

# the *Escapist*

Bungie's

# EPIC

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Think of your favorite book. And now, recall your favorite movie. Last, what is your favorite game? Compare each of them: Are they similar genres or different? How about setting, same or different? Now, think of the basic story structure – the pattern of events, not the actual events themselves. Are those similar or different? I'd be willing to bet that while the answers to the first two questions will be rather varied among a given group of people, the answer to the last question will be, overwhelmingly, "Same."

Why?

Humans seem to tell the same story, over and over. Whatever the specifics may be, whatever the setting, from whatever culture the stories hail, we find similarities running through most myths. These similarities were distilled by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (on which the title of this issue plays) though they have been in use for millennia by orators and scribes the world over.

The "Hero's Journey," as Campbell terms it, is the timeless tale of the reluctant hero, plucked from his or her everyday existence to save a people/relic/lover from the clutches of a shadowy evil. Our hero is helped along his way by some ancient talisman, or perhaps an older figure, often male; he is also often spurred along his way by the thought of his ever-changing beloved. He sets out, battles foes, solves puzzles, and finally ends up in a battle with the Evil, and comes out the other side a changed man, seeming older, wiser and reunited with saved people/relic/lover.

Familiar, yes? Pretty much the story behind every RPG ever created, and certainly many books and films, isn't it? We don't really know why this is so. Perhaps it's echoes of our day to day lives, from hunter gatherer times when we go on our first hunt, to now, when we land our first job. Perhaps the sequence of events happens to trigger just the right series of chemicals in our brains to keep us enthralled, time and time again. Perhaps it is some manner of collective consciousness showing through (Campbell was a student of Carl Jung).

Whatever the reason is, this persevering Myth is fascinating. It is one tie that truly binds, not just current day cultures to each other, but to those of the distant past. And this is why we turn our eyes to the myth in games in this week's issue of *The Escapist*. Join us on our journey, and enjoy!

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**To the editor:** Allen Varney, as usual, makes a fine job of a hot topic in "Trading Web Cards."

But on one point I feel he (probably inadvertently) paints a distorted picture. Wizards of the Coast's *Magic the Gathering Online*

game may be seen by a few grumpy tournament players as riddled with bugs, bribery and lag but for the vast majority of players these are seldom-important details of a very playable game.

In particular, MtGO is actually superior to its paper counterparts in two key respects:

1) It actually enforces the game rules. (Except in high level tournaments, most games of Magic involve rules errors unnoticed by all players.)





2) You can actually find opponents at any time of day or night.

- **Dom**

**In response to “Fun’ is a Four-Letter Word” from The Escapist Forum:**

Someone watching a movie has to actively take an action to stop the film. The film has to be so disturbing, challenging or boring that the viewer decides to switch the player off and do something else instead.

A game, on the other hand, requires the player to actively interact with it. It just has to be disturbing or challenging enough to make the player sit back and it’s lost them. That’s a lot less leeway than films have. Still - it’s no reason not to try striking that tricky balance.

I heartily agree that games should engage people on a more mature level, but they still have to keep the players interacting or they become nothing more than a movie themselves.

- **gregking**

**In response to “Fun’ is a Four-Letter Word” from The Escapist Forum:**

The point that “fun” is subjective is the linchpin of the whole debate. While some games will be “fun” for some, they’re a chore for others. Because of this, you can say that a single title is BOTH fun and not fun. In this situation, you can’t claim victory for either point.

I think that gregking’s point of likening moves to games is true at a base level, but in the end, we watch movies and play games for the same reason. HOW we perform each of these actions is inconsequential, since, at the point where we feel that we aren’t “getting our money’s worth” from either medium, we quit. If a game isn’t interesting me for whatever reason, I stop playing. If a movie or TV show isn’t interesting me, I’ll get up, go to the bathroom, get something to eat, or just stop watching.

To that end, I suggest that rather than focus on the term “fun” we use “engaging”. “Engaging” is a term that means different things to different people based on what they expect to

take away from an event. You can be engaged by a movie, a game, a lecture, a book, a work of art, a conversation, music, sports, or simply by relaxing on the couch. If we can get people to think about being “engaged” by the games that they play, then we can put the products of the industry on a more equal footing, perception-wise, with movies, music and literature.

- **Scopique**

**In response to “Fun’ is a Four-Letter Word” from The Escapist Forum:**

The word “game” itself is becoming such a broad term these days that it encompasses something yuppies do to kill their time to the serious and dedicated connoisseurs to the elite “pro” gamers ... or whatever they’re called. The feeling of “fun” manifests differently to each type of people within these categories.

But hey, if you want to convince the senior management board how much ‘fun’ is in your game, simply apply numbers to this formula:

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**(Number of Guns + Average Size of Breasts + Maximum Player Ego Boosting Level) / Tediousness Factor = Level of Fun**

- **Branded**

**In response to "Fun' is a Four-Letter Word" from The Escapist Forum:**

Maybe Warren stood too close to the Nintendo marketing bullhorns and the corresponding media parrots at E3?

I hardly think his characterization of the current state of game design is accurate. The idea of, "we need to make more 'fun' games," attitude in the industry is simply a result of the success of the Nintendo DS and Xbox Live Arcade. What they are really saying is we need to make more cheap games that are addictive and anyone can play, so we can expand the market and generate more revenue. It is just easier to distill that idea into a single concept, namely "fun."

- **heavyfeul**

**In response to "Fun' is a Four-Letter Word" from The Escapist Forum:**

Warren is pretty much spot on, and I've

been pushing the same point for years in more private circles. One can try to broaden the meaning of 'fun' until it encompasses any meaningful experience whatsoever, but it becomes pretty clear on analysis that this is not how people use the word when they talk about games being fun. They mean something quite a bit more specific, even if what they mean remains frustratingly vague.

- **Walter K**

**In response to "Fun' is a Four-Letter Word" from The Escapist Forum:**

Warren's resistance to the "fun factor" produced the question, "what can games make us feel BESIDES 'fun?'"

For me, the even more immediate question is, "can't developers describe their work with a bit more sophistication?" What about suspenseful, exhilarating, hilarious, riveting, giddy, smooth, etc.?

Replacing "fun" with "engaging" or "compelling" is pointless. Those words sound kind of rugged and intelligent right now, but overuse will render them as flaccid as "fun."

I'm just a bit resistant to the high-low art debate. And I think this elusive non-fun gaming is already happening. *Silent Hill* games are exhausting, tedious ordeals, but could they be any other way? It doesn't seem to threaten their potency, however that should be described.

More sensitive language will, as a side effect, encourage more subtle and varied kinds of expression, including stuff that is distinctly not fun, but good on some other level.

- **david\_hellman**





BUNGIE'S

# EPIC

## ACHIEVEMENT:

HALO AND THE AENEID

by Roger Travis



One of the problems that confronts us as we try to refine the way we critique videogames is that we can't seem to agree on how the medium relates to other forms of art. Comparisons to film and television fall short because they're passive entertainment whereas videogames are interactive, which is the key element that makes videogames so culturally significant, yet hard to liken to anything we've analyzed before. Is the medium entirely new, then, or can we gain something by comparing videogames to older forms of art?

In order to answer that question, we have to look further back than movies, television and even books, back to when unraveling a story was nearly as interactive as playing videogames. The majority of myths, fables and religious stories were originally passed down across generations by storytellers drawing entire communities into the plot to create a more immersive, memorable experience for those who listened. Eventually, those stories were crafted into actual books, anthologies of hundreds or thousands of years of verbal

history. Virgil's Aeneid is a great example of this type of historical refinement, and it's a great place to start if we're going to draw any similarities between gaming and art forms of the past.

The Aeneid centers on an eponymous hero, Aeneas, who escapes from the clutches of the Greeks during the fall of Troy and travels all over the Mediterranean before he arrives in Italy, gets re-married, and founds a city that will found Rome. Bear in mind, the Rome in which Virgil writes the Aeneid conquered Greece and Carthage well before Virgil was born, and now faced newer enemies on its frontiers.

Sounds a bit like Halo, if you relax your ears.

The Halo series centers on a semi-robotic super-marine called the Master Chief, who manages in the first game to save the galaxy by preventing a coalition of religiously-motivated alien beings called the Covenant from destroying it by activating the Halo - a ring in space intended to imprison another alien life-

form, the Flood. In the second game, the Master Chief performs more or less the same feat, with the notable twist that he is aided by one of the Covenant (the Arbiter), who the player gets to play in certain sections of the game.

We are to the Flood and the Covenant as Virgil's Roman audience was to the Carthaginians and the Greeks. Through Halo, American culture is to our real enemies as the Romans were to theirs through the Aeneid: in a ceaseless cultural struggle to imagine them as both alien and destined to be defeated by us. This correlation arises from a deep and important similarity between the interactivity of the epic tradition and the obvious interactivity of the action/adventure game.

Both works arose in cultures that value a specific kind of martial prowess. For Rome, it was the prowess of the legionaries and their generals, prowess bound up - at least in propaganda - with the celebrated Roman virtues that center on honor and loyalty; for America, it is the prowess of the storied United States Marine Corps, memorably bound up in a very similar code, expressed most

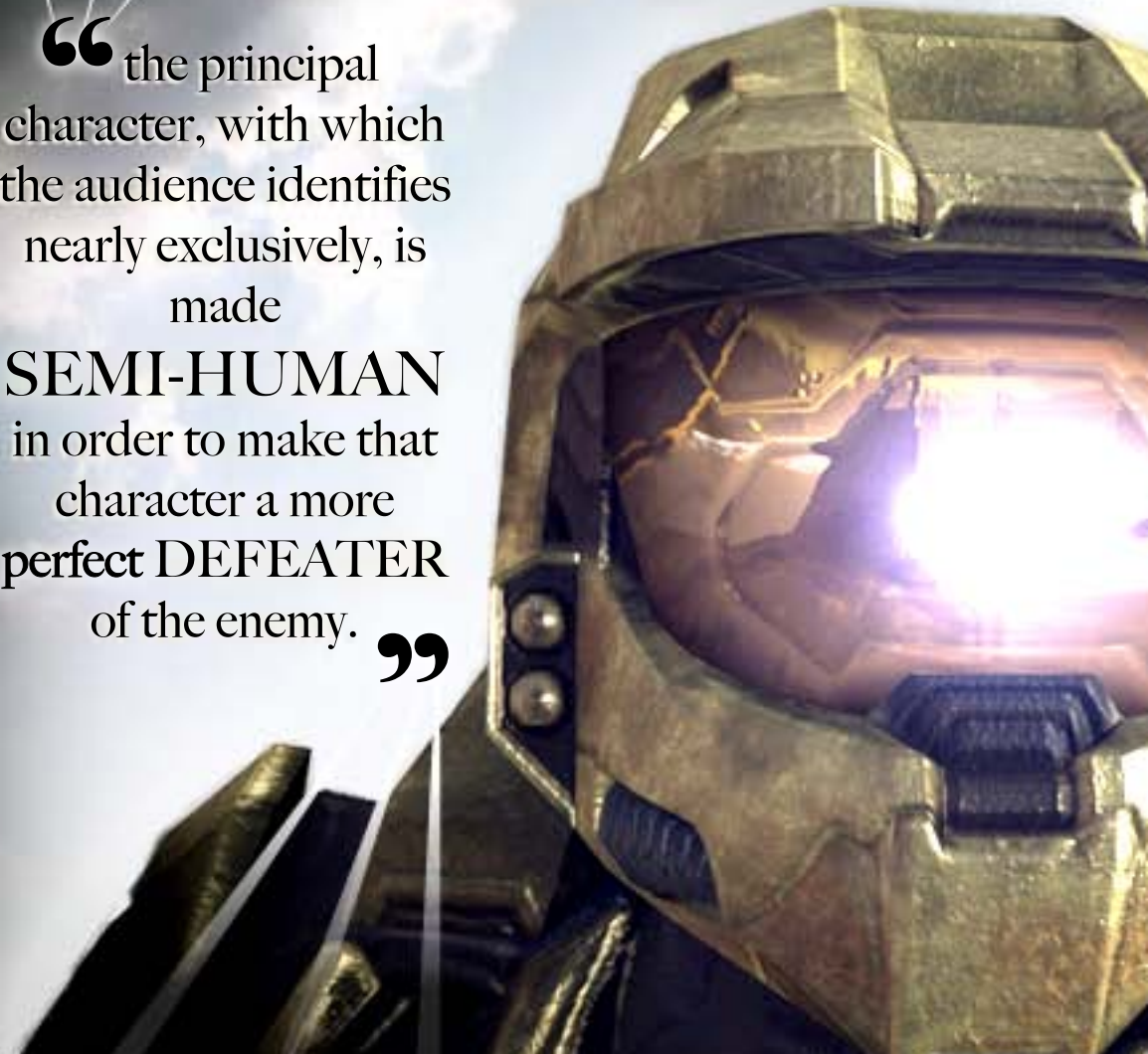
notably in Rob Reiner's film *A Few Good Men*: "Unit, Corps, God, Country."

Aeneas is a strange hybrid of a Greek hero and a Roman general; the Master Chief is a strange hybrid of a Marine and a battle-robot. Their hybridization presents an interesting correspondence in itself, but more interesting still is the way their mixed mythic provenance affects how we view their struggles with their respective enemies. The Covenant forces in Halo very memorably call the Master Chief "the Demon" in much the same way that Dido, jilted queen of Carthage, demonizes Aeneas as being made of stone when he refuses to show human feeling. In both works, the principal character, with which the audience identifies nearly exclusively, is made semi-human in order to make that character a more perfect defater of the enemy.

And make no mistake: Both works are about securing the self by defeating the other. Halo is a little more obvious in this regard, as the entire universe is at stake. Even the most cursory glance at the Aeneid and its historical context, however, shows us how similar it is to Bungie's masterpiece: The Rome of

“the principal character, with which the audience identifies nearly exclusively, is made **SEMI-HUMAN** in order to make that character a more perfect **DEFEATER** of the enemy.”

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“Are there any CLOSET-GAMERS inside the Beltway to compare with AUGUSTUS?”

Virgil, and of his audience, and in particular of his audience-member-in-chief, Augustus Caesar, would not exist without Aeneas' struggle to figure out where the heck Italy was. Both Halo and the Aeneid tell a story about a more-than-human hero defeating enemies who would be too much for ordinary people like us - enemies who nevertheless bear an important resemblance to the ones we and the Romans face in our respective presents.

Even though Joe Roman (or, if you prefer, Publius Romanus) isn't pushing the thumbsticks to move Aeneas around nor choosing the bits of dialogue to tell Dido that he's skipping town, Publius Romanus interacts with Aeneas in precisely the same way Joe Sixpack interacts with the Master Chief.

The interactivity of the action/adventure game is actually an illusion developers employ to generate a feeling of immersion: You identify yourself within the scene and therefore become a part of the scene mentally. Additionally, Virgil, like every other epic poet, is reshaping the myth he tells in ways that are

unfamiliar to his audience, who therefore interact with the work as their ideas of what's going to happen engage with what the epic poet has in store.

Are there any closet-gamers inside the Beltway to compare with Augustus? If so, they should note that modern critics wonder if Virgil really was a huge supporter of Augustus (at the end of the Aeneid Aeneas abandons some of his Roman virtue), and that playing as the Arbiter in Halo 2 tends to make you think that maybe the enemy has a point from time to time. [COMMENTS](#)

*Roger Travis is an Associate Professor of Classics at the University of Connecticut.*

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MY

# Hindu SHOOTER

Making a *non-violent* first-person shooter turned out to be a **BAD IDEA**

by Allen Varney

Regarding the pacifist first-person shooter I designed in 2000-2001 to teach Hindu principles of non-violence using the Unreal Engine, you may justly feel skeptical.

This Hindu non-shooter was conceived and produced entirely by – nobody ever believes this part – recent graduates of the Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield, Iowa. Yes, really. In early 2000, a gaggle of upscale white American 20-somethings with fresh MUM animation and graphics degrees thought it would be fun to create a computer game based on Hindu teachings. Funded by the young heir to a chain of furniture stores, who scraped by on a parental allowance of half a million dollars a year, they licensed Epic Games' hotly anticipated Unreal Warfare engine – six months' allowance right there – and set to work.

After these enthused neophytes spent nine or 10 months learning the editor and designing some levels, it eventually occurred to them they might need a game design. The team's producer – I'll

call him "Newbie" – was a huge fan of Deus Ex. (He pronounced deus "dee-us.") Newbie contacted DX designer Warren Spector, who referred him to me. The project attracted me because there's tons of good game material in Indian culture. Everybody knows about Thuggee assassin cults, but we never hear of the many Indian martial arts, nor Kundalini yoga, nor the siddhi powers of legendary yogis. As for India's history, you could do games about a dozen empires, like the Gupta Dynasty, the Mauryans under Ashoka, Vijayanagara, the Mughals or the British Empire in the time of Gandhi. India today, a rising world power, could inspire games about tangled political scandals, Kashmiri separatism, inter-caste tension, the children's films and stories of Satyajit Ray, Bangla bands, Bollywood musicals and so on.

The MUM people, though, wanted a story inspired by Hindu mythology that illustrated the Hindu principle of nonviolence, ahimsa. In other words, having spent \$250,000 to license one of the most kickass, muy-macho, hyper-adrenalized deathmatch shmups on the

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planet, the Maharishi disciples wanted a game where you could only win if you never killed, injured or damaged anyone or anything in the game. Anything at all.

\*\*\*

Well, OK. I bought a stack of books and hit the web. In the dark age of 2000, Year 1 B.W. (Before Wikipedia), I found no Hinduism portal, but there were sites like Hindu Books Universe, Hinduism Today magazine, Kamat's Potpourri and the Saiva Siddhanta Church in Hawaii. I stumbled on oddities like Saranam ("Hindu Puja and Ritual Services") and utterly jaw-dropping stuff on About.com's Alternative Religions page.

Because few of the Maharishi grads had relevant experience, I first pitched a simple puzzle-based design inspired by the 1993 Trilobyte bestseller The 7th Guest. This approach aimed for a humorous, upbeat tone:

"As the game begins, you are a humble monkey who has gotten lucky. In an incident drawn from Hindu myth, you performed a service for Rama's consort, Sita. As a reward, Hanuman the Monkey

God grants you the opportunity to ascend to a new life – perhaps even to the celestial court of Vishnu.

"Searching for enlightenment, you journey through the mysterious astral realm called Mandala. Hanuman, Rama and Vishnu encourage you to solve their puzzles and reward you by teaching you ever higher states of consciousness. Through each state (each game level), you strive to please the gods by demonstrating cleverness. Along the path, you encounter gurus and demons, helpers and thieves, and a rich array of creatures from Indian mythology.

"Your quest to realize enlightenment will take you through the eight states of consciousness, each with a characteristic gallery of fascinating puzzles. When you overcome ignorance, you ascend to Vishnu's celestial court as a rishi, a venerated sage. Quite a trip for a monkey!"

OK, not much there for an Unreal Tournament fan. Yet, six years on, I still think there's a market for a free-roaming 3-D puzzle game – an Unreal Big Brain Academy, if you will.

But the puzzle idea didn't fly with the MUM team. Newbie the producer wanted an ambitious, innovative triple-A design like Dee-us Ex.

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A nonviolent shooter presents interesting, if not necessarily sensible, design challenges. We decided on a story of demonic invasion in mythic ancient India. Gameplay would permit violence and perhaps even reward it in the short term, but violence would pollute your karma and ultimately complicate your long-term progress.

This was indeed ambitious, not to say foolhardy. If you're facing powerful adversaries but must circumvent them nonviolently, obviously the game needs that always-tricky feature, a stealth model. The game also has to judge your actions. If you trick two demons into killing each other, what is the karmic effect?

Fortunately, the Hindu theme offered other, equally interesting gameplay. We had elephant riding. We had Vedic abilities: astrology, Ayurvedic healing, breathing (meditation), herbalism,



having spent \$250,000 to license one of the most **KICKASS**, muy-macho, hyper-adrenalized deathmatch shmups on the planet, the Maharishi disciples wanted a **game** where you could **only WIN** if you **never killed**, injured or damaged anyone or **ANYTHING**



Gandharva Veda music, architecture (which let you purify demonic areas) and yagyas (rituals). During the game, you could acquire the siddhis of clairvoyance, levitation, invisibility, shrinking and strength. Your aim was to achieve pure consciousness by cleansing your six chakras in ascending order. But your current karma (depicted as a gray pall over your character's silhouette), if it covered any chakras, prevented you from cleansing them. So you had to remove karma by completing quests before you could purify yourself.

The coolest feature:

"During the game, you may die repeatedly, but this doesn't end your adventure. Through reincarnation you resume play in your next life; the storyline's mythic war is assumed to continue unabated for generations. Your karma at the time of death determines your next incarnation. If you have purified yourself and spread enlightenment, you may return as a rich merchant or Brahmin priest; if you have defiled yourself with violent actions, you may instead become a lowly peasant or

even a pig, dog or worm. The game is winnable in any human form, but your current incarnation governs how much people and other beings will tell you in conversation, the price you must pay for equipment and so on."

The storyline starred a young female sneak-thief, Kendi, who was as karmically low as you can get and still be human. Aided, for mysterious reasons, by a demon named Venadatta, Kendi travels from a Himalayan valley across the gigantic carcass of the fallen dragon Vritra, through the city and palace of King Vasudev, up the legendary World-Axis of Mount Meru, to the palace of the gods in the celestial city of Navagraha, and from there to the demon realm of Asat. She's looking for the long-lost mortal hero Anagha, a Brahmin who aided the gods many years before. It turns out Anagha is dead, and, owing to a contrivance too complicated to summarize, Kendi herself is his mortal reincarnation; Venadatta the demon is another aspect of her own spirit.

The MUM team expressed understandable reservations about the

ambition of this design, but they set to it. Some months later, when Newbie sent samples of the team's work, I understood why the Maharishi University of Management has its current reputation in art and animation circles – that is, none. The level design was halfway decent, but the graphics, well ...

Newbie finally understood his team wasn't ready to tackle a Deus Ex. He grudgingly had me adapt the story to the original puzzle-based approach. Now, the player was the goddess Indrani; Venadatta used corrupt soma to strip her of her powers, then threw her down to Mother Earth. Indrani proceeds across a (sharply reduced) number of levels, progressing linearly by solving puzzles that, we hoped, would be integrated more or less gracefully into the setting. By locating gurus, she gains siddhi powers that help her return to her palace. There, she solves puzzles to purify polluted areas and opens the way to Venadatta, whom she can drive out by tricking him into drinking his own corrupt soma.

With that, I was done. My final check cleared. No one called again.



A  
**NONVIOLENT**  
shooter  
presents  
interesting, if not  
necessarily sensible,  
design  
**CHALLENGES**

Presumably, the furniture-store heir, having spent well over a year's allowance for not-so-much, finally pulled the plug in early 2001.

It all happened just this way. If I lie, may I be reborn as a worm.

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I never got to visit Fairfield. Though the producer told me of his team's happy life of 20-minute Transcendental Meditation sessions twice a day under MUM's twin golden domes, I didn't apprehend the spectacular weirdness of the Maharishi community until much later, when I found a long list of Maharishi articles compiled by the cult-hunting Rick A. Ross Institute. Note the September 2006 Los Angeles Times story, "A lotus amid the Iowa corn" by Carina Chocano, about the glitzy new MUMBurb under construction outside Fairfield, Maharishi Vedic City.

My Hindu shooter originated in Iowa, among Americans. Technically, the experience says nothing relevant about India in gaming. Still, it was a peep into the future; one way or another, whether

with Hindu shooters or in a hundred likelier ways, India will eventually become a force in gaming, as audience, developer and, increasingly, as buyer of Western studios.

Currently, India is a minor outsourcing destination (in the game industry, that is) that pulls about \$50 million annually in console and PC gaming, and a little more in the mobile space. So far, there's only one Indian MMOG development shop, Level-Up, which is a branch of a Philippine company that licenses the South Korean game Ragnarok Online for India, Brazil and the Philippines. But Indian gaming is growing fast, piggybacking on the exploding animation business. In September 2006, the Association of Bangalore Animation Industry staged its first conference on animation, visual effects and gaming. Onetime developers have become publishers. Just as large Indian companies outside gaming are going global and taking over foreign firms, Bangalore game publisher Dhruva Interactive plans to quadruple in size within three years, and is looking to acquire game studios in China and Eastern Europe.

One big problem is a lack of skilled workers. The Image College of Arts, Animation & Technology in Chennai, "India's first digital media college," is introducing game design classes this year. Wonder if they need an American instructor? Some rash student may conceive a nonviolent Hindu shooter, and someone should be there to slap him and wrestle him to the ground

[COMMENTS](#)

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



## The Lexicon of

# Latin

by Shannon Drake



No mortal man can sway the Fates from their editorial course. Endless debates about whom to talk to for a mythology issue rang through the halls, but the winds of fortune carried us endlessly toward one man: Stieg Hedlund, Design Director of *Gods and Heroes* at Perpetual Entertainment. His credits include the *Diablo* games, as well as *StarCraft* and an unreleased *Lord of the Rings* game, and then there's his current project, which consists of **gods** and **heroes** in combination. Preliminary conversations with an unnamed source revealed, "Stieg has probably forgotten more about mythology than most people ever know." And the course was set, as we are acutely aware of the consequences of defying Fate.

With his background in mind, I asked where he saw himself on the team, since Design Director is a rather vague title. "I guess I relate to guys like Stanley Kubrick," he answered, "in that he'd grind lenses instead of being content to sit in the director's chair. I'm from the old one-designer school and went on like that even after it became fairly unworkable." He's a very hands-on guy, he says. "I work directly in our tools and feel that I need to know how to do anything that anyone on my team can do. I'll also intervene on any level I feel I need to, to get the right experience in the game; my team respects how hardcore I am, and I try not to step on too many toes."

Asked about his reputation as a mythology guru, he quipped, "That's hard to say specifically; you should just understand that I'm impossibly wise," before getting more serious. "The books that I still own and have had from a very early age — as far back as I can remember — are D'Aulaire's *Norse Gods and Giants* and *The Monkey King*. Sure, I had Dr. Seuss as well, but myth was where my head was at growing up. That never changed, and by high school, I was into some pretty esoteric stuff, especially since a good friend of mine's mother was a Jungian analyst and got me interested in Joseph Campbell, among other aspects of Jungian psychology."



While he didn't have much to do with the story aspects of *StarCraft* and the first *Diablo*, he did work his background and love of history into *Diablo II*. "In the story for *Diablo II*, I made a lot of references to real-world things in any case, albeit on a symbolic level. I drew a lot of source material, from Sufism to the Albigensian Crusades. It's both relatable as well as more meaningful. If you create something that's entirely novel with no relationship to reality, it probably won't resonate with people. There needs to be some level of the familiar with a twist."

*Gods and Heroes*, then, is a logical progression, though it's an "Inspired by ..." rather than a "Based on ..." because "the worlds of history and myth are really very separate, except in the context of myth as justification. ... Right away, our goal was to blend the two in a seamless way in our world, so that what the ancient Romans believed became real and present, instead of at some other place or time." While they enjoyed using the myths and history, they did have one constant goal in mind, he says. "We were always very clear that our

main goal was to entertain, and we'd bend the timeline or pantheon if we needed to achieve that."

To rebuild Rome, they turned to the classics. "In the case of *Gods and Heroes*, I referenced *The Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses* pretty heavily. As far as the translations, my concern tends to be more for accuracy than anything else, and I'll consult the original texts if I have any questions about that." Since he'd mentioned Joseph Campbell earlier, I asked him for his thoughts, figuring Campbell was a mandatory stop for anyone dabbling in classical mythology. "I have tremendous respect for Joseph Campbell," Hedlund said. "And his work is timeless. Some people have tried to reduce the hero's journey into a formula; like the hero needs to meet his mentor here, and now he should be reconciled with the father. But I think like any other formula, this can end up being pretty empty. Campbell has discussed mythic themes in the context of great writers like Cummings, Mann and Joyce ... but he isn't offering a roadmap, just pointing out the ways these guys tapped into that material.

"Really, Campbell was just a cultural anthropologist who started to see similar themes cropping up across diverse groups and began to question the reasons behind that," he continued. "18<sup>th</sup> century philologists did very much the same thing and developed the now widely accepted notion of Proto-Indo-European. Campbell could find no such socio-linguistic thread, and so was led to conclude that the materials of myth were inherent to the human experience; so long as the human experience is relevant, so is his work."

While Campbell is a valuable resource, he shouldn't be the only one. Hedlund says, "Additionally, I don't think the world of comparative myth begins or ends with Campbell, and the broader study of anthropology and ethnography also interests me. I have a whole bookshelf at home, [and] while it contains nearly everything by Campbell, [it] is also full of Frazer, Levi-Strauss, Dumézil and Malinowski, among a great many others. [But] I really think I am where I am today because of Campbell. While it sounds a bit new-agey, his advice to 'follow your bliss' was

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meaningful to me when I was deciding what to do with myself, and games are certainly that for me.”

Getting into the wider appeal of mythology, he continues: “Myth resonates in a lot of successful works by people who have internalized it. Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge* is an awesome example. Christian is drawn into the Bohemian world by Toulouse-Lautrec and a narcoleptic Argentinean. Now, this is very entertaining and engaging on the surface level, but it also really works well on the symbolic, mythical level: The dwarf is small physically because his power is not of the physical world, and the narcoleptic spends more time in the subconscious world of dreams than he does in this one.”

One of the problems that materializes when working with 2,000-year-old myths is the contradictions and elaborations

**People just expect the domains of each god to be clearly defined, as well as that whole crazy ‘good and evil’ thing.**

inevitable in the millennia of telling and retellings. I asked if Perpetual tried to focus or unify the narrative at all. “Yeah, there is a lot of really disjointed stuff in the myths, and even some direct contradictions.” He cited one example in particular, saying, “My favorite example is that Juno bore Vulcan by herself to get back at Jupiter for giving birth to Minerva alone, and Minerva was born when Jupiter developed a massive headache, so he called for Vulcan to chop his head open to relieve the pain.” Contradictions enough to give a designer a headache of his own.

“One of the things you need to take into account about the myths is that there are regional differences, as well as changes through time.” He mentioned the many different cults of each deity before continuing, “Every goddess is a goddess of fertility somewhere and at some time. The gods of Greco-Roman myth are additionally very ambivalent with their good and bad aspects.” His job was winnowing that all down, and also taking into account cultural considerations on this side of history.

“People just expect the domains of each god to be clearly defined, as well as that whole crazy ‘good and evil’ thing.” Harkening back to our earlier conversation, he said, “One of the reasons I referenced *The Aeneid* earlier is that Virgil unifies with *The Illiad* and, to a lesser extent, *The Odyssey* to make a continuous narrative of gods and mortals that runs right up to Imperial Rome. That’s why Virgil was Dante’s idol — he took a bunch of unconnected incidents and turned them into a single cohesive story of the mythical justification of the Roman State, and Dante tried to do the same thing for Christianity with his *Divine Comedy*.”

Building the character classes for the Roman world is no less challenging. “Essentially, we wanted to create character classes that people could understand on the level of an expectation of a certain type of gameplay and then make sure we pay off that expectation,” he began. “This sounds simple, but I think it’s important: I can’t tell you how many games I’ve played and had to restart repeatedly



because I had to play the game for a while to figure out that the character wasn't what I had every reason to think it was." I sympathized here, being a member of the You Re-rolled Again? Club. He continued, "Although we've done a Roman spin on all of the character classes, tying their abilities closely to things from the source material, the Gladiator is easily the most uniquely Roman class. What's great about the Gladiator is that everyone has an image of him."

When it comes to getting the gods into the world, he says, "There are various ways that we do this. If Pluto is walking around in the world, then he becomes just another character. Instead, we wanted to keep the gods interesting, mysterious and otherworldly, and there were plenty of ways to do this that are suggested through the source material." He mentions the numerous ways gods talk to mortals in classical mythology, such as "through their priests and oracles, through their attendants in the animal world as well as creatures of myth and through natural phenomena —

flames, cloud, rain. Additionally, lesser gods appear in person sometimes, and there are plenty of those. Eventually, a player might see a god, but we want to make that a moment with a lot of impact when it does happen."

I was curious about that source material he mentioned, asking him if the team buried themselves in the myths and legends of Rome, or if they just took what they knew and winged it. "We have piles of books and DVDs, as well as plenty of frequently-visited websites," he says. While Stieg himself was the initial "font of knowledge for Roman culture, Greco-Roman myth and myth in general," he soon found challengers for the title, though he retains a trump card. "I do continue to be the dead language expert of the bunch, however, since I'm not sure how many people in the world could write dialogue in Etruscan." When they have to wing it, the team "often [makes] decisions based on the fact that our main goal is to entertain, and then go back to the myth, history or whatever, and try to marry what we've invented with something appropriate from these

sources. Often, we'll read or see things and say, that's just cool and we need to use it; so there's really a lot of back and forth between those two methods."

The willingness to submerge himself in myth isn't something mandated by Perpetual, he says. "I've always felt duty-bound to know the subject matter inside and out. But I think even more important than that is to understand people and the world. I've studied philosophy and psychology extensively, as well as pop culture, which I think is one of the most important ways of understanding people, as the ultimate context of the games as well. People sometimes think it's weird that I'm as likely to quote NWA as Shakespeare, and it's not by accident."

One of the problems with building characters to be god-powered heroes seems to be, well, they're god-powered heroes. I asked him how they compensated for the fact that their player characters are blessed by the gods. "That's certainly the challenge of characters who are demigodly," he







answered, though he turns to mythology for an example of coping with that dilemma. "If there's a snaky-haired gal whose gaze turns folks to stone, you need winged sandals and the cap of Pluto to deal with that. Typically, in the myths, there's more of a one-to-one relationship between magical challenge and magical solution, and the gods either provide the solution or at least tell the hero where to go to get one. That's what really changes — instead of Perseus nicely handing the sandals and cap back to Mercury when he's done harvesting heads, in a game, he's going to continue to use that stuff anytime he likes." In planning for their demigodly players, they "needed to keep escalating the challenges: There are always larger and more powerful obstacles in your way. Looking at myth, we're really looking at epics, the tales of Hercules and Jason, *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid* in particular, as the source for this. So

**It just wouldn't be Rome without murder, poisonings, politicians and fiddling while the city burns.**

when Jason yokes the fire-breathing oxen by using an ointment, he still has to figure out how to defeat the Sparti, get past the Sirens and Talos, and so on."

Moving from the people to the Roman culture itself, I figured it just wouldn't be Rome without murder, poisonings, politicians and fiddling while the city burns. But I was curious, and asked how far they were going into the dark side of classical civilization. "I think those are the kinds of things that a lot of people expect in a game about Rome, so we brought as much of it in as we could. We're shooting for a T rating, so obviously, we couldn't go fully HBO or anything like that." However, he cites the Rogue class from the game as the embodiment of the darker side of Rome, saying, "Now, sure, plenty of RPGs have a Rogue character, and we certainly named the character so that people could get an idea of what he is about, but this is one of those cases where we really spun the class based on our fiction and setting. Just looking at the lexicon of Latin, you'll find a large number of

ways to speak of thieves, bandits, assassins and other shady characters. I think this, together with various literary sources, paints a picture of Rome as a dangerous place. There is this marginal population that is unwilling to fit into Rome's structure of laws, classes, taxes and order in general, and so they live outside of the accepted society, but [are] still very real and present in the culture."

Adapting that culture could be tricky, especially as most players would be unwilling to learn Latin to play a videogame. Fortunately, "My basic take on adapting Roman culture to the videogame setting is that it's important to not have any pain involved for the player," he says when I raise the issue. "We as the game developers will take the pain: We'll learn Latin, we'll read Roman cookbooks, we'll study classic architecture, and then we'll take all of that stuff and marshal it into an experience of pure entertainment." No learning of dead languages will be involved, but "you can sit back and enjoy the fruits of our labor, which come in the



form of a consistent and highly detailed world that's flavored by all the research we've done. There are a lot of things in the world that people will recognize — that's one of the great things about the subject matter: Everyone knows **something** about it. And we will include things that bare out of our time frame because they are so iconic. The Flavian Amphitheater (better known as the Colosseum) is a good example: Our timeframe is well before this structure was built, but it's so emblematic of Rome and so cool that we've included it anyway."

The physical world of Roman-era Italy has gotten similar treatment. "There's certainly a lot to explore," he says, though it's not quite Google Maps-accurate. "Our world map is pretty far from a satellite picture of modern Italy. Instead, we present the world as the Romans would've recognized it: If you go a few miles, differences in terrain, architecture, and color palettes are exaggerated to reflect how close to home people would remain throughout their lives in those times, and how different things would seem to them if they left their homelands." Continuing

the "Inspired by ..." theme, he adds, "There are certainly locations that are based on historical places, but they are not linked in a 'real world' way, and the [way] places themselves are presented is similarly fantastic."

Drawing the line of when to go historical and when to go legendary proved "difficult at first," he acknowledges, but "we had the general sense that we wanted the actual city of Rome to be fairly historical, since its glory comes not from being mythical, but the reality of this magnificent metropolis. And then, the lands farther away from the city would be increasingly given over to the creatures of myth. This also made sense to us as matching the world view of the ancients — far away from home, strange things exist."

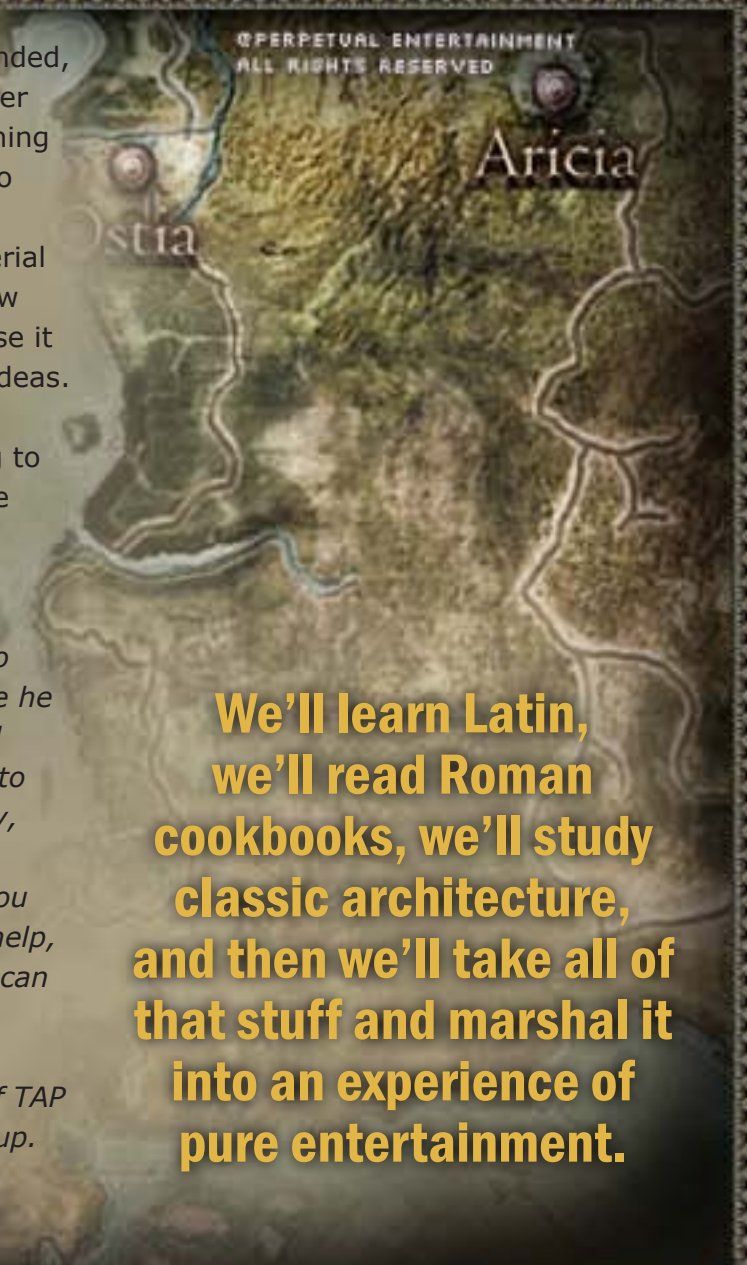
While there is a lot of material to work with in Roman history and myth, there's so much material that I wondered if it was a hindrance. While the Romans had a god for everything — making it easy to figure out who is in charge of what - they also had a god for **everything**, which I assumed would make it difficult

to flex creative muscles. Stieg responded, "I think it's essentially similar to other creative endeavors: I think the 'nothing new under the sun' saying is true, so really creating comes down to the choices you make about which material you include or don't include, and how well you frame and present it and use it to get across your own stories and ideas. The great thing about our source material," he said, "is if you're going to borrow from something, this is some pretty nice stuff to borrow from."

#### 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.*

*Perpetual Entertainment is a client of TAP Interactive, a division of Themis Group.*



**We'll learn Latin, we'll read Roman cookbooks, we'll study classic architecture, and then we'll take all of that stuff and marshal it into an experience of pure entertainment.**



## The **GREAT** CONTINUE SCREEN in the **Sky**



by Tom Rhodes

The countdown began: 10...9...8...

"Where is it?"

7...6...5...

"I dropped it!"

"Dammit!"

4...3...2...

Quick!

1...

clink

"Whew, we got it."

Sound familiar? Anyone who's been in an arcade and fought with the machine's unbearably short countdown to put a bevy of quarters into the slots has been in this exact situation (though I toned down the language a bit). Though arcade attendance has declined, there's still nothing quite like it. The smell of the place, the sticky floor, the machine that's

been touched by who knows how many other hands. Not magical, by any account, but it has its own certain charm.

But back to the quarters. Unlike home systems or the PC, where you'd ordinarily have to cheat to keep surviving, your relationship with the arcade is honest. You give it more quarters, it allows you to continue breathing - honesty.

But what about those quarters? The other day, I was pumping some into a machine across from a movie theater when I was struck by something: the possibility of immortality. Not in the metaphysical sense, but in gaming.

Consider that prior to the late '90s the majority of games on consoles were dominated by a market oriented in Japan and overseas. Religious values there versus here in the U.S. are quite stark: We have a 77 percent Christian population, they have an 84 percent dual Shintoist/Buddhist population. In Japan, 0.7 percent identify as Christian, similar to the Shintoist/Buddhist populace in the

U.S. (1 percent). It's quite obvious that both countries are concerned with very different spiritual origins and planes, yet there is little to any religious quarrel in regard to gaming.

Most disagreements are over violence, blood, sex and profanity, but never religious meanderings. But why? After all, the greatest part of the gaming experience is being able to keep going, to "continue." Short of being the greatest of all gamers, everyone has used continue screens and save points to come back from their destruction. Whether you misjudged a ledge and caused Mario to fall into the lava pit or were blown apart by Combine troops marching from Black Mesa, restarting fresh and new has been a part of gaming from the beginning.

Consider the meaning of that. More importantly, consider the meaning of arcade games, letting you keep going as long as you have the right requirements (in this case, money). Feeding those quarters one after another into the machines is like prolonging existence, ascending each "level" until you find your grand reward at the end of the road. A

birth-death cycle not unlike that of the search for enlightenment and Nirvana in Buddhism, no?

Examine the stories of some of our most cherished games: The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time offers us the view that Link's universe was created when three creator goddesses gave life to the world, leaving behind the Triforce, an object made up of three golden triangles arranged to create an upside-down triangle in the center of it. Three is a sacred number in many religions, of course. In Christianity it represents the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Buddhism, however, it represents the Three Jewels, or "Triratna" (which can look quite similar to the Triforce). It shows that you fully accept the teachings of the Buddha, hold him up as an enlightened teacher, and support those who share the same ideals. In the world of Zelda, the Triforce grants the desires of the man who possesses it. Its location is purported to be in "The Golden Land," which Link briefly reaches after a fierce battle with Gannon at the end of A Link to the Past.

There are many examples of using metaphor and allegory to communicate

religious beliefs. One of the most famous of which is C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia, which espouses Christian beliefs in a mythical setting. Could Zelda be doing the same with Buddhism? I couldn't find much of anything on game designer Shigeru Miyamoto's religious affiliation (other than vague connections in his games to Shinto legends), so I can only speculate.

Regardless of whether that's true, it seems that sweeping legends and vast worlds of myth are commonplace in many of the best games. Final Fantasy has often produced games that emphasize universal oneness and interconnection, such as the Lifestream in FFVII or Gaia in FFIIX. Xenogears goes in a completely opposite direction, saying that humanity was the creation of an alien technology that produced us so that we could power its escape eons later. All this, yet Harry Potter gets flack for having witches and wizards.

Perhaps this is simply the result of gaming being less socially integrated than film, television, or literature. With the increasing influence that gaming is having on the collective psyche, that

“ There are many examples of using **metaphor** and **allegory** to communicate **RELIGIOUS BELIEFS** ”





# the Escapist

can't be too far behind, and with it comes controversy. We may have never connected religion and gaming before in any strong way, but that day is arriving soon enough.

Is this a bad thing? Hard to tell. I think it's positive in the sense that it allows us to examine our preconceived notions about the world, God, and religion in general, like all good art can. One should always try and explore things like that with an open mind. It could only be negative in that it further denigrates a (recently) mainstream medium that is trying to find legs among the general population. After all, if there's concern that violence in games can have undue influence on the youth, imagine what would happen if the manic media reported that it's converting children into Shintoists.

Ultimately, these weighty issues are ignorable if the game is fun to play. Until I sat down to write this article, I hadn't considered what all that mythology meant, let alone appreciated that it may have greater implications. However, if Roger Ebert is right, if gaming is merely a lengthy distraction from more important

things, then we'll happily never have to worry about any of these issues.

But if that's the case, I'm happy to worry. [COMMENTS](#)

*Tom Rhodes is a writer and filmmaker currently living in Ohio. He can be reached through [Tom.Rhod@gmail.com](mailto:Tom.Rhod@gmail.com).*





## Back Story

by Kyle Orland

I was in the third grade when I created my first and last videogame fan fiction. It plumbed the hidden motivations of the nameless driver from *Excitebike* who, it just so happens, was actually Mario, transported from the Mushroom Kingdom into other NES games through a secret warp pipe. The page-long story ended on a dramatic cliffhanger, as the final jump of the *Excitebike* course hurls Mario into another secret warp pipe, setting up an entire series of Mario-in-other-games stories that, to this day, remains unconcluded.

It's been said that videogames, like pornography, need some sort of thin, disbelief-suspending story on which to rest before getting to the hardcore action. How true this statement is depends on the story and the game, but there is a class of games it undoubtedly does not apply to – those without any story. These pure games might have an implied back story (“A bunch of guys get together for a motorcycle race ...”) but by and large, they eschew mythos for pure man vs. other competition, leaving

the motivations of the competitors purely to the player's imagination.

These story-free games, unsurprisingly, are not the most popular subjects in the realm of user-created videogame fan fiction (whose stories are often called “fanfics” or “fics”). That title goes to back story-filled epic roleplaying games like *Kingdom Hearts*, *Pokemon* and *Final Fantasy*, each of which have thousands of individual stories archived in FanFiction.net's extensive games section. The site even contains a few hundred fan-created stories pasted on top of the paper-thin official offerings for games like *Doom*, *Street Fighter* or *Kirby's Dream Land*.

But that doesn't mean fan fiction for story-free games doesn't exist. Indeed, FanFiction.net includes dozens of stories that have been created from whole cloth to describe games that have absolutely no existing back story, including some that would theoretically discourage fictionalizing altogether.



Take, for example, the adventures of Fred, a *Minesweeper* flag who thinks longingly of his family just before his destruction, or the story of the Queen of Spades, who is freed from her Solitaire-based prison, when she magically changes places with the person controlling her. Even the games themselves can take on human characteristics, as in the story of Windows Solitaire giving birth to a baby Spider Solitaire (complete with a pacing Bill Gates just outside the maternity ward).

While many of the stories are obviously just thrown up on a lark, pigeonholing fics as tongue-in-cheek parodies does a disservice to many more serious offerings. While fan fiction about epic games is often constrained by the existing back story, writers use the relatively blank slates of story-free games to create everything from thought experiments on a Lemming's existential crisis, to examinations of *Tetris* as a metaphor for communism, to politically-charged treatises on the nature of war, such as this one from "Asteroids: Where the Stone Falls" by Luke Rounda:

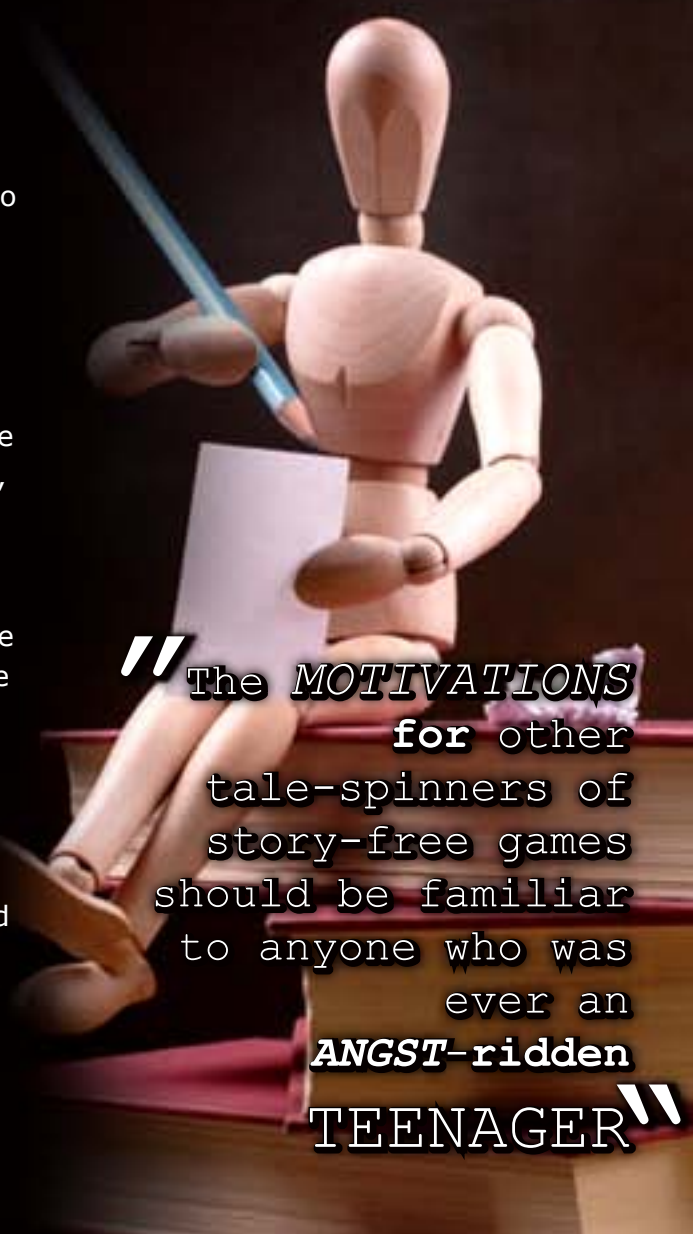
"The militia 'divide and conquer' propaganda always makes sure to include something about 'defending your home' against the beasts, who are always committing some horrible crime against humanity. A Super Saucer takes out a transit tug, and now no one in Orion's Belt gets fresh cheese in for another month. Kill them! Herd them like cattle away from the supply lines! In effect, military propaganda is saying, 'Grab a can of pesticide and meet me outside.' The thing is, there's a clear difference between quelling a plague of locusts and smashing a hornet's nest."

If the whole idea of creating a story for a game that has none sounds like an English-class writing prompt, that's because sometimes it is. "This was originally an English project of mine" writes "The Almighty God of Paper" in an author's note for his *Iliad*-inspired *Pong* fanfic "Taken to Epic Proportions." ("Legend has it that the crisp ashen orb holds great destructive power.")

The motivations for other tale-spinners of story-free games should be familiar to anyone who was ever an angst-ridden teenager: a cry for attention ("I live for

[reviews], even if they are 'flames.'"), a response to boredom ("I have no idea where this came from. I was very, very bored one day."), a need to be part of a group ("Odd, but when I saw that there were fics for solitaire, I had to write something along those lines."), a need to challenge oneself ("I told myself: hey. *Tetris*. You can write a story about *Tetris*."), or even as a way to give meaning to an otherwise meaningless existence ("This may very well be the world's first *Freecell* fanfiction. It may be my only contribution to the human race, as well.").

Some stories weave tales of love and loss for in-game characters that are little more than window-dressing, such as the silent dancers in *Dance Dance Revolution*, or the near-silent stars of games like *SSX Tricky* and *Crazy Taxi*. Think about what this means: These hundreds of people aren't simply expanding the stories for well-developed characters, but crafting fully-formed stories to fill in the empty, stereotypical shells whose most compelling in-game dialogue amounts to yelling "Atomically supercool" when pulling off a massive jump. If there's a better testament to



"The **MOTIVATIONS** for other tale-spinners of story-free games should be familiar to anyone who was ever an **ANGST-ridden TEENAGER**"

Many  
**FANFIC**  
authors  
use  
story-free  
games as a  
**jumping-**  
**off** point  
to wax  
**POETIC** on  
the Zen  
**nature** of  
play

strong visual character design in games, I can't think of it.

Other times, the stories focus on the players rather than the games themselves, as is the case with many of the *DDR* fics available. Often, these are simple descriptions of the writer's experience with the game, but sometimes they expand into full-blown fantasies about drawing crowds and receiving the acclaim of passing arcade throngs. Addiction is a common theme to many of these player-focused tales – writers sharing real or imagined inabilities to draw themselves away from a particularly compelling game (“She felt so cheap, like some sort of Freecell whore!”). Even when the stories aren't ostensibly about the player, they can often offer a disturbing window into the inner life of the author (“But here I am, forgotten, like a silent whisper in the wind on a cold winter night surrounded only by ocean. ... Where did I come from?”)

Many fanfic authors use story-free games as a jumping-off point to wax poetic on the Zen nature of play; the futility of playing an un-winnable game is

a common thread, as are the limitations of games that continuously repeat (“Humans have created a concept/But, in truth, even infinity ends,” writes one *Tetris*-inspired poet). A writer going by the handle K Project seems to be the form's standard-bearer, writing strictly metered sonnets about five separate story-free games so far.

And it's a poetic ideal that seems to be running through the heart of all these story-free fanfics – a need to assign meaning to what are essentially meaningless games. Most videogames and pieces of art, even the awful ones, continue a storytelling tradition nearly as old as man himself. There seems to be a strong desire among these writers to add these story-free games to this tradition.

These are games that were never meant to be more than simple entertainment – games that never even made a slight pretense towards being more than they are – and yet these stories are attempting to do just that. In a way, they could be seen as an effort to justify the hours and hours spent sitting in front of a screen, transforming a consumptive waste

of time into a creative and artistic outlet. Alternatively, many of the lighter-hearted stories could be read as a challenge to the idea that games need to be something more than a set of rules and an interface for exerting control over them.

However you look at it, it's apparent that these stories fill a hole that at least a small segment of the internet felt needed filling. Without some sort of story or mythos backing them up, these games fade to nothingness at the edge of the screen. But in the realm of fan fiction, the game only ends when your imagination does, and what happens when you go through the warp pipe is yet to be determined. [COMMENTS](#)

*Kyle Orland is a video game freelancer. He writes about the world of video game journalism on his weblog, Video Game Media Watch.*



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