the Escapist

Trading WEB CARDS

Since the earliest Magic: The Gathering days, trading card games have been moving online
by Allen Varney

ALSO:

EDITOR'S NOTE
by Julianne Greer

Allen, I'm in the same boat as you on this collectible card game thing – I don't get it. For those of you wondering, go have a read through Allen Varney's article in this week's issue of *The Escapist*, and you'll see what I mean. Perhaps this makes me a dimwit, as well; certainly I'll admit to some level of dimness on the topic, as many of these card games are a smashing success. How did this happen?

I suppose my confusion is based in my lack of experience with CCGs. You see, my one experience with a card game outside of those played with the usual 52-card, four-suit deck was a game called *Burn Rate*. Now this was not a card game of the collectible sort, nor was there any aspect of "betting" a card of your own deck based upon the outcome of the match. Nor were there hundreds of possible cards from which to build a deck or hand. Rather, the deck was relatively close to the size of a typical deck (as I recall) and the cards were divided at random among the players.

The game was not terribly complex: The point of the game is, as CEO, to keep your fledgling dot-com in business. The gameplay emerges through a careful balance of personnel cards and skill cards, the personnel cards each carrying an individual's burn rate and his skill level, and the skill cards representing an action and the personnel skill required to perform that action.

During the first couple of dot-com eras we played, my companions and I focused on the mechanics of the game, taking note that not all employees were worth in skill their required burn. Once we realized that the VP of Finance was necessary to keep the money rolling in, that an HR VP was needed to keep your people from being poached, and that if you were saddled with any Sales VP, you were as good as sunk, we had it all down pat. Then we could focus on the third type of card the game offered – the Bad Idea cards.

The Bad Idea cards represented the obstacles that most confounded a large percentage of dot-com era companies: the business idea. The cards' contents were quite familiar, encompassing ideas of companies that were no more, such as "Butler-Hosted search engine," or "Dot-Com Card Game" – whatever **that** is. And it was these cards that made the game really quite fun in a quirky sort of way, inspiring comments such as, "Wow, that really **was** a bad idea," and "Yes! I remember the sock puppet!"

But I guess it's easy to laugh in hindsight, knowing that these ideas were indeed bad, as evidenced by their failures (though one has to wonder if some of those companies didn't just end up with Vern Slick as VP in the Sales Department). I mean, free internet access certainly seems like a good idea, even though it didn't work out. So, flipside of the same token, who'd have known a card game for which you have to build your own deck and give away a card at the end would be such a huge hit?

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To The Editor: If Christian game producers want to be taken seriously by the mainstream market (in particularly the overseas European and Japanese market) they're going to have to stop designing their games as blatant propaganda and misinformation.

I grant that I am basing most of my opinion off of the highly-publicized (and widely maligned) future game *Left Behind: Eternal Forces* which I've noted includes some particularly juicy creationist nonsense. Such a thing may work in Bible-belt America, but try selling that stuff elsewhere and you'll find the market won't bite.

A lot of video games (which even I, an atheist, have enjoyed) include Christian themes, such as faith, redemption, salvation, divine providence, and messianic fulfillment. My favorite game of all time features a protagonist named JC who can progress through the majority of his challenges in non-violent ways and can come to embody a kind of

divine trinity! That's about as blatant as I want my rhetoric served though ... when the game starts spouting propaganda it ceases to be a game and becomes a tool for proselytizing.

- **J. Azpurua**

In response to 'OK Computer" from The Escapist Forum: The simple fact is until they can make a product that actually works really well for men, no internet sex toy will ever hit the mainstream, because it is men that are the ones seeking a sexual experience online.

Women have the rabbit and the pocket rocket and what do men have? Sure there are toys designed for men, but they are no better than the old tried and true low tech methods we've been employing since the dawn of time. Where's our masturbatory holy grail?

Personally I don't think we can overcome the anatomical, material, and engineering constraints of mechanically pleasuring the male organ. However, I do know this: If you build it they will come. How's that for a pun?

- **heavyfeul**

In response to "One Hand Behind My Back" from The Escapist Forum: I was just thinking about one handed gaming a couple weeks ago, while on a crowded bus. My DS Lite is a big step backward for mobile gaming on some levels as the stylus controls require some stability to use accurately. I can't perform surgery in *Trauma Center* while bouncing around in a bus, you know? And I wish Ouendan let you mash buttons as an alternative to stylus controls. There are a few people out there who enjoy playing DDR with the gamepad instead of a dancemat, afterall.

I think maybe handheld systems need more buttons on the back of the system. Something like the PS2's dual-shock controller. The Dual shock has 6 buttons and a joystick all within reach of a single hand.

- **shihku7**

In Response to "Dancing for Jesus" from The Escapist Forum: I can track one major reason why religiously-themed games never caught on big: Video games still bear the relics of their history as a programmers' hobby. Programmers are usually very cynical,

very scientifically-minded, always wanting to find out how things work, and not trusting anything that they're "not supposed to" understand (which, in all fairness, is a stigma many religions carry).

In addition, that programmer's mindset still is the dominant one throughout the industry. These are the sorts of people who'll look at anything overtly religious and write it off as either an overbearing attempt to "save" them, or merely an exercise in preaching to the choir (in a fairly literal sense).

I'd probably be annoyed if my rhythm game told me in all candor to praise or worship anything (side effects of the programmer's bias, I suppose, but I *am* a programmer), but it is refreshing to see more variety entering the industry - especially a vastly different sort of variety, which is what stands the best chance of expanding the medium. I wish them good luck.

-**Bongo Bill**

In Response to "Dancing for Jesus" from The Escapist Forum: I think it has less to do with programmers specifically and more to do with human

nature. I don't think it matters if you're a programmer, a physicist, a doctor, a musician, a secretary, or a mini-mart clerk: faith is a deceptively difficult thing to understand.

Plus, I think there is a common misconception that science is the enemy of religion, especially with current political climates being what they are. But, that idea is only a throwback to 15th century thinking (Galileo, Copernicus, et al) perpetuated by zealots on both sides of the argument. Reality probably lies somewhere in between.

Anyway, my point is that the denial of the existence of God is not so much the property of scientifically-minded folks as it is the property of anyone who might not believe in something that they cannot empirically experience. But, yeah, religious games are usually teh stinky.

- DrRosenRosen

In Response to "Guitar Heroics" from The Escapist Lounge: It comforts me to know that there is someone else

out there who bought a PS2 for the sole purpose of rocking. They all thought I was crazy, they said there were other games out there, but it didn't matter to me. I had no aspirations to roll the universe into a ball, destroy ancient Chinese armies, or hit my opponents in the nads repeatedly with a polearm or pike.

My PS2 isn't a game console so much as it is a guitar simulator. When *Guitar Hero 2* hits, my friends and I will most likely go missing for several days until our wrists start to deform into immobile claws.

- zackola

In Response to "Gran Turismo HD: game Not Included" from The Escapist lounge: I don't want to interrupt all the fun you lot are having with your rant, but I think you might be a bit confused with respect to the facts of the case.

GT-HD comes in two versions, "Classic" and "Premium". Stephen Rokiski may want the Premium version, but the rest of you without a doubt want Classic,

which comes with 750 cars and 51 tracks included in the price. The Premium version is the one to which the quoted prices apply. There are far fewer cars and tracks available currently because they're all being modelled (both visually and behaviourally) to a ridiculous degree of precision.

To say that having a product like that released commercially is bad for gaming is a very odd position to take. High production values and meticulous attention to detail are something I'm

personally very happy to see and use of micropayments for vehicles seems like an intelligent way to balance the high cost of producing the game assets with the desire to keep the game moderately accessible to those who want to try it.

In my view micropayments are a good tool. Like any tool they can be used well or used badly. The *Chromehounds* stuff I consider bad. *GT-HD*, from what little we know so far, looks good.

- Dom Camus

TRADING Web Cards

Since the earliest **Magic: The Gathering** days, trading card games have been **moving** online

by Allen Varney

In a career riddled with mistakes of minor consequence, I look back at 1980 as the one blunder of colossal magnitude that proved me, beyond doubt, a hopeless dimwit.

While I waited with him in line for an event at Noreascon Two, the World Science Fiction Convention in Boston, Peter Olotka, co-designer of the brilliant *Cosmic Encounter* boardgame, described a notion for a game that players might play while, for instance, waiting in line at a convention. "They would each lay out their own cards," Olotka said, thinking it over, "and play them against each other, and the winner would somehow get the loser's cards." I pondered this, then said, "I don't see how that would work," and changed the subject.

In 1992, long after I blithely abandoned this 12-year headstart, Peter Adkison met at a convention with Richard Garfield. Adkison was a former Boeing engineer who had cashed in some stock to start his own little game company; Garfield was an amateur game designer and doctoral candidate in combinatory math at the University of Pennsylvania.

Adkison, trying to scrape together the money to publish Garfield's boardgame *RoboRally*, was looking for intermediate projects. Having not yet met me or Olotka, Adkison independently inquired with Garfield about a game suitable for convention play. Garfield thought it over and, the next day, proposed a game where each player has his own cards, plays against others, and the winner gets one of the loser's cards. Adkison pondered this, grew excited and said, "This could make us a million dollars. Maybe two million!"

This is why a Boeing engineer revolutionized the game field and is now worth upwards of $50 million, whereas I scrounge a hand-to-mouth existence writing for online game magazines.

Those Were the Days
On the first day of the June 1993 Origins game convention in Fort Worth, Texas, as I sat with him at his small, neglected exhibitor booth behind unsold stacks of his roleplaying supplement *The Primal Order*, Adkison bubbled with characteristic enthusiasm. He showed me Garfield's decks of *Magic: The*

Gathering play test cards -- laser-printed on construction paper with cheap clipart -- and explained the concept in almost the same way Olotka had described it to me years before.

Along with Garfield, Adkison's small Seattle company of six part-time gamers, Wizards of the Coast, had made several market assumptions. They hoped each *Magic* player would buy one 60-card deck and perhaps as many as six 13-card booster packs. Players would naturally form small groups (hence the game's subtitle) and play one another for "ante," a card from the loser's deck. In every player group, the available cards would represent a unique subset of cards from the game's larger universe; no one would have a clear sense of all the cards in existence. About eight months after they released *The Gathering*, Adkison said, Wizards planned (finances permitting) to release *Ice Age*, a companion "Deckmaster" game using the same card backs.

The next day at that Origins show, I stopped again at the Wizards booth and found Adkison even more jubilant than

usual. He proudly showed me samples of the printed *Magic* cards, which had just arrived from the printer, Cartamundi in Belgium. I held what was, I believe, the very first printed card of the Hurloon Minotaur, which would become the iconic creature of *Magic*'s Alpha, Beta, Unlimited and Revised sets. "Very nice," said Hopeless Dimwit, oblivious to the tide of history.

Magic debuted two months later, at the August 1993 Gen Con in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I never saw the Wizards booth there, because gamers were packed solid around it, three deep, every single minute the exhibitor hall was open. They bought the first few thousand of the several billion *Magic* cards sold to date.

This isn't the place for a corporate biography of Wizards of the Coast under Peter Adkison. (Shannon Appelcline offers a brief Wizards history on RPG. net.) But to close off the story: Adkison continued to display his eye for talent, acquiring TSR (publisher of *Dungeons & Dragons*) in 1997 and, in 1998, English-language rights to the *Pokemon* trading card game, which ultimately proved even

more lucrative than *Magic*. In 1999, Adkison sold Wizards to Hasbro for $325 million; he left the company at the start of 2001. He now runs Gen Con and wants to be Stephen Colbert's gamer friend.

Now in its ninth edition, . *Magic* reshaped net gaming, and vice versa. This caught Wizards off-guard. Adkison the engineer was, by the standards of the early 1990s, remarkably net-savvy; he secured wizards.com the instant he started his company, long before most publishers had ever heard of a domain name. Yet the net confounded his expectations about *Magic*'s players, and the players in turn bulldozed Wizards' early plans for the DeckMaster series.

Magic: Even the Paper Game was Online

Though *Magic* was no computer game – not at the start, anyway – it became a huge "computer-enabled" game. Players quickly coordinated through Usenet to compile card lists, optimized deck designs and rules exploits. Everyone quickly learned, and bought, every card. Frenzied by a speculator-driven secondary market, players hungered for

> "*Magic* not only dominates card games and the paper gaming hobby; it also looms **LARGE** in the history of games on the internet."

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more cards. *Magic's* phenomenal success prompted Wizards to postpone standalone DeckMaster companion games in favor of expansion sets for *The Gathering*. (Ice Age belatedly debuted in June 1995 as *Magic's* first "standalone expansion," and Wizards has since published 11 more *Magic* standalones.)

In the first years of the craze, imitators flooded the market with physical trading card games of widely varying quality. In 1996, inevitably, this bubble burst. Because it cost well over $100,000 to produce a trading card game, some ambitious small publishers created their versions online. These games, along with a few pioneering text MUDs, were the first to attempt business models centered on Virtual Asset Purchase. Unlike the small freeware apps players could use to play *Magic* over the net, such as Apprentice, these online-only operations sold nonexistent virtual trading cards. Purchasers could then play the game for free using a downloadable client. This seemed so odd, back then – at least to a hopeless dimwit.

The first online trading card game was *Chron X* in May 1997, followed by *Sanctum* and several more over the years. Some of these survive as labors of love, but only two companies have thrived with digital cards: Wizards itself, with *Magic Online* (though it is blighted with lag, bribery, security issues and frequent downtime); and Worlds Apart Productions, a Denver company that started with text MUDs (*Eternal City* and *Grendel's Revenge)* before moving into online card games in 2003 with *Star Chamber.* Building out the *Star Chamber* technology as the Collect-Trade-Play platform, Worlds Apart hit it big with online versions of two licensed paper card games published by Decipher: *Star Trek* and *The Lord of the Rings.* How big? Hard to tell, but in a *Denver Post* article, Worlds Apart founder and president Scott Martins claimed a successful online card game can generate an average of $70 per player each month.

As that news article reports, Sony Online Entertainment bought Worlds Apart in August 2006 for an undisclosed sum. Renaming it SOE-Denver, Sony has set

the studio to develop an online game based on WizKids' "collectible strategy game" *Pirates of the Spanish Main.* No word yet on the fate of the *Auto Assault* digital card game Worlds Apart designed as a tie-in to NCsoft's new MMOG.

Reshuffle and Deal
Sony's purchase shows its desire to get into the online card business. "We are going to be integrating what they do with what we do," said SOE spokesperson Chris Kramer in a *Rocky Mountain News* story about the purchase. "There may be a point in time in the future where not only is there an *EverQuest II* card game, but people playing in the (computer game version) of *EverQuest II* could go into a tavern, sit down and play the card game inside the computer game."

SOE has already moved into virtual asset sales with its Station Exchange, launched for *EverQuest II* in July 2006. Online card games are a natural extension of this idea, but a risky one, as designer Damion Schubert noted in his Zen of

Design blog entry "SOE Buys CCG Company, Clearly Up To Something"

"[T]here will be a real temptation here to make a money game. *Magic* is a money game – they have a relatively small number of customers buying a lot of cards. This is a very different spending pattern than you see in a [*World of Warcraft/EverQuest*]-style monthly fee. The big danger with money games, if the history of all the *Magic* wannabes is any indication, is hitting critical mass – finding enough other players willing to invest into any given CCG [collectible card game]. The paper CCG industry averages one success every five years."

We'll see increasing convergence between online card games and MMOGs. This follows as part of the larger role that physical trading card games have assumed, as one more routine format for licensed media properties: lunchbox, videogame, trading card game. In fact, the first wave of physical card games based on MMOGs has already arrived: One based on *City of Heroes* appeared in

January 2006, and *World of Warcraft* and *EVE Online* card games are due in late autumn. If any of these games sell well (the *City of Heroes* card game has so far roused little fanfare), we may see events in the online world reflected in the card game expansions, and vice versa. The companies may offer cross-promotions: Send in these three rare cards and get a prized virtual item for your online character; complete this quest and earn a coupon for a free booster.

Beyond that, I wouldn't care to speculate, having already proven myself a dimwit.

[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.

Steve Jackson:
The Escapist Interview
by Russ Pitts

Even if you've never heard of Steve Jackson, you've probably felt his influence.

Steve Jackson started his career at Metagaming Concepts, where he developed games like *Ogre* and *The Space Gamer* and pioneered the "microgame," creating wholly self-contained games often distributed in single plastic baggies. Jackson parted ways with Metagaming in 1980 to found his own company, appropriately named Steve Jackson Games, where he has since produced over 250 games, including *Car Wars, Illuminati, Ninja Burger, GURPS (Generic Universal Role Playing System)* and *Munchkin*, and is currently at work on his first MMOG, *UltraCorps.* But Steve Jackson's reach extends beyond his own vast empire of card and tabletop games, influencing or directly mentoring many of today's brightest developers, including Warren Spector, who started his career at SJG and went on to create some of the most intelligent and innovative videogames ever made.

As with most creative visionaries, one's first impression of Steve Jackson is not necessarily that he's a supergenius. Although he is a hyper-intelligent game designer, the first thing one notices about Steve Jackson is that he's an enthusiastic gamer. As we spoke on the phone, his intelligence was apparent, but his passion for games (both his and other people's) came through even more clearly. And after speaking with him in person at AGC, that impression was solidified.

The man also pronounces punctuation. Questions he's asking are clearly interrogative, it's deadly apparent when he's finished speaking and when he's making an emphatic point, there's no mistaking the exclamation point. I've tried, where possible, to translate that into text using bold-faced type, but having a conversation with the legendary Steve Jackson is one of those things you just have to experience to believe.

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The Escapist: You've been making games for quite a while, and all of your games seem to have that "Steve Jackson flair," but that's really hard to define. What is it about your games that make them "Steve Jackson" games.

Steve Jackson: I wish I knew; it's just what I do. A lot of them have a humorous element, but not all of them do. Certainly *Ogre* didn't. What can I say? I just do them.

TE: Do you see any future in tabletop gaming today?

SJ: As long as we've got tabletops there will be people who will want to sit down and have chips and soda and play with their friends. That's not going to go away.

TE: Is there one that you've done that's you're favorite?

SJ: When people ask me that I like to ask them if they have children. You know? Which is your favorite?

TE: I don't, and I can't help myself. I just instinctively ask that question even though I know that's going to be your answer, because you just have to. I think everyone has a favorite Steve Jackson game, and it may not necessarily be tied to the game per se. Maybe it's tied to the company you kept or the table you were playing it on. And I think that ties back to what you were saying a minute ago. That's what really keeps us playing isn't it?

SJ: Yes. The enjoyment you get out of a game is largely about who you're playing it with. Yes. That's going to reflect on your memories. I have different favorites from month to month and sometimes they're my own games and sometimes they're not. Right now I'm playing a lot of *Puzzle Pirates*.

TE: What else are you playing?

SJ: I'm doing a lot of test playing in *UltraCorps*, which is the online game that we're working on. Other than that it's just a scattershot. … We're evaluating a lot of games for 2007 release, right, so right now I'm playing a lot of different games.

TE: Anything you can talk about?

SJ: No! **Can't talk about it**. I can admit that there's more *Munchkin* coming, but that's about it.

TE: *UltraCorps* is kind of an expansion of an earlier *UltraCorps* game isn't it?

SJ: *UltraCorps* was originally created by a studio called VR-1. And it was released on the Microsoft Gaming Zone and it had a little run there, but it was not successful. It was, in fact, so unsuccessful that there's a short chapter in a book about online gaming that discusses all of the reasons it flopped. I found that very instructive.

The only [reason] I disagreed with was the idea that games like that aren't fun and nobody's going to play them, period. I think that there are a lot of people who like the idea of playing a multiplayer space conquest game that's more "boardgamey" and less about running around with an animated character.

But there were a lot of problems with the way it was originally run for pay, and for me, none of those trumped the essential **coolness** of the game. It's just that there were some little execution problems. Some of them are forgivable. For instance: The game did not have good refereeing on the Zone according, to the book (and I've had other people tell me this). It didn't have good refereeing because the referees were all so into the game that they were playing it themselves. They were sometimes more interested in their own games than in their refereeing duties. It speaks well for the game that it could eat their minds that way; management shouldn't have allowed that.

And we see that here in our play test. I really still love playing the game very much, even after two years of sometimes painful redevelopment. The coder loves playing the game. We're just going to set it up so that game staff cannot join the massive for-points games. That's easily done.

The other problem with the game, the big problem, was that it was hard to learn, and new players were at the bottom of the food chain - quite literally. The winning strategy for the game was to hope that you were set up next to a couple of newbies so that you could roll over them. **And take their stuff**! We have done a whole lot to make the game easier to learn. We're building in some social things to encourage [veterans] to help newbies. Although, of course, there will still be reason to kill them or anybody else. And as soon as we have enough real games under our belt to make this possible, we will divide play up according to experience so that the real tigers will no longer be around in the games that the newbies enter.

TE: So it's safe to say that you're using the experience of the early game as sort of a handbook of "what not to do"?

SJ: There's a lot of what not to do, but it's a great game. The reason that I bought [it] was that I was in it as a player and I though it was **just cool**. It owned my mind for a few months some years ago, and I was very sorry when it went offline. And then, when I had the opportunity to buy it myself, it was like "yeah, duh." I truly don't know how it will do financially when it's launched. We have a lot to learn. But one reason that I wanted to do it is for the experience.

TE: When are we going to get our hands on it?

SJ: You can play it now at ultracorps. com. It's in a free test phase. Before we launch it, we will hit feature lock and we will run one final game as the beta game on the theory that "OK, everything is done and now we're testing it all together." And then we will say "OK, send me money?" And see what happens.

TE: Talking about buying *UltraCorps* raises an interesting question. At this point, your company is pretty well-established. Are you to the point now where you can take those risks and not have to worry so much about the commercialization, or are you still operating more or less as an "indie" developer, living hand-to-mouth?

SJ: It's not totally hand-to-mouth, but we certainly can't go around taking risks randomly. Part of the *UltraCorps* thing is it's a controlled risk. We don't know if we will make a bunch of money on it, but we're pretty sure that we won't lose a bunch of money on it. And we will learn a lot that will position us to do other things later, or make us a better partner for other online publishers who want to take a license.

We have so many properties out there that could be turned into computer games. If I were fully-funded now for everything I want to do, there wouldn't be time to do them all for the next five to 10 years.

TE: Which of your games would you most like to see turned into a videogame?

SJ: If I could just wave my hand and make it happen now? *Munchkin*.

TE: *Munchkin*?

SJ: Yeah. With *Car Wars* in second place. And the only reason *Car Wars* is in second place is that *Car Wars* had its greatest popularity 10 years ago, and *Munchkin's* greatest popularity was last month and has been last month for more than a year. **It just keeps going up**! So *Munchkin* is the hot property right now. *Car Wars* would make a wonderful, wonderful game, and so would *Munchkin*, but they'd just be different games. And so would *Illuminati* and so would *Ogre* and so would yadda yadda yadda I can't do them all at once.

TE: What would a *Munchkin* videogame look like?

SJ: It would look a lot like John Kovalic drew it. I would absolutely want to keep the Kovalic art style.

TE: You were at TIGC recently and you spoke about independent game development. Is there anybody out there that you think "gets" it?

SJ: Daniel James "gets" it. Daniel James gets it so much. He's the creator of *Puzzle Pirates*. He's proven that he gets it by doing something that's both original and commercially successful. He runs

gamegardens.com, which is basically a public sandbox for people to use his tools and do game development. He speaks at conferences and is very forthcoming about what he's doing. He even gives numbers. He'll stand up and tell you how many subscribers he has, how much money he's making and what models are working best. He not only gets it, but he's willing to **share**, and I think that [being] willing to share is part of "getting it." He does a blog called *The Flogging Will Continue* that's very good reading.

TE: Do you think that ties in to the "hacker ethic"? Do you think that sharing of information is really key?

SJ: I would reject strongly the term "hacker ethic" because different hackers have different ethics. But yeah, sharing information, sharing ideas - brainstorming. And the internet lets you brainstorm with people that you have never met and will never meet. And he gets that, too.

TE: Let's talk about design in terms of putting together a game. Which do you see as the more important aspect, the system of a game or the setting of a game?

SJ: Depends on the game. You have some brilliant work out there that's almost all setting and you have things out there that are pure system. SPI's *Strategy 1* was nothing but system. There are some maps of territories that never happened and here are a whole lot of counters in God knows how many colors for generic military units. And there are some brief rules on how to use this to represent medieval and here some brief rules for Age of Steam and there are some more brief rules for WWII technology … and now **run along and play**! No setting at all.

My *GURPS* roleplaying game is all about system, and some people found that either daunting or boring, and they said "well, there should be some setting." And the fourth edition does add some specific setting suggestions, although it's a "multi-versal" setting. It still gives them a framework. Some people like framework. Some people prefer story framework to game rules. They say, "I can make up rules. Give me a story to work with."

There's no right answer, and there's no reason to think that one approach should

or will dominate, because people are different. They want different things.

TE: *GURPS* is obviously a brilliant system, and it's held up pretty well. We've since seen another system come out: the d20 System. I want to know what you think about the d20 system and what you think about the proliferation of it.

SJ: It was an interesting marketing move, and it's been a very enabling thing. d20 enabled indie game publishers like crazy. Between the enabling of a licensee to do imitation *D&D* and the enabling of "Woo we can publish **free** on the web and cheap with Pod," we saw just a huge blossoming of indie game creators. Most of their work was simply **abysmal**, and that had some serious effects on the sales chain.

There was a big bulge of d20 stuff. For a while, you could sell anything with the d20 label on it and then when people figured out that the d20 label meant "lowest common denominator," a lot of retailers and distributors were stuck with product. And that hurt them. So we see enabling is not always a good thing.

At the same time some really, really quality products - some really quality companies - have been created in response to d20 or flourished and sunk their roots deep doing quality d20 stuff. There's nothing about the d20 system itself that says "this has to be lowest common denominator." It's just that out there in the "real world," unless you see a logo on it that you know … when you see Green Ronin or Mongoose, you know you're buying Green Ronin and Mongoose quality. But if you see a d20 sticker on it and you've never heard of it, then what you have to expect is that you're getting imitation *D&D* by somebody that's living out their fantasies being a game creator. Open the cover and look before you buy it.

TE: How do you think d20 plays? Have you played it much?

SJ: Not much. It plays like *D&D*. *D&D* was the first roleplaying game I played because when I started **there weren't any others**. And I liked it! It was **cool**!

Some of my first design was in response to what I perceived as insufficiencies in the system, just like a hundred thousand other people who went out and wrote

something because they saw insufficiencies in the system they were playing. Except I got mine published. Woohoo.

d20 is streamlined *D&D*. Duh. If somebody wants to play with classes and levels and they're in a setting where *D&D* works (because it was optimized for sword and sorcery, it's strongly optimized for that, and you get hilarious results when you try and bring the system into anything else), it's pretty easy to find somebody that wants to play *D&D*. And if you wave a d20 book around,
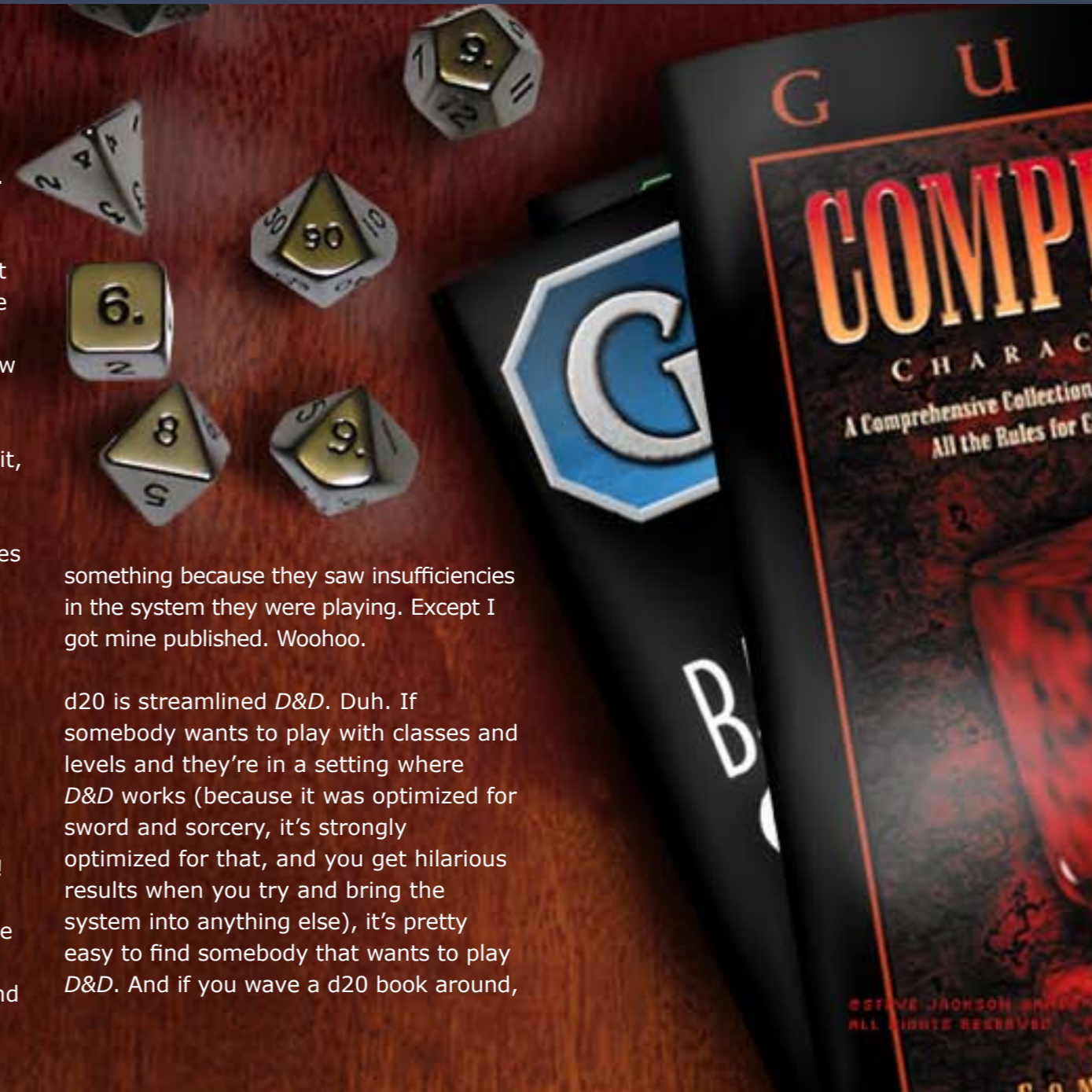
that'll be recognized as *D&D* even though the trademarks are different.

TE: Looking at one of your newest games, *Chez Guevara* - and that's obviously a take-off of *Chez Geek* - looking through your game catalog, one gets the impression that you're kind of a revolutionary. Is that just a side effect of your sense of humor?

SJ: *Chez Guevara* is not a game about the romantic side of being a revolutionary. *Chez Guevara* is about being dirty and sweaty and stinky and out there in the jungle, and the officers are trying to get you, and your fellow troops don't like you all that much, and you win the game by collecting enough "Slack" so that you can escape, go to the city and open up an internet café on the reward money from turning in the "Glorious Leader."

TE: So it's more about the Steve Jackson sense of humor?

SJ: The cliché that that game subverts is the cliché of "Glorious Revolution." Everything is out there to be made fun of. Clichés are to be subverted.

TE: Is that sort of a running theme?

SJ: With some things. On the other hand, with *Ogre* it was "clichés are to be celebrated! Look at the huge tank!" *Ogre* is not ironic at all. I did that almost 30 years ago, but the message with *Ogre* is that tanks are **cool**. The bigger the tank, the better it is.

TE: So you guys are working on *UltraCorps*. Is Steve Jackson Games moving in that direction? Toward computer games?

SJ: I don't want to move entirely in that direction. I want to move **more** in that direction because you can do such neat games on the computer. Over the years, as new styles of games have developed I've had a lot of fun with "hey, can I do that?" I'd like to do digital games. I don't' want to abandon what I've been doing for … a terrifying number of years, but I would like to have more options to play with.

TE: One of the criticisms we've seen of MMOG games or games that have attempted to capture the tabletop game feel in a computer setting is that the computer just doesn't make a very good game master. What would you say to that?

SJ: I would say that's true. Saying that the computer doesn't make a good game master is neither a new comment nor an incisive one. Don't let anybody sell that to you as an insight. The insights will come from the people who find a way to address that problem.

TE: Looking forward at other properties you may turn into a computer game, is that something you're addressing?

SJ: Well. The short answer is "not with anything I can talk about." And if I could talk about it, I would be waving my arms and explaining what I'm dreaming about rather than spitting out lines of code that solve the problem. Putting a real game master in a computer is possibly an issue of true artificial intelligence. And that's a ways off.

TE: Thank you so much for taking a few minutes to talk with us.

SJ: I hope it was useful, and that you had a good time. `COMMENTS`

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. *He has been writing on the web since it was invented and claims to have played every console ever made. He also makes a mean Texas chili.*

FUN is a Four Letter WORD

by Warren Spector

Should games be fun?
This thought popped into my head the other morning as I walked my crazy dog, Maggie. I'd just spoken at the Texas Independent Games Conference, and it seemed like everyone at the show kept coming back to the question of how to make games fun; or were games as fun now as they used to be; or was the mainstream game not fun anymore; or was Raph Koster right in his book, A Theory of Fun for Game Design?

"Fun" was everywhere, as a topic of discussion, if not as a characteristic most of the attendees used to describe most recent games.

So, I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that questions about games and fun would occur to me. What did surprise me was my response:

Maybe all this focus on fun — this requirement that games be fun or that all evaluations of games be run through the fun-filter — maybe all this is a bad thing.

For one thing, the word "fun" is kind of meaningless. It's a flabby, ill-defined word, one that describes a state or a feeling that's different for each and every one of us. As Marc LeBlanc pointed out in his GDC talk, "Formal Design Tools: Emergent Complexity, Emergent Narrative" back in 2000 (wow, a millennium ago!), the word "fun" isn't much help to us as designers and developers.

But, the word "fun" has other problems. It kind of locks us into a "games are for kids" mentality. It implies that games are good for just one thing: passing time in an enjoyable manner, for want of a better definition.

And perhaps most damning to me is that all this focus on passing time puts a ceiling, of sorts, above us that separates us from other media, media that are allowed to strive for something other than simple "fun-ness."

Movies, books, musical compositions and so on are — or can be — fun to watch/read/listen to, but there's nothing in the definition or judgment of those other media that requires fun. We're the only medium that says to itself, "This is what you must be and all you will ever be."

That kind of thinking makes me mad. What about other words, other values? What about "challenge"? What about "compelling"? What about "discomfort"? What about "enlightening" and "thought-provoking"? We do "aspirational" some of the time, which is a start, I guess. And one of my friends and colleagues, Doug Church (unsung hero of gaming and smart man that he is), commented to me recently that "There are things like Reel Fishing or Harvest Moon or Animal Crossing which allow more space/contemplation during play, but still have a 'fun' core in that they need to appeal to a visceral/competitive vibe." I have to agree with him (though I admit that I may be twisting his thought around a bit as I obsess about fun). Even when we try to do something different, we end up going for the fun.

And that drags me back to my question: Does "interactive" inevitably equal "playful," or can we strive for different (and more)?

Actually, I guess this line of thinking was driven not only by the conference emphasis (not a pre-planned focus on the part of organizers or attendees, by the way) but also by the fact that my wife, Caroline, and I recently watched David Cronenberg's film, A History of Violence. And, man, would I say we didn't have fun watching it — not in the way we had fun watching The Incredibles or Pirates of the Caribbean (the first one) or a Woody Allen movie (when he was funny). No. A History of Violence can not be described as "fun," not by Caroline and me, anyway. But, man, was that movie thought-provoking (and pleasurable in that way).

After the credits rolled, Caroline and I talked for hours about the questions raised (and left largely unanswered!) by the movie. And even when we weren't talking, we were thinking about it until one of us would break the silence with another comment that set the dialogue rolling again. Heck, Caroline dreamed about the movie, for crying out loud!

That's valuable — a story that wasn't fun to watch, that wasn't pleasurable in and of itself, but was clearly "troubling," "disturbing," "annoying," "over the top," "ambiguous"; all things that mature media, for mature people, allow and encourage. I mean, it's not as if reading James Joyce or Thomas Pynchon is "fun" (come on, admit it). No one goes to a John Cage concert because it's going to put a big ol' smile on their face. And A History of Violence was a lot like being in a room with someone you just wanted to scream at but couldn't.

So why must games be "fun"? Who said that was the highest, or even worse, the only value? Is it a function of our status as a medium that is truly for kids? Is it a function of a development community dominated by Peter Pan types who won't grow up? (I'll cop to that, if you will.) Is it that games are just different from other media in some way I can't define? Maybe I'm missing something; maybe the serious games movement is where our not-fun games are being made.

I mentioned this whole rigmarole to another friend, Robin Hunicke, who's currently working on a game that promises to be a ton of fun (plus a lot more) and she dragged me back to current market realities, which probably explain a lot here. She said, "I think that the common (and sad) response to 'The Fun Question' is that fun sells, and games are made to sell. A History of Violence or John Cage concerts have limited audiences because they are 'art,' and games are primarily not considered

Does *"interactive"* inevitably equal **"playful,"** or can we strive for **DIFFERENT** (and more)?

WHY must games be "FUN"?

an art or made for art's sake (as it's pretty hard to make a living making them that way so far). So people don't generally decide to make games without considering how much they will sell (to people who want to have fun, specifically). It's not that it's wrong to think about making arty games - it's just not profitable, so hardly anyone does it 'for real.'"

She's right, of course; Robin usually is. And she makes me feel a little like a hypocrite. It's not like I'm exactly working on stuff that isn't trying to push every fun button I can reach. But I have to think that maybe, someday, I'll get that chance — the chance to do something that's enjoyable in some way, but without falling into the typical, competitive, games mode.

You know, the thing that kills me about this is that, even as I write this, I'm left with a knot in my stomach at the thought of making a "not-fun" game — the unexamined assumption that "Games = Fun" is powerful and insidious. But I'm a believer in the idea that the unexamined and, more, the thing we

don't think is worth examining may be the very thing we most have to examine.

Right now, I'm thinking we should be thinking about whether a game has to be fun to sell; whether we've trained our audience so well that we've trapped ourselves in funsville; whether we can, or even want to, try to change things.

I don't have any answers about this stuff, but I sure wish more of us would start thinking about it. If we don't — if we just accept uncritically the idea that games have to be fun, we're doomed to a future as a way for people to pass some empty time — and nothing more.

COMMENTS

Warren Spector is the founder of Junction Point Studios. He worked previously with Origin Systems, Looking Glass Studios, TSR and Steve Jackson Games.

The IDEA of Warhammer

by Shannon Drake

While Games Workshop began as a small bedroom company focused on importing American roleplaying games for the British market, their own lineup of tabletop miniature games like Warhammer Fantasy Battle made them a power in their own right. By 1990, Games Workshop employed over 250 people, and by 1994, their shares were floated on the London Stock Exchange. However, while there were many successful Warhammer 40K (Warhammer's sci-fi relative) videogames, Warhammer's fantasy line struggled to find success in the age of electronic gaming, boasting some obscure PC strategy titles and not much else.

Their online effort, Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning (WAR) is a star-crossed project. After costs began to rise under Climax Online, WAR's original developer, Games Workshop pulled its funding, ultimately killing Climax's chances to secure a publisher. In the meantime, Mythic Entertainment's decision to shelve its aggressively-promoted Imperator left the company looking for a new project. One thing led to another, and WAR found its way into Mythic's Virginia-based development house.

Managing this marriage of American videogame and British tabletop game companies is Design Manager Paul Barnett, more business consultant than misty-eyed visionary. That's not to say he's unfamiliar with the industry, as his roots go back before Ultima Online, to the days when text-based dinosaurs ruled the Earth. "I wrote some MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) back in the early `90s," Paul says, going through his resume. "One, Legends of Terris, went on to become the biggest MUD in Europe. After that, I went into business consultancy working with big business." While he'd left the gaming industry, the gaming industry hadn't forgotten about him. "I had stayed away from the computer industry and only went back into it because of two things: Warhammer and Mark Jacobs (Mythic's CEO and lead designer for WAR). I met Mark years ago when my games were on AOL. He and I hit it off, but it took another decade before we could work together."

While he'll mumble about a dark conspiracy to bring him back into computer games, the real story isn't quite so mysterious - on the record. "Games Workshop had just cancelled their first Warhammer game with Climax.

They had decided that they would consider licensing out the project, but only to a company they trusted. As part of my consultancy, I suggested Mark and Mythic." A remarkable series of coincidences came together, by his telling: "Games Workshop already had a history with Mark. I had introduced them a few years back. Once the magic had happened, both Games Workshop and Mark indicated they wanted me to be part of the project." Conspiracy? "Quite simply, I was asked," he says, though the rhythmic pattern of his blinking may just be Morse Code.

Balancing the desires of an old-school British tabletop game company with the urges of Mark Jacobs and the Mythic team can be, he says, "a difficult job. Games Workshop is rightly protective of Warhammer, and Americans are naturally optimistic that they can understand anything." He serves as a liaison between the two, he says. "I spend most of my time helping both sides get the best out of each other, explaining the needs of Mythic to Games Workshop and vice versa." When the inevitable culture and game design clashes pop up - "Two countries divided by a common language and different cultures, and all that" - it's

his job to mediate the dispute and get everyone on the same page.

The major challenge for a company taking something with a built-in audience and converting it to a videogame is deciding where to draw the line when it comes to strictly sticking to the existing property. I asked Paul for his thoughts on that, whether they are trying to get a complete, exact replication of the tabletop game, or if they are looking to capture the "spirit" of Warhammer itself. "[That question] has a very long answer that I really can't do justice to here. But if I had to try and explain it, I would say it's important to understand that we are not making a game based on the tabletop war game. We are taking the idea of Warhammer — the idea, concept, theories and feeling — and making the best Realm versus Realm MMOG we can." He adds, "Warhammer is Batman," meaning no matter what form Batman is in — be it comics, movies or LEGO — there is always a central theme, a sort of spirit of Batman's character running through it.

"It's complicated," he allows, "[but] trust me. It will be an MMOG that drips Warhammer." To that end, they use the

best resource available, the game system itself. Many designers would envy the extensive background on the Warhammer world, from the sourcebook to the miniatures game to fictional stories. When it comes to building the game, "We look to the eight points of Warhammer." He starts ticking them off: "Empire, Battle, War, Magic, Monsters, Grudges, Humor and Chaos. These eight points, driven through endless, heroic, perpetual struggle are what our game is all about. As for where we get these points from, we go right to the source — Games Workshop's Rick Priestly and Alan Merrett." As the Shadowrun debacle was still fresh in my mind, and as Paul also faced the challenge of adapting an older games style to a new format, I asked him for his thoughts on whether Warhammer had "too much baggage." "It's back to the idea of Warhammer," he answered, capturing both the difficulty of dealing with an established property, and the mindset required to overcome that obstacle. "We have a definitive vision we want to follow, and we get the best out of Warhammer when we stick to its core idea. That way, you don't get caught up in all the 'baggage.' To mangle a quote, we fudge the IP for the gameplay and

While he'll mumble about a *dark* CONSPIRACY to bring him back into computer games, the real story *isn't quite* SO mysterious - on the record.

the gameplay for the IP. But we always aim to make tasty fudge."

Outside of Warhammer's eight points, the Mythic team has three more guiding principles: "We want the game to work through skill, commitment and imagination," Paul says. "Part of that is to reward players' skill. We want to ensure that those people who bother to learn the best ways to play, find the best ways to gather information and make the most of their gaming time get a reward. It's not communist in outlook. It's about heroes being just that. If you have the commitment, the skill and the imagination, then you damn well deserve the best game experience."

Since we were talking about game experience, I was curious about his "roots," as in his likes and dislikes. You can tell a lot about a person by the games he likes. "I cite Bubble Bobble, GoldenEye 64, Civilization, Half-Life, Doom and Elite as some of the greatest games of all time," he answers, which tells me he has taste. As for his MMOG touchstone, it's a title that predates Ultima Online: "I think that *Gauntlet* (the arcade game) is the greatest MMOG of

all time," he says. While it may not suit the massive definition, the focus on small groups and constant combat should be familiar to anyone immersed in the genre.

The old school MUD designer negotiating the relationship between an old guard British company and the Young Turk Americans is the stuff geeky sitcoms should be made of. It will be interesting to see if it works out, especially considering Mythic's lofty goals for the game. "We want WAR to be to the MMOG model [of] what Half-Life was to Quake - the same, but different; essentially the same tech, but a new experience. We want to move things on and to make a great game in a way that no one could see coming." **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.

we *fudge the* IP for the gameplay and the gameplay for the IP. But we always aim to make *tasty* fudge

Ace IN THE HOLE

by Dan Dormer

The rush of taking down the repugnant Alliance in *World of Warcraft* is something hard to replicate. Knitting a sweater really doesn't cut it in contrast to discovering a lone Paladin out of mana in Stranglethorn Vale, separated from his group. The joy of unleashing the glorious Frost Shock/Earthbind Totem combo and asking your party, "Where is his god now?" as you laugh about the recently departed; it's almost **too** much fun. Could you imagine trying to recapture that action and transform it into a complety different medium? How hard would **that** be?

To find out, I spoke to two men, Brian Kibler and Danny Mandell. They're the Lead Developer and Lead Designer (respectively) of the group responsible for distilling all of *WoW* into a collectible card game (CCG). The game, called the *World of Warcraft Trading Card Game*, is being published by Upper Deck and aims to bring the persistent, massively-multiplayer experience of *WoW* offline, pitting two friends against each other in heated battles. Of course, you don't just sit down one day and say, "Hey, let's make a card game of this really successful MMOG." It requires a lot of work.

According to Kibler, the hardest part is figuring out "how you make a game of a game. One of the pitfalls is trying to include too much of the game. If you do that, it's gonna fail. You could imagine that you start the game at level one and you're fighting mobs and your opponents, but the problem is if you go really wide, it's hard to go deep, and then it's hard for a lot of new players to process. … You want it to be accessible."

Mandell added, "We want to make sure you can play your character that you have in the game."

"We had a big whiteboard, and we basically went about asking ourselves what our goals were for the game," Kibler said. "We were like, 'We want the games to be 20 to 30 minutes, so you could get three to four games done in an

Each class has about 15 abilities.

hour.' So we had to pick a pretty specific scale. We asked, 'What's the game really about?' - the combat. Yes, exploring the regions is cool, and the flavor on the cards in the deck adds that to the game. So, we ultimately chose combat to set it up for the PvP experience.

"There are seven card types [and] 16 different heroes - one for every class on the Horde and Alliance side. The hero does several things. The object of the game is to kill the other player's hero. … A hero usually needs a weapon to deal damage. Casters deal from the hand with spells, like Fireball. Though, there are no racial abilities in the first set."

"Deck building is pretty open-ended," Mandell said. "There's gear, which is tons of armor. Abilities are cards played from your hand that are sweet spell effects like Fireball, and some of these remain in play. There are the allies, which are your party members. You can have one in combat at a time, and the damage they take remains on them. It's a thematic perspective, so that you could have healing play a factor like it would online. There are weapon and armor cards that

you'll equip to the hero. You pay the strike cost to add their damage to attacks. Rogues, Paladins and Warriors armor [have] a defensive value, and you can exhaust your armor to absorb damage. There's items, and they're standard play.

"And while a lot of the game is based [on] combat, players will instantly see things they recognize. Weapon cards, armor cards, quest cards. When you see a Mortal Strike card, you immediately have a connection to the game. There's a lot things that are meta-flavor connections in the game. For example, the Leeroy Jenkins card would be one of those."

Sounds like the makings of a pretty solid game, but Kibler's words regarding the quest cards really made it sound special. "Then, there are the quest cards. Once per turn, you can play a card face down as a resource. It stays face down, and it's pretty much gone for the [rest of the] game. Quest cards are played face up, and [each] has an objective and a reward. There are fortune ones that you, say, pay three resources to complete the quest, and you draw a card. There are

also quests [from the game], like … 'Tooga's Quest,' where you have to protect this turtle, Tooga. … We have it where you put a Tooga token into play, and if you can protect it for a turn, you can draw two cards."

"Everything is drawn directly from the game," Mandell said. "All the allies are recognizable and have made up names. Additionally, each class has about 15 abilities, with about 10 being straight from the game. The others are ones we generated. … For example, there's Smite, which deals Holy damage, but we decided to not do ranks (as characters level, their spells get stronger, rather than just getting newer spells). A, it's boring; and B, it's weird. It seems unattractive. That's why we have a card called Chastise - a baby Smite in addition to the named one."

Of course, as they said, they're trying to appeal to everyone who plays *WoW*. They wouldn't be able to do that without emulating the raid content that has countless players scheduling their weekends around their guild calendars. "The second release is the Raid deck.

We're also planning on doing these three or four times a year," Kibler said. "The PvE version - well, the first one - is versus Onyxia and it's for three or four or five players, with one of the players controlling Onyxia.

"It's sort of weird. We had to look at the constraints first. We had to balance it so players could play through the game in an hour. You could use any deck you want, but there's a little bit of a puzzle solving aspect to it. The first time you do it, you're going to get wrecked. You'll lose, but it will be fine. Then, you'll figure it out and you'll be tuning your decks as a team. You'll do stuff like in the game, having a mage handle the whelps with some AOE (area of effect)."

"It's a 3 vs. 1 or 4 vs. 1 setup, and Onyixa has special rules," Mandell said. "It takes place in three stages. She draws more cards as the game goes on, so it gets harder as you progress through the stages. The Raid deck also comes with a treasure pack, with gear that mostly drops off Onyxia. Future Raid decks will mirror the progress that players actually experience in the game,

though raid content in the [online] game comes out a lot faster. We're following up with the second Raid deck being Molten Core with Ragnaros. It'll get shaken up a little bit after that."

The CCG will also take *WoW*'s first expansion, *The Burning Crusade*, into account in future installments. "We don't want to forget about everything that came before [the expansion]," Kibler said. "Set Two is our bridge set between the existing and new content. We work pretty closely with Blizzard. A couple of Blizzard guys come to the office every few weeks to tell us what's going on. "

And the game will also pay off in the MMOG, with special cards known as Loop cards. Mandell elaborated, "The Loop rares are cards in the set that are alternative versions of cards in the set with codes redeemable for cosmetic upgrades in the [MMOG]. Stuff that looks cool, akin to the Murloc pet from

BlizzCon. There are three in the first set, and there will be additional ones in future sets through our online redemption program."

When the CCG releases on October 25th, players will have a chance to take a crack at the game themselves. Who knows, maybe some of that secret sauce Blizzard is cooking made its way over to the folks at Upper Deck. If Kibler and Mandell's take on *WoW* kindles the same fire in the player base that the original game did, maybe they'll take over the

card game industry like *WoW* did the MMOG field. I'll have my eyes on my local hobby shop to find out.

COMMENTS

Dan Dormer is a videogame freelancer who keeps a poorly updated blog at his personal site. He's also afraid of seeing scary movies. True story.

Maybe some of that secret sauce Blizzard is cooking made its way over to the folks at Upper Deck.

the escapist

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