the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Russ Pitts

For those of you who fell asleep during the classical mythology portion of your higher education, the stories all go like this: Some guy decides he no longer needs the gods, sets off to prove as much and promptly gets smacked down.

Prometheus, Sisyphus, Icarus, Odysseus, the stories are full of men who, for whatever reason, believed that they were not bound by the normal constraints of mortality. Men who dreamed impossible dreams, set out to make them realities and failed. Often miserably. Prometheus was chained to the side of a mountain to feed the crows. Icarus flew as high as the sun, then plummeted to his death. Odysseus was cursed by Poseidon to spend 10 years fighting his way home only then to find that a gaggle of suitors had besieged his faithful wife. And Sisyphus? Well, his story is better left for another time.

What's the moral of these stories? That no man is an island, for sure, but also that the gods aren't to be trifled with. Gods are gods, men are men and that's just the way it is. Do what they say, stay in line and everything will be just fine. Which, frankly, is about how many of us think to this day. With the exception of a very brave few.

In this issue of The Escapist, we take a look at the stories of a few, brave souls in the game industry who, for better or worse, decided that they, too, were destined to make their dreams a reality. Some actually succeeded, while others crashed and burned. We in the game industry may not have jealous, angry gods against which to struggle, but oftentimes the rabid fans, power-hungry distributors and cynical reviewers can be just as irascible.

In *The Escapist Issue* 55, "Against the Gods," Allen Varney talks with legendary MMOG developer Raph Koster; Lara Crigger tackles the story of storied Infocom; Bruce Nielsen gives us a first-hand look at the demise of a wargame company; Shannon Drake deals with the hubris of EA's *The Sims Online* and John Romero discusses both his successes and failures in his interview with *The Escapist*.

Russ Pitts

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Development in a Vacuum" from The Escapist Forum:
As for the fact that thier isolation has been a benefit to them rather than a hindrance, that's what I discussed with Oveur (Nathan Richardsson) while in Vegas earlier this year at the EVE Gathering. The fact that Iceland is such small country, with a very unique culture and the fact that most of the early CCP team was from a telecommunication background also benefited the game early on.

Very curious about "other games" that they eventually get into. We've been hearing about it here and there, but nothing concrete so far.

– crazykinux

In response to "Footprints in Moondust" from The Escapist Forum:
What an unforeseen intersection, the discovery of determinism in a game where the player is only an observer. Since it was mentioned in no less than two articles I fired up Noctis to see the insanity for myself. That is the loneliest game I've ever played.

- Danjo Olivaw

In response to "Footprints in Moondust" from The Escapist Forum:
I'd just like to say this was a fantastic article. I think I'll have to read Olaf

Stapledon's 'The Star Maker' again. And maybe I should try Noctis again too.

- Zapatero

In response to "My Own Private Galaxy" from The Escapist Forum: I started reading this weeks issue, and as I read past all the articles mentioning Wing Commander, X-wing, and other space games I thought, "How could they write an issue based on outer space games and not mention Escape Velocity". To my surprise, Pat Miller cooled my jets with a piece about the game I used to play on the old Macintosh. Escape Velocity had such depth that you actually felt as if you were out in space calling the shots. It was an awesome game, no doubt

- Gradius Master

In response to "Wing Leader" from The Escapist Forum: Actually Origin's *Ultima* and the *Wing Commander* series are what inspired me to get into the game industry as an artist.

If I could meet Chris C. I would shake his hand for how much influence he had in my career and game playing.

- JohnnyLA

In response to "Lost in the Void" from The Escapist Forum: It seems that BioWare is attempting to tap into some of that space sim mystique in the upcoming RPG Mass Effect. I have no idea what the mechanics of space exploration will be like -- probably nothing like the old school sims -- but it's at least an indication that glimmerings of this genre are still alive in the mainstream.

- Ian Dorsch

From "Bang for your buck" in The Escapist Forum: It seems that the very nature of the initial cost of a new game somehow determines a persons willingness to play it. Let's face it, its all about our level of satisfaction with the game vs. the amount of money that we spent on it. Who hasn't paid good money for a dog of a title before? Games such

as *Fable* (highly innovative) are marginally received I think because of the consumers lack of willingness to commit to the idea that went into the games creation. On the other hand, the market is overflowing with various game genres that try to do, in my opinion, too many things. Games that focus on doing a single thing extremely well always satisfy my expectations and usually leave me wanting more.

- Br0wnShugha
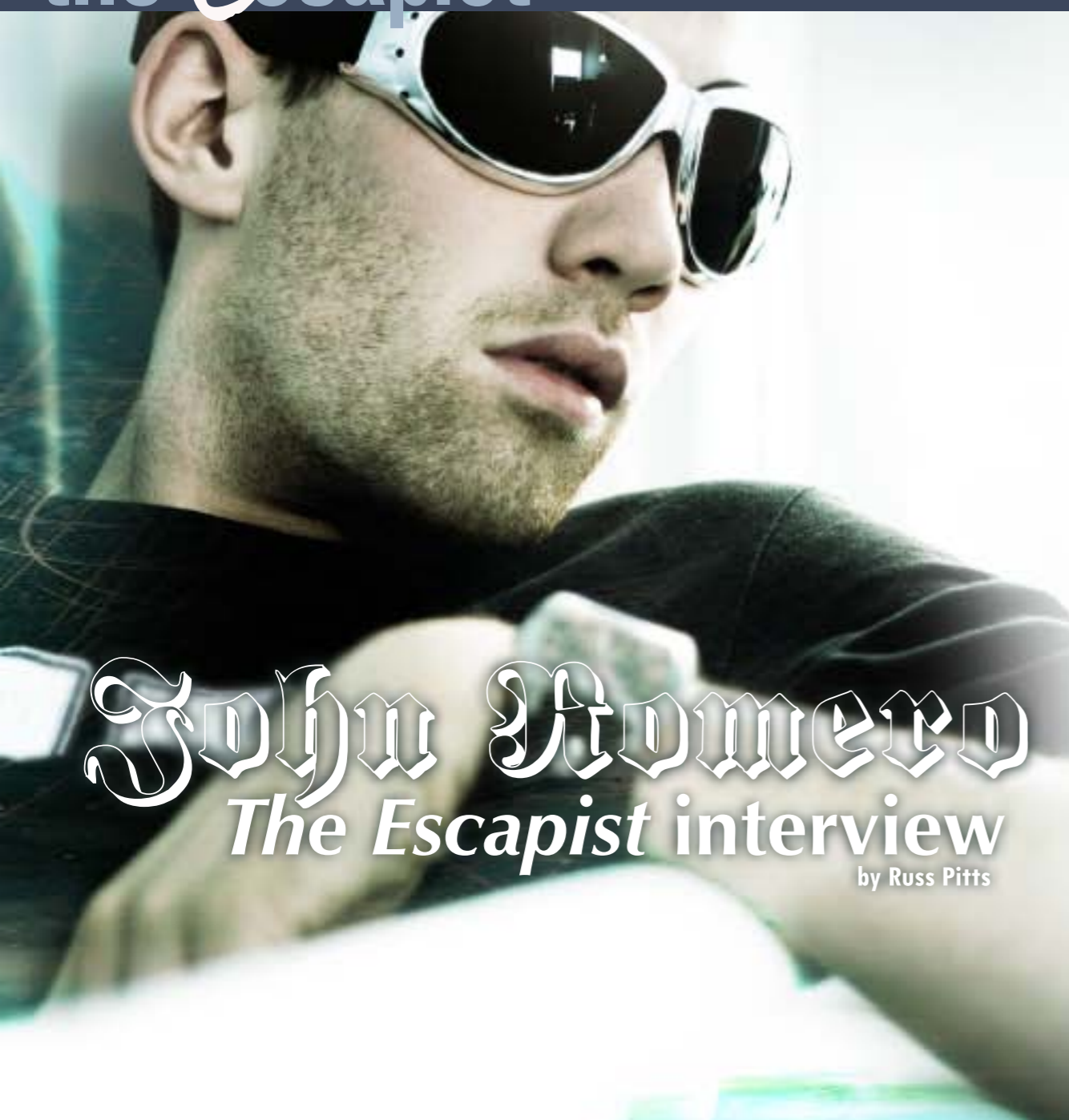
John Romero
The Escapist interview
by Russ Pitts

Romero.

Perhaps it's something about the name itself that brings to mind great things. Some combination of etymological triggers, perhaps; a heady mental mixture that's part romance, part Camaro - sex in a Z28.

The man himself evokes a similarly visceral response. Meeting him, speaking with him and tracking his movements across nearly three decades of life in the game game, one can hardly imagine John Romero as anything other than a smashing success. Which is why, perhaps, so many take such pleasure in pointing out his one great failure.

Romero has developed, or been involved in developing nearly 100 games, at least half a dozen of which have sold more than 100,000 copies. Having cut his teeth in the game industry coding games for the Apple II, Romero worked for Origin and Softdisk (founding a few of his own companies along the way) before co-founding id Software in 1991 with John Carmack, Adrian Carmack (no relation) and Tom Hall.

In the five years he worked with id Software, John Romero contributed heavily to developing a number of innovative PC games, including id's breakout hit *Castle Wolfenstein 3D* and one of the most widely recognized and controversial games of all time, *Doom*; the game that has been accused of inspiring the Columbine High School shootings, made its designers multi-millionaires and ushered in the era of the "rockstar game developer." Yet inside the game industry, Romero is even better known for the one that got away.

In 1996, following a widely-publicized feud with John Carmack - centered around the belief among key id staffers that Romero talked too much to the press and worked too l ttle on the games - Romero founded his own company, Ion Storm, with fellow designers Tom Hall and Todd Porter and artist Jerry O'Flaherty. The men leased the penthouse of a prestigious Dallas, Texas office building, deep in the heart of oil country, for the company's headquarters. A monument to excess, the Ion Storm offices featured a movie screening room (complete with leather

furniture), arcade machines, a bank of computers devoted to *Doom* and *Quake* "deathmatches," 60-foot glass ceilings (which prompted the company's programmers to erect felt tents over their workspaces to reduce the glare of the daytime sun), oak furniture, steel cubicles, and a pool table. It was an office fit for the man who had once referred to himself as "God," and it would be within this 54th floor glass cage that John Romero's Icarian flight would come (at least temporarily) to an end.

Ion Storm, backed by publisher Eidos, planned initially to ship three games, each designed by one of the company's three co-founders. Romero's long-time friend (and Softdisk and id Software colleague), Tom Hall, planned to develop a science-fiction roleplaying game called *Anachronox*, which was eventually released in 2001 to poor reviews and lackluster sales. Todd Porter, former ministry student, exotic dancer and Origin employee, was to develop a game called *Doppleganger*, which was eventually cancelled. Romero's game was *Daikatana*. It was intended to be larger and grander in scale than any

videogame ever made, and was heavily advertised as the game that would make you, the player, John Romero's "bitch."

That *Daikatana* eventually sold 200,000 copies - a smashing success by some standards - is irrelevant. Costing more than $10 million and taking three years to develop, *Daikatana* would have had to do far more than make you its bitch to have been considered a success. Since day one at Ion Storm, Romero and Co. had set their sights on *Doom*-like sales figures, and in what was certainly the greatest example of star-driven, game industry hubris, had been completely surprised by their failure.

Ion Storm's Dallas office, rocked by political in-fighting (which led to a near-complete walk-out of Romero's *Daikatana* team) was closed in 2001 by Eidos following a bail-out deal in which the publisher had acquired a controlling interest in the hemorrhaging game company. The company flag was then moved to Austin, Texas, where industry veteran Warren Spector had been hired in 1997 to create a small arm of Ion Storm away from the tumult to the north. Spector's team had succeeded

where Ion Storm's other designers had failed, creating the critically acclaimed, best-selling science-fiction action/adventure game, *Deus Ex*. Spector then presided over a sequel to *Deus Ex* and a long-awaited follow up to Looking Glass Studios' *Thief* games, before parting ways with the company to pursue other interests. Ion Storm was closed for good in 2005.

After leaving Ion Storm, John Romero founded his own company, Monkeystone, with former girlfriend and game industry icon, Stevie Case. There, the pair, with Tom Hall, produced games for the mobile phone market, until Romero joined San Diego-based Midway, long-time maker of arcade games such *Spy Hunter* and *Mortal Kombat*. For Midway, Romero developed a follow-up to the successful arcade game *Gauntlet* and an original game called *Area 51*. Romero has since left Midway to found a new company,

tentatively called Slipgate Ironworks, which has recently begun hiring programmers and artists to work on a new, super secret massively multiplayer online game (MMOG), which the man himself has called "super stealth," and which he promises will be bigger than

It was an office fit for the man who had once referred to himself as "God," and it would be within this 54th floor glass cage that John Romero's Icarian flight would come (at least temporarily) to an end.

anything he's ever made. Looking back over his resume, one has to wonder how such a thing is even possible.

The Escapist recently spoke with John Romero about his past, his present and his mysterious future.

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The Escapist: So, let's start off by going back to the heady days of *Castle Wolfenstein 3D* and *Doom* shareware releases. There's a lot of ink being sacrificed right now on the topic of "indie" or "scratchware" development, and comparisons to id's success story have been made more than once. Back in those days, just before the entire universe became your playground, did you guys see yourselves as "indie" game developers?

John Romero: Yeah, we definitely saw ourselves as indies, but it wasn't something we focused on – we were just doing our own thing. We developed our games in a pretty non-disciplined and non-organized way because so much of it was R&D. We were lucky that our first game trilogy sold well enough to afford

us indeterminate [development] cycles on our games, which then fed the next game's dev cycle; it's not something many indies can do. We were also very active in trying to help other small game dev teams make great games (Raven, Rogue, Ritual, Valve).

TE: All of the id guys, but especially you, pretty much defined the role of "Rockstar Game Designer." A lot of us who've been playing games (including yours) for most of our lives have thought at one time or another that it would be nice to be John Romero. Who does John Romero want to be?
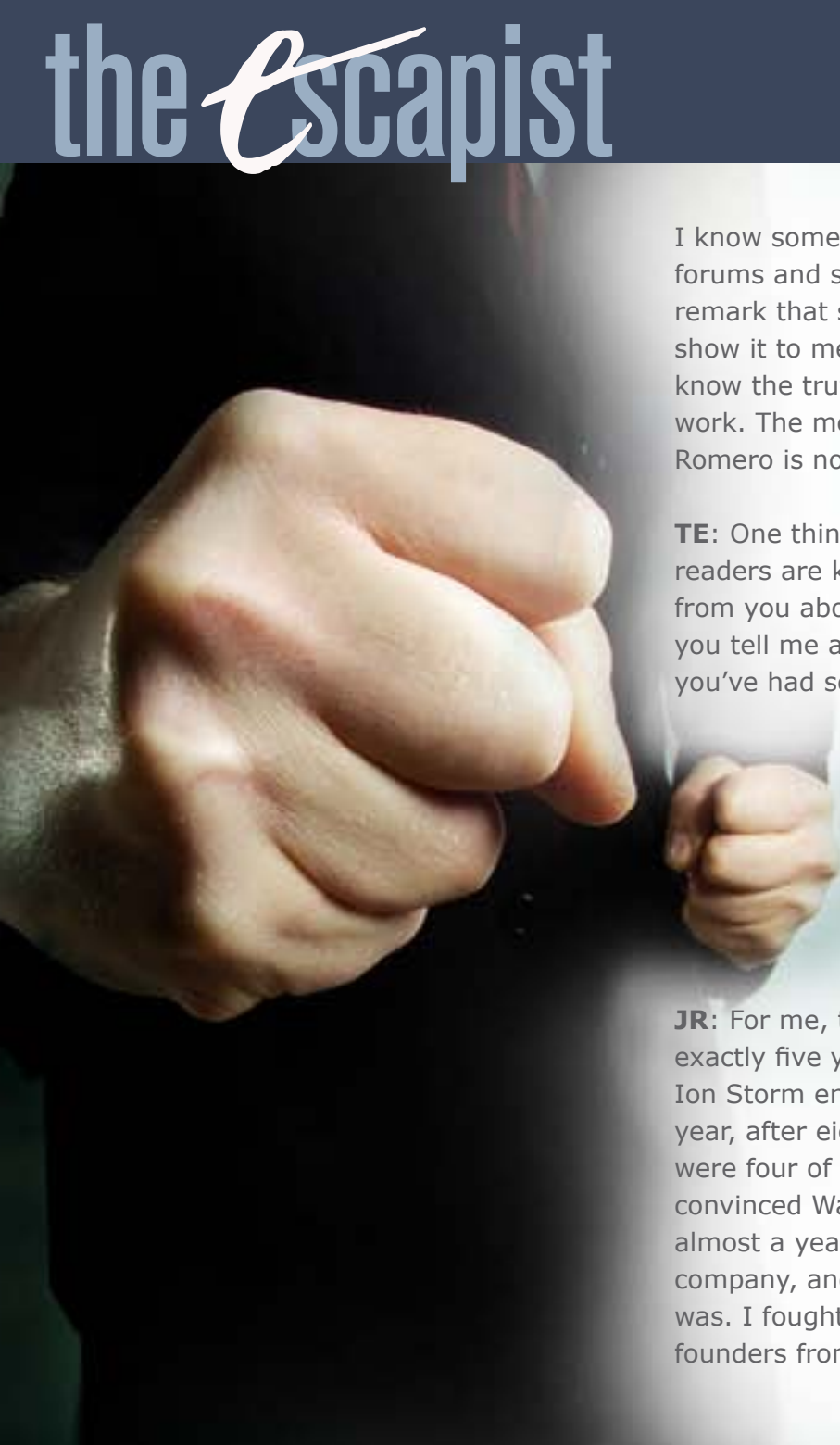
JR: I like being me, actually. I want to continue doing things I consider fun. As do we all. I still love developing games and as a daily job it just cannot be beat. No matter how much bitching you hear from overworked game employees, the work definitely beats just about any other job for the kind of work you do and the salary and benefits you can get. I've worked beyond insane hours and have loved every minute of it. You have to really love game development to go through that. Especially for 27 years.

We definitely saw ourselves as indies.

TE: Touching again on the subject of fame, for better or worse you became remarkably famous in a relatively short time, and consequently became a sort of lightning rod for criticism of the industry in general and the products of your company(s) specifically. How much of what is written about "John Romero" do you take in, and how much of it do you put away in a special place never to see or hear from again?

JR: After 10-plus years of reading about yourself, all the good and bad, it all just becomes irrelevant after awhile. I know what I'm capable of doing and the people I work with are united in our mission, and they treat me just like they treat each other. The whole fame thing doesn't come into play when we're in development, because we're all a team.

I know some of my guys read a lot of forums and sometimes they'll see some remark that someone clueless made and show it to me, chuckling because they know the truth of who I am and how I work. The media personification of John Romero is not who John Romero is.

TE: One thing that I and I believe our readers are keenly interested in hearing from you about is Ion Storm. What can you tell me about that time, now that you've had some distance from it?

JR: For me, the end of Ion Storm came exactly five years ago, and for the world Ion Storm ended in February [of] last year, after eight and a half years. There were four of us co-founders, and I convinced Warren Spector to join us almost a year after starting the company, and what a great decision that was. I fought hard to keep two of the co-founders from trying to shut down the

Austin studio every few months – that's just a taste of the pure insanity that prevailed in the Dallas office.

It was hard to concentrate on making a game when someone was always trying to disrupt everything every day. And it showed in our first two games. Luckily, *Anachronox*, Tom's game, had an extra year of development without the negative influences affecting his team, and it shows; his game is a work of art and passion by a young dev team trying to prove something. Of course, with the Austin office far away

> ## It was hard to concentrate on making a game when someone was always trying to disrupt everything every day.

and Warren at the helm, *Deus Ex* turned out to be a masterpiece.

All I wanted was a big, fun game company where everyone was united in the purpose to make great games. I never imagined that someone would ever want to screw that up, but they did and it happened. I've learned a lot from that experience.

TE: What were your aspirations for Monkeystone, as a company, and how well do you think you achieved them?

JR: My main aspiration for Monkeystone was to get back to a small game company and work directly with Tom again and my girlfriend Stevie. To get back into programming 24/7 and learn as much as I could. I wanted to explore the emerging mobile world and see what it was all about. We had a blast with Monkeystone, and so much happened during the short time we ran the company – an incredible amount happened. It deserves its own book.

TE: In 2003, you and Tom Hall joined Midway. I suppose the two questions that immediately come to mind are: Why would such an independent, creative guy join a company like Midway; and: Why did you leave?

JR: The reason I left Monkeystone was that Stevie Case and I broke up and a major part of creating Monkeystone was to have a company with her. The breakup was more like a supernova explosion that we tried to contain and keep away from the media (it worked).

Truly, all the turmoil of Ion Storm was dwarfed by this event; it was the worst experience of my life.

I finished off the *Red Faction* N-Gage project with the team and told Tom that I needed to get out of Dallas and do something else for a while. I was devastated. But Tom wanted to join me, so we put Lucas Davis in charge of the Monkeystone office while Tom and I looked around for other opportunities. The best [opportunity] we found was working at Midway in beautiful San Diego. In the meantime, we had Monkeystone working on an N-Gage version of *Chronicles of Riddick* (eventually canceled), and then we moved the company down to Austin to complete the multiplayer part of *Area 51*. I was working on *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows* and Tom was Creative Director in third-party over several games.

I joined Midway because of two reasons. Reason number one was that I wanted to see what working for a big company was like. So, I was only talking to big companies, and Midway seemed like the best place, because revitalizing *Gauntlet* felt like it could be really fun, and

because San Diego is awesome. My second reason for joining Midway was to do original console development as opposed to the majority of my career which had been focused primarily on home computers. It was something new for me, in a way.

Tom and I eventually hired our Monkeystone guys when we decided to shut down the company. Tom then left Midway to be Creative Director of two MMOGs at Kingsisle Entertainment in Austin, and I left to co-found my new game company in the Bay Area to do an innovative [MMOG] on the PC.

TE: What can you tell us about that?

JR: I can't say anything until the summer of 2007! What a difference it makes being quiet about my projects.

TE: To wrap up, a lot has been said about this, so I don't want to belabor it, but I do have to ask: If you were to believe in a Bizarro World (and who doesn't), what do you think a Bizarro World in which *Daikatana* had actually made gamers your bitches would look like?

I wanted to see what working for a big company was like.

JR: It would have been some kind of crazy world without game magazines and online media. Just kidding. It would probably have been a world where people all **love** to baby-sit their sidekicks and watch them die while doors close on them 1,000 times in 10 seconds. A world where people love to hear sidekicks talk to each other and the player, where air control and speed in deathmatch is something taken for granted and where

cooperative gameplay left out of a single-player game is unthinkable. COMMENTS

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor at The Escapist, who was formerly head writer and producer of TechTV's The Screen Savers and has been writing on the web since it was invented. He will soon be producing and hosting a bi-weekly podcast for The Escapist called Escape Radio, which will undoubtedly make you its bitch.

Raph Koster on fire

by Allen Varney

> I almost feel like I am dousing myself with gasoline and setting myself on fire, but here goes ...
>
> **–Raph Koster**

Raphael Koster is a prolific theorist in the young field of massively multiplayer online game design. For many years, he has developed his design philosophy on his blog, in lectures, at conferences and in his 2004 book, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*.

Unlike some high-profile thinkers, Raph Koster actually ships product. "I do all this writing to clarify things for myself," he says. "I put it out there afterwards, figuring maybe it'll help other folks, but the initial drive comes ... because I am banging my head against a design problem. So, the theory is a tool. You write it down so you don't forget it – it's like having a toolbox full of screwdrivers, wrenches and whatever."

Koster started designing for MUDs in 1992, while working on a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; he was "implementor" "Ptah" in *LegendMUD*. (Check out an in-game interview with him here.) Joining Origin in Austin, Texas, in 1995 as a designer, Koster worked as creative lead on *Ultima Online* and, after launch, was lead designer on the Live Team until 1999. He joined the Austin office of Sony Online Entertainment, where he was creative director for *Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided*. Shortly after *SWG*'s launch, Koster moved to San Diego to become SOE's Chief Creative Director.

Though Koster left Sony in March 2006, his contract expired in June. In this interview, conducted by e-mail soon afterward, he talks about past and current projects, and about what went right – and wrong – in *UO* and *SWG*.

Writings
In *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (you can find some excerpts here), Koster defines "fun" as a function of learning and mastery. As we explore a new game, we learn to recognize its challenges and exploit the tools offered to overcome them – that is, to gain mastery over the game environment. "Fun" (which Koster distinguishes from aesthetic appreciation, visceral responses, delight and other forms of enjoyment) is "the act of mastering a problem mentally" – the endorphin reward feedback the brain gives us when we are absorbing patterns for learning purposes.

"Overall, I was thrilled at the reception the book got. I'm really honored and pleased it seems to have become a useful part of the overall landscape of thinking about games. It was interesting seeing the criticism, too. Many academics wanted much more detail in the book, for example. It's a mode of writing I am not all that interested in anymore, not since graduate school, so I felt few qualms about shrugging and moving on. Lots of folks said the ideas in the book were too obvious – and certainly lots of folks, like Chris Crawford, had said large pieces of the book before.

"By and large, the general ideas have held up for me. I think the most interesting comments on the book's ideas have come from the folks who say it did a good job of pinning down one sort of fun – a few people have taken to calling it *kfun*. I think there's something there. As [player experience psychologist] Nicole Lazzaro keeps doing research into emotion and games, my theorizing may get replaced by concrete data soon, which would be incredibly helpful to game designers."

Koster's current book project is *A Grammar of Gameplay,* an ambitious attempt to symbolically describe the component "atoms" of games. He presented an early example at the Game Developers Conference in San Jose, CA, March 2005. The grammar would be a tool to reverse-engineer and notate individual game ingredients, such as topology ("the operational space for a given asset"), core mechanics ("ludemes"), depth of recursion, cost of failure and many other abstractions. Using the grammar, a designer could quantifiably assess a game's difficulty, range of challenges and required feedback mechanisms.

Raph's book [*A Theory of Fun*] is one of the most important written for our industry, not to mention interesting to read. You cannot possibly read it and not feel at least twice like your brain has been hit by lightning.

–Jessica Mulligan

Ultima Online
The first large-scale success among graphic MMOGs, *Ultima Online* peaked at 250,000 subscribers in July 2003 before gradually declining to its current 135,000 (of whom half are in Japan).
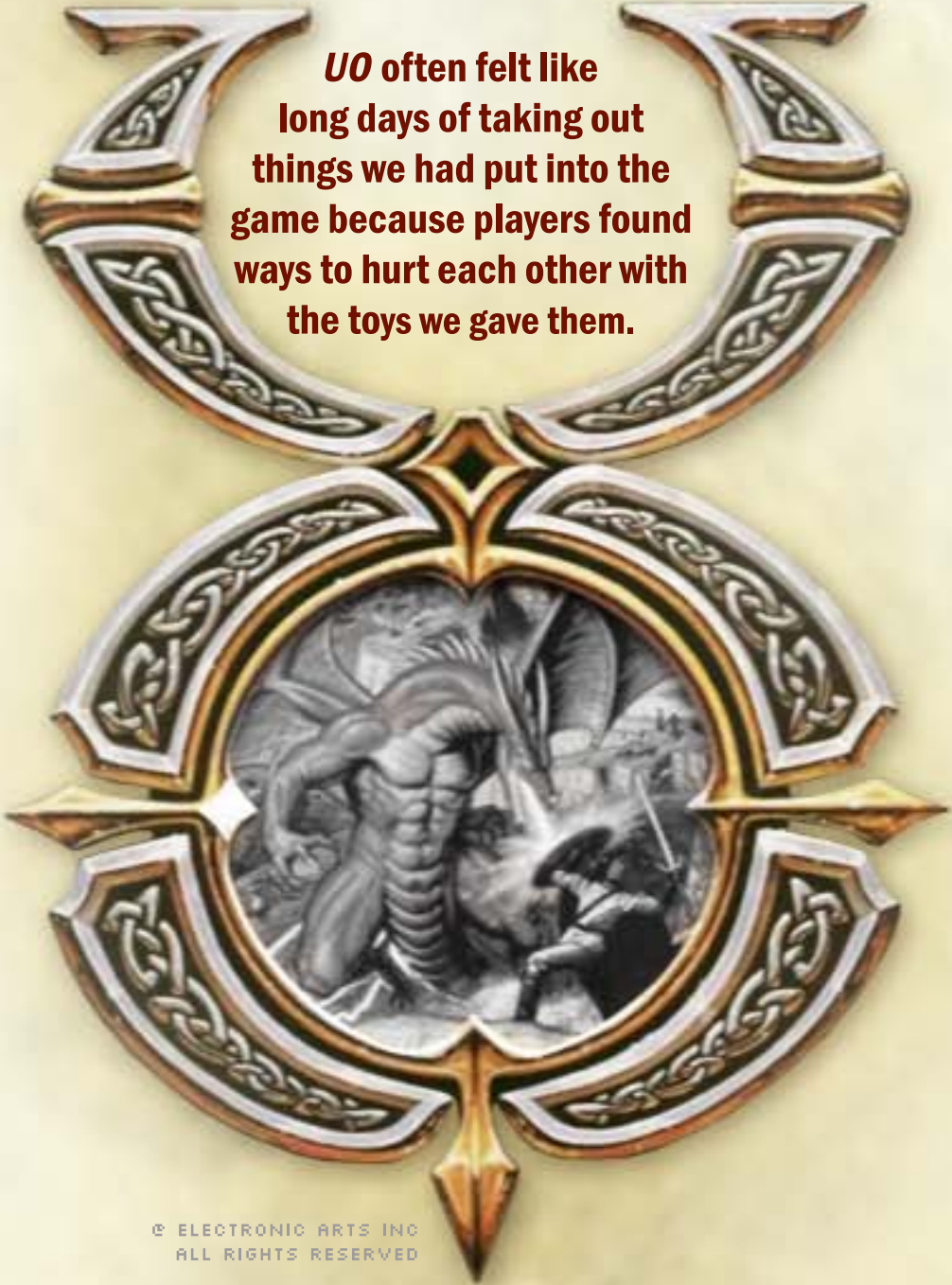
"I really like my [MMOGs] to embody user creativity. I also dislike cliques, so I have tried to design so people who wouldn't normally hang out together come to realize each other's importance in the world, the value of their roles in the society, that sort of thing. So I try to have interdependence as a key feature – people relying on each other, not in the moment-to-moment sense, but in the sense that our modern lives would fall apart if there weren't people in a zillion jobs doing things we never think twice about, from stocking grocery shelves to manufacturing pens. The heart of *UO* was in many ways the original ecology system, which I wrote about at some length on my blog. It didn't pan out, but even what we managed to get in there did in fact open up a lot of doors. I think we hit a lot of [our design goals], and were close to having much of it working, but the PK [player killing] problem basically undermined everything."

UO inadvertently popularized several now-familiar online dysfunctions – especially player-versus-player (PvP) griefing. Koster and the Live Team wrestled with *UO*'s escalating problem of high-level player characters killing and looting lower-level characters. Koster argued against a "PK switch," whereby players could select whether to participate in, and be vulnerable to, PvP combat. After Koster left Origin, *UO* instituted an area-based PK switch, segregating its shards (servers) into two facets (worlds): "Felucca" (unrestrained PvP) and "Trammel" (PvP only by mutual consent). Most players migrated to Trammel.

"A big part of why I fought the PK switch was because it meant we were trading away player self-determination for security – echoes of today's political situation, in some ways! *UO* often felt like long days of taking out things we had put into the game because players found ways to hurt each other with the toys we gave them. But the goal was still self-determination and freedom. The *Ultima* series was about learning to live with the Virtues, and I wanted the MMOG to be about the same thing.

UO often felt like long days of taking out things we had put into the game because players found ways to hurt each other with the toys we gave them.

"We worked hard to reduce PKing without instituting the switch, and based on what I saw, we did in fact make steady progress. But after I left the team, the introduction of the Trammel and Felucca facets [settled the issue] in a very different way than I would have chosen. I would have kept to the general path we were on. The various systems like stat loss and ping-pong murder counts were having a gradual effect on PK attacks.

"If we had gotten to the natural next step, which was player cities with control over PvP within their territory, I think the real nature of PvP in the game could have emerged.

"On the other hand, in terms of what I expected players to do with it, I think [*UO*] exceeded every wildest expectation. The players don't care about what you wanted there, about what the dreams were – they only care about what they have in front of them, and then they proceed to do things you never imagined. And in *UO*'s case, a lot of what they managed to come up with was truly amazing and not at all something I had ever pictured.

"I literally have not logged in for several years now. It's changed beyond recognition for me, in some ways. I am still in touch with some of the players, though."

Star Wars Galaxies: What Went Wrong?

After almost three and a half years of development, Sony Online Entertainment launched *Star Wars Galaxies* in June 2003 to mixed or negative response. *SWG* peaked in 2004 below 300,000 subscribers. SOE revamped the game, first in April 2005 and more drastically – some say disastrously – in November, with the New Game Enhancements (NGE). Bruce Woodcock estimates *SWG*'s current player base at between 110,000 and 175,000.

"When I started on *SWG*, one of the first things I did was write down the things I thought the game had to mean: a great civil war, political battles (under the influence of the new trilogy here), the Light and Dark sides of the Force, swashbuckling derring-do, a rich and diverse world and, lastly, community – because this last one is common to all MMOGs and also because *Star Wars* fans are themselves a strong community. My goal was to marry the open-endedness of

Ultima Online with all the content and depth of *EverQuest*. My feeling at the time was, 'This is the single best opportunity ever for MMOGs to swing for the fences, damn the cost – if not now, when?'

"Fundamentally, *SWG* was launched too early from a game design point of view. It may not have been from a financial point of view – there's considerations like how much had been spent, how soon it would earn back the investment, that sort of thing – but most systems in there were first-pass at best. The place where that was most obvious was in the relative lack of content at launch. The tools simply came on too late to make the volume of content needed, and even though a heroic final push tried to populate the game with distinctive content, it just wasn't anywhere near enough.

"A large chunk of the blame lies with me, for being over-ambitious with the design. I don't think there were all that many fundamental problems with the overall design itself – some, sure, but nothing like the closed-economy debacle in *UO*, for example. [The systems] were first-pass, but mostly conceptually solid. (I am sure current and ex-*SWG* players will want to argue this point in detail, but

hey, this is an interview, and there's no room to give my detailed postmortem on every system! Yes, I still think something like HAM [the threefold Health-Agility-Mental damage system] could work, but yeah, it was probably too complicated.)

"I was not involved directly with *SWG* from about four months after launch. People seem to think that as [Chief Creative Officer] I was somehow in control of all the design being done at SOE. That's not really the case at all; I had some influence, but I spent most of my time doing pitches, R&D, publicity stuff and that sort of thing. It's been well over two years since I did anything significant on the title. The last things

really finished under my tenure were player cities, mounts and the Warren – and by cities, actually, I was barely involved. I had philosophical disagreements with a lot of the direction taken after that.

"I didn't like a lot of the subsequent choices – thinking here of Holocron drops, [Temporary Enemy Flag] changes, group sizes, buff expansions, global market, entertainer changes, creature handler removal, levels, a lot of the combat upgrade ... I could give you my

A while back, you could have pulled together the original core [*Star Wars Galaxies*] fanbase by just delivering piles of content, cutting back the incredibly high buffs, making sure every profession worked, and tuning up combat to be tighter and faster paced ... but changes since those days have closed that path. At this point, it's a different game, with different sorts of expectations.
–Raph Koster
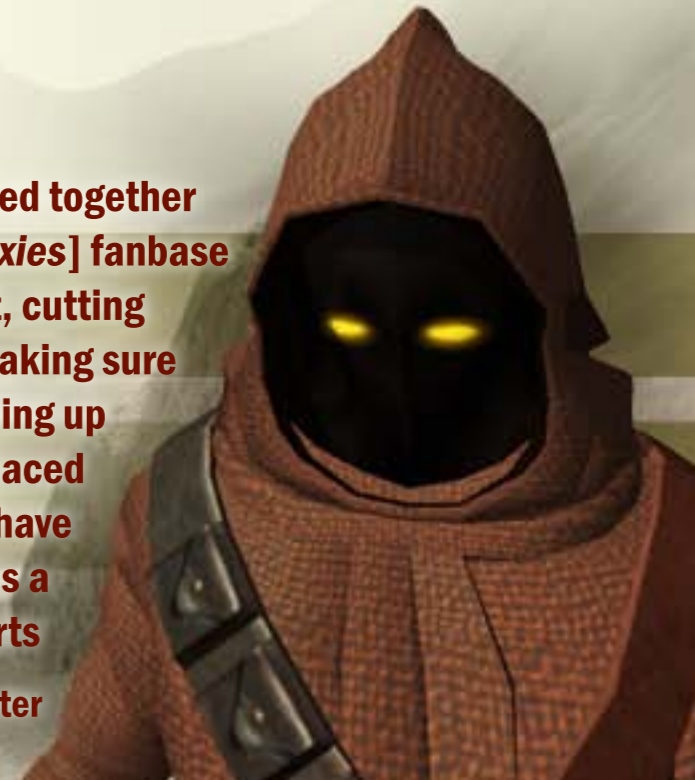
opinions there, but there's no point – even those changes have been changed. Many of them were essentially trying to dig out of the hole that launching prematurely had caused. I can't really blame anyone for them, whether I agreed with the decisions or not. The whole time, the team worked their ass off and tried their best.

"I'll make an exception for the NGE. I don't think you can or should change a game **that** radically out from under a user base. You dance with the ones that brung ya, whether they are the market of your dreams or not. They have invested their passion and built expectations about where they want the game to go. Changing things out from under them isn't fair in my mind, especially given how they have been loyal to you in times of trouble. It's like dumping the girlfriend who has always been patient and loving to chase after the supermodel who probably won't love you back."

Next
"I wanted to do things that weren't really possible at SOE, for a variety of reasons. Oh, we'd had our disagreements, too – the NGE changes in *SWG*, for example,

were a big one. But it boiled down to the fact that I had a few projects and directions I really wanted to pursue, and SOE wasn't at a place to pursue them. They couldn't fund the projects I wanted to do, because of other projects already going. They generously let me start working on going indie before the contract term was up, even, which they didn't have to do – it was a very amicable departure.

"I really wanted to get back to working hands-on on a game, and I also have firm ideas about the next directions online games are going to take. The cost of making things like *World of Warcraft* is pretty much completely unsustainable for most companies, and it's mostly in making endless numbers of static quests and awesome artwork. The next generation of MMOGs, outside of a few blockbusters, will have to be about something different: lower cost development, smaller mountains of static content, more embracing of techniques that reduce those costs.

"I don't doubt the *DikuMUD*-based game we're all still playing will have legs as long as there's people who still haven't tried it out, but it won't keep the current

players happy forever. That means new sorts of virtual worlds have to come into being, or else all those folks will just flow right back out of the market. It's way, way past due that we get out of the tank-healer-nuker game I got bored of back in 1993.

"I am working on a startup company, but we're running quiet for a while. I've got that book to write. I also have two or three game ideas banging around that I really shouldn't work on, since I need to focus on the startup!

"The public doesn't get to see it, but I usually design a dozen games a year, of

different sizes. Sometimes they are trivial little card games you can play in five minutes, and sometimes they are complicated German-style board games that take an hour or more to play. Sometimes they are puzzle games on the PC, and sometimes they are online worlds. I just enjoy making games, so I imagine I'll keep doing it." 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.

COLD EQUATIONS:
The Death of a Game Company
by Bruce Nielson

(*Author's note: The story you're about to read is real; only the names have been changed.*)

I stared the Cold Equations in the eye and survived, though I was not unscarred. Yet the true hero in this story was a man named Jim.

When I started working for Erudite Software Consulting in 1994, I was excited about finally getting out of school and into the software industry. Though primarily a software consulting company, Erudite also sported a games division, which was working on a game based on the board game *The Great Battles of Alexander*.

Three years passed before *Alexander* finally saw the light of day. It was a complex, historically accurate, turn-based strategy game made during the time of the RTS. Despite this, the only truly negative review I read about it was in *USA Today*, which said that its – obviously casual – players couldn't figure out the game. But magazine critics, who were hardcore gamers, raved about *Alexander*! At last **their** favorite niche was being filled.

Then, one of Erudite's owners, Jim, approached me about managing the game division on their follow-up titles. I was nervous about this, because the game division wasn't popular with the other company owners. But seeing an opportunity to help turn the division around, I eventually decided to help out part time. Besides, how hard could game development be?

How hard indeed!

Although managing artists was a new experience, it turned out to be pretty much like managing programmers. But there was one huge difference between the two groups: The game programmers made between $30,000 and $50,000 per year, whereas the artists were lucky to break $19,000. So, why would highly skilled, highly trained, college-educated artists make less than equally skilled and trained programmers? When I asked Jim, he responded, "It's the price the market will bear." This was my first brush with the Cold Equations of economics.

Though not well paid, the artists were still passionate. Making money as an

artist is, for them, like jocks making money playing sports. Unfortunately, artists "over supply" the market compared to its demand, which means lower salaries.

Soon, I realized the game programmers were underpaid, as well. By far the most technically adept programmers in the company, these game programmers made 30 to 50 percent less than equivalently skilled software consultants – **not counting overtime**! I supposed this was the price you paid to make games for a living. Like Jim, the programmers and artists had real passion for what they did. Making money at making games allowed them to do what they enjoyed and still pay the bills.

The effects of supply and demand on game division salaries reminded me of Tom Godwin's classic story, "Cold Equations." A spaceship captain was to deliver time-sensitive vaccines to the dying inhabitants of a far-off planet. According to physics laws, the ship's mass and fuel must be carefully calculated to insure an exact arrival time. But after discovering a stowaway, and realizing her added mass will endanger the mission, he sacrifices her life to save millions of others. Little did I know that supply and demand would soon create my own "Cold Equation." I found myself confronting immutable economic laws that coldly took their victims, regardless of the best human intentions.

The first game I worked on, *The Great Battles of Hannibal,* was only a six-month project. It was little more than a re-skin of *Alexander* with a few new rules, so I was confident of its schedule. We produced it almost exactly to schedule and made a 20 percent profit. Though relieved, one thing still bothered me: If I had deployed these same resources on a consulting project, Erudite could have easily brought in a 50 percent gross profit. In fact, if our software consulting arm only made 20 percent profit, we'd go out of business.

Though we talked big about making additional royalties if the game sold better, this proved a pipe dream. *Alexander* had sold to all of the approximately 30,000 people in the world that liked that sort of game. And they didn't just like it, they **loved** it. They loved it so much that almost all of them returned to buy *Hannibal*. Besides, as is typical in the developer/publisher

I found myself confronting immutable economic laws that coldly took their victims, regardless of the best human intentions.

world, we only made a few dollars on each game sold. We had found a niche and captured it. It wasn't possible to sell more units.

Concerned about the game's profit margin, I asked Jim what the original game had cost compared to its advance against royalties. Jim had to pick me up off the floor. It had cost nearly 10 times the amount of the royalty advance! I ran the numbers, taking into consideration the capitalization of the game engine, and found we'd have to publish 20

games as profitable as *Hannibal* before we'd break even! What had I gotten myself into?

Undaunted, the passionate people of our little game division moved on to *The Great Battles of Caesar*. Although we made our schedule and were profitable again, I still worried about how easy it would be to fail. Even a one-month slip would wipe out our profit margin. Our software consulting arm would walk away from such business, because, in software, a single unforeseeable problem can easily lead to such a delay. I was beginning to understand why the other company owners disliked the game division so much.

Jim's passion was the sole force allowing us to exist. A man with a mission, Jim was fulfilling a dream to bring these board games to videogame fans worldwide. So I knew we were in trouble when Jim announced he was leaving. He left saying, "I'm coming back for the game division. I'm going to convince my new company to buy it. Keep it in good shape." I saluted smartly and reassured the team that Jim would return for them.

We started work on what would be our final game using the *Alexander* engine. This Civil War game, *North vs. South*, was a departure from the previous games. Many on the team started to worry. They had grown tired of being the "ugly duckling" at a successful company. Would it be any different at Jim's new company? Some approached Jim with their concerns. He reassuringly said he'd find other types of games for them – perhaps web-based Java applets – if the new company wasn't interested in their current work. This revelation didn't sit well with many team members, who saw Java applets as featherweight programming.

Jim's passion was the sole force allowing us to exist.

Fearing the worst, some programmers departed for greener pastures. One of them was going through a divorce partly caused by the job pressure, and he just couldn't take anymore.   One of Erudite's

game-division-hating owners offered him $80,000 to work as a software trainer. It was three times what he used to make. Passion? Ha! What had it gotten him? He quickly left and others soon followed.

Then, my worst fears were realized. Near the end of the *NvS* schedule, we ran into a problem: The new unit types (like cannons) were too big for the engine to properly display inside a single hex. In some circumstances, this caused the large units to turn invisible. We did not have time in the schedule to resolve this unforeseeable glitch. Working through the issue required all of our rapidly shrinking resources. Pouring salt on the wound, our financially struggling publisher canceled our follow-up project. Our future vanished before our eyes. By the time we finished *NvS*, there was exactly one programmer left, and all the artists had been laid off.

Joe, the remaining programmer, had a lot of talent and was passionate about games, but even he needed to feed his

family. I helped him find a job in the game industry with a friend of mine. He alone stayed in the game industry. With the publisher's help, we figured out a way he could finish off *NvS*. We completed the game two months late and lost money in the process. Not long after *NvS*, they went out of business.
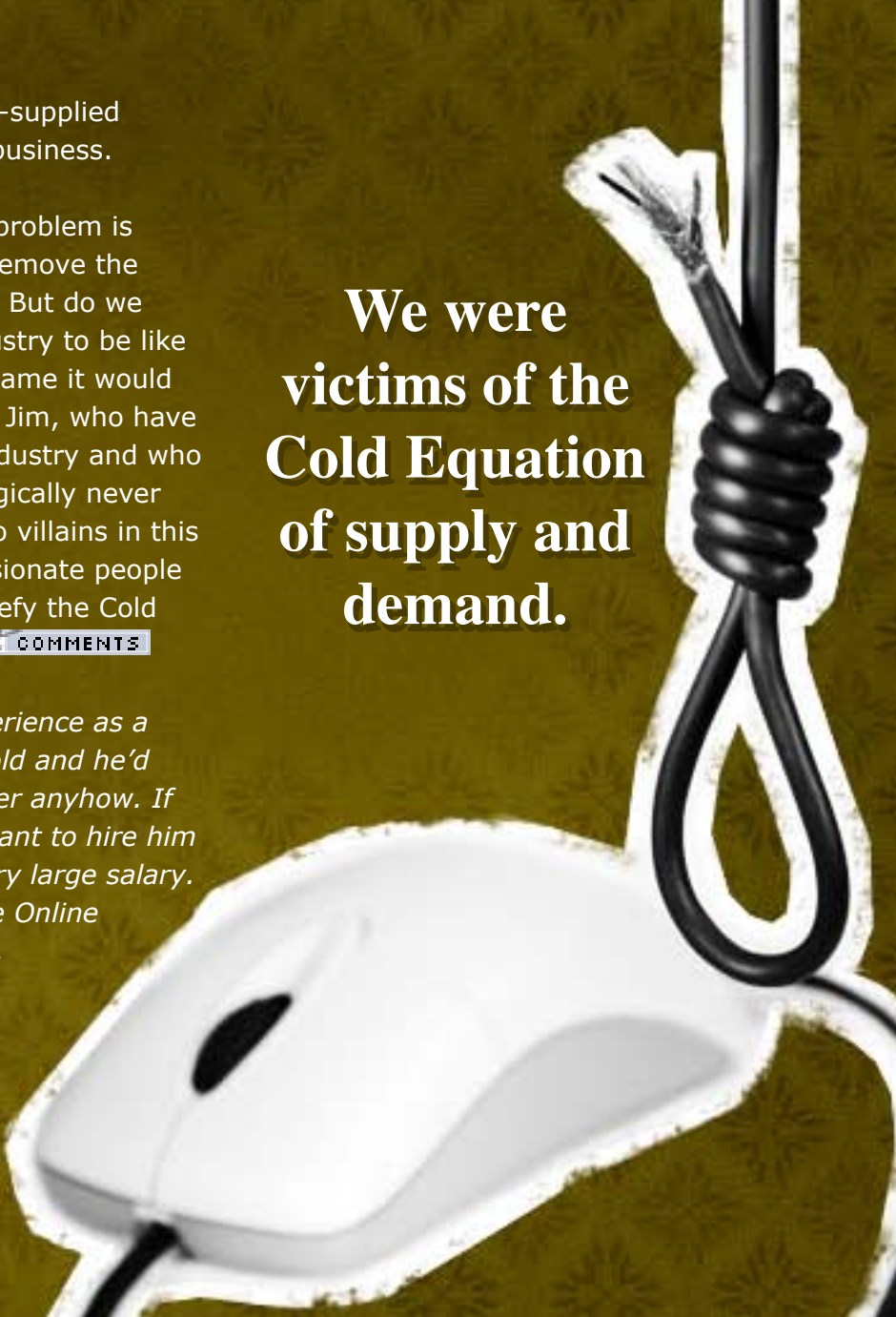
The sad truth is that we never had a shot at success. We were driven by Jim's passion to make computer games. From an economic standpoint, it is simply not worth making a game for the 30,000 "historically accurate turned-based" enthusiasts in the world. We were victims of the Cold Equation of supply and demand.

My perspective on computer games has changed forever. Soulless companies that don't take chances, show little originality, work their people to the point of lawsuits and let the accountants run the company may not be popular with hardcore gamers, but they do understand what it really takes to wrestle with the

cold equations of our over-supplied industry and **still** stay in business.

The only real cure to this problem is worse than the disease: Remove the passion from the industry. But do we really want the entire industry to be like Electronic Arts? What a shame it would be to not have people like Jim, who have a driving passion in the industry and who take chances that were logically never worth taking. There are no villains in this story. Just a group of passionate people that believed they could defy the Cold Equations of economics. COMMENTS

Bruce Nielson's short experience as a game producer left him cold and he'd rather be a game consumer anyhow. If you're stupid enough to want to hire him anyhow, please offer a very large salary. He can be reached via The Online Roleplayer, which he runs.

We were victims of the Cold Equation of supply and demand.

20 Million Dollar Failure

by Shannon Drake

The Sims Online should have been a sure thing. The premise reads like a gaming executive's dream sheet. A popular, long-lived franchise loved by casual and hardcore gamers alike; a game that sells at Wal-Mart as well as it does at EB Games and developed by Will Wright, one of the most famous names in game design. The launch window picked was close to perfect: December 17, 2002, just in time for Christmas, virtually assuring millions of sales. In-house predictions called for an ongoing active subscriber base of up to 1 million people, but *The Sims Online* launched out of the gate and promptly fell flat. Six months after launch, *Wired* reported 125,000 retail copies sold and 97,000 active subscribers—not bad, but not enough to justify the game's $20 million budget. By April, 2004, their subscription rate peaked at around 55,000, and has now stagnated near 35,000.

The "sure thing" is now an "also-ran," an embarrassment to all concerned and an eyesore on the balance sheet of the world's largest game company.

"The game we shipped didn't actually have the complete feature set that Will and I envisioned," says Gordon Walton, Executive Producer of *The Sims Online*, who called the task of transplanting the wonder of *The Sims* to an online environment one of the "real challenges. We just couldn't get everything built in the time available, even with great resource support from EA."

"Not enough time" is a common refrain among developers of failed games, but gamers and reviews alike have also laid blame for *TSO*'s stunning failure at the feet of its a boring, repetitive skill system. One that even the hardest-core MMOG players considered tedious. There were also significant problems with the target *Sims* audience.

"Will was really interested in the social and gaming possibilities bringing the *Sims* audience together would offer," according to Walton. Fans of *The Sims*, however, didn't seem to agree. The series' core audience, in hindsight, had little interest in playing an online game at all, but if they were to play an online *Sims* game, they'd much rather play one that was more like the rest of the series.

Instead, players logging into *The Sims Online* found themselves in a strangely familiar, yet incredibly unsettling place.

It was like *The Sims*, yes, but here they were expected to create and micromanage one Sim, rather than a family of them. Moreover, they were expected to raise her up in the classic MMOG model: Doing repetitive things for a meager amount of money to raise numbers that make doing the repetitive thing slightly easier which would then enable them to possibly get more money. In *TSO*, however, once the player clicked on an object, all there was left to do was watch and chat.

"Not having a fully functioning economy and more fun activities to entertain players made the game less appealing than we wanted," according to Walton. Those brave few who tried *TSO* would seem to agree.

The flashy bits, all the furniture and gadgets that made *The Sims* what it was, were very, very expensive in *The Sims Online*. It was possible to build a rudimentary house with a few moneymaking objects with the initial grubstake, but the rewards were meager. Rewards scaled up proportional to the number of people playing, which meant to accomplish anything, it was necessary to attract other players who were

disinclined to show up to some new Sim's house when they could just as easily work for more popular players who would then collect the rewards for all the stuff going on in their house. It was a backward system which punished latecomers severely.

Yet, as with any desperate economy, many *TSO* players (the majority of which were female) soon discovered that the world's oldest profession still had a place in the world's newest boomtown. Whorehouses soon sprang up, as did freelance child prostitutes and the inevitable nude patch.

"The most exciting major feature that the team wanted was player-generated custom content," says Walton. "It was also the most involved to implement and administer." Meaning EA had launched the game with no clear guidelines or tools for players wanting to creatively express themselves. Players filled the void themselves by injecting their own ideas of what might make a good game great. The result was, of course, an avalanche of explicit content and activity, and since the T-rated title had no outlet for adult content, it went everywhere.

Hardcore online gamers, raised with one eye on the game and the other on an image of goatse have come to accept the "porn-ification" of an online community as a matter of course; the inevitable entropy of an anonymous virtual hangout. However, the majority of *Sims* players, new to online gaming, were unaware of the den of iniquity that awaited them. The initial reaction many had to the game wasn't that it was a massively multiplayer virtual dollhouse. It was "My god, it's full of whores."

Many *TSO* players soon discovered that the world's oldest profession still had a place in the world's newest boomtown.

"We really wanted to make something the majority of the *Sims* audience would love to play online," says Gordon Walton, who now heads BioWare's Austin studio, and is working on an MMOG he hopes to announce at next year's E3. What he and his team at EA created was the online world's first great social experiment. The underground has largely moved on, as it's far more exciting to play one of the many other

MMOG offerings, and the launch of *Second Life* gave the adult elements a playspace all their own. What remains is the 'til-the-lights-go-out crowd and the faint, but distinct, scent of disappointment at a 20 million dollar failure. **COMMENTS**

Shannon Drake likes commas and standing out in the rain.

The Short, Happy Life of Infocom

by Laura Crigger
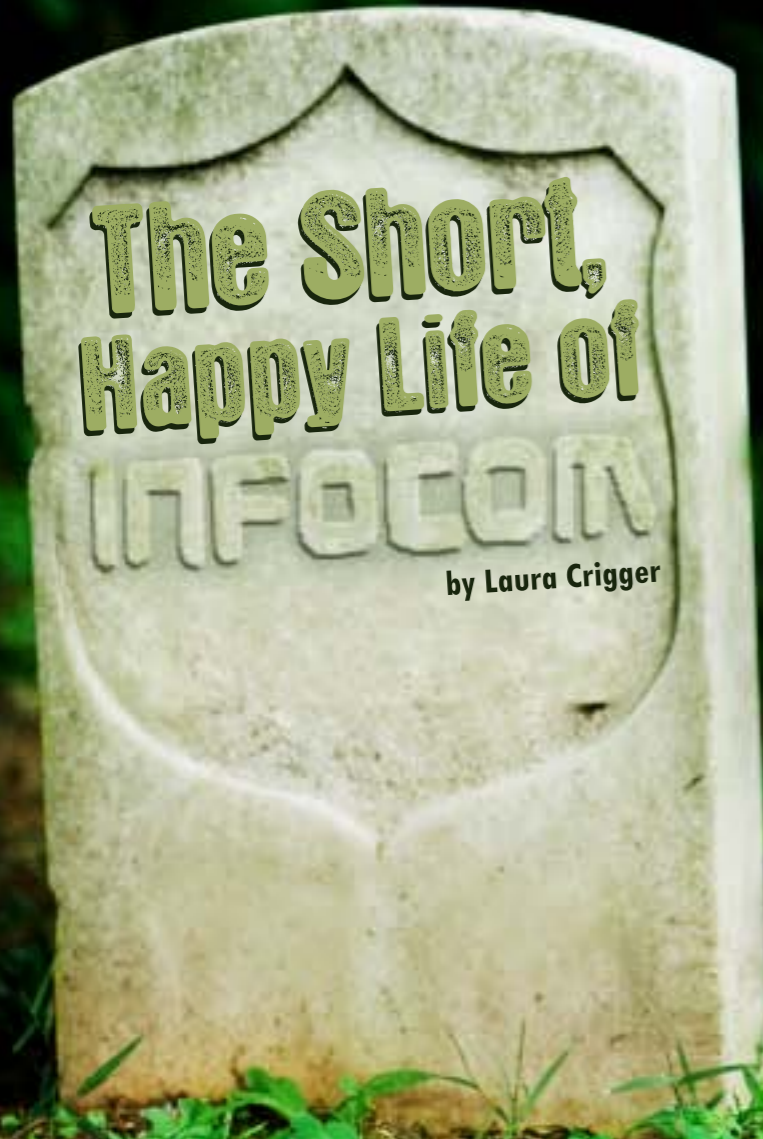
Infocom, king of the text adventure and the first behemoth of American computer game development, began not with a bang, but with an internet meme.

Long before "All Your Base" and the "O R'LY? owl," there was *Adventure*. Released in 1975 onto the ARPANet (the internet's predecessor), Will Crowther's *Adventure* was essentially a simulation of a caving expedition he'd done in Kentucky. But his co-workers loved it, and they passed it along to their friends. As the game traveled across networks, it was revised and re-written, particularly when Stanford researcher Don Woods beefed up the storyline and added some Tolkien-esque flair. By the time it migrated onto MIT's mainframe in 1976, the game had blossomed into somewhat of a pre-internet net phenomenon.

As a game, however, *Adventure* was far from perfect. Aside from programming artifacts and design flaws, *Adventure*'s biggest drawback was its parser (the program that translated a player's input into directions the game could understand). The parser could only handle two-word commands, like "go north" or "take sword," frustrating players who wanted more natural, complex commands.

So, in 1977, four MIT students - Marc Blank, Tim Anderson, Dave Lebling and Bruce Daniels - decided to make their own game in *Adventure*'s image. Their version retained *Adventure*'s basic interface but featured an improved parser, which now could understand complete sentences. The new game, which they named *Zork*, appeared on the school's mainframe in 1979, where anyone who had access could play. Like *Adventure* before it, *Zork* steadily earned a worldwide cult following.

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Shortly after *Zork*'s publication, a few MIT computer science students - including *Zork*'s writers - decided that they wanted to work together outside a stuffy university setting. That summer, they started their own software company and called it Infocom.

In retrospect, the idea was painfully naïve. Although Infocom's founders vaguely knew they wanted to create business software, they had no model,

no business plan, not even a product. But as luck would have it, the home PC market had just entered its first boom. Blank, along with his friend, Joel Berez, suggested bringing *Zork* to this new home audience; the game's profits could help finance Infocom until its business division took off.

But *Zork* was monstrous; the game's memory requirements alone made most contemporary PCs weep in horror. To make *Zork* run on a weaker system would require substantial re-engineering.

Blank and Berez started their ambitious task by first constructing the "Z-machine," a virtual machine that included only the operations *Zork* specifically required. The Z-machine would also leave most of the game code on disk, loading sections into the system's memory only when necessary. Next, they built a new compiler, the Z-machine Interpretive Program (ZIP), which ported the game to a given operating system. To run *Zork*, all a computer needed was its platform-specific ZIP. With the variety of computer models available at the time, this portability would become the crux of Infocom's success.

But even after re-tooling, *Zork* was still too big. So, the game was divided into three parts, and the first segment was released in 1980 as *Zork I*.

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Although *Zork I* would eventually sell more than a million copies over several platforms, initial sales were slow. This was partly because *Zork*'s publisher, Personal Software, Inc., incorrectly marketed the game as a hack-and-slash: The cover art featured a mustachioed barbarian with a gleaming sword, vanquishing a cowering orc. But when Personal Software dropped Infocom in 1981, Infocom brought its publishing in-house and started over. They discarded all of *Zork*'s original packaging and made their own much-improved game materials.

In-house publishing was a brilliant move for Infocom, since it allowed them more creative freedom. This proved especially true in 1982, when Marc Blank, working on his detective mystery, *Deadline*,, realized he couldn't fit everything he wanted into the actual game. So, he designed extra items to include in the packaging, like photos, lab results and pills. Reviewers and players alike loved

it, and thus began Infocom's famous tradition of "feelies."

As *Zork I* steadily gained in popularity, Infocom released the rest of the *Zork* trilogy, as well as some standalone titles: *Deadline*, *Starcross*, *Planetfall* and others. These games were consistent critical and commercial hits, and soon, Infocom had earned a reputation for enjoyable, well-written games. This goodwill continued for years, and some of their later titles - like *Trinity*, *A Mind*

Forever Voyaging and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* - would be remembered among the greatest games ever made.

Much of Infocom's success rested with its employees: Most were young, well-educated and without families. Lacking other commitments to hold them back, the programmers (known as "Implementers," or Imps for short) could turn games around quickly - within nine months, on average - and for less than $500,000.

Although Infocom's founders vaguely knew they wanted to create business software, they had no business plan, not even a product.

Moreover, most Imps enjoyed developing games for Infocom because it was a genuinely fun place to work. There were parties, costume contests and weekly Imps' Lunches, where employees got together and discussed ideas freely. In the Imps' Lounge, aborted board games and half-finished diversions covered the tables. Sometimes, Imps would stage hermit crab races on a makeshift tabletop racetrack. The quirky culture and laid-back creativity made Infocom unlike anything the gaming industry had ever seen.

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Emboldened by their gaming success, Infocom executives felt confident enough to return to their original plan: Developing business software. In 1982, the company created a Business Products division and started work on a relational database called Cornerstone.

At the time, Cornerstone seemed like a bright idea. Business software promised higher profit margins: Whereas the typical game retailed for $50, database software sold for 10 times that. Also,

many employees believed the company should diversify in order to survive; fickle gamers could quit their Infocom addiction at any time, but business clients tended to invest heavily and stick with their software.

Yet, from the start, Cornerstone suffered money troubles. Finding investors proved difficult, since people were understandably skeptical of a gaming company interested in making "serious" software. Moreover, Business Products hurled cash at new offices and resources, money that Infocom hadn't yet made.

This might have resolved itself, had Cornerstone sold well. But when the software was released in 1985, it was a commercial flop. In its first year, Cornerstone only sold 10,000 copies, less than 40% of its projected sales.

Cornerstone's problem was not poor design but obsolescence. It operated on the same virtual machine technology that had made *Zork* and other games so portable, but by 1985, the IBM-PC had become the dominant computer

platform. Portability was no longer an issue. In fact, Cornerstone's virtual technology slowed the IBM to a crawl.

Unfortunately, Cornerstone's failure coincided with a lull in the gaming industry. For the first time ever, Infocom's game profits stagnated, and *Zork I* slipped from the number one slot - where it had been for three years - to number 10.

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Infocom was in dire financial straits. Even three rounds of layoffs and across-the-board salary cuts couldn't save the company. By the end of 1985, it was clear Infocom would need outside assistance.

In 1986, Jim Levy, CEO of Activision (and huge Infocom fan), offered to buy the struggling company. Infocom accepted, and that February, Activision purchased the company for $7.5 million.

In general, most Infocom employees looked favorably upon the union, realizing it was the only way to keep their beloved company afloat. It didn't hurt that Activision's corporate culture was similar to Infocom's, or that Levy promised to stay out of their affairs.

But then, six months later, Activision also ran into financial trouble. Levy was replaced by Bruce Davis, the only board member who'd been against the Infocom merger.

Davis was far more hands-on than his predecessor, and many of his ill-conceived decisions crippled Infocom. Not only did he require the company to use Activision's packaging plant instead of their own, doubling their marketing costs, he also restructured Infocom's selling practices. Previously, older Infocom games sold like books, side-by-side with newer ones. Davis halted that, retiring the older ones for good. To fill the now-empty shelves, he ordered Infocom to produce eight games a year, instead of the four or five as before.

To make matters worse, text adventures were no longer selling as well as they used to, especially since graphical adventures had finally become competitive on the market. But Infocom had little time or money to experiment with graphics, and the few such titles they released sold poorly.

By 1989, Activision had had enough. That May, the company laid off most of the remaining Infocom staff and integrated Infocom's sales, marketing and customer support teams into its own. Infocom was officially dead. While Activision continued to release greatest hit compilation of Infocom games (like *The Lost Treasures of Infocom*), text adventures themselves faded away.

That is, until they found a home on the internet. Returning to the primordial soup from which they spawned, text adventures have inspired a quiet but substantial net following. Today, you can find most of Infocom's games online, and *Zork* is only a short Google away.

COMMENTS

Lara Crigger is a freelance science and tech writer whose work on videogames has appeared in Computer Games Magazine andGamers with Jobs. Her favorite Infocom game is Trinity, but she still has a soft spot for Leather Goddesses Of Phobos.

Returning to the primordial soup from which they spawned, text adventures have inspired a quiet but substantial net following.

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