the Escapist

EDITOR'S NOTE
by Julianne Greer

I remember the days we were brainstorming ideas for the current editorial calendar. We were going through our Seekrit Process of Editorial Calendar Making, with the obligatory calls for scotch and cigars, as well as a whiteboard in my office covered with scrawled … words, if you can call them that, which likely made sense only to those in the room.

As we went back through them to narrow down the topics into something resembling an order with a purpose, we came across Ubisoft. We paused. Several said, "Why?" Well, because they're huge. They've been around forever and who **doesn't** own at least one Ubisoft title? And, well, I don't know anything about them. How does that happen? Who is Ubisoft, anyway?

Our interest was piqued, and so, hoping we weren't cats, we ran with the curiosity. We began looking for one of our stars to write a profile of this prolific giant that lived in shadows. We knew it would be hard (Sorry, Spanner!).

What we didn't know is how hard it would be to get **anything at all** from Ubisoft. There's a reason no one knows anything about Ubisoft - they don't talk to journalists. I'm not complaining; I'm really just not sure what to make of it. In a world of people, businesses, countries all spending as much time clamoring about the good things they do as they spend actually **doing** them, a silent one screams louder than the rest.

And so we scrounged what we could from Ubisoft games, our memories and the dark corners of the internet (yes, we go there so you don't have to) in order to bring you "Ubisoft: Ubi, Uber, Uni." Spanner, good lad that he is, took on the task of profiling Ubisoft and came back with a great read and some interesting conclusions. Joe Blancato spoke with an ex-Frag Doll to get the real scoop of the Ubi-sponsored gaming clan. And Jim Rossignol waxes a bit philosophical about underrated *Beyond Good & Evil*, which I now want to go and play. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Response to "Escaping Katrina" from The Escapist Forum: I didn't want to read this article. As someone not physically touched by Katrina, I've been able to put aside detailed examination of what the survivors must have felt/feel or experienced. Lara Crigger did a masterful job in crafting an article that draws the reader in, and in a few short paragraphs makes you feel what she saw, and actually care about the people she is describing. I was very touched by the story -- for the story of the experience, certainly, but more by her gentle and thoughtful reflections on human nature. George's seeming indifference to his warped Magic cards and poster, and how they only represent something that truly is permanent, struck a chord with me that is still resonating. Kudos to Lara, and please publish more of her work!

- kvivian

In Response to "Escaping Katrina" from The Escapist Forum: An incredible piece of writing; the writer captures so much about the value of games in general, not only in times of crisis, but their value to us as people. The best Escapist article by far, in my opinion. I teach a course on games at a university, and I'll shove this in their collective stockings next week.

- wolvesevolve

In Response to "Escaping Katrina" from The Escapist Forum: Excellent article. I would only add that the useless nature of escapism in a society or community in crisis is also a matter of distance and immediacy. Those in New Orleans still dealing with Katrina's aftermath, and perhaps even New Yorkers now five years after the event, may find simple escapist fare rather trite, but in the rest of the country, simple and easy entertainments gained a great deal of popularity. The same of Astaire/Rogers musicals during the great depression. I'm wary of the "comfort food" theory to explain everything, but it makes sense that when a threat is immediate and obvious escapism is unimportant, but when a threat is abstract and distant (terrorism, economic depression) people

find their world worrisome, and use entertainment as some form of relief.

- weinerjew

In Response to "Immersion Unexplained" from The Escapist Forum: Simply said, I don't quite subscribe to narratology/ludology dichotomy, I guess it's all about personal preferences. In the first type of games, the immersion comes from the thrill of imagining your story and setting your own goals and then fulfilling them, in the second type you enjoy unfolding the story made up by someone else. Both things can be equally enjoyable in their own way.

- WanderingTaoist

In Response to "Immersion Unexplained" from The Escapist Forum: Get those feet back on the ground, people.

- dejanzie

In Response to "Immersion Unexplained" from The Escapist Forum: The article seems to be premised on the assumption that we who

study videogames want to make them. While sure, if I got offered a job as a game designer I would have to think about it, but that isn't my primary goal.

Realistically, the author is also tapping into a debate that, hopefully, has already died. I'm past the narratology and ludology debate and I think most people are as well -- at least the people I talked to at said DiGRA conference in Vancouver last year were. Murray's keynote was practically the only paper that mentioned the "N" and "L" words.

Yes, narratology and ludology don't contribute to making better games, but they aren't meant to and yes narratology and ludology are pointless meandering debates, which is why they have largely died down.

- jccalhoun

In Response to "Not With a Bang, But a Click" from The Escapist Forum: What the hell are you talking about?

It's a good read and an interesting article but how do you go from id Software to computers to CD-ROMs to internet to

search engines and therefore searching = a game. Just because you spent half the time searching does not automatically make searching a game.

meh... I'm finding it difficult to argue my point... because I see where you are coming from and that is clouding what I want to say.

- guided1

EVERYWHERE &nowhere

by Spanner

It's not often that an editor comes to **you** and asks for something so, when Russ (the new guy at *The Escapist* who pulls the strings to make the writers dance) approached me with a hole in his schedule, I felt quite flattered.

And the assignment was - I chose to assume - a simple one. Write a company profile on Ubisoft. Naturally, I waved a Spanner flag in one hand and blew my own trumpet with the other.

"No problem," said I, confident in my ability to hack out a few thousand words of romanticized eulogy. "Ubisoft is vast, and certain to be steeped in glorious history – 'twill be but the work of a couple of hours. The best thing about an assignment like this is that nothing – **nothing at all** – can go wrong." As you can guess, I was off to a good start.

Well, I poured my afternoon rum and ginger and set about making good on my bold promises of uncovering the humanity cowering behind the veils of one of Europe's biggest game developers. Eight hours later, with eyes so square I could dress them in dungarees and take them to a barn dance, I came to realize the internet is small, cancerous and filled with the same repeated, empty webpage surrounded by a billion different banner advertisements.

Who the hell is Ubisoft? It's like some kind of personality black hole; compressing a galaxy of individuality into a dimensionless, cross-platform singularity so dense that no personal information can escape its vast event horizon. (Everything I know, I learned from *Star Trek*.) Has it grown too big to support an individual identity, or has it become the worst kind of soulless byproduct of a passionless corporate mind? It started life purely as a publisher in France, so could it be possible Ubisoft was born as a peddler of another's imagination, feeding on the commercial creativity of bedroom programmers with no discernable spirit of its own?

Maybe.

It's equally possible that Ubisoft pours its gargantuan resources into making games rather than painting a high gloss public veneer; promising revolution upon revolution until its back catalogue is a vortex of downwardly spiraling anticlimaxes. All I had were theories and the kind of questions no public

relations manager worth his salt would answer candidly.

I did uncover a few tenuous facts, I suppose.

- Ubisoft was founded in 1986 in France by the five Guillemot brothers as a computer game distributor. Good business tactics soon led to U.K., German and U.S. divisions and working relationships with Sierra On-Line, EA, Microprose and a whole load more.

- In 1994, it established an in-house game development arm where Michel Ancel quickly invented the prolific *Rayman* character. Keeping a steady pace allowed the company to go the distance without too many perturbing chest pains, and in 2000, it acquired Tom Clancy's Red Storm software label along with its catalogue of espionage and tactical thriller titles.

- It now enjoys distribution in over 50 countries and has a physical presence in 21 of them, with its various development studios having turned out well over a thousand titles and an annual turnover of blah-di-blah-di-blah millions of euros.

- Ubisoft gets its name, and therefore (presumably) its founding philosophy, from the word "ubiquity."

- A guillemot is a sea bird found in the northern Atlantic and Pacific waters. (I don't know what flavor it is, though.)

An impressive, self-made legacy of hard graft and competent management. Trouble is, none of this stuff is especially unheard of in the industry or, for that matter, particularly interesting to read about. Other than a brief moment of uncertainty when EA suddenly devoured just under 20% of the company's shares and a degree of controversy surrounded its workers' strict employment contracts, no substantial scraps of hot gossip have ever really fallen from Ubisoft's expansive table.

I cannot accept, however, that a company with such a significant history and massive profile is so totally void of personality. I must be looking in the wrong places.

My research went from the jumbled mass of non-information that is cyberspace to the seldom updated, yet well-stocked video shop down the road

which also rents out games. I came away with anything and everything proudly bearing the Ubisoft logo.

After an hour or two of playing - err, research - the lines that I had been looking for, between which I hoped to read the story of a world class software developer, began to appear.

It seems the identity of Ubisoft is lightly etched across their entire back catalogue, not particularly visible from any single game, but present in the background nonetheless; delivering a warm, familiar climate to its games via a deep undercurrent of experience. Let me explain how my personal meeting with the entire workforce of Ubisoft - past and present - transpired.

Although I looked up the Ubisoft timeline, the random selection of games I'd rented didn't really lend themselves to an anal consideration of chronological arrangement, and I got straight on with playing whichever game adorned the top of the pile - *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*. Being a one-time fan of the old Amiga version, I had high hopes for this game, and wasn't disappointed – in fact,

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it proved to be a superb introduction to the Ubisoft hive mind.

I suppose you could call it a strategy game, or a puzzle game, a fighting game, an RPG, even a racing game during a thrilling chariot race through the streets of Babylon. Suffice to say the list is endless enough to ensure the Prince cannot easily be pigeonholed into any specific genre. An impressive feat for a game that has a very distinct style and theme while refusing to restrict itself to one specific mode of gameplay; and without ever feeling like a mishmash of cobbled together mini games. If it must have a genre, it can only be classified as a "Prince of Persia-'em-up."

Once my mind had regained its composure from the toe-curling vertigo and breath-taking anxiety found high above the labyrinthine alleyways of Persia, I was put in mind of the company's name – Ubisoft. My seemingly wasted time surfing the still waters of the internet had at least dredged up the snippet of trivia about the origins of that name, "ubiquity."

Reflecting on the last couple of hours spent clinging to the window ledges of

Babylon, sword fighting with savage hordes, deciphering the 3-D physical enigmas of an ancient city and navigating narrow pathways in a high speed chariot derby, the answer to uncovering the identity of the French developer turned out to be in the question.

Ubisoft, like the Prince of Persia himself, really is ubiquitous; everywhere at once, moving in a pattern of its own design. Whether this is an aspect of company policy that dictates the requirements of all Ubisoft titles, or a coincidental parallel of philosophies between the company's founder and the designer of Prince of Persia, it's not my place to say. But that parallel exists nonetheless, and after such an invigorating experience, I was itching to see if it was reflected in any other games.

Next in the pile was Splinter Cell; not an entirely different game. In fact, after the first 10 minutes I was prepared to journey back to Persia, but in the name of research I persevered. And, as you fans of Splinter Cell already know, I'm glad I did.

A favorite of mine back on the PS1 was Tenchu, but Splinter Cell took the

concept of a stealth-based game to a whole new level. If I were the designer of this game, you can bet it would have descended into macho mayhem and juvenile violence a long time before the depths of this masterpiece had begun to be explored; a little bit of tip toeing around the corner followed by a bucket full of brawn and bloodshed would have been my course, much to the detriment of this astounding game.

By focusing the emphasis on the stealth aspect of gameplay, yet another new genre seems to have been cut from the dead wood of the often overcomplicated espionage thriller.

Even as I belatedly read the old advertisements and reviews of Splinter Cell, the descriptions suggested that all the best parts of this kind of game (for an uninspired player like myself, at least) had been pushed to the background for the sake of what seems a minor characteristic – stealth. Creeping around in the shadows instead of shooting, fighting and jumping off things (I'm shallow, and don't care who knows it); a risky strategy that has certainly paid off.

the escapist

Yves Guillemot, CEO of Ubisoft and one of the founding brothers, gave a speech a while ago advising the videogame industry not to blindly pour its efforts into mimicking Japanese developers' abilities. He spoke of Japan's notoriously discerning, experienced gamer and the difficulties Western publishers face when trying to crack that particular cultural barrier. Though it may seem harsh and a little shortsighted, he went on to suggest we shouldn't even bother trying. To do so would only hamper the successful recipes many developers have created for making more locally appealing games.

Splinter Cell struck an immediate accord with this line of thinking. Where Ubisoft vehemently avoids building its games around genre, it does at least have a strong sense of who its audience is, creating titles that hit their intended mark with unswerving accuracy.

Splinter Cell, developed by Ubi's Montreal Studio, shares Ubi's philosophy of building trans-genre games without the confusion or aggravation of making them cross-culturally relevant. Whether this is a good or bad facet of Ubisoft's profile really depends on which side of the ocean you live on, but having titles specifically geared to my Western gaming fingers was no bad thing.

These ubiquitous themes were repeated throughout my pile of games, and every time I came close to recognizing a specific genre, it ducked out of sight like the stealthy, balletic characters that permeate Ubisoft's massive catalogue. *Rainbow Six*, *XIII*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, even *Rayman* (one of the in-house development team's earliest outings) seemed to nimbly side step any expected facets of the 2-D platform game, aiming at the younger player who traditionally prefers this type of bouncing cutesy character, while offering a challenge grueling enough to make the most seasoned joystick junkie sit up and take notice.

With this year's E3 disappearing into the distance, a further source of evidence

presents itself in the form of the shameless self promotion that is key to the event. Ubisoft's public face certainly seems to be behind the next generation of consoles and the new realm of gaming delights they pledge to bring us. Looking at its forthcoming lineup, it seems the French giant is continuing to build its empire with yet another multiverse of horizon-expanding titles, such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Rainbow Six Vegas,* all promising to hold Ubisoft's defiant, genre-less principles at their core.

This trend for creating strong brands (even those that may have originated elsewhere, such as the Tom Clancy franchises) is another telltale piece of the jumbled Ubisoft jigsaw. Many large companies, and not just within the video and computer game industry, are well known for latching onto a popular product and milking it dry until people lament the day they ever heard of it. Ubisoft, however, has a frankly remarkable track record for not only sustaining a brand longer than its limited life deserves, but consistently improving it with each new incarnation.

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When looking at the origins of the company itself, bred and built from such strong family stock, it's no surprise that the empire is growing precisely as the Guillemot family has always intended it to. Rather than following the established route to software success, which consists mainly in conquering the U.S. and/or Japanese markets, Ubisoft first set its sights on a distinctly Eurocentric domination; improving its stamina in a local arena before breaching any demanding cultural barriers.

Though he may only have voiced his opinion openly in the last few years, Yves Guillemot's mildly controversial advice about dispensing with the incompatible Japanese market is apparently not a new philosophy for his company. Forging alliances across the globe and building a personal presence with strategically placed development

studios in such places as Romania, China and the heartbeat of modern game design, Canada, the software powerhouse is mustering a wealth of industry strength.

It would appear the Guillemot foundation holds true to more than just a 20-year-old company mission statement. With its established family heritage, penchant for strong brands and a shrewd understanding of its own scope, Ubisoft has evolved more akin to an imperialistic French noble house intent on broadening its empire.

Although the colonies may be no more, the new world to be conquered is undeniably that of emergent businesses, and approaching it as a noble and ancient imperial clan establishes a principal set of unbendable values that cannot fail to permeate every aspect of

the company's existence, from the people who choose to work for it to the customers who unswervingly salute the company banner.

Despite being the appointed lord of a powerful European dynasty, Yves Guillemot remains adamant that Ubisoft attain its successes by allowing its workers more creative room than most developers would feel comfortable with. I suspect, in a roundabout sort of way, this is true.

Naturally, all people at the helm of an industry are going to proclaim their fundamental connection with the little people; movie producers sustain they listen to the average cinemagoer, music managers declare artists are in full control of their own voices and game developers insist that creation is left to blossom in the hearts and minds of the common player. None of this is remotely true, of course. It'd be a ridiculous and suicidal way to run a business, and these people know it better than anyone.

Looking at the impressive Ubisoft vista, it does seem plausible that its designers are, at least, free range; allowed to

roam unsupervised around the Ubisoft pen. Within the camouflaged structure of the company's mission plan, over a thousand different games have been released with massively varying content, yet certainly the ones I have played appear to be built according to those few fundamental Ubisoft laws of game creation. I'm confident, now, that after my intensive induction into the French developer's fan base, I could look at 10 new games and pick out the Ubisoft among them.

Up to this point, my research into the mystery shrouded world of Ubisoft had provided me with an ironclad opinion of who it is, but I had yet to hear any of my hypotheses echoed from within. All I needed was a brief discussion with the people at the helm to grant solid foundations to my new faith.

Unfortunately, Ubisoft doesn't talk. Even with the considerable journalistic weight of the Themis Group behind my complimentary tribute to the French giant, there is apparently no one at Ubisoft (U.K., France, U.S. or Canada) that can be persuaded to breach the peculiar media blackout that envelops the entire company.

While this may climb up the nose of an investigative writer and kick at the inside of his skull after a month's worth of trying to get answers to apathetic questions such as "We think Ubisoft is great. Do you agree?" in truth, it matters little to the player.

It seems my first attempt to understand the mind of Ubisoft was correct; it really isn't interested in building a media pedestal from which to shout its own name into the abyss. Perhaps it's no bad thing that whatever it is that goes on behind Guillemot's iron curtain, the only result is a protracted catalogue of highly enjoyable games. Certainly it is not whiter-than-white; otherwise it would have answered my phone calls, but in the end, I feel I know – on a very personal level – who Ubisoft is, and that has come solely from sampling its impressive wares.

It seems a little backward, in retrospect, to try and research any company's history without first sampling its products (in the case of many it can easily be done, however), but with Ubisoft, its legacy - past, present and future - begins and ends with the games. It may not sit quietly in the background, but this well-principled noble French house certainly doesn't march to the beat of the industry's drum; it's a company, nay an imperial family, which pursues an ancient principle of colonization, bound by its own code of honor and set free by a love of great games. COMMENTS

Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.

Unfortunately, Ubisoft doesn't talk.
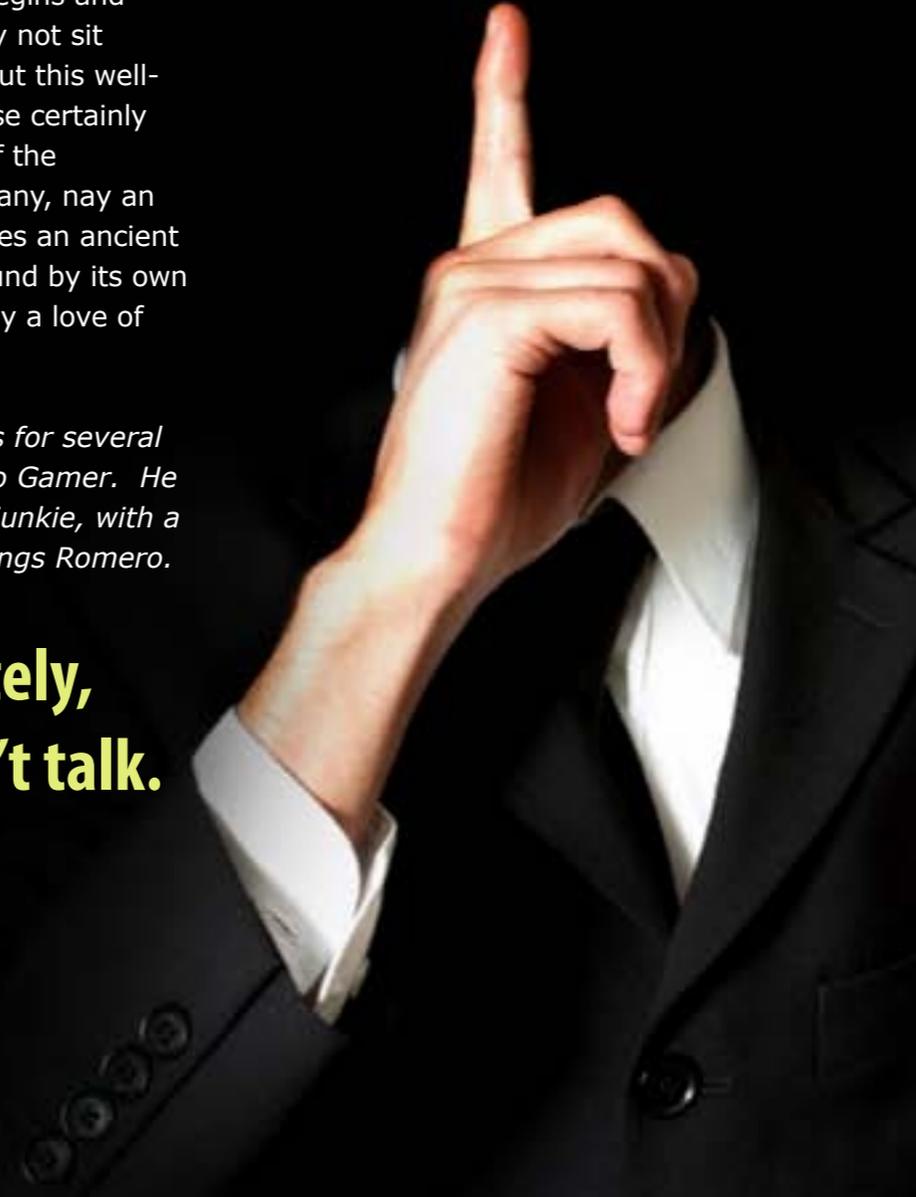
UBISOURCING

Ubisoft pushes game production into a larger world

by Allen Varney

Next time you eat lunch with coworkers, ask them, apropos of nothing, "What do you think of outsourcing?" Watch what happens.

Some people hear "outsourcing" and go completely nonlinear. Often, these folks feel personally threatened that someone in India or China will take over their own job. We're just starting to hear that note of fear in the electronic gaming industry, where "offshoring" (subcontracting production work to overseas studios) is quietly becoming standard practice - fostered, in great part, by Ubisoft.

For years to come, we'll undoubtedly read lots of passionate arguments about game outsourcing, but an early spat appeared last year on the IGDA Forums. "McMillanDaniel" wrote, "We don't believe it is good to be a company showing a profit, but seeing your neighbor out of work. Therefore, we don't hire, support, or purchase any products from publishers using offshore resources for development. Do you think graduates from all of the new schools around America for game design and art are going to relocate to offshore facilities to get jobs?"

Whatever your own position, you'll probably agree the **International** Game Developers Association isn't the best venue to call for America-first boycotts. "Whether you're American, Japanese or Pakistani, the best qualified people should get the job," said poster "KennethN." "If you think all the best-qualified people are American, you're pretty naive. The fact that the gaming industry pretty much spans across the entire globe is something we should be very glad about."

Forum moderator David Weinstein pointed out North America itself is an offshore destination: "So, you want Ubisoft, Vivendi and Atari to shut down all of their North American studios?"

Game publishers keep moving offshore due to high financial pressure. The cost to develop a next-gen console game is well over US$10 million, pushing fast toward $20 million, with two- to three-year development cycles. Companies are cutting corners where they can, and offshoring promises faster production at savings as high as 25 to 50 percent. Business intelligence analyst Screen Digest estimates 60 percent of all games

Ubisoft and the World

Ubisoft, based in Paris, has expanded its game production more broadly and aggressively than any other major game publisher. "The company's 12 in-house production studios are located in nine countries," says Ubisoft's corporate site. "The choice of China, Canada and Romania as host countries for its major studios offers Ubisoft competent, trained people as well as tax benefits or a lower cost structure."

For instance, Ubisoft Shanghai, established in 1996, was the first major mainland Chinese game studio operated by a Western publisher. It claims to be the largest game studio in China and one of the world's largest. Starting with *F1 Racing Championship,* Ubisoft Shanghai has graduated to more ambitious projects, such as the well-received *Pandora Tomorrow* expansion for *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell*. The studio currently employs about 500 people and is growing fast. In late 2005, Ubisoft posted a five-minute recruiting video that boasted Shanghai's virtues: night life, sports, food and ubiquitous English. "Ubisoft Shanghai is a team with a purpose," says the video, "to break

boundaries and to take gaming beyond its limits."

Gaming is breaking past limits all over, not just in China. Currently, most outsourcing/offshoring game jobs go to Russia, Eastern Europe, India, Israel and Vietnam. But as Outsourcing.org and Games Outsourcer prove, wannabes are popping up anywhere they can scrounge copies of Maya3D and *Teach Yourself C++ in 21 Days*: Thailand, the Philippines, Egypt and more. The widespread popularity of Korean MMOGs has spawned many new companies across Southeast Asia; some of them start as Korean games licensees, such as Indonesia's Lyto and Boleh.

Right now, these offshore studios are writing music and making low-poly objects. Will they be happy doing that forever?

An excellent September 2005 *Hollywood Reporter* article by Paul Hyman quotes Dustin Clingman, professor of game design and development at the Full Sail school: "What I'm most concerned about is what I call the 'ambition gap' ... the people who we outsource to - in India

produced today use outsourcing, and projects that the figure will rise to 90 percent by 2008.

In America, a senior game programmer might earn $85-100,000 plus benefits; a senior artist or programmer in Communist China, the workers' paradise, gets below $20,000 and no benefits whatsoever. Of course, the Chinese programmer can't make good games - yet. To date, Western developers have offshored technical and minimally creative jobs: audio, music, art assets

and animation, as well as localization of Java-based mobile games across 130 phones. But as they learn the industry and hire Western consultants, offshore companies are gradually taking over more and more aspects of game production: multiplayer modes, sequels and (increasingly) full games.

And the publisher leading the way overseas is Ubisoft.

and China and such - they're not going to stop at just doing menial tasks. As we ship them more and more to do, they're training themselves to take over the more important game development jobs. We're just laying the groundwork for our competition."

How Big Can It Get?
Offshoring has many pitfalls. Annoyances include currency fluctuations, language barriers and gaps in intellectual property laws. Logistics can be expensive, given time zone differences and the need for time-consuming supervisory visits overseas. (One startup, SeaCode, plans to overcome logistical obstacles by refitting a retired cruise ship as a "sweat-ship" of coders anchored in international waters off Los Angeles. A hundred Indian and Eastern European programmers would work long shifts, seven days a week, for $1,800 a month. SeaCode, which hopes to drop anchor later this year, pitches this as "keeping jobs in the US.")

And offshoring won't necessarily help you meet a schedule. THQ's much-delayed *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow Over Chernobyl,* being made entirely by GSC

Game World in Kiev, was originally announced in November 2001 and is now scheduled for Q1 2007. (Offshored Ukrainian programmers also created 2003's notorious *Big Rigs: Over the Road Racing*, one of the worst-reviewed computer games in history.)

The greatest perceived danger in offshoring is quality control, owing to cultural differences. Many take as an article of faith that "you can't outsource creativity." Overseas game creators, they argue, just won't ever, **ever** be as good as our great native sons in the English-speaking world. And Japan, of course. And, oh yeah, Korea, if you play *Lineage*. Well, also Croatia, assuming you like *Serious Sam,* and Poland if you like *Painkiller.* But the rest of the world, forget it!

Intellectual property lawyer Ross Dannenberg, partner at law firm Banner & Witcoff, said in a May 2005 interview with IT Business Edge, "[T]he video game industry has built-in defenses against outsourcing: creativity and nationalism. ... What one culture finds humorous or entertaining, another culture might find lackluster, dull, or

even worse, offensive. Thus, it is difficult to outsource creative aspects of video game development."

What do these commentators overlook? Offshore companies can hire Western designers to visit and teach them design.

In 2005, Ubisoft Shanghai offered American developers US$12,000 signing bonuses. From September 2004 until this month, the studio's team of 27 to 30 Chinese designers was managed by American Erick Wujcik, and he aggressively recruited North American designers. Tutored by experienced Western professionals, how long will it

These offshore studios are writing music and making low-poly objects. Will they be happy doing that forever?
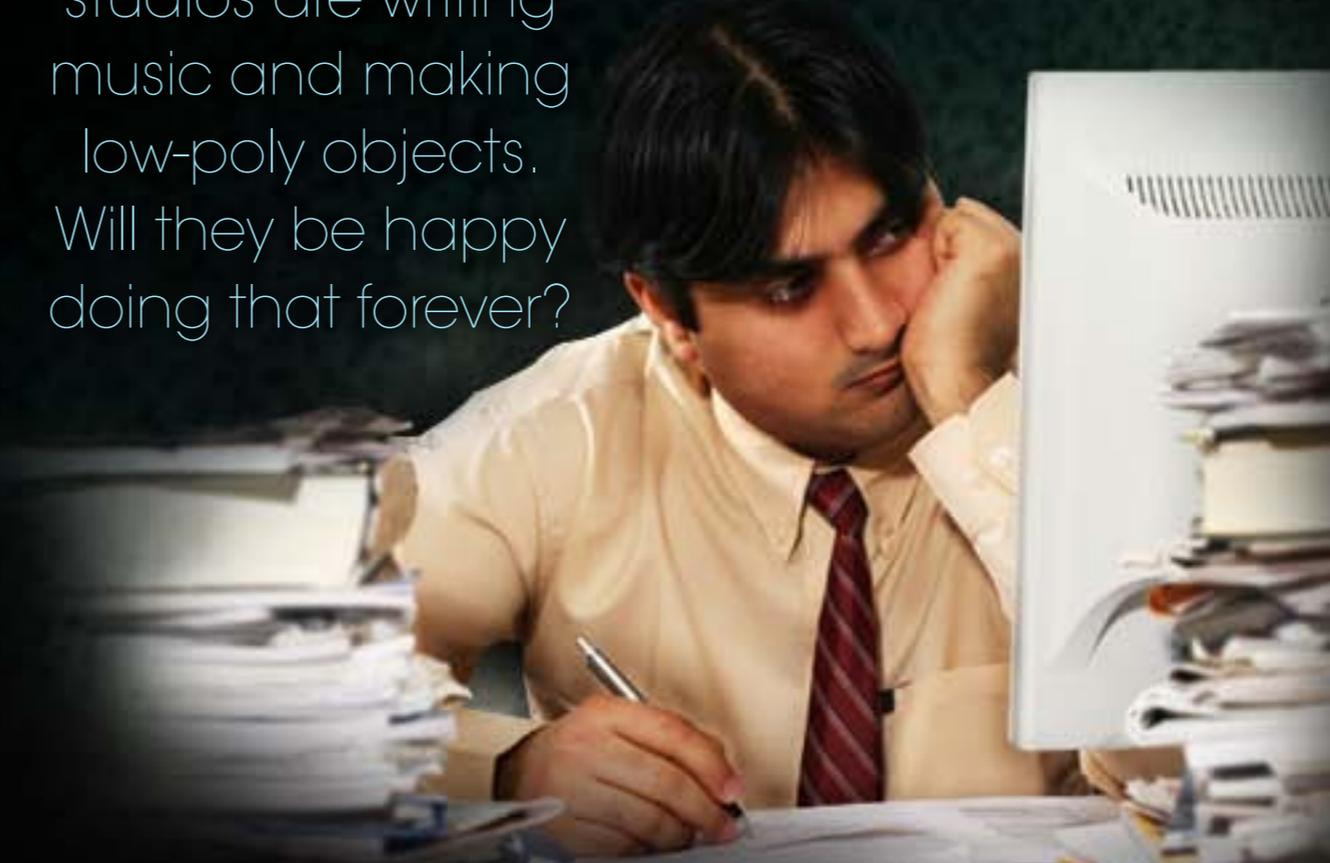
take Chinese developers to learn what Westerners find fun? Ten years? Five?

Then, too, there is precedent for Western pop culture adopting other nations' entertainment icons whole-cloth. A Google search for "anime" brings 169 million hits.

Try to Enjoy It

Once cost-cutting publishers can outsource design as well as everything else, will the entire business of game production follow so many other American industries overseas?

"The trend in game development seems to be away from a model that separates design from execution," says producer Warren Spector. "We're moving toward a low-document, you-conceive-it-you-build-it model. I can see a time when U.S. development becomes so expensive it's tough to justify hiring a U.S. company to [design] a game. System specs generated in a vacuum are worthless. If the talent's over there, the game should be made over there. Splitting off the design part of it, the way you'd split off modeling a chair, doesn't make sense."

But Spector believes game production will never be entirely offshored. "There are thousands and thousands of people in the U.S. who love making games and want to continue. Most of the big publishers are based in the U.S., have offices here or want to have offices here. And, with some notable exceptions, the top creative talent is here. I honestly think salaries overseas will go up, and that's how the playing field will be leveled. The offshore guys will have to pay more as their employees realize they can't afford the stuff they're making!"

Remember that IGDA Forum debate? Consultant Maximillian Meltzer wrote there, "[Offshoring] won't go away, so prepare for the future. It's not all about outsourcing, it never was, but the maturing of a technology-driven industry. As a US developer you just have more competition. Sounds like an industry about the survival of the fittest. Sounds like business as usual to me."

The new globalization of game production offers opportunities for a savvy developer. There are few barriers to entry, so anyone with net connectivity - you yourself - could outsource your own workload for a fraction of your current salary. Call it "pointsourcing." Do what Ubisoft's own Worldwide Managing Director Gilles Langourieux did: Formerly a manager at Ubisoft Shanghai, he left in 2004 to start his own offshoring operation, Virtuos. Virtuos now employs 120 people and recently closed Series A financing with Legend Capital.

Why not you, too? **COMMENTS**

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

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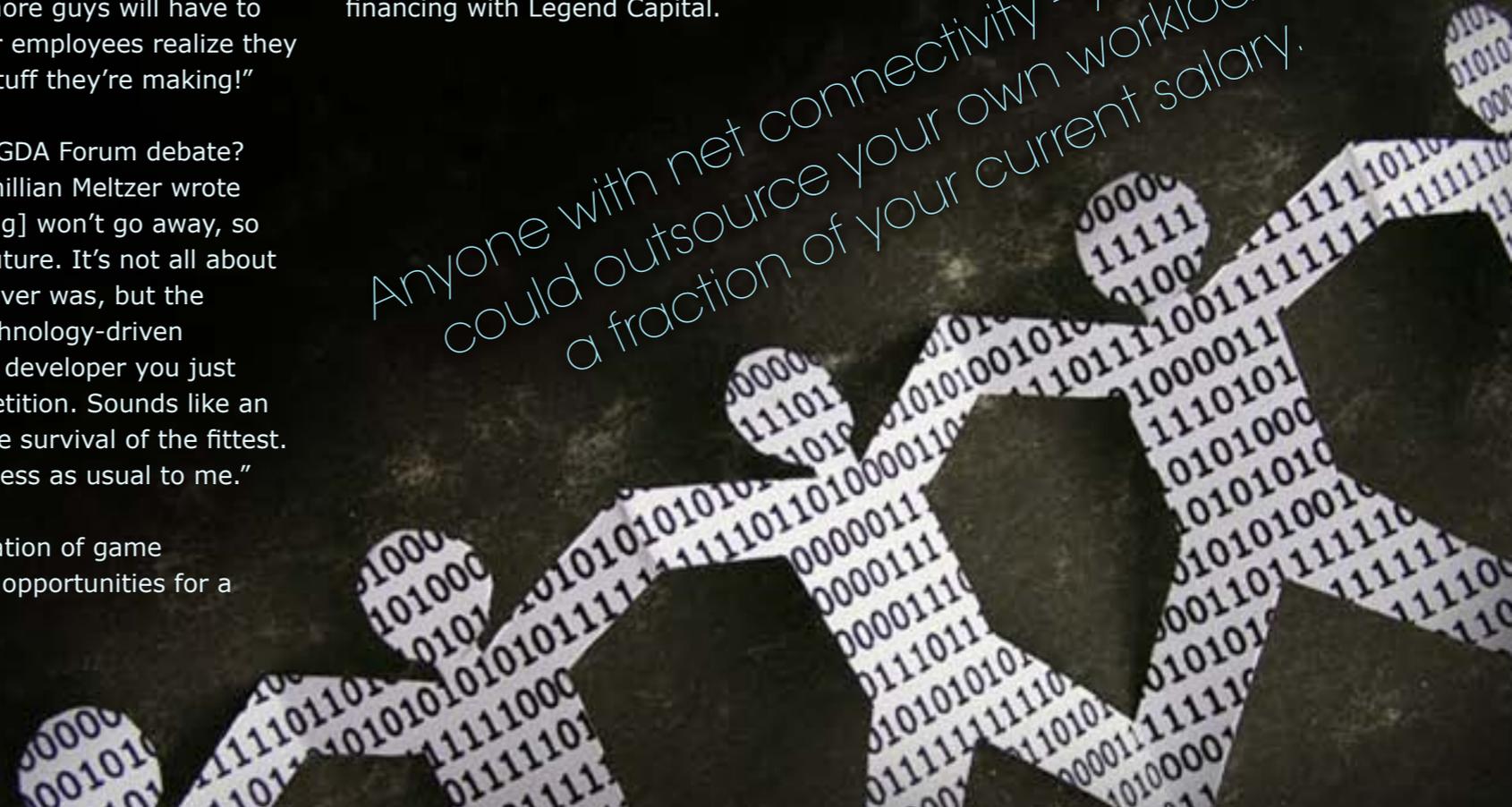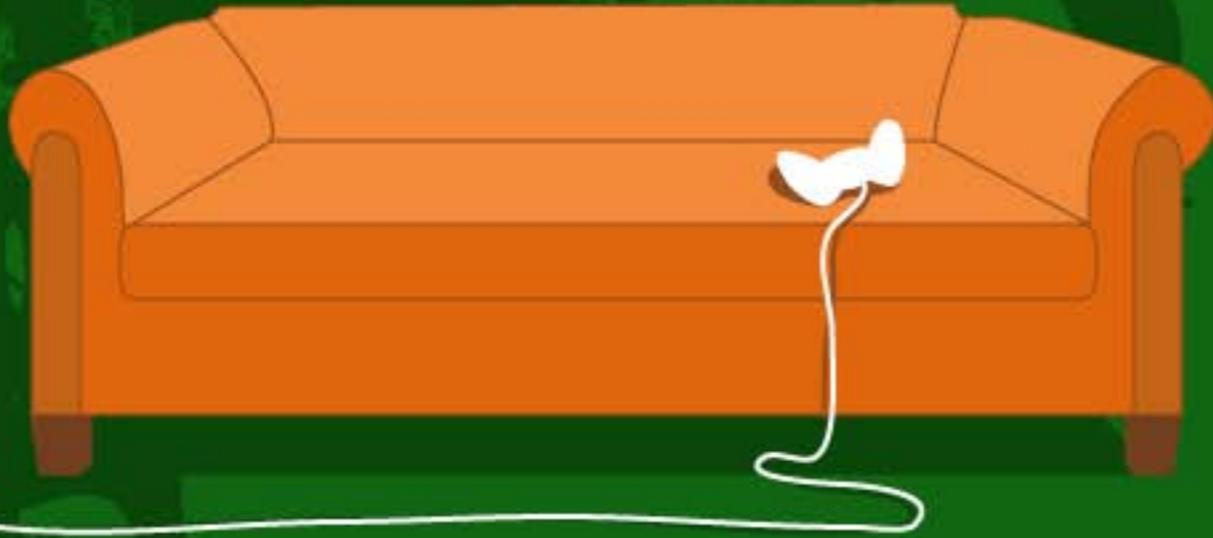
Frag Doll on FRAG DOLLS

by Joe Blancato

The Frag Dolls, Ubisoft's team of sexy girl gamers, have engendered controversy since their inception. Originally promoted as a sponsored clan, the latest "About Us" page on the official Frag Dolls site reads, "The Frag Dolls are a team of gamers recruited by Ubisoft to represent their video games and promote the presence of women in the gaming industry." Sure, that's Ubisoft's line on the group, but I wanted to hear about the Frag Dolls from, well, a real Frag Doll.

I spoke to Jade "Siren" Eaglemeare, an ex-Frag Doll from the U.K. branch, and Whitney Butts, who underwent the application process here in the States, to determine exactly what the Frag Dolls are, what being a part of the team was like and why someone would leave.

I was interested in the application process, first and foremost. How, exactly, did Ubisoft go about assembling an international group of young, attractive women who look more at home on the cover of *Vogue* than *PC Gamer*, and also happen to play videogames well enough to win professional tournaments?

Butts said she found an ad on classified ad site Craigslist, which read, "Female Gamers Wanted." When she replied to the ad, she was asked to fax Ubisoft a non-disclosure agreement because "they wouldn't release the details of the program." She was then asked to submit 15 pictures of herself from a "wide variety" of angles.

Afterward, during her second phone interview, Ubisoft filled her in on what they were looking for: "Basically, they wanted to [assemble] a group of girl gamers who not only were good looking, but knew how to play games, in order to get other girls interested in games. Their goal was to use us to get other girls to play [their games]." The position was part time and paid $500 per month. The girls would appear on webcam, message boards and blogs and talk about their gaming lifestyles. During webcam appearances, the webcam was to be focused on the girl, not the game she was playing.

Ubisoft was interested in girls with "stability," Butts said. "They wanted people who either had another steady job or had a 'husband to fall back on to

support them,' were the exact words." At the time, Butts was an unmarried student, which was partially why she wasn't asked to join the team.

Eaglemeare's series of interviews were less clandestine in nature. Rather than signing NDAs and answering cryptic messages on websites, she sent Ubisoft a photo and spoke to three Ubisoft employees, as well as journalist Aleks Krotoski. What struck her during the interview process was how "little focus seemed to be paid on how extensive my gaming knowledge was or how good I was at actually playing games." Despite that reservation, when Ubisoft extended the offer, she took the job.

As I talked to both women, they both referred to being a Frag Doll as a job, rather than being a member of a guild or a clan. Butts said she got the impression early on that the mission to put an all-female clan in the spotlight to draw more women into gaming was nothing more than a façade. I asked Eaglemeare what she thought about her role as a Frag Doll.

"The Frag Doll ethos claims to be centered around trying to attract more girls into gaming, but during my time in Frag Dolls, I didn't see any evidence of this," she said. "First and foremost, the Frag Dolls are employed by Ubisoft to promote their games. Every part of their job revolves around this fact; be it playing certain games, doing interviews or posting on forums."

And when she says they're playing "certain games," Eaglemeare means Ubisoft games - at least publicly. Half of all of their official blog posts are to be Ubisoft-related, and they're not allowed to speak about certain games if those games are deemed to be competitors to an Ubisoft game. "We were told not to talk about EA's *Battlefield II*, as it was a direct competitor to *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*," she said. Of course, it isn't too surprising to have to toe the corporate line every now and then, and Eaglemeare agrees, but she still takes issue to the way the Frag Dolls are portrayed in press releases and on the internet: "[They're] presented with the appearance of being an independent group … but this isn't really the case."

Ubisoft has pretty much abandoned the notion of the Frag Dolls as a girl-gaming clan; the U.K. branch hasn't attended a gaming competition in the year it's existed (the American branch competes sporadically, usually playing Ubisoft titles), and according to Eaglemere, "the [U.K.] Frag Dolls themselves would agree that they are not a clan." However, in that year, they've made it out to numerous conventions to promote new Ubisoft games, where Eaglemeare recalls one particular incident at a *King Kong* launch party: "[We] were told to stand in front of the demo pods in the hall and try to lure drunk guests into playing. I felt more like a booth babe than a gamer."

The U.S. branch operates in a similar manner. Go to a convention where the Frag Dolls are in attendance and you'll find beautiful, painted faces throwing T-shirts to crowds of young men; few women flock to them as gaming idols.

Working in such a way - talking only about games sanctioned by the company, enticing drunken gamers to play games on kiosks - finally got to Eaglemeare. She decided to leave the Frag Dolls because "I just felt increasingly dishonest to myself. I have a true love for games, and in the

end, I'd had enough of being made a marketing tool."

Since then, she's formed a community of her own, WeAreVersus. There, she blogs about the games she chooses in the way she chooses with her friend, "Vixen." She's obviously affected by the time she spent as a Frag Doll; on their "About Us" page, they say: "We're not here to endorse any product or sell you anything. If we say it, it's because we mean it, not because it pays our wage.

"In our experience 'promoting girl gamers' can often be used as the cover story of big business trying to widen its market whilst still getting some pretty faces in the magazines. In other words: Free advertising."

Eaglemeare and Vixen want to keep their new endeavor gender-neutral, but in such a sexually-charged industry, the very fact they have pictures and videos of themselves playing games is going to make that difficult for a lot of gamers. To their credit, they don't play up to their femininity; in fact, Eaglemeare thinks doing so damages the industry's

credibility: "We don't see [gender] as a factor that needs to be labored upon. More and more girls are becoming interested in gaming, which is great, but I really don't think there is any need for some big crusade to attract more women to the field. Constantly drawing attention to the fact that 'girl gamers' are [a] minority, you only encourage segregation between the genders."

Butts agrees. "Knowing what the Frag Dolls have to do [every day] makes them look dirty."

Do operations like the Frag Dolls cause a rift between genders? If anything, they're drawing them together, but not in the healthiest of ways. On message boards spanning the internet, people of both genders seem more than happy to unite together in distaste for this particular blend of sex and advertising. And to their credit, the Frag Dolls have done a heck of a job of bringing girl gamers out in droves. Unfortunately for Ubisoft - and for the women like Jade Eaglemeare, who just wanted to talk about games - they're not buying into the vision. COMMENTS

(Editor's note: We attempted to contact Ubisoft for their side of the Frag Dolls story, but they were unavailable for comment.)

The Escapist, a shadowy flight into the dangerous world of a man who does not exist. Joe Blancato, a young Associate Editor on a crusade to champion the cause of the innocent, the powerless, the helpless in a world of criminals who operate above the law. Joe Blancato, a lone crusader in a dangerous world.

Do operations like the Frag Dolls cause a rift between genders? If anything, they're drawing them together.

RED STORM WRITING

by Russ Pitts

In 1975, a Soviet naval officer staged a mutiny aboard a nuclear submarine. His motives were unclear, but in Tom Clancy's mind - who used the story as the foundation for his best-selling novel, *The Hunt for Red October* - the man, Captain Valery Sablin, had intended to defect to Sweden, taking his submarine with him. Perhaps that's true. Unfortunately, it didn't work out for Captain Sablin. His mutiny failed, and he was executed.

Mr. Clancy decided to give his fictional version of the tale a rosier ending. In *The Hunt for Red October*, the mutinous submarine captain deftly maneuvers his way through a series of claustrophobic ship-board adventures, harrowingly authentic underwater engagements and dizzying political intrigues before being rescued from a near-certain death by a dashing, young government agent intent on rescuing both the submarine captain and his experimental submarine. The novel ends with the Russian and the American sailing the stolen submarine together up the Penobscot River in a glorious display of pre-glasnost Cold War defrosting.

Action, heroism and obsessive attention to technical detail; this is the Clancy formula. *The Hunt for Red October* sold at least 6 million copies world-wide, spawned a videogame and a feature film and turned the former insurance salesman and Maryland native into a brand -- a multimedia empire glorifying the right of American military might.

Some have suggested over the years that Tom Clancy and Jack Ryan may be one in the same; that Mr. Clancy is actually a former military or CIA man who's turned his classified adventures into almost-treasonous knuckle-biting fiction, ala Ian Fleming's James Bond. One supposes that these rumors would suit the secretive Mr. Clancy and his Jack Ryan Enterprises just fine, but according to all reputable sources (including Mr. Clancy himself), there's no truth in them. Jack Ryan, the hero of *The Hunt for Red October* and many of Clancy's other novels, is a complete work of fiction and the technical details filling the thousands of pages of prose bearing Mr. Clancy's name are all acquired through publicly available research sources, not (as some have suggested) from secret, classified documents.
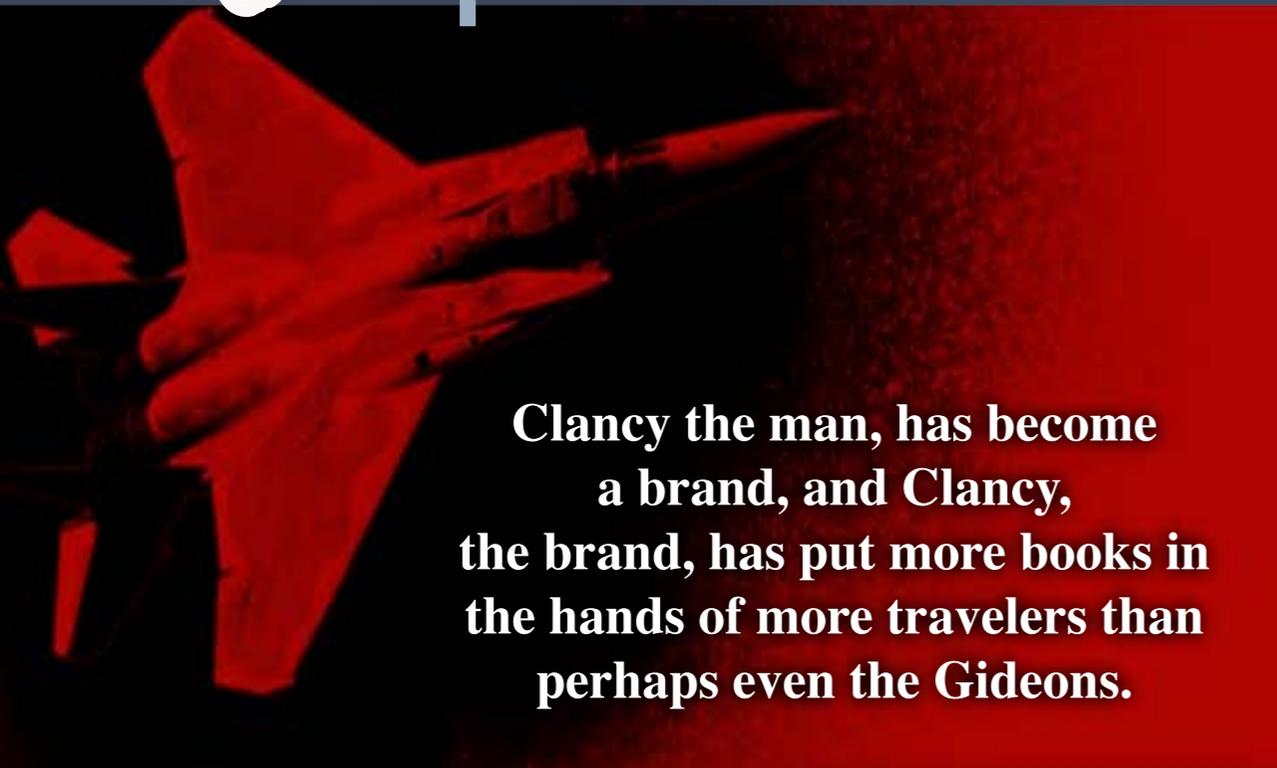
Clancy the man, has become a brand, and Clancy, the brand, has put more books in the hands of more travelers than perhaps even the Gideons.

From The Tom Clancy Plot Generator

"Terrorists devise a scheme to take over a generic industrial compound for ransom under the watchful eye of corrupt US diplomats. The plot twists when the Terrorists hijack a shipment of nuclear warheads even after their demands are met, unless a rookie CIA agent eager to prove his worth can overcome his brooding self-doubt and stop the Terrorists once and for all. The movie ends with a mildly comical and/or ironic scene in which the Terrorists blow up or go to prison. Another satisfying tale of political intrigue and personal redemption closes, and we all walk away from this [book/videogame/movie] a little wiser."

Yet, whether the story is fact or fiction, the name on the cover is what's important; more so than who's actually written it. Two decades after *The Hunt for Red October* introduced the world to the techno-thriller, Tom Clancy is **presenting** more stories than he's writing. His 12 follow-ups to *Red October* have each made the best-seller list, enthralling millions of airline travelers each year, but the popular *NetForce*, *Op-Center* and *Power Plays* series which also bear his name are all penned by somebody else. Several somebodies, in fact. You can find their names near the bottom of the book covers, underneath the gigantic **Tom Clancy's** and the book's title, and another credit for Mr. Clancy (and the cover illustration). That many readers have overlooked this fact over the years is in no way surprising, but has apparently gotten under the skin of some Clancy apologists.

"For the umpteenth time in this forum," says one newsgroup poster, quoted from ClancyFAQ.com "[This] has been common in the publishing world for over four decades (that I know of) to indicate that the book has been written using a concept, or characters, or whatever, from the named author, **by another writer**, who is usually credited on the cover under the title, but not always."

The practice referenced by our forum poster is called "ghost writing," and it has been around for a lot longer than four decades. As long, one supposes, as famous writers have had more money than time. Clancy, the man, has become a brand, and Clancy, the brand, has put more books in the hands of more travelers than perhaps even the Gideons.

The Hunt for Red October was made into a videogame in 1987 and a feature film in 1990. Three more of his books would follow *Red October* onto the silver screen, but as successful as those adventures were, the videogame arena is where the Clancy brand found its true home.

In 1997, Tom Clancy co-founded Red Storm Entertainment. His stories had long been a staple of computer and board gamers everywhere, but with Red Storm Clancy would break new ground; not simply transplanting his novels into the digital medium, but creating characters and stories specifically for use in a game. The company's first game,
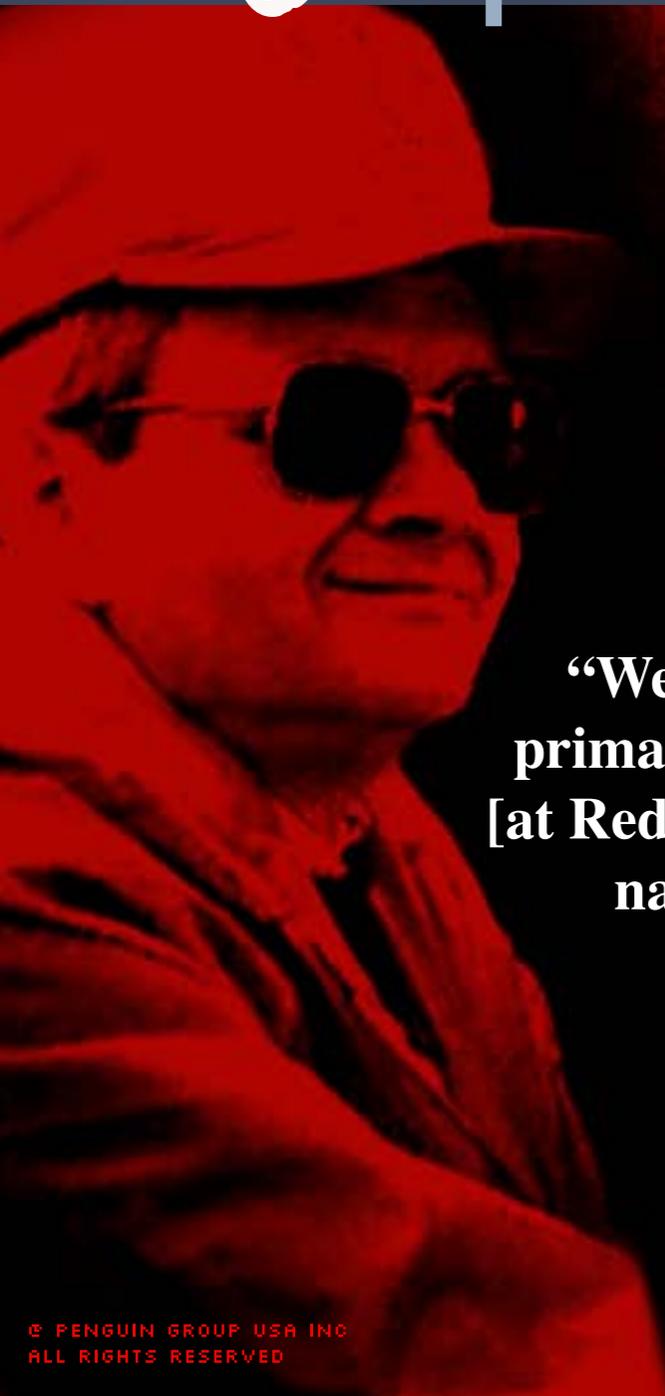
Tom Clancy's Politika, released in 1997 (packaged with a paperback copy of *Tom Clancy's Power Plays: Politika*, the novel) was a hit, and paved the way for two of the most successful videogame franchises in history: *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* (timed for simultaneous release with *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six*, the novel) and *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon*. Both of which re-wrote the books for their respective genres, and redefined the role of story in videogames, mainly by following

> ## "We have two people with primary writing responsibility [at Red Storm]." Two people not named Clancy, that is.

Clancy's winning formula. *Rainbow Six* puts the player in the black boots of a counter terrorist squad, employing true team-based tactical action, while *Ghost Recon* employs a similar style of play, but instead enlists the player into an elite squad of Special Forces commandos.

Both games inspire bravery, patriotism and an appreciation for authentic depictions of military hardware.

"[Clancy] gave us entry into his world for developing games," says Richard Dansky, Lead "Clancy Writer" for North Carolina-based Red Storm. "There was a lot of collaboration on the original *Rainbow Six*. We've concentrated on Clancy titles since then, but at the same time Ubisoft has gotten other studios involved in the Clancy franchise, making it much more of a company-wide and world-wide endeavor."

In 2000, Red Storm was purchased by publisher Ubisoft, who quickly began development on their own Clancy title. In 2002, Ubisoft's Montreal-based development studio released a startling stealth action game called *(Tom Clancy's) Splinter Cell*. The game starred a grizzled "black" operative named Sam Fisher, who was voiced by B-movie veteran Michael Ironside and written by J.T. Petty, the latest in a long line of Clancy ghost writers who've made an art out of distilling the Clancy "feel," as Richard Dansky calls it, and replicating that feel throughout the various extension's of His universe.

"There's always this incredible urgency in the Clancy books because so much is on the line," according to Dansky. "And that's the sort of thing that lends itself precisely to great gameplay. Knowing that what you are doing matters and that you're running out of time to do it in makes for exactly the right type of tension to drive a game narrative.

"We have two people with primary writing responsibility [at Red Storm]." Two people not named Clancy, that is. Being one of them, Dansky points out that the typical day in the life of a "Clancy" writer begins with brushing up on current events:

"The first thing I do in the morning is check a bunch of news and reference sites to see if anything interesting happened in the world. You never know when current events are going to catch up to your storyline, which can have all sorts of repercussions. Besides, I always want to stay on top of material for potential future storylines.

"In the office, the writing process generally involves a lot of touching base with designers and other folks to make

sure that what's being written fills the game's needs, is appropriate for context and gameplay and doesn't impinge on other aspects of the game. There are a lot of meetings on the front end, and then once implementation of the dialogue happens, you do a lot of walking through and tweaking to make sure that everything fits just right.

"It's always good to have the writing experience in the building," says Dansky. "Both as a resource and also as a way of making communication a lot easier and cleaner." And, one supposes, as a way of injecting great story into great games. To date, Red Storm has released over a dozen games embossed with the Clancy brand, and is currently working on a next-gen installment of *Rainbow Six*, set in Fabulous Las Vegas.

"I think people are going to be more than a little surprised with the territory we're starting to move the Clancy storylines into. We're delving more into the consequences of the actions the characters take, and the hard decisions have to be made. What's Sam Fisher willing to do in order to fulfill his mission? How many people can you

sacrifice for the greater good before the scales start tipping? That's actually one of the unique opportunities we have doing the Clancy stories, the idea that these are decisions and issues that players can relate to. Just the fact that it's people in the real world gives the material an emotional **oomph** that you don't necessarily get when it's a question of space lizards or trolls or Roman legionnaires or whatever. We've got that added advantage - and responsibility - of letting the player think 'it might be you.'"

Richard has been with Red Storm since 1999, having written for *Shadow Watch*, *Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield*, *Rainbow Six 3: Black Arrow*, *Ghost Recon:*

Island Thunder, *The Sum of All Fears* and "plenty of others." He is currently working on *Splinter Cell: Double Agent* and *Rainbow Six: Vegas*, although you'd be hard pressed to find the name "Dansky" anywhere on any of those games' Clancy-emblazoned boxes. One assumes that's all a part of living in the shadow of one of the world's most prolifically ghost-written authors, but we may never know for sure. *The Escapist* asked Richard about that, but he wasn't

allowed to give us an answer. Apparently, that information is classified. `COMMENTS`

Russ Pitts is an associate editor of and frequent contributor to The Escapist *and is the host and producer of The Escapist's podcast,* Escape Radio. *Pitts is the former producer and head writer of TechTV's* The Screen Savers, *and has played every game console ever made.*

To date, Red Storm has released over a dozen games embossed with the Clancy brand.

green-eyed GRRL

by Jim Rossignol

Of all the female protagonists who now inhabit the landscape of gaming, there is one who stands apart: Jade, the central character in Ubisoft's *Beyond Good & Evil*, exhibits an admirable kind of **cosmopolitan verve**. She has somehow been freed of genre expectations. With her green lipstick and a powerful sense of loyalty to her family and the people around her, she cuts an idealistic but believable figure against the absurd backdrop of games.

Beyond Good & Evil is a melange of styles, and Jade's personal depth is a reflection of that philosophy. She is not an action heroine, a creature of firepower or a fantasy goddess; instead, she is a journalist with a dash of martial arts training and a lighthouse full of orphans. She is a strong, desirable woman who is not far removed from the possibilities of the real world. Jade is also a protagonist with a strange secret - an essential quality of the sci-fi heroine.

Beyond Good & Evil's world is one of allegorical science fiction. It is a world under siege with a mainstream press and government who are conspiring to alter the perceptions of the people they are supposed to protect. It is a caricatured world with a very serious sense of paranoia, but still has a sense of humor when dealing with serious issues. A pig-man with rocket-boots somehow makes the perfect foil for a confident, independent young woman.

The game itself is determined to be confident and versatile. Even though we are left with that itchy feeling that it could have reached a little higher, it is routinely and intuitively entertaining. Numerous genres are introduced as plot elements: Racing arrives as a social necessity; shooter action appears in travel sequences; melee combat with dramatic slow-motion lets you know that this is a game with a story. Even photography and platform puzzles make sense and do not seem to take place in spite of a narrative.

Beyond Good & Evil avoids *Tomb Raider*'s leaping and jumping repetition. An action adventure with a female lead it might be, but recognizable as a clone of previous genres leaders it is not.

Crucially, *Beyond Good & Evil* takes big risks by stepping outside the axis of American and Japanese games. It is not identifiable within the aesthetic or thematic trends of either of those cultures, and instead it seems to access the European sensibilities of its parent company, Ubisoft. There's something distinctly French about the game, both visually and aurally. It's a quality that is detectable in other titles from the same stable, such as *Rayman* (whose producer, Michel Ancel, worked on *Beyond Good & Evil*) and *Flashback*. Furthermore, they seem to access something else in France's rich comic book and science fiction materials. The world of Hyllis is reminiscent of the contemporary Mediterranean, as if the Riviera were to be re-imagined by the creators of architecture fantasy *Les Cités Obscures*.

Beyond Good & Evil is a risk-taker simply because we do not readily recognize its subject matter - no orcs, no space marines. It also takes risks in the story it decided to tell: A politically driven tale that does not fit expected templates. Stepping outside the standard arcs of hero, revenge and villain, it delivers a decidedly modern tale of political deception and the power of the press. While there are puzzles and some fighting with Jade's staff-based martial skills, it is her camera that represents the key motor for the game's story and action. Jade's photos start out as a way of making money, but result in being an act of rebellion and liberation for her people - a population that, like some many contemporary populations, is being lied to.

Jade's photos are proof of what is taking place, and it's only by bravely performing acts of journalism (sneaking and stealthing where a fight will lead to disaster) that she is able to defeat her enemies. It is a game about the power not of guns or magic, but of **information**. It is the propaganda machine of the enemy that finally leads to its downfall, and the scene is set for a wider adventure and further-reaching philosophy. Would you expect anything less of a game with such a loaded title?

There is no evidence to suggest that *Beyond Good & Evil*'s story was an

Crucially, *Beyond Good & Evil* takes big risks by stepping outside the axis of American and Japanese games.

explicit commentary on the way that the Iraq war was manipulated by both the American and British government, but the lessons can nevertheless by read from the actions of Jade and her friends. Like the most elegantly constructed novels, *Beyond Good & Evil* suggests something about life without being so clumsy as to spell it out for us. It's a tool for learning - an action-packed lesson about life, if we choose to see it as such. Such games are worth playing as much as family entertainment as they are exercises in the margin of our own experiences. Sure, it's not exactly a philosophy lecture, but its gentle storytelling is nevertheless imbued with implication.

The tragedy of all this is that *Beyond Good & Evil* sold rather poorly. It was immediately drowned out at the time of its release by a string of high-profile titles across console and PC platforms. *Prince of Persia* and *Splinter Cell* were particularly overbearing at the time and were, unfortunately, both Ubisoft titles.

This is a game that should **never** have been overlooked by the game-hungry public, and I myself feel a twitch of guilt at the very mention of its name - a feeling that I didn't make enough of this provocative and entertaining game at the time I reviewed it. "Quite clever," I said of the game I was to talk about for another three years ...

So I'll consider this my penance to a game ill-served and ask you to point this browser at Amazon and demand a copy be couriered to your door. You'll be doing us both a favor and, perhaps, if that long tail of extended sales is long enough, Ubisoft will be able to continue the planned *Beyond Good & Evil* series. I think we owe Jade that second chance, and I, for one, want to see what she does next. [COMMENTS]

Jim Rossignol is a writer and editor based in the South West of England. He writes about videogames, fiction and science.

Like most constructed novels, *Beyond Good & Evil* suggests something about life without being so clumsy as to spell it out for us.

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