

**ALSO:** EDITOR'S NOTE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR STAFF PAGE

#### A Marketing Jove Slave

those trinkets, gimmicks and doodads once included in computer game boxes - what happened to them? by Allen Varney

# BEREAT DIGITAL

#### Screenshots Boobies

Lowest Common Denominator Marketing by Corvus Elrod



Advertising is ultimately a good thing.

What?! What is this heresy I speak? Yes, I did say that and yes, I do believe that.

Sure, at its worst, it's extremely annoying and rather intrusive. And these days, I do believe the whole thing's gotten a bit out of hand; the day we started attempting to sell things to people just trying to use the restroom in the train station is the day we crossed into the absurd.

To that end, I have a couple of notes to the advertisers, starting with the aforementioned potty ads:

1) We're focused on getting in and out of there. We're not paying attention to that ad for ... whatever it is you're trying to sell. A captive audience does not necessarily equal a receptive audience. In fact, do you really want to associate your product or service with the act of going to the bathroom? 2) I need to put something in here about heavy use of flash in online ads – are you **trying** to annoy us? You see, aside from the repetitive, seizure-inducing boxes all over my screen, you are eating my CPU cycles for breakfast. This makes me unhappy. Again, do you really want to associate your product or service with my being annoyed?

Now, those things having been said, advertising can provide a valuable service, both for the product or service being advertised, as well as the consumer to whom it is directed. When accomplished well – and the two examples above are simply bad execution, and not demonstrative of "Advertising is inherently Bad" – advertising is useful communication. The public can learn about new (or old) products and services in which they may be interested.

And if the media buyer is good, these products and services can be welltargeted to reach people who may be interested in them. Some people find this troubling, this being a "target audience." Why? Don't you **like** learning about products or services which your peers find appealing or useful? What's so terrible about that?

I daresay those people, as do I in some cases, likely have a problem with the execution of advertising. Our generation has been bombarded from every angle with ads since we were babes. Clever is not so clever, shiny not so shiny anymore. If someone is trying to "communicate" with you by continually bouncing around in your face while yelling silly rhymes, it's not long before you pull out a book and put in earplugs, assuming the person is a nitwit, having nothing interesting to say.

Advertisers, try something new. Perhaps try going back to the days of Ogilvy when Copy was King, the days when an ad ... wait for it ... **explained** a product, what it was used for, what made it special, the value proposition. Since advertising is communication, **communicate** with us. We're getting tired of the bouncing, yelling nitwit.

Cheers,

Julian Gra

#### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**To The Editor:** I'm not sure how computer games are becoming more significant each day given the fact that only very few people worldwide have access to computers. From what I know, there are only around 600 million computers worldwide, or something like one for every ten people. The ratio might even be smaller if most of those computers are obsolete and if many users own or use more than one computer. And with the possibility of both peak oil and global warming, we might industry and technology going the other way round during the next few years.

#### - Paenggoy

**To The Editor:** Thank you for your article "Frag Doll on Frag Dolls" in issue 58. I could have been that Frag Doll who talked in the interview, as I made it down to the last 15 applicants to be a UK FD. But I turned down an interview for the job for the exact same reasons as Voodoo left it - it seemed to be a



massive publicity stunt hiding under the respectable facade of being about gender equality in gaming.

I've always wondered if I should have gone for it anyway, if only to become well known in the gaming world and hopefully, playfully, cheese-off my games-obsessed male friends. But reading your article has convinced me that the Frag Dolls are not to be taken seriously and if girls want to game, they should just get on with it.

#### - Hannah

In Response to "Back in The Day" from The Escapist Forum: I became a SysOp of my own BBS when I was 12, using my parents' fax line. I was soon hooked into a network of local BBSs. For me, this was truly the precursor of the internet. People had a great sense of loyalty to the BBSs they logged onto regularly, and some good friendships developed between the SysOps and their users.

Now, I too am a game developer, and games like *Trade Wars 2002* (my personal favourite back then) will always be an influence on me, because these games were 100% about design and gameplay. There were a lot of great BBS games and a lot of poor ones. When all you had was ASCII (or later, extended ANSI) graphics, you really needed a creative knack to make a game that people could get addicted to.

- kbeam

#### In Response to "Who Really Makes the Games" from The Escapist

**Forum:** I think the Retro-*metroid* example is an interesting one to bring up here. The fact that retro is a first party to Nintendo had more of an impact in that game becoming great than a standard developer-publisher relationship.

I remember reading interviews with the retro guys during the development of the original *Metroid Prime* and they would often mention how often the Nintendo guys would visit, looking over their shoulders and offering suggestions to make sure the final product was good. I'm sure the same could be said for many of the other games that Nintendo outsources.

In research, it doesn't matter how much of the work was performed by the student, the supervisor will always get their name on the final product and 99% of the time it is well deserved, because without the supervisors input the end result would never have become what it finally did.

In the video game industry a lot of publishers seem to claim this sort of credit by default but let's not rush into saying that it is always undeserved. While it does seem necessary for the actual developers to get more credit than they are at this point, I would have no problem with EA taking credit for some of the games they publish if they were to offer Will Wright up as a supervisor, both to help increase the quality of the games and at the same time teach the developers how to make better games.

- Goofonian

In Response to "Working in Games" from The Escapist Forum: Good article, kudos to Dana.

One thing that wasn't approached in this article is the rapidly expanding game industries in the Far East. In some countries game developers are paid a

fraction of what they get in the West and typically work well over 60 hours a week. The same and worse apply to outsourcing companies where many western game developers elect to give their work out to. I'm not just talking about the "sweatshop" factor coming to play here. Work ethic in Japan for example is much different than in the West. It's not uncommon for game developers to work over 90 hours a week, not get paid overtime, and love it.

Competition from the Far East is increasingly becoming a factor for market share, even in western markets. These trends could steadily drive salaries down and demands on human resources higher.

#### - Tasos

In Response to 'Why We Haven't Lapsed" from The Escapist Forum:

Wonderful essay. I'm a big fan of what you've done, Erin. In many ways, we are saying the same things, though the particular piece of mine you linked to was a bit on the dark side. - Focus on people-centric development methodologies. Game development really doesn't need to model itself on the practices of Mr. Disney circa 1941.

- Take advantage of growth markets such as casual games, the DS, and online games.

- Value experience.

I also believe that it is okay to leave the game industry and see how things are done outside our mildly inbred community. Perspective and an omnivorous liberal arts appetite for different ideas can still have a positive impact on game development. As any great game designer will tell you, making a good game isn't just about referencing other games. We all need to pull our heads out of the sand occasionally and sample outside influences.

Many of these gloom and doom comments ultimately stem from a passionate belief in the immense potential that games offer as a creative and social medium. It is customer service 101: the ones who complain the loudest love you the most. It is good to have some prickly characters that rile things up occasionally, because they still believe that our industry has the ability to better itself. That warms my heart immensely.

- Danc

Confessions of an Online Guerilla Marketer by Russ Pitts Jack, John and Joe are talking about games.

Jack has played a new game. He likes it. He tells John and Joe, who, knowing Jack's reputation for giving games a fair, balanced review, and that their tastes and his are often similar, decide that it's a game they should try. So, based on Jack's recommendation, they buy the game, as do several other people who have been listening in.

These kinds of conversations are the stuff of legend in the advertising community. Getting a consumer so excited about your product that he'll **tell others to buy it** is essentially free advertising, and the most effective form besides. Marketers call it "buzz," and they track it as religiously as brokers follow the stock ticker. They even try to create it, by sending trained salespeople, or "shills" into places where normal people congregate in order to get those normal people talking about their product. These days, the tactic has moved online.

Jack, John and Joe are all members of an internet community forum. Their conversation is not taking place in one workplace, but several; each of them is typing his part of the conversation onto his computer and posting it on the forum. Each message is then read by more people in other workplaces, some of whom live across the globe. John and Joe visit the site during their offhours, or from their desks, when they should be working. Jack, however, actually is working when visiting the site. His job is to post messages to internet forums frequented by people like John and Joe, and to convince them to buy products represented by his employers. Jack is an internet shill.

Jack is what is called an "Online Guerilla Marketer," or "OGM," and his name isn't Jack. He's agreed to speak to *The Escapist* on the condition that we not identify him. Like an undercover cop or secret agent, Jack's effectiveness at his job depends on his ability to remain anonymous. He'll often spend days, even

weeks, infiltrating a community to earn
the trust of its members before he strikes
inserting a recommendation in the right
place, at the right time to generate
interest in the products he represents.

A typical day for Jack starts with checking "to make sure I haven't been discovered," he says. "I check logs and IP pings, and I revisit forums and posts I recently made for comments. I return to the threads, chat rooms or other places and respond to posts I have already made. I then go through and talk like a normal poster would - commenting on other subjects, talking about politics, throwing in some wood into a flame war, etc. - pretty much just to fool anyone that might be suspicious of my activities to show them that I'm a 'real' person and not some corporate shill.

"I have to flow along with the community and react to the changes which will change the way I post. The point is to completely blend in with the community, whether it is a place normally visited by 15-year-old suburban males who like rap and videogames, or a stay-at-home wife community that supports each other's problems with their husbands and diapers. My personalities range from a 10-year-old girl to a 78-year-old man and across different ethnicities, stereotypes and ages."

Jack has been living the life of a corporate-sponsored internet secretagent for "about four years, employed by two different companies," he says. In that time he's used his clandestine. tactics and marketing know-how to shill "about 20 products - mostly videogames, websites, computer hardware and a few other small products." He declines to name names for fear of damaging his reputation in the industry and those of the companies he's represented. Because, in spite of how good he is at his job, in spite of how many companies employ his services - and those of people like him - OGMs are often looked upon as pariahs by the very people to whom they are trying to connect. At a time when most consumers are becoming more and more media savvy, the OGM is viewed by many advertising firms as a weapon of last resort and by the denizens of the internet forums the OGM is tasked to infiltrate as a threat to the verv existence of the internet community itself.

It is this strange dichotomy which makes online guerilla marketing such a delicate dance, and why people like Jack (who have become so adept at juggling the moral ambiguities of the job) consider themselves elite movers and shakers in the internet community and - oddly morally superior to the rest of us.

#### "It's evil," Jack says. "I'm evil."

"It's evil," Jack says. "I'm evil, and I will make you buy this commercial item or visit some site using any means necessary. That's my job, and I have to admit, I'm pretty damn good at it. I don't believe people are dumb while they are online, they just 'relax their minds.' They want to be dumbly entertained just like [when] watching TV. But I ... pity



# **WG**

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them, because they don't expect it and I blindside them. They don't know what they are getting themselves into by going online."

What they are "getting themselves into" is an advertising engine which is rapidly surpassing television in market share and effectiveness. Pundits, analysts and even some journalists have taken to calling it "Web 2.0," in an effort - one supposes - to comprehend this new, larger and more participatory iteration of the barely 30-year-old computer networking technology. The youth of today, however (that magic percentage of people falling into the 18 to 24 demographic), simply call it "the internet," and have been using it their entire lives.

To the millions of potential young consumers populating sites like Myspace, the internet is a communication tool, an information store, a recreational exercise, a friend, a confidant and a place to pick up chicks. It is, quite simply, the place where life unfolds, and it is through this medium that those who make their bread by convincing others to spend theirs are hoping to fill the rapidly growing advertising vacuum in the living rooms of America.

That's where Jack comes in. Disguising himself as just another consumer turning to the internet for entertainment, advice and counsel, he prowls community forums looking for an opportunity to share his "opinion" of his clients' products and services. But his task isn't easy. Part of the reason many consumers are turning away from television in the first place is the pervasiveness of advertising, and they will not hesitate to thwart the efforts of marketers in what they consider as "their space." For Jack, this is what makes his job both challenging and fun - avoiding detection becomes a game, and one that Jack is incredibly good at.

"I've never been caught," he says. "No accusations have been made to or about the companies I've worked for or any of the clients that I have done work for. Most of the time, I can [spot an OGM like me]. I say 'most of the time' because there are others out there that are as successful as I am, and I have not noticed them at all. But OGMing isn't some new-fangled complex idea; companies do it all the time. Often, the companies do not employ someone trained in online guerilla marketing they grab one of the interns and tell them to do it. Or worse, the executives get the urge to try it. I have called out 15 different companies that have unsuccessfully tried to OGM their product because they were so obvious."

Jack then lists a number of companies whose OGMs he's "outed." They are mainly technology and entertainment companies; one of which is among the largest entertainment media conglomerates in the world. To that company, Jack offers this bit of advice: "Seriously, did you think posting your press release with the exact same wording across a dozen sites (saying 'what a new cool show! OMG!'), with different usernames, using the same IP that resolved back to your home office, wouldn't be noticed? I can't even think of how to [do] worse.

"Many forums are tightly-knit communities of people who 'know' each other pretty well. Any [newbie] that starts posting random stuff about products and stuff is just going to draw an immense amount of ... bad attention. That account and/or IP would be banned

"I never only have one account. I always have several accounts.

#### Why?

if I acted too quickly. For the tightly-knit forums, I'll be charming people toward my client's product after a week of innocent posts. Other super-huge sites ... can be coerced within an hour.

"I never only have one account. I always have several accounts. Why? Because people follow the popular crowd ... everyone does, just like a herd of cows being moved to the slaughter. If several people are talking about a certain 'something special' and how awesome it is, it seems more popular than it really might be. "About 25 percent of my day is spent switching between different ISPs, proxies and other forms of IP spoofing. Would a post from a sergeant in the military who has commented about how crappy Iraq feels compared to home be posting from New York, Michigan or Canada? Course not, his IP traces back to Kuwait or Saudi Arabia, but not Iraq because I haven't found a way to do that yet."

When asked if he enjoys his job, Jack seems to be conflicted. His apparent glee at being able to influence so many people is obvious, but it is also clear that the job can be draining. "I like the creativeness that I have freedom over," he says. "The thrill of the reactions of people online in response to my efforts and the false power that I feel while doing my job over the online masses.

"Unfortunately, I'm not an evil person, so the unethical and immoral strategies that I employ [weigh] heavily on my soul. It's hard to keep doing this [for] 50-plus hours a week (at one point, my contracts had me working 85 hours a week) without being spiteful of yourself. "Honestly, it's a form of advertising that is completely legal, but ethically, I'm convincing the 'online sheep' to go where I tell them to, whether I personally think the product is good or bad. I'm a fun person [who] likes to socialize, go out on the town and hang out with friends, but when I'm working, I'm methodical, unrelenting, charming, convincing and completely uncaring of my targets and of the people around me. The problem with this 'night and day' mentality is that during the 'twilight' hours, I'm sad and remorseful of what I've done."

"Will I ever be caught?" He asks. "Sure I will, right? Good always wins over evil, right? LOL, [newbies]. Now go back to the forums and chat rooms and complain and rant about this expose. I'll be there in a minute."t. Nothing like a hard day's work. COMMENTS

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist and the host of Escape Radio, The Escapist's podcast. He has been writing on the web since it was invented and has played every console ever made.

Because people follow the popular crowd."

Shiny pictures, flashy ads – heck, even simple black letters on a red field are enough to hook me. When John Romero promised to make me his bitch, I promptly rushed out and bought a nice dress. After all, if I was going to be his bitch, I wanted to look like a **nice** bitch.

I'm an older gamer – in some cultures, I might even be considered "grown up." Yet most of my peers in my age group tend to be extremely skeptical of prerelease game hype. While I get caught up with the young gamers fawning and cooing over the polygon counts and frame rates in advertisements, gamers my age scoff and ask such heretical questions as "Yeah, but what is the **gameplay** like?"

I want to be like my peers. They're the mature, wizened men of the community. I should be one of them: a man set in his ways, distinguished, careful in his consideration, perhaps even so far as **jaded**. But every month I go through my stack of the latest gaming magazines and I get excited at every glossy ad, every "exclusive" preview and every "sneak peak." Don't even get me started on "special feature fold-out covers." On the other side of all this excitability is my wallet. Even more pressing than the shame of the peers I respect, my wallet attempts to exert some modicum of control over me. Every time I see an advertisement for the latest and greatest soon-to-be-released game, my wallet begins screaming in a desperate attempt to drown out the siren lure of the hype.

I try to be a responsible adult. I budget amounts for games and try to stay within that budget, but invariably I fall prey to marketing because I'm a simpleton.

In late 2003, one my favorite games, *Puzzle Pirates*, came out. Was I one of the first to be playing because I knew it would be the exact sort of game I love? No, because I was busy being infuriated by the *Lineage II* beta. This was a game that, had I spent **any** amount of time researching, I would have instantly realized I wouldn't like. But because I had seen promotions for it and got caught up in discussions involving its usage of the Unreal 2 Engine and **not** about the actual gameplay, I rushed out to buy a copy of the game. I never even finished my free trial period.

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e s ave

by Shawn Williams



I'm not saying *Lineage II* is a bad game. But if I had looked beyond its buzz, I would've known pretty quickly that it wasn't a game for me. Level grind, limited character creation, endless hunting – all things I don't enjoy. Yet because the hype meter on it was reading high, I became brainwashed.

During that same period, *Puzzle Pirates*, a game **not** featuring cutting-edge graphics, ridiculous polygon counts nor even a single television ad, completely escaped my notice. It was only after hearing about it from a friend that it came to my attention.

I try to be an "informed" game shopper. I try not to base my decisions on hype and focus on matters that are important to me. I even try and read **reviews** of games. But the problem for me is that even after spending years reading gaming magazines and websites, I still don't have any sort of connection with their reviewers. Numbers, stars, percentages – none of those really stick with me. Word of mouth sticks with me. If I hear a bunch of my friends saying good things about a game that's a game I'm likely to pick up. But by the time I start hearing good things about it, I'm usually so far behind everyone else playing it that I'm stuck being the perpetual newbie.

Instead of heeding solid information, I get excited about the **ads** instead of the **game**. Is *Hitman: Blood Money* a great game? I have absolutely no idea, but it was only because it won't run on my antiquated gaming system that I was able to resist the amazing (albeit controversial) advertisement campaign. Even then, it was a close call. I had it in my hand and stood in the store for a good 20 minutes debating the matter – because someday I'm going to upgrade. Wouldn't I feel stupid then if every copy of the game had disappeared and I wasn't able to find it?

I am learning, though. Not consistently, but I've had some occasions where I demonstrated common sense, patience and a bit of immunity to hype. This month, I bought a game, but I waited until I read thorough reviews that talked about the gameplay to ensure it was something I'd like. I read threads on message boards that had nothing to do with hype, but only addressed whether the game was stable and easy to get installed and running. I refused to pay any heed to advertisements and instead focused on cold, hard facts. After careful consideration, I made this informed purchase, and proudly presented it to my friends.

"What? Dude, none of us play *StarCraft* anymore!"

#### Sigh. COMMENTS

Shawn "Kwip" Williams is the founder of N3 (NeenerNeener.Net), where he toils away documenting his adventures as the worst MMOG and pen-and-paper RPG player in recorded history.



I've had some occasions where I demonstrated common sense, patience and a bit of immunity to hype.

Those trinkets, gimmicks and doodads once included in computer game boxes - what happened to them?

#### by Allen Varney

Woohoo! Just look at all the cool stuff in these game boxes:

- Full-color cloth maps of Britannia, setting for Origin's *Ultima* roleplaying games.
- An antiqued bronze coin, a "zorkmid," in Infocom's *Zork*.
- A Japanese cloth headband from the Origin RPG *Moebius*; also, a booklet of the I Ching from the sequel, *Windwalker*.
- From *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*, a send-up of pulp space opera, a 3-D comic book (with glasses) and a scratchn-sniff card.

- From the text adventure adaptation of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, lots of stuff taken from Douglas Adams' bestselling book/radio/TV series: opaque peril-sensitive sunglasses; a permit to demolish Earth; a microscopic space fleet; and the nonexistent "no tea." ("No tea" is an item in your game inventory.)
- From the second Douglas Adams text adventure for Infocom, *Bureaucracy*, a three-sheet G-IC2-FIT form - a white original with yellow and salmon-colored copies - for a "Fillmore Better Beezer Card." The blanks on each sheet were the same, but the labels changed. The "Own condo/co-op" checkbox on the top sheet became, on the salmon sheet, "I wear ratty underwear."



Physical Evidence Fabletz Jound Near the Body April 1842

MI-ATT-FOT

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All these games date from the 1980s. That golden era of game packaging popularized the non-game items generically called "feelies." You kids today [raps cane on floor] can't imagine the creativity designers and publishers once expended not just on their games, but on their packages and contents. Feelies enhanced the mood and impact of their games, back when graphics were at best simple sprites. Often, feelies also provided a relatively graceful vehicle for authentication-word copy protection.

If you're old enough to remember feelies, you're already murmuring "Infocom." Infocom text adventures were the state of the art, swag-wise: pens, postcards, calendars, photos, maps, comics, fiction - a feelie catalog showroom. Interactive fiction fans dutifully preserve photographic proof at sites such as the Infocom Gallery and the Infocom Documentation Project.

According to Infocom "Marketeer" Mike Dornbrook, "The first exotic package was for *Deadline* (the third game, after *Zork I* and *II*). It was created because [designer] Marc Blank couldn't fit all the information he wanted to include into the 80K game size. Marc and the ad agency, Giardini/Russell (G/R), co-created the police dossier, which included photos, interrogation reports, lab reports and pills found near the body. The result was phenomenally successful, and Infocom decided to make all subsequent packages truly special. (A big benefit was the reduction in piracy, which was rampant at the time.)"

Other publishers liked feelies, too. Origin prompts nostalgia (check the online Origin Museum) for those cloth Britannia maps and clever game-world-based documentation, Richard "Lord British" Garriott, mastermind of the Ultima games, and other Origin designers pushed hard for non-game trinkets in their games. Dallas Snell, Vice President of Product Development (PD) at Origin in the 1980s, recalls the inclusion of trinkets "was always driven by PD. Publishing sought to minimize COGS [cost of goods], whereas PD wanted lots of interesting support material, trinkets and doohickeys. The cloth map and the metal ankh in the Ultimas were a source of debate every single time. Publishing would always remind us the product could be played just as well with a paper map and a plastic ankh (or no ankh at all). Richard was consistently adamant

about this, and always stood his ground - even if it couldn't be financially justified.

"I am a fan of *Ultima*'s cloth maps," Snell says. "Can't say it really facilitated game play versus a paper map, but it sure added an 'experiential' quality to the product that is seldom encountered. [And] I liked the actual film canister we shipped the deluxe version of *Wing Commander III* in. That was really cool!"

Everybody thought feelies were cool. Yet as the game market moved to emphasize graphics and Infocom's star fell, feelies declined in originality and production values. George Collins, who ported games for Infocom in its latter days, recalls: "*Return to Zork*, Activision's first *Zork* title after they bought Infocom, included an envelope with a letter that you won a sweepstakes [prize trip] to the Valley of the Sparrows. I think it was the last time Activision tried to do that Infocom thing. Only the first few editions had the actual letter."

The decline of game feelies echoes a similar vanishing act in productivity software. Word processors and spreadsheets used to include thick manuals, workbooks and plastic keyboard templates. Why did publishers abandon these physical adjuncts? Game packaging historian and collector Bill Loguidice believes elaborate packaging appealed primarily to the hardcore gaming hobby, and declined because games started reaching a broader audience uninterested in such fripperies. Yet Infocom games, the apex of the feelie aesthetic, sold in huge numbers in their day to an audience larger than that of many un-feelied games today. It's hard to think of Infocom fans as hardcore.

The real problem was, feelies were a tremendous amount of work. Dornbrook's description of the Infocom feelie creation process serves as an unwitting epitaph: "We were spending a fortune on package design (\$60,000 each on average in 1984 - just for design!), so we eventually decided to bring it in-house." Acquiring unusual items like scratch-n-sniffs "was often an incredibly difficult task" and involved several people for three to four months. "I would estimate that each Infocom package had 1.5 man-years of effort invested in its creation." Infocom games, the apex of the feelie aesthetic, sold in huge numbers in their day to an audience larger than that of many un-feelied games today.

In mainstream games, the feelie art survives today principally in collector's editions. Bethesda's collector's edition of Oblivion includes a Cyrodiil coin (shades of the zorkmid!). Blizzard's Diablo II collector's set has polyhedral dice, a tabletop roleplaying rulebook based on the computer game and a DVD of past Blizzard cut scene movies. LucasArts' Jedi Knight 2 offered what one fan called "this crazy strobing lightsaber key chain. The thing could be used to host your own personal raves." Other games deliver books of concept art, making-of DVDs, T-shirts, figurines... But even today's premium-priced collectible editions feature trinkets that are, by past standards, unimaginative. At best, they're an opportunity for crosspromotion, like the HeroClix miniatures in the City of Heroes box.

Imaginative feelies, those intended to enhance the game experience, are now lovingly crafted by amateurs. Feelies.org, "your one-stop shop for interactive fiction feelies," was founded in 2002 by hardy interactive fiction enthusiasts to create all-new doodads for their own and others' text games. The Feelies.org catalog includes posters, maps, antique paper, a "rephasia pill" (in three colors) and a soundtrack. Still sporadically active, the group is working on its greatest challenge: a teddy bear.

But this is demanding work, beyond the reach of many amateurs. Feelies.org cofounder Emily Short, herself an interactive fiction author, said in an Armchair Arcade interview, "There are very few items that didn't cost more and take longer than I thought, even though I thought I was estimating carefully based on good information. I think I've finally learned most of the things I should have known when we started this." She wasn't the first to discover this; witness Infocom fan Robin Lionheart's abortive plan to mint new zorkmids.

A modern, less stressful phenomenon is the seemingly self-contradictory idea of "virtual feelies" - that is, .PDFs. Feelies. org and other interactive fiction fans offer downloadable setting-related documents in Adobe Reader format, and we're also seeing new .PDF wonders in other gaming fields, notably live-action roleplaying games (LARPs).

An active Call of Cthulhu/Cthulhu Lives LARPing group, the H. P. Lovecraft Historical Society, sells an impressive range of 1920s-era .PDF documents and Lovecraftian period fonts the group created as props for their live games: an Arkham bank checkbook, bank statements and passbook, library card, news clippings, a full newspaper, toe tag, asylum record, auto registration, luggage tags, burial permit, driver's licenses for four states plus London, dues stamp, hunting license, insurance documents, matchbooks, Miskatonic University letterhead and diplomas, police documents, press passes, private eye license, pulp magazine covers, stock certificates, streetcar transfers, telegrams, airplane and zeppelin tickets, union card, Army ID cards and secret messages, U.S. and British passports circa 1923-1937, a Brazilian visa, and membership docs for the Ku Klux Klan. Many of these props and fonts are

displayed in the terrific HPLHS fanproduced silent film adaptation of Lovecraft's signature story, "The Call of Cthulhu."

Still, reading .PDFs printed on your laser printer can't match the - not to sound overwrought - palpable pleasure of handling an actual feelie. If publishers won't create them, the next frontier is custom fabrication. One interesting option for the future is OGLE, "an opensource software package by the Evebeam OpenLab that allows for the capture and reuse of 3-D geometry data from 3-D graphics applications running on Microsoft Windows." In other words, you can pull your World of Warcraft gnome out of the game and cast it in plastic using a "fab," a 3-D printer such as the Dimension BST 768.

Don't get excited yet; OGLE still has quirks. Programmer Michael Frumin's candid list of OGLE's shortcomings confesses, "So far, none of the data captured from any application has been clean and well-formed enough to go right into our 3-D printer. We have, however, achieved meatspace with manual cleanup of some models."

## Feelies lend dimension to a setting. They establish atmosphere and locale in ways unmatched by even the most realistic graphics.

Meanwhile, it would be nice to see feelies back in our games. By neglecting them not even offering a .PDF or two on the game disc - today's developers are missing an opportunity. Feelies lend dimension to a setting. They establish atmosphere and locale in ways unmatched by even the most realistic graphics. Interactive fiction author Peter Nepstad, whose historical murder mystery 1893: A World's Fair Mystery has sold over 3,000 copies - a remarkable number for text games these days - included a wide array of feeliestyle .PDFs on his game's disc. "Quality feelies help transport the player to the world you are trying to create," he explains. "I remember with Infocom games, I used to read every word of their packaging and feelies before even booting up the game for the first time. These things were an important part of the game experience for me, and so naturally, as a writer, I want to carry on that tradition."

"All of that said, I wouldn't say feelies are a must-have. If they aren't there, well, that's sort of to be expected, and not really a big deal. But if they are there, then that's better. Feelies are always better." 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.

he GREAT DIGITAI

by Dana Massey

A game's biggest fans are usually those who make it. Many developers pour their lives into projects at the expense of friends, family and natural light; it's understandable when they get overexcited. This, however, can be poison to an aspiring game community.

The only thing worse than making a game with no hype, is making one that is overhyped. "Overhype" is when a player's vision of what a game will be far exceeds what a developer can possibly deliver. As a result of overhype, the game is judged more harshly than it otherwise might be.

A perfect example of this is Farlan's MMOG, *Dark and Light*. They launched in June and have been universally panned. Admittedly, the game is no masterpiece, but is it truly deserving of the harsh criticism it's received? Over at my day job, the user ratings would tell you so. It is currently scored 3.4 out of 10, a full point worse than any other MMOG on the market. This includes garage games and titles approaching 10 years old. It is no coincidence that *Dark and Light* was rated the most-hyped game in our system for nearly six months prior to its beta. But the game shipped unfinished, and disenfranchised players responded by scoring the game negatively.

Developers have to balance their enthusiasm with what they're actually capable of accomplishing. On one hand, it is imperative to get people talking before the game ships, especially if you have little to no marketing budget. On the other, the more fans talk, the more they dream, and the more they dream, the more they expect. If it gets out of hand, expect a violent backlash when reality rears its ugly head.

I am writing from personal experience.

Wish was an MMOG cancelled in January of 2005, despite very good beta sign-up numbers and a slew of online media coverage. We bore all the trademarks of a small independent developer. One of these was my serving simultaneously as the Co-Lead Game Designer, Assistant Producer, World Designer and Community Manager, and I was hardly the only one wearing multiple hats.

Two of those hats got us into trouble, though. I had little development experience, and when someone serves as both a senior designer and a community talking head, things can get out of hand.

My experience was in the realm of online journalism, and I knew how that worked. I took that knowledge and tried to spread the word as best I could. We relied nearly exclusively on word of mouth. I spent a lot of time answering questions on message boards and working with game sites to place features.

As a company, we knew our defining and differentiating features and made it our goal to drive them home. Our concept was called Live Content, which called for a small team of game masters to set in motion macro-scale world events so the playerbase could respond to them. Unfortunately, this was a grand concept and not easy for a small development studio to pull off.

By December of 2004, we had a decentsized community. We had been working hard and – to us at least – it seemed like we'd come a long way from where we'd left off in the last round of testing. Combat was more fun, the magic system improved, the graphics overhauled and some small part of our defining feature existed.

On January 1, 2005, we opened the doors to the 80,000-plus players who had signed up to participate in our open beta. It was during this time that the *Half-Life 2* demo had released, and I remember being quite pleased when our beta dropped it down to second on the most active list over at FilePlanet. It looked like things were going well. Famous last words ...

The beta lasted only nine days. On January 9, 2005, after careful consideration of the way the beta had played out, examination of our internal metrics and an honest appraisal of the MMOG landscape (*WoW* launched the previous November), we made the decision to shut things down.

Wish had no single cause of death, but overhype played a huge role. Our statistics didn't lie. At every step of the way, from signing up for beta, to downloading and installing the client, to playing the game for more than an hour, we lost huge percentages of players. In case we didn't trust the stats, tons of players told us about their departure on our forums, as well.

On message boards, people had spent months retelling the tales of the first beta with Live Content, and by the time our next beta hit, those of us who actually created those events didn't even recognize the tales being told. The community had gotten carried away with itself, and we'd encouraged it.

This same phenomenon applies across all fields. *The Da Vinci Code* movie simply couldn't recreate the magic people had experienced when they read the novel, despite a massive marketing campaign. A politician who rises to power with big promises and high expectations can be voted out just as quickly if he's nothing short of amazing. This is the same reason that people routinely list massive hit movies, books, games or shows on their "worst ever" lists. Wish had no single cause of death, but overhype played a huge role.

#### A decent game can be sunk if the community expects more than what's delivered.

For the community and marketing people, it is important to define and recognize where awareness of a product ends and inflation begins. The worst part is, they're battling human nature. Imagination is always more fun than reality. In imagination, features do not get cut or reigned in to meet deadlines, and things like poly-counts and draw distances need not be considered.

There are people who will spend years of their life following a game's development. During that time, they write fan-fiction, draw pictures, run websites and chat on message boards. These people are not the problem; after investing so much of themselves into the game's progression, they'd never let themselves be disappointed. The danger comes when casual fans expect more than a developer has to offer. When that happens, usually the developers or community and marketing folks are to blame.

The key for developers is not to lie, exaggerate or promise things they're only moderately sure they can do. Hype is not bad. *Half-Life 2* may be one of the most-hyped games of all time, but fans were generally happy with the product, and it sold extremely well. The same could be said for *The Sims 2*. The key is that in those cases, the developers did what they said they would do.

For small and mid-sized developers, this battle can never be fully won. Usually, simple economics means they're going to produce mid-quality titles. What they need to recognize is what niche their game fills and try to attract a community that respects that. A decent game can be sunk if the community expects more than what's delivered and simply doesn't buy it on principal.

The dangers of overhype can't be ignored. It is the difference between a legendary train-wreck in the style of *Daikatana* and another no-name game lost to history. Whether it's inexperience or hubris, hype can kill. But so long as it is tempered by reality, and continually kept in check, it can propel a game to unbelievable heights. Unfortunately, it's a lesson many learn in retrospect.

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



#### Screenshots and Boobies Lowest Common Denominator Marketing by Corvus Elrod

Repeated visits to my local video rental store have led to an interesting observation: The videogame rental aisles were almost exclusively inhabited by male customers. The same mothers who stand by and wait, mostly patiently, while their sons select their favorite *Batman* episodes on DVD stand well away from the game aisles and call for the boys to hurry up. Women, who moments before combed the new release wall with their significant others, would tune out, pick up a magazine or wander aimlessly while the men browsed the latest available game rentals. It was almost as if a massive electro-gender-magnet were switched on. Men were attracted, women were repulsed. I even witnessed a large percentage of women bee-lining for the new release wall walk **around** the gaming aisles rather than **through** them to reach the first few bays. Not a huge trip out of their way, but a telling trip nonetheless.

I followed up these observations with a few casual conversations about games with a wide variety of rental customers. By and large, women were concerned about the violent and sexual content in games. Mothers, renting sports titles and racing games for their sons, expressed concern about games in the same worried and powerless tones as mothers faced with the topic of sexual predators. When I talked to their kids about the games they play, and why they like them, the mothers were invariably surprised that there was something to actually talk about.

It always catches me by surprise when people believe that gaming has nothing more to offer than sex and violence. Where are they getting these messages?

This particular video store has two magazine racks. One, located near the checkout line, contains glamour and teenie bopper magazines, along with music and fitness magazines. The second rack, located near the game rentals, holds Brady Game strategy guides, gaming magazines and shrink wrapped men's magazines. Pawing through a gaming magazine, I realized where the messages of sex and violence were coming from: The industry is actively portraying gamers as a horde of energydrink-fueled, sexually aggressive, violence-obsessed young men in the way it styles its advertising.

The screenshots used to promote games in magazines invariably show violence, which when taken out of context can easily be seen as gratuitous and unnecessarily shocking. The promotional artwork used in advertising pushes the negative image even further. Scantily clad women posed provocatively, inviting you into the lurid depths of the game. Stern, muscular men forever poised on the brink of attack, brandishing large sexualized guns and swords. In other words, images designed to appeal to the lizard brains of these magazines' core audience: men aged 18 to 24. In my

experience, the men these images are designed to appeal to like games for the same reasons the rest of us do - the quality gameplay, the compelling characters and the engaging stories. Talk to these "libidinous" men about Shadow of the Colossus, for example, and the conversation quickly moves into the realm of the introspective as you discuss the first colossus you felt ashamed of killing. Ask them why they liked GTA, and they'll invariably mention the underlying story, the music or the selection of cars. Even those who admit to quickly abandoning the plot tell stories of crazy motorcycle stunts and narrow escapes from the law long before they mention the various methods of killing people.

But it's the magazine advertising campaign for the latest *Hitman* installment that is the quintessential example of the "boobies and bullets" depiction of games. Each advertisement depicts an airbrushed model, recently killed in a gruesome fashion. If you were basing your impressions of the game on these ads, you'd clearly be concerned about *Hitman*'s social message. After an hour or so of playing the game, however, you learn that your targets are The industry is actively portraying gamers as a horde of energy-drink-fueled, sexually aggressive, violence-obsessed young men in the way it styles its advertising.

The games we produce and enjoy are deeper, richer and more socially relevant than is being portrayed by our own marketing. murderers, drug dealers and child pornographers. The violence is present, obviously, but it's not centered on the brutal murders of seemingly innocent women. In fact, of the more than 20 targets in the game, fewer than five are women, and all of those are portrayed as violent and unstable, not the helpless victims portrayed in the advertising campaign.

People tell me you need to appeal to the lowest common denominator when marketing products. They tell me it's difficult to present the more ethereal elements of a game coherently. They tell me the poor market performance of games such as Beyond Good & Evil and Psychonauts means the industry will continue to focus on visual glitz, violence and sex appeal. But I feel this approach has done us a disservice. And by "us" I mean all of us - from the developers and publishers who sweat over their game to the player who craves quality entertainment. The games we produce and enjoy are deeper, richer and more socially relevant than is being portrayed by our own marketing.

There are signs that this is slowly changing. If the 12 Steps toward

responsible game marketing that John Geoghegan, Executive Director of The SILOE Research Institute, laid out at the Game Marketing Conference earlier this year are any indication, it's clear that game marketing and promotion is taking a more serious tone.

It couldn't come at a better time, either: The average age of a "gamer" skews older every day, and older audiences are bound to demand more mature content from not only their games, but from the way those games are marketed to consumers. The "screenshots and boobies" approach is going to have to grow up with the rest of us, or marketers will have to resolve themselves to losing the 18- to 25-year-olds they're continually wooing every seven years.

Corvus Elrod is a storyteller and game designer who is working on bringing his 16 years experience into the digital realm. He has a habit of taking serious things lightly and frivolous things seriously, a personal quirk which can be witnessed on his blog, Man Bytes Blog.

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