the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

We hear from a lot of people on a weekly basis wishing to write for the magazine. Some just like the magazine's style and want to be involved. Sometimes, they've already looked at our editorial calendar and have an issue in particular for which they'd like to write. And some come forward with fully fleshed out pitches or articles, great ideas, but not at all related to our calendar.

It is these orphan articles which cause us the most difficulty. You see, we're suckers for a great article, but we have built, and love, our editorial calendar. It is the foundation upon which the whole of *The Escapist* is built. However, we have learned in our first year of publishing *The Escapist* that sometimes it is best to have a little flexibility built into the mix.

It is this need for flexibility that has brought forth the recurring Editor's Choice issues you'll find scattered throughout the calendar. These issues are literally a mix of some of our favorite Homeless Articles over the last few months.

And this week, we present the first of the Editor's Choice issues, all tied up into a neat package. Max Steele drops in to tell us about three hot up-and-comers in the world of game development. Pat Miller writes in from Tokyo, discussing how the ubiquity of games in Japan actually reduces the number of those considered gamers. And newcomer Matthew McKeague takes us on a quest to find gaming gems through the most Random of all realms, The Suburban Yardsale. Find these articles and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*. Enjoy!

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Anne Died of Dysentery" from The Escapist Forum: I remember playing that game a lot. In the end, I learned how to "cheat" the trading system so that I could get as much as I wanted before I even started the trip.

...and I never stopped looking for ways of beating the system since.

- Meophist

In response to "Piano Wizards" from The Escapist Forum: If only there had been something like this while I was taking piano lessons. Around eight years of my life wasted. I have nothing to show for it. I memorized every song assigned to me and knew it by ear. I can only tell you where middle C is on the piano and on sheet music ... What a waste ... Of course I feel bad about it now. I could be playing decent piano

right now if I had only focused, paid attention, etc.

Actually the article makes me want to get the software and try this whole thing over again...

- falselogic

In response to "Playing to the Test" from The Escapist Forum: The question of learning games shouldn't be "how can we make learning fun?" Learning is already fun. It is built into our cognitive systems genetically. The entire school system has unintentionally

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broken almost everything about our children's natural ability to learn through play. More on this can be found by reading about it from a teacher's perspective at johntaylorgatto.com

Applying this idea to games is simple enough. Our son, Elijah, never sees the inside of the zombie factory, and a large portion of his "learning" comes from PC and console games. A lot of parents wouldn't dream of throwing *Homeworld 2* at a four-year-old; however, my theory was that the fun of the game would spur the learning of *Homeworld*'s complex systems like upgrade paths, 3d navigation, tactics, and teamwork. My idea paid off, and *Homeworld 2* quickly became one of Elijah's favorite games

My point is that educational games (with a few exceptions) are often the worst possible games to give to your kids. Full of boring drivel, the only thing they teach is a general mistrust of games. Your kids want to play what you're playing, so let them. When my dad showed me how to copy the floppies to get my own *StarFlight 2* galaxy going, it was a turning point in my young life and

lead me down the road to becoming a lifetime gamer and PC tinkering expert.

- Jacob.pederson

In response to "Learning the Gaming Way" from The Escapist Forum: Wow. That was the best article I've read all summer. I know of a couple senators who should give this a gander.
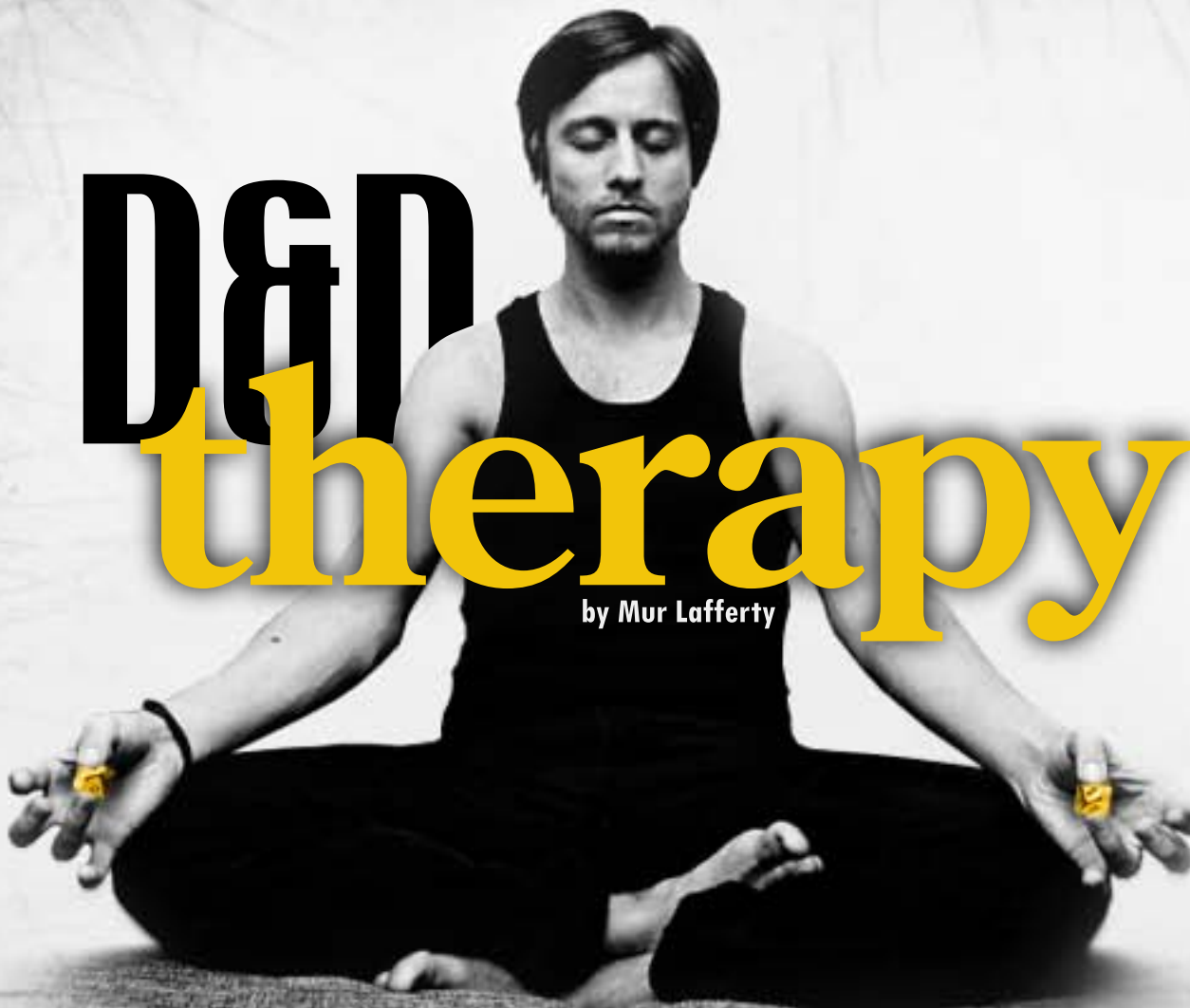
It's so very heartening to hear of Becky's improvement. It's also wonderful to know that the industry is contributing to society in ways not related to money or entertainment.

Between brain games and the Wii's potential for motor function therapy, Nintendo should think about expanding into the medical industry.

Thank you for making my afternoon!

- number40one

D&D therapy

by Mur Lafferty

It's becoming so ubiquitous that the hatred is old hat to us. Don't allow your kids to play videogames. It deadens their imagination, makes them more violent, exposes them to boobies and ruins their social conditioning with other kids. Don't allow your kids to play roleplaying games. It's a gateway drug to the occult, it encourages devil worship, suicide and only losers do it, anyway.

Most gamers are tired of hearing this, so tired they're numb to the criticisms. But what we don't hear enough of is the truth of the matter: Gaming is good for you.

Really.

While many have blamed today's hectic lifestyle – and computer games – on the rise of attention deficit disorder in children, the fact has gone silently under the radar that there are computer games available that are specifically designed to help kids with ADD.

NASA developed a high-tech helmet to assist pilots in flight simulator training, measuring sustained attention, engagement, awareness and stress.

Using neurofeedback, the helmet can register how much the user is focusing - the very problem ADD sufferers have. Doctors soon discovered its usefulness in therapeutic situations, as these are qualities monitored in children with ADD. The helmet supports a surprising number of games on the PlayStation, PS2 and Xbox systems. After measuring the neurofeedback from the child, the helmet modifies the game. For example, if the child's attention starts to waver, the game slows down. It works best with racing or platform games that require speed and direction control, responding to higher focus and rewarding things other than hand-eye coordination.

The S.M.A.R.T. BrainGames EEG Neurofeedback system from Smartbraingames.com won't even break the bank. But does it work?

This past March, doctors declared that 9-year-old Ethan Meyers was brain dead after a car accident, and when he woke up, would never function on his own. But Ethan has regained much of his memory and mental abilities, partially with the help of videogame therapy from the same S.M.A.R.T. BrainGames product.

It has long been known that doing puzzles is good for your brain, and there's a plethora of cheap puzzle games available, and even more can be found for free online. What's more, *Big Brain Academy* and *Brain Age* are selling Nintendo DSes just as quickly as *New Super Mario Bros*. These games are so popular, the publishers are developing marketing campaigns to focus on women and the elderly.

Brain Age tests your concentration with a variety of tests from arithmetic to word memorization – and of course, it runs the puzzle game that's all the rage now: *Sudoku*. It uses the microphone for some voice recognition games, such as saying the color of a word – if a word "red" shows up in the color blue, you have to say "blue." It's challenging, and even more so when your dog decides to bark at the UPS driver while you're yelling "Red!" at your DS. It also utilizes the touch screen with handwriting recognition software for arithmetic and writing games. All of the games, as the little bobbing host head constantly reminds you, are good for your prefrontal cortex.

On a social and religious level, roleplaying games (namely *Dungeons & Dragons*) have been mocked, feared and demonized. In pop culture, playing *D&D* is considered the stamp of the Geek With No Social Abilities™ - the thing you quit when you get a girlfriend, a job and finally grow up.

Derek Colanduno of Atlanta, GA, is an adult, geek, gamer, intellectual and co-host of one of the web's popular independent podcasts, *Skepticality*. He has dabbled in being a radio DJ, an anti-terrorism expert and a project manager for an environmental engineering company (his current job).

Last September, Derek suffered a stroke; specifically what's called a "bleed."

"A bundle of small blood vessels at the base of my skull ruptured and started to fill my skull with blood," Derek said. "They had to go in and drill three or four holes and insert tubes into my head to let out the excess blood." He was in a coma for 45 days.

We figure Derek lost at least three-fourths of his hit points that night in September. His recovery has not had any

Cure Light Wounds speed, sadly. It's been slow, proceeding in baby steps to begin to get back the skills he lost during the stroke.

At the beginning of the 2006 summer, Derek was nearing the end of his official speech therapy appointments. His therapist, Karen Patterson, asked him

> In pop culture, playing *D&D* is considered the stamp of the Geek With No Social Abilities™.

what he did for fun, since a lot of everyday activities count as therapy for stroke victims, and if they can have fun during therapy, all the better. When he mentioned his *D&D* playing, Karen asked for more information.

"Once she read more about *D&D* and other games of the type, she realized that it is a good use of my time at home to get myself back to talking normally and with friends and coworkers," Derek said. "She also found out that in the early days of the creation of *D&D*, it was used at hospitals and schools for kids and others that had issues with talking and other problems with relating to

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at the official blog for the magazine!

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> Blackmon had a suicidal patient by the name of Fred who resisted conventional therapy with great hostility, but his therapy had a significant turning point when Fred joined a *D&D* game.

others, or with the world in general. So, she became a big fan of me getting back to doing the gaming with friend on a normal schedule. Who was I to argue?"

Patterson was right that *D&D* has been used in speech therapy before, but the ironic thing is that there are several examples of it being used in psychotherapy. In 1994, Wayne D. Blackmon published an article in the American Journal of Psychotherapy titled "Dungeons and Dragons: The Use of a Fantasy Game in the Psychotherapeutic Treatment of a Young Adult." In his study, Blackmon had a suicidal patient by the name of Fred who resisted conventional therapy with great hostility, but his therapy had a significant turning point when Fred joined a *D&D* game. Blackmon writes, "It did allow him some social contact, and the eagerness with which he told me about the game indicated to me the importance of his sharing this material. I began to encourage him to bring summaries of episodes into therapy and to ask about motivation and feelings of characters."

After exploring issues regarding his parents and his mentally challenged brother, Fred began to recognize the

range of feelings from love to hate within therapy, and to master them.

Games are easy targets for the fundamentalist leaders and uninformed parents who want to blame the Problems of the Youth Today on one easily defined and censorable hobby. Have gamers killed people? Yes. But so have sports fans, rifle enthusiasts, military personnel, NASCAR devotees and people with other hobbies. And yet roleplaying is the one hobby that is vilified; it's the one that people always assume has a definite connection to violence.

Detractors point to the fact that you can worship demons, cast spells and kill innocents in games, and that these lead to more violent thoughts that escalate into actions in real life. But, as the case of Fred showed us, sometimes the violent actions in our imaginations can act as a valve on a pressure cooker, letting us pretend to do things that we know are socially reprehensible. Fred's character had killed a rich man's sons and was conspiring to marry his daughter in order to gain the man's fortune. Blackmon writes, "As he recounted this material in the therapy we focused on two questions: the

motives and feelings of the character as he schemed and acted, and whether Fred had ever had such feelings, and in what situations. Gradually, he was able to relate that he had felt his brother had always gotten the family 'treasures' of love and attention and that he had wanted to murder him much of the time."

We didn't see Fred running out and killing his family who he resented. Instead he played it out, releasing the frustration and anger in a controlled game setting. Games are a stress reliever, an escape. A pediatric dentist in Cary, NC, has a waiting room that's fitted with TVs and Xboxes to comfort and calm nervous patients. Why they have to keep this only in pediatric dentist's offices, I'll never know. My dentist prescribes me Valium. I'd rather have *Final Fantasy VIII*.

While games do have direct therapeutic applications, their benefits can extend beyond those suffering psychologically. Gamers should be familiar with Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik's three-year-old charity, Child's Play. The creators of the mega-popular *Penny Arcade* webcomic started a charity in order to address yet another report about how

gamers were nothing but violent, socially-repressed dorks. This charity has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of toys, books and yes, games for children's hospitals.

"Incorporating videogames marks a new frontier that taps young people's fascination with animation and electronics to sweeten often frightening, lengthy and tedious medical treatments. … Videogames are being used, for instance, to help sick children manage pain and anxiety during hospital stays," says a Reuters report.

Every year, hospitals make a wish list of items to keep sick children occupied during treatment. The items can be as simple as a $3 coloring book to a $400 Xbox 360. And yes, several 360s make it into children's wards. The larger consoles, Nintendo GBAs, DSs, PSPs and scores of games are available for rent in hospitals, occupying young kids' times.

And who can forget the whole issue of obesity? "Games make kids fat" was one of the rallying cries, until, that is, *Dance Dance Revolution* came out. The game was so engaging that kids of all energy levels wanted to play, and some

progressive – some might call them desperate – schools in West Virginia actually incorporated *DDR* into their physical education program.

Let's face it: Nothing is black and white anymore. For every kid who got fat and anti-social from playing too much *Monster Rancher*, there's a kid with ADD who can focus without meds, or a kid who doctors claimed would always be brain damaged, or an adult who is finally able to function socially. *Penny Arcade*'s Holkins and Krahulik might also argue that gaming makes one more generous, as their $600,000-plus take for Child's Play 2005 showed.

Whatever the issue, it's clear that the gaming good/bad debate is firmly mired in gray territory. We, as gamers, just need to find a way to make the good side heard as loudly as the bad. With

doctors, psychiatrists, dentists, speech therapists and high school curriculum planners on our side, we might actually make some headway. Gaming **is** good for you. COMMENTS

Mur Lafferty is a freelance writer and podcast producer. She has dabbled in as much gaming as possible, from her website work at Red Storm Entertainment to her RPG writing for White Wolf Publishing. Currently she writes freelance for several gaming publications and produces three podcasts: Geek Fu Action Grip, I Should Be Writing and Pseudopod: the Horror Podcast Magazine. She lives in Durham, NC.
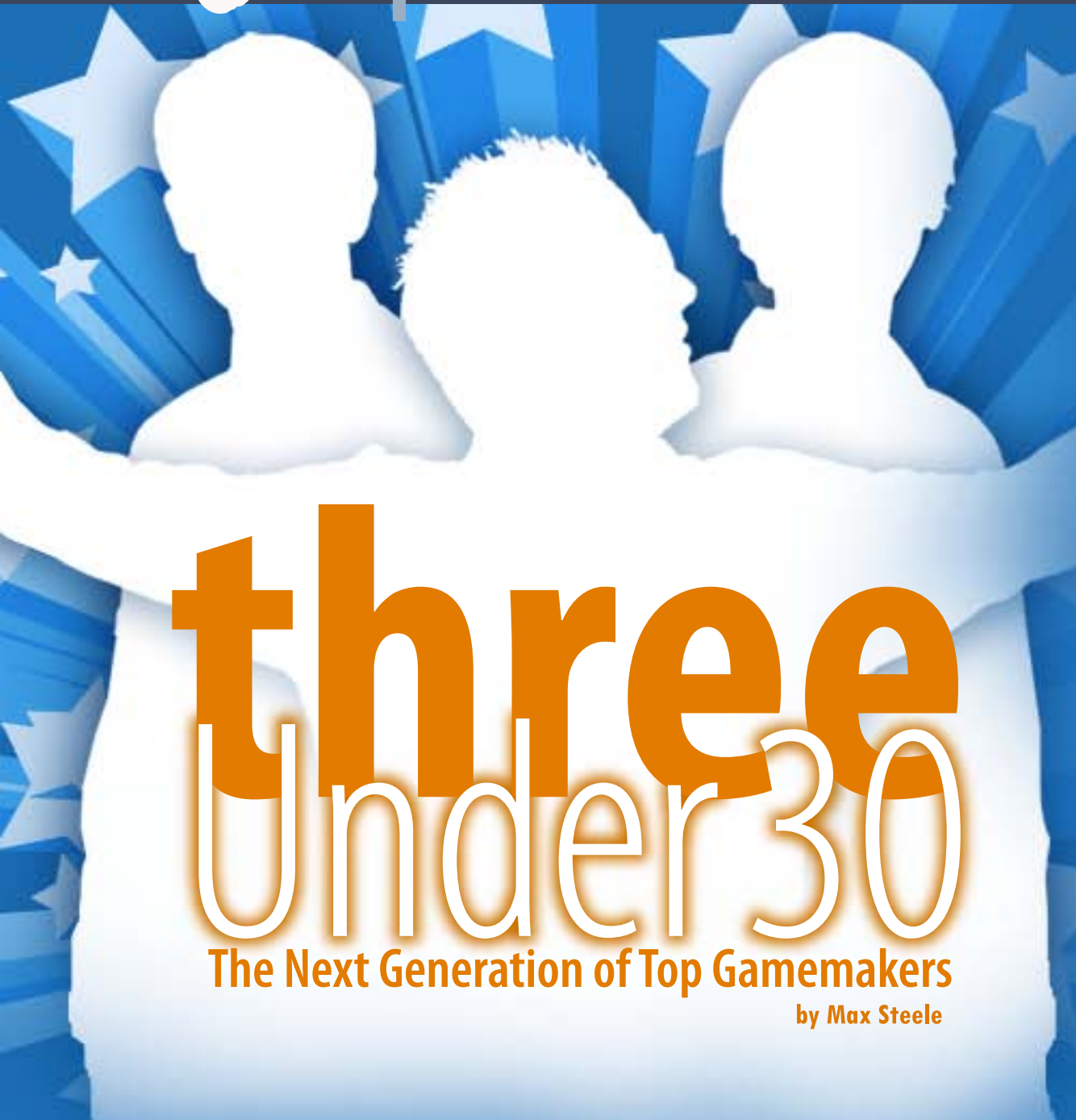
three
Under30
The Next Generation of Top Gamemakers

by Max Steele

The game industry is widely perceived as young. And, in a sense, it is: The "old masters," developers like Garriott, Meier and Miyamoto, are still in their prime, still young; and the game development studios are chock full of fresh blood itching to make the Next Big Thing.

But the industry's relative youth is as much a curse as a blessing. While Shigeru Miyamoto is still making games, no rising star can claim to be the new Miyamoto. And no one can claim to be the successor to Sid Meier's turn-based strategy legacy while Sid Meier is still making really great turn-based strategy games. Compounding the problem is the ever-increasing cost and complexity of game development. Fewer and fewer publishers are willing to risk development capital on green crews and bright ideas, and production values have risen so high that something like Garriott's *Akalabeth* seems impossible today. As a result, the vast majority of the industry's young developers are still working at junior-level positions in their seniors' studios.

The vast majority – but not all. Like film and television, gaming has its wunderkinds, young stars that shatter expectations of accomplishment. I've assembled profiles of three of the best and brightest of these gamemakers, our industry's future game gods. One is an independent publisher, the second a revolutionary risk-taker, the third a graphical prodigy. Each is under 30 years old. Here, then, are three under-30 next generation gamemakers to watch.

***The Independent*: Thomas Arundel**
Call him "The Last of the Bedroom Programmers" and you get a wry chuckle out of Thomas Arundel, director and co-founder of game development studio Introversion Software. "I'm actually the commercial director. I'm the entrepreneur. I handle all of the business aspects of Introversion," he explains.

And business has been good under the stewardship of the 27-year-old executive. "When we founded Introversion, we had £1,000 between three of us. A friend of mine [co-founder Chris Delay] had

written *Uplink* in university, and that was our first product. After three months, we'd made £100,000. Our gross margin was 95%. Since then, all of our growth has been organic. We've never raised cash, never sold out."

Riding high on *Uplink*'s success, Introversion began work on its second game, *Darwinia*. "That was supposed to take 18 months, but it took three years." The delay was nearly disastrous for the team, he notes. "We had to sell everything we owned on eBay and go without salary for 10 months. I moved back in with Mom and Dad. But we made it through."

The belt-tightening commitment paid off. *Darwinia* went on to win three Independent Game Festival Awards at San Jose earlier this year and has paved the way for the team's next projects. "It got us a lot of credibility. It's given us a comfortable salary for the past 18 months. And it's made us enough money to get us through to *Defcon*."

Defcon, a game of global thermonuclear war due out in September, is Introversion's next project. "After that's released, we're going to split the

company into two divisions, a more creative side and an implementation side. Chris [Delay] will come out with the original IP, and Mark Morris and I will get it done. Our plan is to work as producers with third-party developers doing the nitty-gritty."

It's perhaps common to think of the small development studio as the recipient of work-for-hire, rather than as an outsourcer, but Arundel sees a different trend emerging. "I think this method we're adopting of developing unique IP independently and then outsourcing the nitty-gritty work is an emerging trend. People will look back and say that we were the first guys to adopt an independent producer-director-studio model, like in the film business. At E3, people talk a lot about trends in indie development, and they talk about trends in the film business. And this is it."

Arundel is sanguine about his accomplishments at Introversion. "You don't need a huge amount of capital to start a game company. You just need a lot of time and a lot of inspiration. But you have to be able to live on the edge. There's no safe bets." Except, perhaps, a bet on Arundel.

"Ever dapper, Tom is pushing the boundaries of what it means to be an indie developer via Introversion's unwavering commitment to make what they want to make, and yet being business savvy about what it means to thrive in the indie space."
  – Jason Della Rocca, Executive Director, IGDA

"Tom is exceptional -- I've been impressed with his will to drive Introversion in a different direction to traditional developers. He's astute, articulate, a fast learner, and a lot of fun to be around."
  – Alison Beasley, Lincoln Beasley PR

The Revolutionary: Scott Foe

Ask Scott Foe what his favorite project is, and he'll tell you "whatever's next." Often outrageous, always funny, the 29-year-old producer has made a career of staying on the forefront of industry trends – sometimes too far ahead, but always looking to the future. He got his start at age 21 at Sega, which recruited the Japanese-fluent Foe straight out of Antioch College.

"When I came on to Sega, it was before the launch of the Dreamcast and the plan was to have this big consumer-facing gaming network. The vision was not unlike what Xbox Live eventually became," Foe explains. "But we were right out there on the precipice, looking forward."

Foe created the first game that used the Dreamcast Network SDKs, then went on to work as a senior-level production consultant on projects like *Phantasy Star Online*, *Bomberman Online* and *NFL 2K1*. "It was a tremendous amount of responsibility for a 22-year-old," he adds. When the Dreamcast era ended, he led the team that assembled the various network projects that had been created for the console into the unified Sega Network Application Package (SNAP). When Sega abandoned online, his SNAP technology was sold to Nokia, and Foe followed his creation to make it mobile.

"The idea that you could be walking down the street and whip out your phone and play a game with someone in Thailand – that was the Wild Wild West of the videogaming industry. I got to make that idea reality. I was the product manager on N-Gage Arena, the visionary for that project."

After laying out the design for N-Gage Arena, Foe had the opportunity to produce Sega's *Pocket Kingdom: Own the World*, a massively multiplayer mobile game that won the game of the year for the N-Gage platform and even a nod from notoriously un-N-Gaged *Penny Arcade*. "*Pocket Kingdom* was played after launch an average of 7.3 hours per

"Foe has really big balls, and when they get to swinging, watch out!"
    – Ed Annunziata, Creator, *Ecco* the Dolphin

"Scott has continually impressed me as a creative thinker, and one of the rare breed that understands how business, marketing and design all mix together in the making of a great game."
    – Scott Miller, Co-Founder, 3D Realms

"Scott pairs cutting-edge vision with the ability to execute and that's what makes him formidable. He has a broad palette of skills that he brings to the table. He is analytical, but can pair that with an emotional and intuitive angle that is rare in any business."
    – Gerard Weiner, Director & GM, Nokia Games Business Program

month per user, making it possibly the most popular online mobile game in the world at that time," says Foe.

At just short of 30, Foe has already been a coder, designer and producer for two mega-brand companies. The polymathic Foe is also well-respected in the marketing community, speaking at conferences worldwide on viral tactics. "Salable product is a producer's primary responsibility. On-time, under-budget is the fallacy of production. You could go to the bathroom for less time and money than you ever thought possible, but all you've made is a piece of shit."

So, what's next? "I want to bring things into this world that cut the edge into little pieces that could cut further still. And it's not graphics. We've already reached a point of diminishing returns in graphics horsepower. Fun is no longer proportional to polygons. There was this great leap from 2-D to 3-D. And there was another great leap when we took it online; that was a new dimension. But it's not any more. Now what I see the next dimension as being is passive entertainment – games that are fun for

other people to watch. One future of gaming will be entertainment that can be enjoyed by the non-player, creating as a byproduct of your own entertainment something for the masses to enjoy." He takes a breath. "That's how we'll escape Hollywood's shadow."

"Lots of people sit around and tell you why something is impossible. Then someone thinks for himself or herself and goes out and does it. Scott Foe was the big thinker who brought globally multiplayer worlds to mobile gaming with Sega's *Pocket Kingdom*. I don't know if it was his gaming instincts or his mathematical training, but he saw the opening that everyone else missed."

– Don Daglow, Founder, Stormfront Studios

"Scott's been at the forefront of a couple really cool advances in gaming; he was a pioneer in online console gaming with the Dreamcast and he has helped to realize the first Mobile [MMOG]. I'm really interested to see what he does next - he's got tremendous potential (and a boat-load of passion)!"

– Greg Zeschuk, Co-Founder, BioWare

The Photorealist: Sam McGrath

Twenty-seven-year-old game engine prodigy Sam McGrath is entirely self-taught. "I've been programming ever since I can remember, since I was maybe 6 years old. It's something I've always had a passion for. I read a few books here and there, but the rest is trial and error."

McGrath's first trial was the creation of *Savage*, the RTS/FPS hybrid by S2 Games that swept three Independent Game Festival awards in 2004. "I was the lead programmer. I wrote the engine code. But I wasn't happy about the direction the company was heading, and I didn't have a lot of control. So, I started Offset."

Offset Software is now a 19-person team with publisher backing, and their eponymous *Project Offset*, a first-person shooter in an epic fantasy universe, is generating massive buzz for its gritty *Call of Duty*-style action and amazing graphics. The engine that powers *Offset* is all McGrath.

"I locked myself in an apartment for a year, and I worked on engine technology," Sam McGrath explains. "I

"Sam and his team are proving to a jaded industry how a few guys with great ideas and great technology can still succeed. The Offset Engine really surprised the big engine vendors, coming out of nowhere like they did. Carmack once mentioned that the industry would go on without him if he left, and that others would carry the torch. Sam is one of those special guys following in his footsteps."
   – Mark Kern, Founder, Red 5 Studios

"Sam is firing on all cylinders. He knows the importance of saving money, making great tools for great artists, and is even a brilliant composer."
   – Dave Taylor, Industry Consultant (formerly of id, Transmeta and Carbon6)

had saved up all the money I made working at S2 games and I had the freedom to work on this technology without any income."

The outcome of McGrath's isolation has to be seen to be believed. "The Offset Engine brings together next-generation hardware with rendering techniques from film, such as motion blurs, self-shadowing, a full HDR rendering pipeline, all the rendering features that people are used to in movie effects, but which have never been done in real-time before.

Effects that used to take an hour to render out a frame, we're able to achieve 30 times per second."

McGrath is quick to share credit for Offset with his two lead artists, brothers Trevor and Travis Stringer. All three share a vision of games that push the envelope of what can be done visually. "We want to make games that are incredibly immersive. People always talk about making games that look like movies, but it hasn't really been achieved yet. I want to be on the forefront of actually achieving that."

McGrath cites Tim Sweeney, Dave Taylor and John Carmack as major inspirations; indeed, it's clear that if McGrath has his way, Offset will be the new id Software. Like id, the company is working with a publisher to release its FPS title while retaining all underlying technology rights to its engine and pursuing licensing deals. The ex-Blizzard veterans at Red 5 Studios have already licensed Offset for an upcoming game. "It would be nice to be the next id. It's something we're striving for. There are no guarantees in life, but things are looking really good for us."

"In a world were videogame budgets have gotten crazy, it is great to see someone like Sam push the envelope and make a great engine because he has a love and a passion for it. I love it that Sam is able to shock people with his work. Hearing the questions at shows of "is that really all in real-time?" and "nah, that has to be rendered" is the greatest compliment that a game can achieve.

"I can't wait till I am sitting in the audience and hearing Sam McGrath and his partners on *Project Offset* being awarded Best New Developer and Best Game of the Year."
    – Eric Reichley, Dev Relations Manager, nVidia

The Future of Gaming
The future of gaming doesn't lie in the Xbox 360, the Wii, Windows Vista or PlayStation 3. It can't be found in next-generation graphics processors or dual core chips. It's not in mobile or online. It's found in the new wave of people – people like McGrath, Foe and Arundel — that have learned from the game gods of the past three decades and are ready to lead gaming forward into its place as the preeminent entertainment medium of the 21st century. COMMENTS

Max Steele is an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. When not actively being mysterious, he passes his time manipulating time and space to fit his plans for world domination.

Arundel, Foe, and McGrath aren't the only people you need to be keeping an eye on. Here are a few more emerging stars from among the next generation of game developers:

Jenova Chen, Designer, USC School of Cinema & Television
Joshua Glazer, CTO, Naked Sky Entertainment
Erin Hoffman, Designer, 1st Playable Productions
Robin Hunicke, Game Designer, Maxis
Darius Kazemi, Data Analyst, Turbine Games
Christophe Soum, CTO, Allegorithmic
Naoko Takamoto, Associate Producer, Harmonix Music

They're Everywhere!

by Pat Miller

I've walked across the Sophia University campus in Tokyo, Japan almost every day at 9:10 a.m. for the last few months. The entire campus is shaped like a gigantic T, and from the Yotsuya train station it took me about 10 minutes to turn the corner, walk straight through the main gates and down the long end of the T until I got to the building that housed the Faculty of Comparative Culture, affectionately referred to as the "*Gaijin* Ghetto" by its inhabitants, most of whom were international students.

Normally, I would show up to school in a T-shirt, jeans and sandals; hopelessly underdressed by the standards of most Sophia students, but I didn't particularly care. I would only see most of the other students while we were making the long trek across the campus, and general campus-walking etiquette requires that one either look straight ahead, far off into the horizon or stare down at the ground immediately ahead of oneself, the idea being that these two postures are ideal for avoiding unnecessarily awkward eye contact with strangers. This, of course, meant I was blissfully ignorant of wardrobe-based judgments of my character.

The exception to all of this was my bright green 1UP mushroom T-shirt, which inspired even the most tenuous of acquaintances to comment, with genuine curiosity, "So, you know *Mario*?" More excitable individuals would simply point and yell "*Ichi-Appu*!" to get my attention. The shirt was, I already knew, tragically, hopelessly *otaku*, particularly because Japan's 8-bit memories haven't been merchandised to the college crowd quite like they have in the U.S., but they didn't seem to mind. There was no subtlety to my character while I wore the 1UP; it transformed me from an ethnically ambiguous, mysterious foreigner to a dorky American kid who violated the first rule of the Japanese Dress Code by wearing his heart on his sleeve. At least it wasn't an icon of obscure Japan-worship, like some cult *anime* character. Mario is relatively harmless, I thought.

After all, Mario is everywhere. He is on *New Super Mario Bros.* billboards; he is in TV spots starring well-known Japanese actresses; he has his own brand of curry. He shows up in Nintendo-sponsored trivia ads on the Yamanote train line that runs in a loop around downtown Tokyo. If you know where to look, you can find

someone's rendition of Yoshi hidden in Harajuku's Takeshita-doori. And, of course, he shows up on Game Boys and Nintendo DSes all over. Seeing pink Nintendo DSes in the hands of girls and women of all ages isn't so surprising when it hits the fastest-selling-console-in-Japanese-history milestone, which isn't to say that you won't see plenty of PSPs dotting Tokyo's portable landscape, for that matter, or tiny laptops with mahjong games. Or cell phones playing baseball sims. This is the same country that brought us the *Final Fantasy* Potion; of *course* games are everywhere.

And yet, despite the incredible saturation of Mario in Japan, people were surprised that I wore the 1UP. Average young Japanese people had no idea how popular Mario is overseas. They probably haven't seen the *Super Mario Brothers Super Show*, the movie with John Leguizamo, eaten the Nintendo cereal or any of that. Never mind that Kentucky Fried Chicken's Colonel Sanders has successfully penetrated the Japanese market; imagining the reverse, that a Japanese symbol has become an integral image of an entire American generation, is completely unthinkable. Likewise, of

course, with *Final Fantasy*'s rampant American popularity; to the Japanese who *haven't* encountered American fan-people, the idea that Sephiroth occupies the hearts and minds of a million LiveJournals is nigh impossible to imagine.

In the United States, kids who play videogames are relatively "normal"; it is not considered unusual for the children of the last few decades to lust after whatever the flavor-of-the-month game system is. As we age, our platform may change with us; perhaps we will change to a more "adult" platform like the Xbox or the N-Gage. But at some point, the grown man who spends more of his weekend on home improvement in *Second Life* than his real life is seen as an anomaly. In Japan, videogames are more accessible - there are thriving arcades in most major commercial centers, for one, and almost everyone spends one-sixth of their waking life on a train with nothing better to do than play games - and so it's not so uncommon to find a mid-30s salary man playing *Dragon Quest VIII*.

Games are accessible, which means more people play games, which means

playing games is less weird, and so it's not so surprising when my friend Emi, a third-year college student, points out *DQVIII* as her favorite while I'm running errands in Akihabara's Electric Town. Yes, people who play too many games are still considered weird - with the notorious examples of "*hikikomori,*" shut-ins that tend to spend their days insulated in their bedrooms in their parents' house, playing games all day being a prime example - but *presence* of games alone, in acceptable contexts, is not necessarily enough to be what we call a "gamer."

Present-day America does not have the identity of "moviegoer" in the same sense that we consider our gamers. A DVD player alone is not enough to constitute part of our *identity*; we are science-fiction moviegoers, action moviegoers or Johnny Depp moviegoers. The analogue to a gamer is, perhaps, a "film buff," but of course, the film buff is characterized not simply by knowledge of movies but *excessive* knowledge of movies.

This is why it's a little weird when I wear my 1UP tee, and a little weirder to see Super Potato, Akihabara's legendary retro game store, populated by wolf

packs of college-age Americans. Japanese people - the ones who know Electric Town well enough to *know* about Super Potato, at any rate - stop by to get in a quick game of *Super Mario Bros. 3*. Americans come on a pilgrimage. We gasp and drool in awe over something that everyone else takes for granted. We incorporate the gaming into our *identity*. Everyone else thinks that's kind of weird.

A fellow American international student landed a sweet job teaching English in Tokyo for about US$30 an hour. One of his students - a housewife in her early 40s - carried Mickey Mouse emblems on her electronic dictionary, handkerchief, watch, cellular phone, cosmetic pouch, even her imitation Louis Vuitton handbag, and introduced herself as "Miki." "I really like Mickey Mouse," she said on the first day. As Americans, perhaps we're not surprised enough to ask, "Oh, you know Mickey Mouse?" because, well, *everybody* grew up with Mickey Mouse, didn't they? We won't, generally speaking, handle Mickey Mouse with the same amount of retro cool that we regard the 1UP. In fact, we might think it's kind of weird when grown people saturate their belongings with

him. But searching for the barest hint of familiarity, like Mickey or the 1UP, can be enough push someone over that cultural gap and hesitantly stammer in a language that's not their own, "You know Mario?" Which in turn could lead you to "Do you play videogames?" "Oh, you like kickboxing, too?" or, more often than not, "You like drinking?"

Mario - and the 1UP - will not make you look more Japanese any more than adorning her accessories with Mickey Mouse will make a Japanese woman look more American. They will not speak volumes about your personality the way that they can in the U.S. They're not a cultural skeleton key, guaranteeing you acceptance into another people's way of viewing the world. But making the effort helps bridge gaps that have been open for far too long. That, I think, is good enough. COMMENTS

Pat Miller has been doing this for way too long. Stop by his blog, Token Minorities, for more on race and videogames.

We incorporate gaming into our **identity**. Everyone else thinks that's kind of weird.

there's a lot more to tell

by Shannon Drake

"I am forced into print because men of journalism have refused to follow my advice without knowing why." It's a sign things are going awry when the walls start bleeding. Then, the voices start up, and the Gamecube spits up an error message saying the controller isn't plugged in. And in the meantime, the monsters are closing in and it's time to start questioning how much sanity you have left.

Chainsaws and gore pass for cutting-edge in gaming, but Silicon Knights' *Eternal Darkness* takes the craft of horror further. A *Call of Cthulhu*-style Sanity system plunges characters into madness, but the game also reaches out into the life of the player as his character goes mad. Instead of zombies out of nowhere, there's that cold chill in the pit of the stomach, that little shudder as the game announces 20 hours of gameplay has been deleted. There's the unsettling feeling of realizing the bug crawling across the TV is on the inside.

I hunted down Denis Dyack, Producer and Director of *Eternal Darkness* and President of Silicon Knights, to get inside **his** head. "Doubt of the real facts, as I must reveal

them, is inevitable; yet, if I suppressed what will seem extravagant and incredible, there would be nothing left."

Eternal Darkness was "something that kind of came together. At that point, there had been a lot of horror games, specifically survival/horror. And we wanted to create something that was in the horror genre, but not categorized as survival/horror." There was another reason, too, something less lofty, he says. "At the same time, and [this] still is ongoing, videogames were under fire for messing with people's heads, and being accused of being murder simulators and stuff. So, we thought, wouldn't it be a good idea to make something that really does mess with people's heads?"

Combining the atmosphere of a Poe story — protagonist going mad, dealing with forces that may be entirely in his mind — with the themes of a Lovecraft story — protagonist going mad, dealing with forces that may be entirely in his mind and the ancient evil lurking on the edges of consciousness — *Eternal Darkness* is a different kind of horror game, almost literary in its storytelling.

Not surprisingly, Denis cites the classics for inspiration. "All horror is steeped in Edgar Allen Poe, but Lovecraft is a staple of horror, and just about every major horror movie, almost every major horror writer, had to have some homage, and [we] stand on the shoulders of giants," he says, adding, "The other one that's a little more subtle in *Eternal Darkness* that a lot of people don't pick up on is Michael Moorcock and the parallel universes, *Eternal Champion* kind of thing."

He's actually hesitant to talk about his influences at all, saying, "These are things that I like, that resonate personally. We hadn't really looked at it and said, 'Let's do part of this and mix it all together.' It's just that these are the kinds of things, if I was to say, it was similar to. … [However], we try to create something original every time. … [In *Eternal Darkness*,] we talk about the history of the Ancients and them being imprisoned. [In] every major area in *Eternal Darkness*, there was a major catastrophe that occurred at some level."

He cites an instance from Tamerlane's exploits as an example: "The Pillar of Flesh in the chapter with Abdul" - he's speaking of a monument made out of people - "that's historically accurate. That stuff really did happen," he says, referring to Tamerlane's habit of slaughtering the people of the cities he conquered. "So, we've basically gone through history and said, 'What are these crazy, insane things that have happened?' and then put a fantasy spin on it of, let's say there's an ancient influence on people to do these really bad things." Somewhere, an ancient evil sleeping in a lost city stirs.

"Things like that were tied in or thrown in everywhere. That was kind of the guiding light," and the research didn't stop there. With crazy historical events in place, they began looking elsewhere. He tells me, "We did a lot of research into the occult [and] magic systems, and we really tried to pull it into something that would really make sense and be fun for people to play. At the same time, we tried to ground it in something that's somewhat believable and doesn't break the suspension of disbelief. And one of the things we really tried to do with the story that I personally am pretty happy with -" He pauses to ask if I've played through the game's three different plots, and I confess that I have not, only half joking when I cite a weak heart. "If you actually play it through all three times, and it changes to a different god every time, the story actually explains how you could've played the game three times in parallel, and that's the parallel universes," he says.

That commitment to keeping things believable was something I was curious about. While the undead walk, ancient evils sleep and people travel through time, there is an internal consistency to the story that seems rooted in keeping it believable. I asked if it was intentional. "Yes!" he said, quite emphatically. "Yeah, I think whenever you create any kind of fiction, you have to set up your own ruleset, and if you break those rules, you're going to upset the audience. We think that's really important. When we create content, that's one of the major rules. So, with every game we've created so far, it's basically, here's our set of rules. Here's what we're never going to break. With *Eternal Darkness*, it was, 'Let's be historically accurate.' So, yeah, that is something I think improves the game and helps people appreciate it more and the content within."

While the undead walk, ancient evils sleep and people travel through time, there is an internal consistency to the story that seems rooted in keeping it believable.

Without question, a hallmark of Silicon Knights' games is a strong focus on history. *Eternal Darkness* hops across history, *Too Human* is rooted in Norse mythology and most of their other titles are set in the past or a dystopian dark fantasy that looks a lot like the past. I asked what significance history has for the team, and why it keeps popping up in their titles. "I was a History minor at university," Denis answered. "I love history. I actually think that history is so rich, that there's so much that can be learned from it." He cites *Conan*, a series and movie he loves, as an example: "A lot of the philosophy was based on Genghis Khan. And a lot of the things that Conan would say would be straight from that. And it's sort of, well, people don't realize that, but it sounds really good, and they like it. I think by having that kind of foundation, we create something that's enjoyable and entertaining. And in the end, that's what we're trying to do, is entertain people. If we have that grounding in history, god forbid people learn something. I think we do [learn something] through osmosis, and I think that's a nice secondary goal."

Mythology is another big feature of Silicon Knights games, be it the Norse mythology of *Too Human*, the vampire lore of *Kane*, or the Lovecraft-style mythology of *Eternal Darkness*. I asked what motivated that. "I think … [mythoi] really are rich, involved and deep, and I think it's just a love for that stuff. I don't know if you've seen our blogs, but I was a big Ray Harryhausen fan. And, to me, when you look at the Cyclops or the statue of Kali, when you start looking into those mythologies, you're like, 'Wow, that's really cool stuff,' and then you look at the interpretation, and the interpretation adds so much more.

"Really, art is a perspective, and you take these mythologies and [say], 'Let's spin a perspective on them and see what people think.'" *Too Human* takes Norse mythology and adds cybernetics, and explains that twist thusly: "'Let's take the Norse mythologies and let's put these perspectives on them, and see what people think.' And you'll find it'll be extremely consistent and very well-researched."

Getting into the specifics of the game, I felt I would be remiss if I didn't ask the guy named on the insanity patent about *Eternal Darkness*' Sanity system. Voices, horrible visions, bugs crawling across the

Even the creator isn't immune to the machinations, to hear him tell it. "The one that still fools me once in a while is when the volume gets turned down."

screen, the game spitting up fake error messages and worse effects happen as the player characters go insane. It's possible to confront the monsters and madness of *Eternal Darkness'* world, but it always comes with a price, be it a character seeing things or the game shifting the volume up and down for the sake of creepiness.

"We really wanted to create something that messed with people's heads," Denis said. "So we had these ideas, and hallucinations had been done before. And so, the whole idea that we could make it so that as you saw things you slowly lose your Sanity, it would change the way the game would play, [that] was something that we thought people would really enjoy." Lovecraft's name comes up again as he says, "If you look at Lovecraft or the *Call of Cthulhu* games, in their sort of mythos, when you lost your sanity, it was really bad, and it usually meant you would die. *Eternal*

Darkness is the opposite. It's actually really fun. And we found, in focus testing, that people would want to go insane. And so, there's things like that, just exploring the fascination." Citing gaming as a form of escapism, he brings up a rhetorical question. What if you could go insane for fun?

He's eager to mention the Sanity effect where the game says your memory card has been wiped out. "It's funny; these are the worries that people have," he says. "We tried to play upon the things that people worry about when they play videogames, or when they're investing time into a product. The whole crash screen coming up, erasing all the time you've spent on the game, and having the bug crawl across the screen is annoying at first, but then you realize it's this big bug and you're like, 'Oh, my God.'"

Even the creator isn't immune to the machinations, to hear him tell it. "The one that still fools me once in a while is when the volume gets turned down. It depends on your TV. We did it with some of the TVs that we had here, and if it actually matches the TV that you have, it is completely nuts. We had focus testing. We had people in the background, we'd

be playing, and they'd say, 'Turn it up.' We'd say, 'We didn't touch anything.' And they'd say, 'Ooh, that was awesome." Perhaps ironically, the game itself was playing with minds before it even shipped. "It was pretty scary getting that through testing, as well, because Nintendo is a hardware manufacturer. They would look at it and go, 'How many calls are we going to get about this game?'"

Though I'd been told he was tired of sequel questions, I tried a nudge, asking which stories he'd really like to tell, and as I expected, I was rebuffed. Almost. "Ooh," he says, laughing like a man who just parried an unexpected strike. "I don't think I can go into that. Secrets for the future. But one of the things we lightly touched upon, and some people have discovered, there actually is a fifth Old One in the game that's really alluded to, which is the proponent of yellow magic. And explaining that stuff and the mythos, there's a lot more to tell, [like] why have the Ancients been imprisoned, those kinds of things. It's just the tip of the iceberg, where we need to expand the universe and stuff. There's a lot more to tell."

One word that keeps coming up is "story," and I suspect I've found a member of the Games Need More Story Club. After talking about books for a few minutes, we get into a discussion of why many games shy away from story. "Why do people shy away from stories? I think it's just because our industry is immature. And if you look at the movie industry when it first started, there were no stories in movies then either," he answered, leaving me to wonder if viewers of Train Coming Out Of A Station pined for something more engaging. "It's basically similar, but it was all about technology. Once the technology matured to the point where everyone had the right tools, and it started being about content … the content won. The people who could tell the best stories won. You're starting to see that more and more. You're starting to see gamers say, 'Do I like the story?' more now, starting to rate how good the story of *Half-Life 2* was compared to *Half-Life*. People never used to do that.

"I wish there were more of us. But there's more coming, and I'm starting to see it. And it's funny, because *Eternal Darkness* is one of those games where

you have a lot of people in the industry come up to you and say, 'I want to make a game like that.' And the response we always have is 'Can't wait. We'd love to play it.'" Wouldn't we all? `COMMENTS`

In 1972, Shannon Drake was sent to prison by a military court for a crime he didn't commit. He promptly escaped from a maximum security stockade to the Los Angeles underground. Today, still wanted by the government, he survives as a soldier of fortune. If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find him, maybe you can hire Shannon Drake.

EPIC YARD SALE

TALE

by Matthew McKeague

Websites like eBay, Craigslist, and even MySpace and other networking sites seem like the obvious places to look for long-lost videogame treasures, old-school games for a long-dead consoles or the odd peripheral that has since gone the way of the dodo. But when sifting for the cultural remains of the ghost of gaming's past, one shouldn't overlook the traditional, and perhaps outdated, repository of discarded memorabilia: the yard sale.

Epic Yard Sale

In an effort to combine my hardcore gaming hobby, my journalism degree and a mild curiosity in yard sales, I decided to see what kind of videogame-related items were to be had amidst the assorted knick-knacks being cleared from the garages around Central Pennsylvania. I searched the lands for gems of the videogame world with only a pen, a notepad, a wallet full of small bills, the newspaper classifieds section and my *Monty Python*-esque haggling skills, and discovered a bit about gaming's history and perhaps my own in the process.

Gem number one

I dragged myself out of bed to begin my quest. Upon consuming my hero's breakfast (a bowl of sugary cereal), I was out the door and on my way to my first on-the-job yard sale experience. My first destination was the town of Woolrich, PA. This was no ordinary yard sale outing: On sale were the combined offerings of an entire 40-person community.

At one sale, I caught a glimpse of a small child holding one of the holy relics of the Nintendo Gamecube community: An unopened *Legend of Zelda* Collector's Edition that included *The Legend of Zelda* and *Zelda II: Link's Adventure* for the Nintendo Entertainment System, along with *Ocarina of Time* and *Majora's Mask* for the Nintendo 64, all on one disc. Previously only available as a reward for *Nintendo Power* magazine subscribers, this Collector's Edition frequently sells on eBay for as much as $80.

"So many classic games on one tiny disc," I thought to myself. "How could anyone sell this?"

Watching the cinematic opening scene in *Ocarina of Time*, visiting the majestic Gorons, winning Epona, discovering Dampe, the comical gravedigger, and his

quirky and downright disturbing idiosyncrasies – those gaming memories alone were priceless. I wondered how much it would cost me to buy it off the kid.

I got closer to the boy and saw the $5 price sticker. I decided to try and see if I could bid him up. I opened my mouth, and before I could speak, he bolted, taking the game and my chances of acquiring a handy dwarfish sidekick with him.

Gem number two

I'd missed out on *Zelda*, but continued the quest. The blistering sun bombarded my skin and the near triple-digit humidity made me feel as if I was walking through a sauna.

In a black, dirt-covered plastic garbage can, I found my next quarry: one of the more spectacularly unsuccessful peripherals of the videogame world – a Nintendo Virtual Boy. I hoped I wasn't having heat stroke-induced hallucinations.

It wasn't the heat - or the humidity. Not only had I set my eyes on the mythical Virtual Boy, but all the accessories were there as well; including the manual, the controller, visor, stand and a game, along with a gumball machine, a neon wristwatch, a broken alarm clock and a set of non-related electronic cords, all for $0.50.

"I don't even remember buying that. I'm not sure if it works or not," said the man behind the table of the Virtual Boy.

I was more than happy to pay $0.50 for a Nintendo relic that could at worst be used as a decorative paperweight. The Virtual Boy was the only Nintendo system I never owned, because when I learned about it, the Nintendo 64 had already become the "new hotness," rendering its VR-enabled cousin culturally obsolete.

My brain was playing its own celebratory fanfare music. I didn't care that the Virtual Boy was a failed system with only 33 games; I didn't care that it was the butt of many jokes on online message boards; and I sure didn't care about the supposed retina-burning images – I only cared about it becoming mine.

It's hard to forget the magical feeling of owning a new console, discovering what exactly it can do and getting to physically touch it after drooling over pictures of it online and in magazines. Sure, the Virtual Boy wouldn't have that wonderful new plastic smell when I took it home, but the experience could still be wonderful. I quickly bought it and disappeared, fleeing into the crowd like the boy with the *Zelda* disc. I had gotten in touch with my inner-treasure-seeking-child.

Gem number three

Weeks later in another small town named Howard, I found myself lost in a sea of women's clothing, with no electronics in sight. Or so it seemed. Under a table, I spied a seemingly out-of-place giant green tub under a table. With a glimmer of hope, I approached it and pulled the top off. The result: Nirvana. The tub was filled with over 100 Sega Genesis games.

"I'll give you all of it for $20," said the lady behind the table. "I don't even know how they got here."

Part of me was appalled - someone had probably spent years amassing these games. Playing them and loving them. A piece of this mystery person's life was being sold for a pittance alongside piles of slips, skirts and blouses. I was, in

In a black, dirt-covered plastic garbage can I found my next quarry: one of the more spectacularly unsuccessful peripherals of the videogame world - a Nintendo Virtual Boy.

effect, rooting through the discarded corpse of some unknown person's memories, picking at the bones. On the other hand, there were a ton of games in that tub, and I had to restrain myself from acting like a giddy school girl as I searched the pile for a few of my long-sought favorites.

A giant stockpile of games for $20 is definitely a deal, but most of the games in the tub were also back at my house in my own collection, so I moved on, leaving the find to someone whose collection wasn't as complete, and perhaps salving my own feelings of remorse at committing a sin I'd never wish on any gamer, least of all myself.

Though I left the Howard yard sale empty handed, I did purchase a number of games throughout my travels. Some I had been interested in, but for which I had never wanted to pay full price, while others were games I'd needed to replace because I'd stupidly sold them as a child to buy something cooler.

I also purchased games if they seemed interesting enough and were close to rental price, because even if they were terrible, they still make wonderful stocking-stuffers for my unsuspecting friends. And even though I didn't stumble upon any earth-shaking finds, after fighting through hoards of EA sports titles and other videogames that didn't catch my interest, I did return home with a bag full of videogame-related goodies.

At the end of my adventure, I wiped my prizes with an antibacterial soap (you never know where yard sale objects have been), spread them out on the table and tried to calculate how much I'd saved over "suggested retail." Altogether, I'd brought home almost $500 worth of videogame-related objects for $10.

You can save lots of money if you're willing to wake up early and go on a yard sale adventure. And sure, there's a thrill in getting a bargain and bringing home an old game for nostalgia's sake, but a lot of what makes getting out and rooting through suburbia's "junk" is just **being** out there with other people. I ran into a kid who, in 10 years, might be more of a hardcore gamer than I am or might even design the next Mario or *Halo*. That encounter alone was worth

more than the $10 I spent, and would never have happened on eBay.

COMMENTS

Matthew McKeague is a freelance writer and journalism graduate student at Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania. He can be reached at yankovicfarley [at] hotmail [dot] com.

HERE'S JUST SOME OF WHAT I FOUND:
- Super Mario Kart for the SNES. $3.
- Rygar for the PS2. $2.50.
- Shadowrun, Monopoly, HyperZone and Mario is Missing! for the SNES. $0.50 each.
- Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom in a mint condition original NES box. $0.50.
- Sega Dreamcast with two controllers. $20
- NES lightgun. $0.50.
- Collection of NES and Sega Genesis instruction manuals. $1.
- Three Mario dolls from Wendy's 2004 Kid's Meal toy collection.
- A 1986 Super Mario Brothers doll.
- Intec PS2 game console LCD screen. $75.

the escapist

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