inherited the legacy of the before-its-time PS1 game *Bushido Blade*, which pioneered one-hit kills and lasting character damage and sold well enough to inspire a sequel, despite the fact its interface didn't include a health bar. We need more new ways to go *mano a mano*.

### **Tales of the Over-world Map**

The common theme in most high fantasies from *The Lord of the Rings* down is the glory of the past - the world we live in is rotting, and we must restore *ye greate olden dayes*.

It stands to reason, then, that the fantasy-obsessed RPG genre also falls into this trap. So much so that when it comes to game design, they don't seem to realize that it's 2006 now, and we are not playing with 1980s rules anymore.

**While you might appear to be going from Random Home Village to Giant Metropolis City, in the gamer's Mind, you haven't really gone anywhere at all.**

Even as RPGs pull out all the stops to immerse us in their artfully created artificial worlds, they also cling to traditional aspects that do just the opposite. The whole level-up, random battle, turn-based combat with warriors and wizards thing is a tapped out genre. It caters now only to its own fans, becoming ever more insular and obsessed with its own inherent RPG-ness, so much so that it forgets what it is trying to recreate: an adventure. Aren't adventures supposed to be fun?

Take the over-world map. A relic of another age, the over-world map was originally designed to simulate the long journey across a supposedly big world, at a time when resources couldn't match the developers' imaginations. Now the over-world map just sucks you out of the game, changing the dimensions and making a huge world seem small. While you might appear to be going from Random Home Village to Giant Metropolis City, in the gamer's mind, you haven't really gone anywhere at all.

If you're going to have a game that involves the player traveling across some

massive world, you have to allow the player to make that journey himself, not shuttle him needlessly and instantly from one town to the next. Surely the point of having a dozen different towns full of shops and speaking characters is to make him feel that this is a real place filled with real people? Creating the illusion of another world is like making a house of cards; adding these elements is like trying to do it in a giant wind tunnel.

The more RPGs concentrate on artful cut-scenes and voiceovers, the more these non-immersive elements stand out like battle-sore thumbs. Full disclosure: I have admittedly never fought a party of saber-wielding trolls, but I have difficulty believing they would stand around waiting for me to decide whether I should attack with fire magic, or if ice works better on trolls. The best way we have to show character development in the single most story-oriented game genre is a list of numbers that increase based on the amount of monsters killed. And every life or death situation can be solved simply by making sure to pack some herbs before you head out.

**I'm not 11 anymore. I don't have the time to play through the same section of a game more than once just because I missed some hidden save point.**

The RPG is in serious danger of becoming nothing more than a parody of itself – like the cowboy movie, so afraid to deviate from the rule book that it formulaically burns itself out of mainstream existence. If the RPG is to continue, it must look to the future instead of feeding off the decaying glories of the past.

#### **Save me! Power and responsibility**

With the advent of Tivo and the internet unshackling television from scheduling, gaming is now the only media form that demands you play by its own time rules – stopping and saving when it wants you to.

Yet here's the problem: I'm not 11 anymore. I just don't have the time to play through the same section of a game more than once just because I missed some hidden save point or didn't have enough typewriter ribbons.

When you get to a ripe old age living in a multitasking society, it becomes a daunting task to sit down and play a game like *Metroid Prime*, which you know will require at least two straight hours of playtime to make any progress. And if, after an hour and 59 minutes of play you suddenly die without saving,

well, that's just tough. Like a strict parent, the game just tells us to do it again, and do it properly this time.

Save systems have to go. Let's get one thing clear, games: I pay for you. You are my playthings. When I say enough, enough. At the very least, every console should function like a DS – where just closing the lid puts the machine into temporary standby. But the save point itself is a cheap trick to extend lifespan that's been used for too long. Surely by now we can find a better alternative to keeping up playing games than the save point, the health-pack and the 1-up.

*Halo's* respawn was an admirable solution. But even as it cured one problem, *Halo* exacerbated another: the lack of suspense and responsibility.

It seems somewhat bizarre to recreate the storming of the beach at Normandy in such detail as modern WWII games do, only to leave out the most crucial element: the very real, terrifying possibility that these could be your last moments on Earth.

One of the reasons gaming attracts so much flak is because it fails to show the consequences of your actions. If you die

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in a hail of bullets, you just press restart. While the idea that this leads people to become lunatics is dubious at best, the thrill of victory is even better when there is something at stake - something more than just escaping the tiresome bother of having to redo a section.

Consequences of your actions - at the least lasting damage to your character, at its best a change in the story or the course of a game depending on your choices - is the key to the struggle through life. With all its realistic physics and graphics engines, that is something gaming has yet to grasp.

## **You need the blue key: A world of painted sets**

Since being propelled from the 2-D to the 3-D world, game designers have struggled to mark off their boundaries. The best games give you a world that seems near limitless, so you don't notice the restrictions; the worst bar you off meaninglessly with doors that will never open because there is nothing behind them and invisible walls that suddenly stop you from advancing.

Sadly, most games still resemble the western movie sets of old - entire towns

that are really just 2-D illusions, only convincing from afar.

In what crazy world can a space marine with a rocket launcher not break through a simple window? Why does a kick-ass gun-toting vampire like Dante wander through towns full of closed doors without breaking some of them down?

Show me a door and my first instinct is to see what's behind it; show me a far-off mountain and I long to see what's on the other side. Games like *Shenmue* and *GTA* imperfectly but successfully create the soon-to-be-standard illusion that you can go anywhere.

If you think about it, games should be nothing but fun from beginning to end - the do-anything promise that *Mario 64* began to elicit. Yet, far too many games have us running errands instead of having fun - collecting 100 golden whatevers or searching in every obscure back corner until you find some arbitrary key to progress.

Videogames need to think less like part-time jobs and more like playground games - where the fun is guarded by flexible rules, but within those rules anything

goes. The fun is in figuring out what to do for yourself. Yet, success in too many videogames depends just on rote memorization - memorizing the track, the map layout or the boss movements - than on true skill or innovation.

## **Far too many games have us running errands instead of having fun.**

### **Stepping out of the primordial goo**

It's never easy letting go. But to create a new world, we must sometimes sacrifice those we love. So, so long, bosses, health bars and over-world maps. So long, 100 golden coins, closed doors and the 1-up. The future is built on the bones of the past. [COMMENTS](#)

*Gearoid Reidy is a journalist working in Japan who would be very happy if he never had to memorize the movement patterns of another boss ever again. You can find him at [www.gearoidreidy.com](http://www.gearoidreidy.com).*





The least controversial article I ever wrote – that anyone noticed, anyway – was “Lifegame 2020” in *The Escapist* issue 5.

That piece, a blog entry from the future, imagines megacorporate online “shopgames” – Wal-Mart World, TargetView, DisneyLife – that combine aspects of MMOGs with real-world consumer loyalty programs. You could buy 10 lattes at Starbucks to gain extra experience points for your character, or complete quests in the game to earn discounts at brick-and-mortar stores across the corporation’s sprawling empire. All your real-life credit-card purchases would earn advancement in your chosen shopgame. Quoting: “By setting up virtual game kingdoms to match their real-world equivalents, and tying together performance in both, the conglomerates secured total customer loyalty. They built the new millennium’s version of the old-fashioned company town – an online simulation, widely distributed across meatspace but densely linked in virtual reality.”

Did readers scoff at this consumerist fancy? Hah! It was like boldly asserting

that tomorrow the sun will rise in the east. Many readers expressed distaste or despair or outright horror at the shopgame idea, but not one of them, not a single one, doubted such games will become a reality. On the spot, everyone who heard the notion flatly believed it.

None of them liked it, but they all believed.

It turns out they were right – and these shopgames will arrive a lot sooner than the year 2020. But for those who don’t welcome our new megacorporate online overlords, there is hope.

### **Avatar-Targeted Marketing**

A hundred million Americans, many in highly desired demographics, play videogames. Media group IGA Partners offers “Gaming 101” seminars for ad agencies eager to infest the new medium. Many firms, like Massive (acquired by Microsoft in May for between \$200 and \$400 million) and Double Fusion, are building infrastructure for in-game ad delivery. Early customers will probably include tobacco companies, which target young people but are prohibited from advertising on TV.



Will these efforts evolve into shopgames? Not likely. Though it's a busy time for in-game product placement, actual revenue is ramping slowly. According to GameDaily Biz, "research firm Parks Associates forecasts that PC in-game advertising will top \$400 million by 2009." There's slightly more money in advergaming – those wretched little branded Flash/Shockwave games knocked out in five days as movie tie-ins or promos, as well as branded pseudo-MMOGs like Coke Studios and Disney's Virtual Magic Kingdom. Advergaming revenue is expected to grow from \$200 million in 2004 to \$1 billion in 2008.

Four hundred million? A billion? A pittance. In 2005, internet advertising as a whole grossed \$12.5 billion; broadcast TV ad revenue was three times more. Game ads, as we have conventionally understood them, won't bring comparable returns for years, and aren't likely to propel the evolution of shopgames.

A likelier path: In-game shopping. Everyone knows you could, in early 2005, type "/pizza" to order a real-world Pizza Hut delivery from inside the

*EverQuest II* client. (Now, the command sends you to a Collector's Edition order page.) Inevitably, that idea will spread to other games and other merchandise. In July 2005, science fiction writer Cory Doctorow held an in-game book signing in *Second Life*; wouldn't it have been nice if you could have clicked on him to order the book from Amazon?

Advertisers are slowly growing aware of MMOGs. Paul Hemp's June 2006 *Harvard Business Review* article, "Avatar-Based Marketing," is, by *HBR* standards, vague and anecdotal. But Hemp proposes a novel angle: Advertising in 3-D MMOGs that targets, not players as such, but their avatars. "Advertising has always targeted a powerful consumer alter ego: that hip, attractive, incredibly popular person just waiting to emerge (with the help of the advertised product) from an all-too-normal self. ... [I]n the mall of a virtual world, an avatar could try on — and try out in front of virtual friends — real-world clothing brands or styles her creator typically couldn't afford or wouldn't dare to wear. If she got rave reviews from her pals and became (along with her creator) comfortable with the idea of wearing a particular outfit, a purchase in the real world might follow."

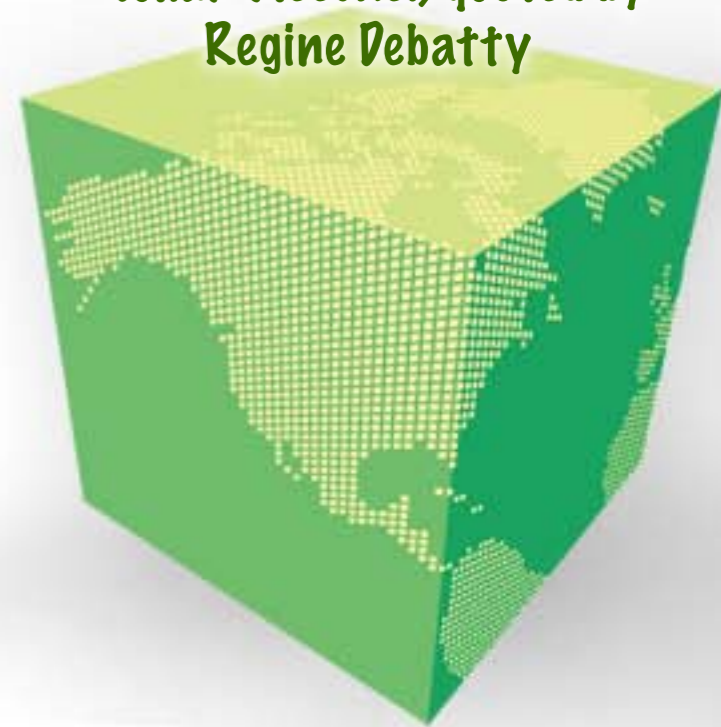
This idea, like so much about online societies, remains untested. But immersive 3-D environments, such as *Second Life* or the Croquet Project, may not be the best shopgame platform for the mass audience of the future. An equally promising venue is already here, and it already has over 70 million users.

### **MySpace as MMOG**

Some commentators call social networking sites (SNS) – *MySpace*, *Facebook*, et al – a fad. Nope! The SNS phenomenon is more pervasive and long-lasting than *World of Warcraft*.

Young people who have no interest in MMOGs will nonetheless flow smoothly through a lifelong pipeline of successive online networks. They can start young with *Neopets*; at age 13 they join *Habbo Hotel*; and soon they move on to *MySpace*. In high school, they might enroll in one or another niche SNS like *Sconex*. In college, they join *Facebook*, and after graduation, they jobhunt through *LinkedIn*. Whether or not these particular sites will continue to thrive is irrelevant; if they die, replacements will rise. Online networking feels natural to this generation, like Grandpa's Rolodex and Mom's Franklin Day-Planner.

**Pervasive play takes us into the network. It adjusts our perspective on the physical world, creating a renewed experience of what the world contains. [It] makes it difficult to look away from what we don't like to see.**  
-Julian Bleecker, quoted by Regine Debatty



The current SNS field is a bubble, crowded with hundreds of me-too sites. To compete, these imitators seek new reasons for community. Their solutions will include games. "Social networking for the sake of social networking just doesn't cut it," says doctoral student Fred Stutzman on his blog, Unit Structures. "If we're going to invest our time in a SNS site, make it worth our while. Make it a game, make it entertaining, make it useful – but don't expect us to come if you think it's enough to browse our friends' profiles."

These SNS hangouts already feel interestingly game-like. In the introduction to *MySpace Safety: 51 Tips for Teens and Parents*, authors Kevin M. and Dale G. Farnham write, "In one sense, *MySpace* is a massive online roleplaying game, probably the world's biggest. Each member makes a page that represents how the person wants to appear to their friends and (if their profile isn't set to 'private') to the rest of the world."

In Asia, some SNS communities have already added game-like features. South Korea's *Cyworld*, which gets 15-20

million visitors daily (out of 47 million South Koreans), has an economy of sorts, based around "wave riding." You have a graphical "minihompy" (mini home page) room you can decorate as you like; get decorations either by buying them with the *Cyworld* currency, "acorns," or by getting someone to add you to his "cybuddy" list so you can ride his wave (use his stuff). With your well-appointed minihompy, you attract visitors, give presents, and boost your ratings in Erotic, Famous, Friendly, Karma and Kind. There's no explicit goal, but it works like a game – a game of status, as surely as rising in level in *D&D*, maxing out your Slashdot karma or getting a Harvard MBA.

Asian social networks are also extending feelers into the real world. According to research group Pacific Epoch, *Habbo* in China "will offer a service that will allow Chinese users to purchase items that will be both virtual and physical items ... Through the service, users can purchase items such as flowers, clothes and movie tickets online in the virtual community and the physical items will be delivered to their homes the next day."

## Your next-gen cell phone will have GPS, so the game will always know where you are.

Eventually, advertisers will take these social games in-house. And shopgames will be here.

### Game Meets World

As SNS communities continue to seep into physical reality and evolve toward true shopgames, how will they work?

The tools and infrastructure coming into place soon will bring a new era of ubiquitous online gaming – games accessible any time, any place. You'll play these games through your cell phone or PDA, the ever-present online connections where no laptop can reach. Your next-gen cell phone will have GPS, so the game will always know where you are. (Corporations can't wait for this locational awareness. As you pass their storefronts, they'll spam you with coupons.)



## Why not a lifegame based on the Peace Bomb?



Many designers, from sociologists to web entrepreneurs to performance artists, have used precursors of locational awareness in cell phone games that network whole populations of players:

- “Big Urban Games,” such as *ConQwest*, which ran in five American cities in 2004. Sponsored by the telco Qwest, *ConQwest* was a territory-based treasure hunt in which contestants snapped phone cam photos of special semacodes to collect clues.
- *Superstar Tokyo* sent UbiComp 2005 conference attendees around Tokyo to place photo stickers and snap photos of others’ stickers. They scored points for forming links in a spontaneous social network.
- Blast Theory’s *Uncle Roy All Around You*: “Online players and street players collaborate to find Uncle Roy’s office before being invited to make a year-long commitment to a total stranger.”
- *Pooptopia* (mentioned in *The Escapist Lounge*) is an urban location-based game of pet waste removal. Designer Aram Saroyan Armstrong, who created the game as part of his thesis project:

“*Pooptopia* LBS is much more than a super smart, fun and high-tech poop scooping service. It’s a lifestyle.... We encourage good citizenship and are helping people to reclaim their streets in a playful and positive way.” Among other projects, Armstrong has also envisioned a pedometer-based game, *Piedimonsters*, which would encourage obese children to exercise.

However likely (inevitable?) the “Lifegame 2020” article’s consumerist vision of Wal-Mart World and DisneyLife, art projects like the ones above inspire an alternative vision of networked social games: not shopgames, but lifegames – vehicles not for hype and coupons, but for flash-mob activism.

The third annual Game Design Challenge, held at the 2006 Computer Game Developers conference in San Jose, asked contestants to describe a game that could win the Nobel Peace Prize. Designer Harvey Smith won with “*Peace Bomb*,” a networked game that would spontaneously draw people together for various constructive projects, like tree planting, cleaning up, building homes or donating money. Smith speculated, “After pooling together

and trading resources, players can win on a quarterly basis, or every six months or whatever and [the] flash mob erupts around a socially constructive movement.”

Why not a lifegame based on the *Peace Bomb*? It wouldn’t require deep corporate pockets. You could fund it with pledges collected through fundraising sites like Fundable.org or even *Second Life*. This activist design might take inspiration from “distributed labor” projects like the ESP Game, Mycroft, and Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, or from the cancelled Game Neverending that spawned photo-sharing site Flickr.

The inspirations are many. The goal is worthy. The motivation, at least for those who didn’t like hearing about Wal-Mart World, is clear.

It’s worth a try. [COMMENTS](#)

*Tim Stevens is a freelance writer who covers videogames and software engineering. His work can be seen at a variety of interesting places like G4’s X-Play and Yahoo! Videogames, along with his blog, DigitalDisplacement.com.*



# This One's For You, COACH

by Chris Dahlen

I'm not a great gamer; I don't have much hand-eye coordination; I'm terrible in a deathmatch; I make the same mistakes over and over again and, I'll be frank: I'm a bit of a spaz. Nobody will play with me, nobody wants me on their team – so I spend hours every night, alone at home, sucking.

So, a year ago, when I bought a new console, I paid extra for the latest version of the Nintendo Coach – the artificial intelligence that would watch every game I play, study every mistake I make, every bonus move I pull off and generally get to know me well enough to fix me. The ads promised that it would make me a better player – and it would only be “mildly intrusive.”

When I booted up the console for the first time, I was expecting a floating head or a cutesy UI to pop up in the corner of the screen – you know, like that legendary Microsoft paper clip. In fact, I was expecting the coach to be incredibly annoying, a backseat driver that would spring up to razz my serve in *Table Tennis 2020*. Instead, a warm,

fatherly voice spoke up from the rear speakers of my surround sound system, and started to give me suggestions. “That was a great headshot,” it would say, or, “You’ve got some Nazis sneaking up behind you – are you keeping an eye on your minimap?”

The longer I played, the better Coach got to know me. Coach knew every game I played backward and forward, probably because he was downloading information on everything I brought home. He knew when I was rushing and when I was taking too much time, told me the best skills to take when I leveled up a character, and helped me understand my weaknesses – but in an encouraging way, like he knew I was just a couple steps away from real improvement.

And I got better. Coach matched me up with other players, always finding someone a little better than I could learn from or a little worse to boost my confidence after eight straight losses. And as strange as it sounds, he even gave me tips on my love life. “Fifty Monkeypants has requested a match

with you again," he told me, and added, cool as your dad on prom night, "She looks you up quite often." He was right; I instant messaged her, and Fifty Monkeypants and I have been an item ever since.

I'm used to playing by myself. I grew up alone, my mom was always at work and, like I said, people never lined up to play with me; I always let them down. But with Coach, I got used to having someone watch me play and lend me a hand.

So it was a real dilemma when the latest Google game console came out. I eyeballed it every day at the store, but I couldn't bring myself to buy it: There was no way to move Coach over, and anyway, the new consoles say they have "better" trainers of their own. I could keep playing the same old games with Coach, or I could move on to the next system like I always have in the past – and basically shelve him away.


In the end, I gave in. I said I'd go back and visit – and I never did. I haven't touched the Nintendo in a month, and Coach would know I've moved on. And

yeah, I shouldn't care – but that time together meant a lot to me. It was the first time anyone wanted me to win.

I haven't forgotten him, though, or everything he taught me. The other night, I jumped into a *Duke Nuke'm Forever* deathmatch. I used to rank dead last, but that night, I fought everybody off with vicious attacks and perfect defenses. I scored every headshot, showed up every time the best weapons re-spawned and when I got on a roll, I started walking straight up to people and shooting them right in the face with my shotgun. I made people **flinch**. Finally, dawn came, and I had to sign off – but not before I won a prize: "NUKE-MASTER." And another: "MOST IMPROVED."

When that came up on my screen, the only thing I could think was: This one's for you, Coach. I don't know where I'd be without you. [COMMENTS](#)

*Chris Dahlen also writes about technology and culture for Pitchforkmedia.com, The Onion AV Club and Paste Magazine, where he is games editor.*



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