

# the Escapist

## The Definition OF AN Art Form

Mike "Gabe" Krahulik, John Enricco and Joseph Hatcher Discuss the Art of Videogames  
by Russ Pitts

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by Julianne Greer

Have you ever drawn/painted/sketched a still life in a group? While everyone in the group was looking at the same subject, more than likely each person had a different outcome. One person focused on the lighting and shadows; one person focused on a smaller area of the subject; another focused on perfecting the colors; a fourth focused on perspective; and the last one seemed ... to focus on not much at all.

This happens with other art, as well. I know I've talked with a group of friends about a new song playing on the radio and each of us has said something completely different: "The lyrics are great," "The use of strings in that one part was cool," "I liked the vocals." We all listened to the same song, but it spoke to us in different ways.

True, that scenario is not really the artist's interpretation of the subject, but rather the audience's. That interpretation is just as valid: Art is expression, both by the artist and by the person experiencing the art. It's a

communication device or the communication, itself; art allows us another avenue to share points of view, to help us empathize with others. Art can also help us better understand ourselves as we look at another's interpretation of a subject and contrast how ours are similar or different.

From what I say above about art, one can conclude (correctly) that I have a rather broad opinion of what constitutes art. Does it convey someone's view? Does it evoke a response, emotional, mental or physical, in someone experiencing it? If so, it's probably art. It may not **only** be art. And not all those who engage in an activity are artists – a child may be drawing, but unless he's drawing pictures of high-fashion models, chances are those stick figures probably aren't **really** how he interprets the world.

My "rules" for art, and many other people's for that matter, get cloudy on the subject of videogames. Why? Videogames, like movies, musicals or ballet, are the combination of several defined forms of art. Just as a musical is a combination of dance, music, singing, acting and storytelling, a videogame includes layers of visual art,

programming, music, storytelling, voice acting and interactivity. For a videogame to be considered art, do **each** of these have to follow the rules for art? Just a few, maybe? Even, perhaps, only one?

This week, *The Escapist* focuses on just one of these many layers of art in videogames: visual design. Visual 2-D or 3-D art is one of the most accessible layers for the general population, as most of us have participated in this art form, whether as creators or viewers. It is the aspect most often pulled out when the "Are games art?" debate heats up. In this issue, our writers discuss their own experiences with, and speak to those who create, visual style in games. Enjoy!

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**In response to "Back Story" from The Escapist Forum:** This article reminds me of how I generally have conversations in my head for my

characters in games where they don't speak. Where I have to put my own story in where one doesn't exist.

It also reminds me of how I end up getting attached to the individual units in a game. I might really try hard to create a squad of elite rangers in Generals or keep alive that one marine who got 7 kills. I think of the first as my elite go-to squad, or if I'm playing China, an elite sniping unit. The second becomes my promoted NCO who keeps peace in his squad, and makes them more effective. There are no gameplay mechanics to reasonably support either story. But I do it anyway.

- Tom Beraha

**In response to "The Great Continue Screen in the Sky" from The Escapist Forum:** I've often wondered how I've developed my view of the cosmos, and I'm sure my odd views (which align themselves closest with Buddhism) come from games like *Zelda*, as well as the old TV shows like *Battle of the Planets* and *Monkey Magic*.

- FunkyJ



**In response to "The Great Continue Screen in the Sky" from The Escapist Forum:** I kind of see the continue screen as having very capitalist overtones, the more money you have the more chances you have to finish the game, it's almost as if money can buy you anything - even life, I don't know if that makes home gaming communism though.

- **TheMonkeysAteMySoul**

**In response to "Bungie's Epic Achievement" from The Escapist Forum:** Don't get me wrong, I really like videogames and I think that they can achieve "art" status. I also have nothing but total respect for Bungie (I was a Mac gamer for many years before Microsoft flashed too much money in front of Bungie's eyes), but I found the premise behind *Halo* more notable than the delivery of the story. Maybe I was merely distracted by the awesome gameplay and physics while a truly "epic" story was being presented to me, but I think this may be why some people might find it hard to draw comparisons between *Halo* and *The Aeneid* ... or at the very least, appreciate them.

- **Echolocating**

**In response to "Bungie's Epic Achievement" from The Escapist Forum:** I think you will find that the people at Bungie are actually relatively intelligent and I know that some are certainly very well read. These similarities may be the result of conscious research and application of the idea that good stories are those that survive. If you want a good story you should look at those ones that have stood the test of time.

- **Simon.McCallum**

**In response to "My Hindu Shooter" from The Escapist Forum:** I've always thought it'd be cool if semi-realistic war games like *Battlefield 2* and *2142* had non-fatal ways of dealing with enemies. And that these ways would net you bonus points for NOT killing your enemy. Basically, you could kill your enemy and score 1 point, or you could take the more difficult route of disabling and capturing him and score 2 points.

To me this is also a realistic method of warfare. Nowadays many militaries are trying to find more ways of dealing with enemies in non-fatal ways, because this can increase the public relations points

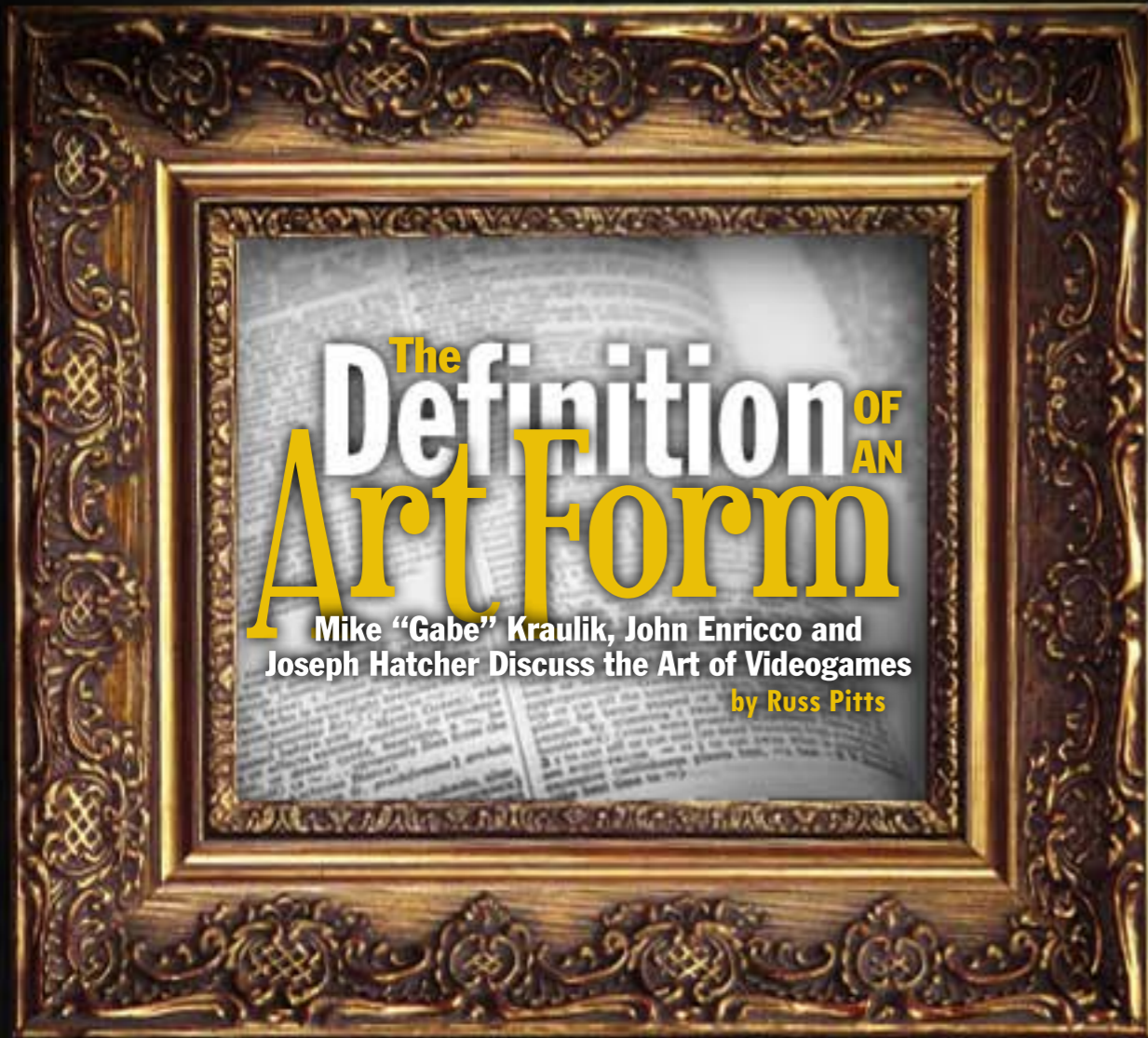
of the war back home and within the country you're fighting with.

- **shihku7**

**In response to "My Hindu Shooter" from The Escapist Forum:** On that note, when I finished *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* on the 360 a week or so ago, I discovered that I'd massacred nearly 600 Mexican rebels. As the uplifting music played and the credits rolled, I felt very ambivalent about the moral framework espoused by the game. Yes, I prevented a secret weapon from falling into the hands of a notorious terrorist, but I had to perpetrate mass murder to do so, and the game did nothing but cheerlead my slaughter.

*GR:AW* was a very good game, but where's this generation's *Shadow of the Colossus*? I'd like some moral ambiguity with my murder, please.

- **Ajar**



**"Videogames represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic."**  
- Roger Ebert

It's a chicken/egg question, from a certain point of view: Are games a form of art? The question can be (and usually is) reduced to semantics; what is art? Is the definition of art some communal thing, some mutually agreed-upon standard to which all things are held and by which art is judged? If so, who does the judging? One of us, or all of us?

Perhaps the definition of "art" is to be decided by those who make it. If so, one would have to consider the opinion of a very large number of people calling themselves "artists," who have studied art and how to make it, and are now making their living by applying what they've learned about art to the art making of videogames. And yet, there are some people who call themselves artists, who have been granted federal funds for the making of "art," and yet whose work has been widely vilified for not being anything closely resembling art. All of this seems to say that

everyone has his own definition of art, and each definition rests in the mind of the beholder.

So, is it a problem of definition or a problem of perception? Perhaps it's both.

The history of game art is a lot like that of everything else related to videogames: People started making games, decided they needed art to go with games and hired artists to make it. When the art actually started appearing in the games, things got interesting. And now that making art for games has become its own (lucrative) career niche, the potential for chaos and misunderstanding has snowballed into an ongoing debate from which none of us, it seems, will ever be able to extricate ourselves.

Not without help, anyway.

I recently spoke with three men who are deeply involved in both videogames and art. One is an actual artist working on actual games, the second is a cartoonist who makes art about games and the third is a developer working on a game which will ostensibly teach players how to make their own art. All three consider

themselves “artists” and, to varying degrees, the work they produce “art.”

## The Game Artist

*art form: noun. A creative activity or type of artistic expression that is*

*intended to be beautiful or thought-provoking. (Encarta)*

John Enrico has been working in games for about seven years, having gotten into the game industry in what he himself calls a “pretty roundabout” way.

“I never took any art classes,” Enrico says. “But later on, as I was starting a master’s degree program, I [became aware of] all of the exciting things

**Perhaps the definition of “art” is to be decided by those who make it.**

happening in art and games. ... I decided to drop the degree and instead enroll in a computer animation/multimedia program in Pittsburgh, created a demo reel, graduated and was lucky enough to land a position in the games industry.”

His first game (and still his favorite) was Volition’s *Freespace 2*. “Volition took a big gamble hiring so many new artists at the time,” he says, “but we were pretty excited working in the industry and on this title.

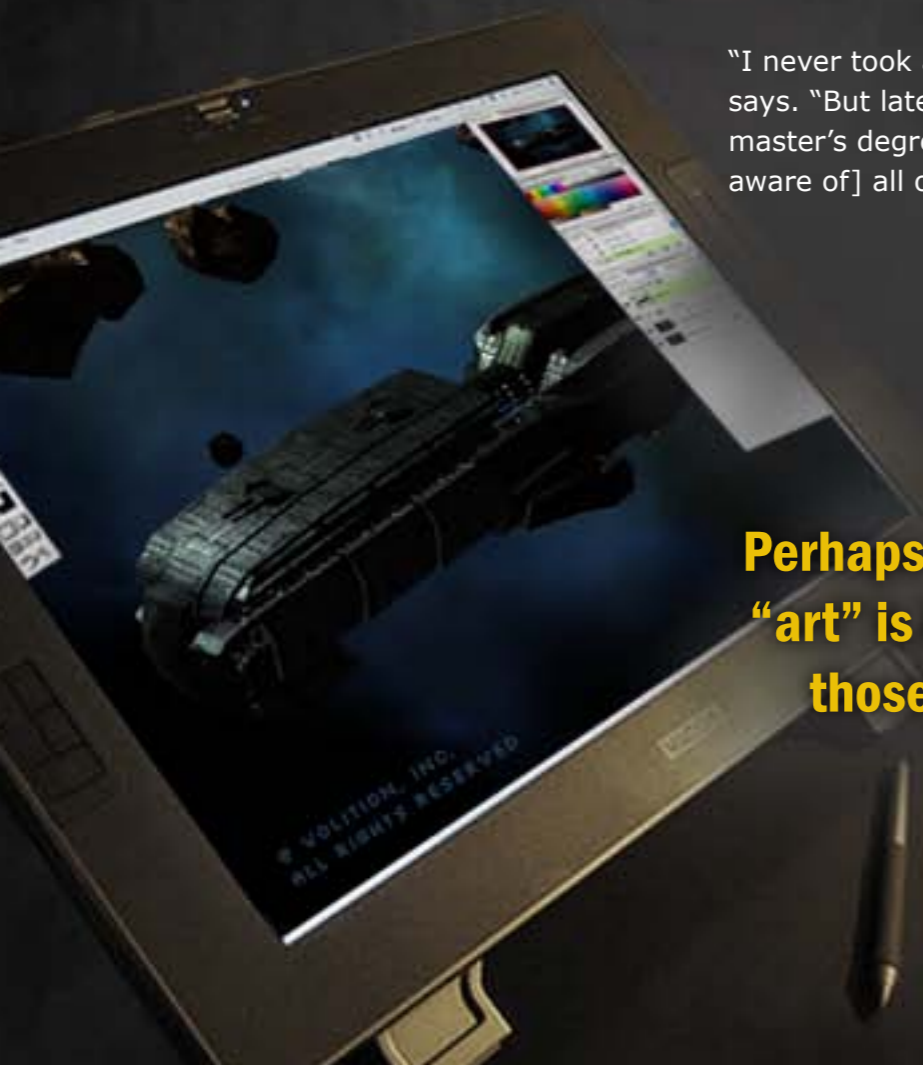
“Since it was a small team, we had a lot of say in the creation of the art, and all of us had a lot of different responsibilities. I went from working on the UI to creating the player’s avatars to building ship models, and many of the other artists were doing similar things. The favorite part for me would have to be creating some of the capital ships and the interior loading screen of one of the alien vessels.”

When asked what makes for successful game art, he replied: “What I think makes good game art ‘good’ is how it effectively solves some artistic and

technical problems. One challenge is how good the game art establishes the art style or vision. I look at *Okami* and I am just floored at how they pulled off the simplicity (but not simplistic) [of the] Japanese calligraphy ink style. Everything is completely consistent, and it’s so intuitive. When I see a group of three ‘ink’ brush strokes on screen, I know there is a mountain in the distance.

“Also, besides being effective artistically, I like to see if the ‘asset’ simply fits into the confines of the technical requirements of the game. Since this is interactive entertainment and there are hard limits to the art compared to other mediums, I really appreciate seeing a great piece of beautiful artwork or [an] effect that was created in such small confines of a game system.

“An example would be when many of my co-workers and I first saw the beginning of *Metal Gear Solid 2*, with Snake sneaking onto the ship in the hard rain, first in the cut scenes, and then watching it switch seamlessly in real time. All of us really thought it was exceptionally well done and were trying to figure out how that effect was created.”



## The Game Cartoonist

*art form: noun. An unconventional form or medium in which impulses regarded as artistic may be expressed. (Merriam-Webster Online)*

"I started doodling in the margins of my school work back in fifth grade," says Mike Krahulik, the artistic half of web comic duo Tycho and Gabe (he's Gabe) at *Penny Arcade*. "As time went on, I started paying more attention to the doodling than the work."

*Penny Arcade*, the comic strip first appeared in 1998 on another gaming site, but was re-launched the following year at *Penny Arcade*, the website. Krahulik and Jerry Holkins (Tycho), the writer of *Penny Arcade*, have since produced a new comic every few days for the past seven years; created an educational campaign for the ESRB, the videogame ratings board; founded PAX, an annual consumer-oriented game convention; and created Child's Play, a charity organization originally founded three years ago to equip the Seattle

Children's Hospital with toys and games for sick kids to play with. It has since grown exponentially, funneling more than \$600,000 in donations to over 20 hospitals in North America last year alone.

They have also become the game industry's most visible social critics holding developers, publishers and even fans to task through their satire for anti-consumer, anti-fun and anti-common sense tactics.

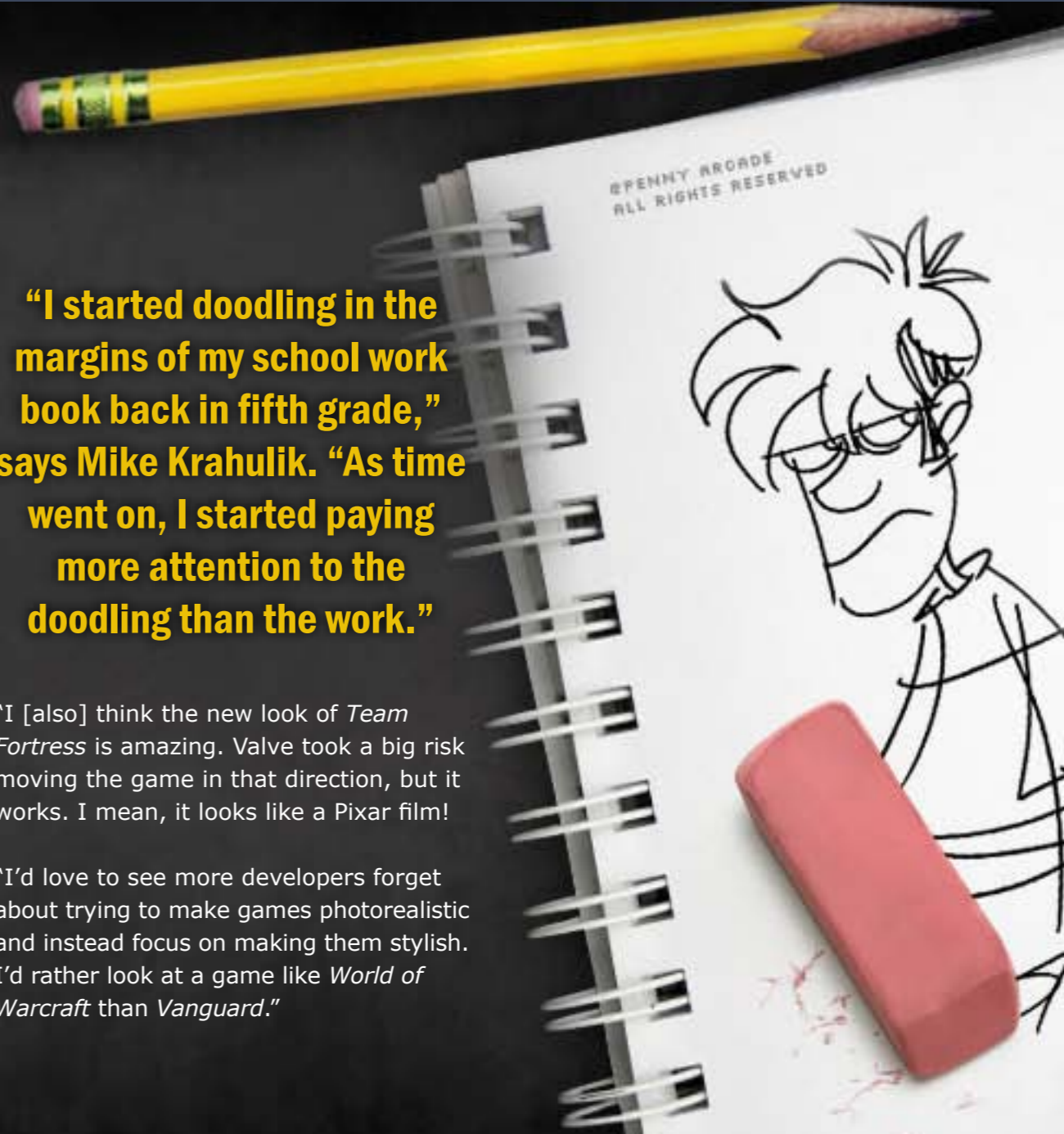
"DESIGN IS LAW!" Screams a Christ-like John Romero, in their second-ever comic strip, "John Romero - Artiste," to a nonplussed sidewalk hot dog vendor, who replies: "Nice try John. No game, no wiener."

As for who's getting it right, making games that are not only good, but look good being good, Krahulik suggests it's *Final Fantasy* creators Square Enix: "Square [Enix] never gets it wrong," he says. "Even if the game play doesn't knock me out, I never get tired of looking at a Square game.

**"I started doodling in the margins of my school work book back in fifth grade," says Mike Krahulik. "As time went on, I started paying more attention to the doodling than the work."**

"I [also] think the new look of *Team Fortress* is amazing. Valve took a big risk moving the game in that direction, but it works. I mean, it looks like a Pixar film!

"I'd love to see more developers forget about trying to make games photorealistic and instead focus on making them stylish. I'd rather look at a game like *World of Warcraft* than *Vanguard*."



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## The Developer

*art form: noun. The more or less established structure, pattern, or scheme followed in shaping an artistic work. (Dictionary.com)*

"I've been playing videogames since I was 5 years old," says Joseph Hatcher, of AGFRAG Entertainment Group. "When the movie *Tron* came out, that pretty much helped flip the switch in my head that made me want to make videogames growing up. I started designing my own videogames on paper as a kid (among other screwball inventions) and wanted to someday work for Nintendo, Sega, Electronic Arts or Atari."

Hatcher's career path followed an all-too-familiar trajectory: He holds a diploma in

desktop publishing and design, but abandoned his post-graduate work, ultimately ending up with his long-sought career in gaming in 2004 as a tester for Electronic Arts.

He's also an artist.

"I've been drawing since I was 3 or 4," says Hatcher, "about the same time that I started reading. I did take a few art classes in grade school, but nothing major. I see or think of something, I draw it. I do want to learn how to draw human forms better. I can do it, but it takes me forever. The end result is more comic-bookish than real life. I'm self taught, highly determined and deeply passionate [about] accomplishing my goals. I love to learn. I apply what I learn to how I create."


And he hopes that you will do the same.

Hatcher is applying his love of art, games and design to one of the most innovative games currently in development, *Bob Ross' The Joy of Painting* for the Nintendo Wii.

"In Jan 2006 or so, [I] saw Bob Ross on TV and started checking out more Wii stuff, and it hit me that the Wiimote would be perfect for the game. ... So, eventually in March 2006, I contacted Bob Ross Inc. about wanting the license to make games based on Bob Ross' painting style. We came to an agreement and it's been on a roll ever since.

"Bob Ross Inc. offers classes for people to become instructors, and the instructors offer classes to the average ... person who wants to learn to paint like Bob Ross. Some of them, I'm sure, watched the TV show, got hooked, then just had to learn more and sought out an instructor. We are consulting with [the instructors] for the development of the game, and some of us are taking classes so we understand his style better.

"The Wiimote will be used just as if you were moving a paint brush doing one of Bob Ross' movements for his paintings. The same movements you see him do on TV, we are doing our best to see what the Wiimote can do to match them."



**Hatcher is applying his love of art, games and design to one of the most innovative games currently in development, Bob Ross' The Joy of Painting for the Nintendo Wii.**

## Influences

*art form: noun. An activity or a piece of artistic work that can be regarded as a medium of artistic expression. (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition)*

Art is about life. It attempts to explain, to create and to destroy; to make us better than we are, point out our flaws, our strengths - our essential humanity. But art is not created in a vacuum. All art takes from what has come before, and all artists, in sharing their experiences through their work, inevitably share with us the art they themselves have seen and appreciated; passing down, in essence, the art that has moved them and the art that has moved the artist who made the art that has moved them.

The final result is a distillation of humanity's essence, filtered through the expressions of millions of creative souls who have inhabited the face of our planet since the dawn of time. Games, game art and game artists are no different.

"I try to take influence from as many different places as I can," says Mike Krahulik. "I keep a folder on my

computer, and whenever I stumble upon an image I like, I just toss it in there. Then, when I need some inspiration I just open it up.

"I honestly don't collect much art. I have a few pieces from Stan Sakai and a couple from Stephen Silver. I do have tons of art books, though. I love hitting Barnes and Noble and buying the big picture books they always have in the discount section. You can grab huge books full of great photos and paintings for 10 bucks.

"I'd say my biggest influence is Stephen Silver. He's an incredible character artist, and I've learned a lot just from looking at his work."

"What I really love to do the most is CG lighting environments and assets," says John Enrico, "and one of the lead artists that I worked with in the past said that the best CG lighters he knows are the ones that can paint ... Since then, I've been starting to get into digital painting for some of my personal projects. It's inspiring to look at the past masters of painting in their use of color and shading (one of my favorites being the Dutch master Vermeer) and see something that

**All art takes from what has come before, and all artists, in sharing their experiences through their work, inevitably share with us the art they themselves have seen and appreciated.**

you can incorporate digitally in both 2-D and 3-D work.


"I have a couple prints up on the walls: the Disney movie *Mulan*, 'The Old Guitarist' from Picasso's blue period, and 'Yellow, Red, Blue' by Kandinsky, so my tastes are all over the place.

"The art assets that I create for my current project are guided by a couple of factors: an environment lead's 3-D mock up, which shows the technical limits and art direction that is needed; conceptual sketches of a piece that a concept artist has iterated and fleshed out with the help of the Art Director and Lead Designer; or, if it's a very realistic piece, some reference photos given as a guideline.

"An example would be a sailing boat that had a carved wooden mermaid on the bow. I could have more artistic freedom with the mermaid prop, but I would still







need to create the other 90 percent [of] the ship to spec. ... I feel I switch back and forth between trying to be an artist versus being more of an artisan; both have different challenges and artistic rewards."

**"If games are not art," asks Joseph Hatcher, "then why do so many people admire them, love them and have such great memories attached to them?"**

## The Question

*art form: noun. A form or medium of expression recognized as fine art. (Merriam-Webster Online)*

"If games are not art," asks Joseph Hatcher, "then why do so many people admire them, love them and have such great memories attached to them?"

"What other media brings together painters, 2-D artists, 3-D artists, sculptors, 2-D animators, 3-D animators, programmers (they are code poets), musicians, composers, writers, etc. like videogames do? Videogames bring so many types of art into the same media for the observer to enjoy that they are a real sight to behold.

"All that hard work, all the creativity that those people pour into [games], all the beauty that ends up being displayed on the screen ... the respect that's deserved never really appears."

"I think in some rare instances," says John Enrico, who's currently working on an as-yet unannounced title for Pandemic Studios, "videogames can come close to being an art form. But I

think that our industry is still too young to consistently achieve that goal; the tech is too primitive, and we really don't know what the 'end all be all' of our idiom is right now.

"I say give it 10-20 years with all of the tech advances and a more codified knowledge base and a deeper history, and I think you'll start to see interactive entertainment hitting its stride and becoming a more and more a true art form.

"Hopefully, I'll be there with everyone else, stretching and achieving that ideal."

Mike Krahulik puts it more simply: "Of course videogames are an art form. They are created by artists. What else could they be?" [COMMENTS](#)

*Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He also, when he was 12, had a chalk drawing of a covered wagon being attacked by Apache Indians on horseback featured in an art exhibit in the library of his home town. He cannot remember the title of the piece, but is sure his mother still has it, somewhere.*

## The MILKMAN COMETH

Or, how *Psychonauts*  
explores the art of  
**INSANITY**  
by Lara Crigger

Midway through the game *Psychonauts*, in which you literally infiltrate characters' minds for some hands-on therapy, the hero, Raz, encounters a security guard named Boyd. As Boyd shuffles about, babbling incoherently about squirrels, conspiracies and fortified milk, it's clear he's not all there and his mind has been broken for quite some time. But he refuses to let Raz pass until he can locate "The Milkman," so the hero leaps into Boyd's brain to determine who and where this Milkman might be.

The subsequent stage, "The Milkman Conspiracy," is one of the shining gems in a game already crammed with memorable moments. But more than that, it's a striking and deeply disturbing portrayal of one man's lost battle against his own insanity. When I think "art in videogames," I think of this stage.

Art is the method we use to quantify and express "the human condition," the sum of those experiences which make us uniquely human. In a way, it's a coping mechanism, a technique that sorts through our jumbled lives and makes sense of things. The achievement of art is not beauty, rebellion or social

commentary (although, of course, it can include all three). Instead, art is a reflection of our experiences, through which we filter ideas of what we could and should be.

To that end, art must aim to be as realistic as possible - not in the sense that it becomes life-like, since that would be mere imitation; but that it captures life and distills it down into its vital or true essences. Particularly with works in visual media, such as sculpture, oil paints and yes, even videogames, the artist must fight a constant temptation to settle for life-like art. After all, accurate reproductions of a subject's physical form, be it with sharper lines, increased pixel count or higher resolution, are beautiful and generally well-received. The football players in *Madden '07* drip with sweat so perfectly rendered, you could taste it. But pretty sweat alone does not make art.

The key is to partner the visuals with a certain degree of abstraction, which allows viewers to open up and interpret what they see.



*Shadow of the Colossus* is  
not just another  
**BEAUTIFUL GAME**

In many cases, it's actually easier for viewers to decipher abstract art, or art in which the subject's physical form is not accurately depicted. When a graphic is too life-like, it becomes distracting in the same way that robots which appear too humanoid make us feel uncomfortable. We put up similar mental barriers. But there's something about abstraction, something primal that makes us drop our guards, allowing the art to penetrate our psyches on a more intuitive level. In fact, abstract visuals are sometimes the only way truly difficult emotions and experiences - tragedy, sadness, love, even madness - can be communicated without seeming melodramatic or maudlin.

Take, for instance, *Shadow of the Colossus*. Undeniably, the game is beautiful; the towering mountains, sprawling grass plains and crystalline lakes are stunningly rendered. And yet, as lovely as they are, the landscapes are not entirely substantial. The color palate is too muted and ethereal, like a faded photograph, and the mountains, plains and lakes seem too large for the space they inhabit. The environment is utterly isolated, empty, even apocalyptic. It suggests that

some great tragedy has occurred here, and, perhaps, may still be occurring.

As for the Colossi themselves, they are elegant, magnificent creatures. However, they're so different from any other animal in our taxonomy that they seem only organic enough to be alive. Decorated with glowing sigils and aboriginal tattoos, they appear impossibly old; when they die, their twisted skeletons immediately melt back to the mud and dust from whence they came. That Wander chooses to slaughter these ancient, beautiful Colossi, only to face a similar fate himself, is a philosophical quandary. But the game makes clear that this cycle of death and rebirth cannot be averted, that struggling against it is futile.

This is why *Shadow of the Colossus* is not just another beautiful game. It's through these visual details that the game transcends its purpose and becomes a work of art, where tragedy, death and resurrection are the subjects.

*Psychonauts* achieves the same goal, but this time, instead of tackling tragedy as

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subject matter, the game addresses the experience of insanity.

Arguably, the way Psychonauts experiments with color and form is ugly, even hideous. Although the characters are ostensibly human, they look more like Tim Burton creations, straight out of Halloween Town or The Land of the Dead. The children look like nightmares; Dogan, Raz's friend, is little more than a walking robin's egg, and Bobby, the local bully, is a freakish monster with broken, yellow teeth and a candy-orange afro. Even Raz himself looks misshapen and malformed. All this is on purpose; *Psychonauts'* character design evokes the imagery of dreams, because the game takes place entirely within mental realms, in which people are held captive by their own imaginations.

Each of those mental realms in Psychonauts becomes a physical manifestation of a character's mind, in which intangible concepts assume corporeal form. Figments of the Imagination - or dim, shadowy figures of people, plants and household objects - haunt each brainscape like imprinted memories. Purple Mental Cobwebs grow

in unused corners of the mind. Secret Memories that shouldn't be shared are stored in armored Vaults, which lightly gallop away from Raz whenever he approaches. And the only enemies you encounter are the Censors, whose job is to protect the mind from unwelcome or intruding thoughts - like you.

Thus, by representing these intangible concepts in easily digestible, cartoon-like images, Psychonauts depicts brain mechanics in a way a player can actually interpret. Had the brainspaces in Psychonauts been made of gray tissue, with electrical networks mapped out in vector form, sure, it might've been more accurate. But then it wouldn't have made as much sense, or have been as intuitively real, as this abstracted version.

Using this setup, the game explores the various forms of insanity by assigning each to a different character's brainspace. For instance, former actress Gloria, who suffers from bipolar disorder, acts out her worst memories on an internal theater stage. Shellshocked Oleander's mind is a thicket of trenches, barbed wire and land mines. Fred, afflicted with multiple personality

syndrome, is locked in a room without doors, losing endless board games against his alternate personality, Napoleon Bonaparte.

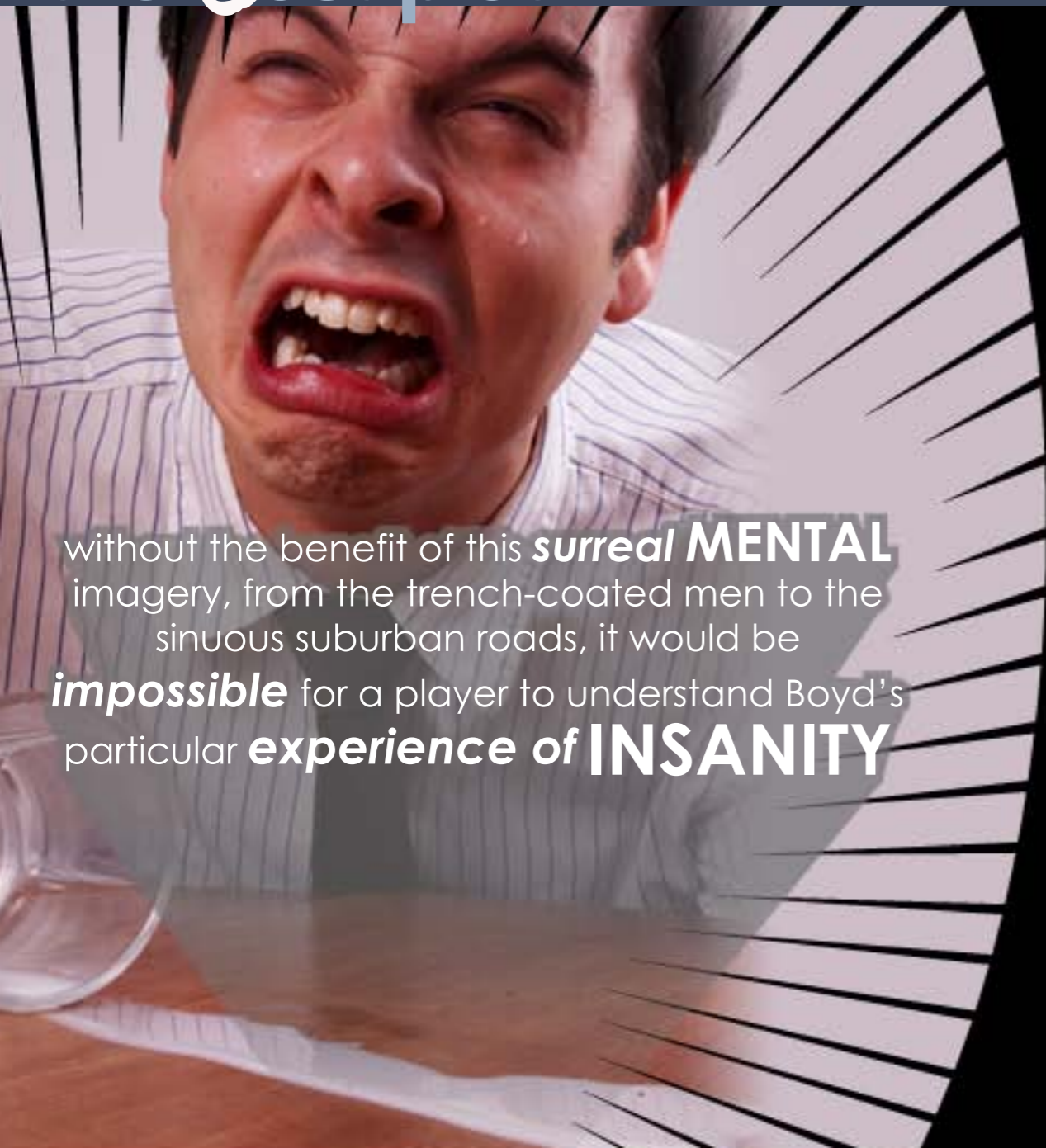
And then, there's Boyd.

Boyd appears to suffer from deep paranoia; his brainspace is a quaint 1950s suburb, drenched in oppressive pastels and punctuated by identical subdivisions. Behind every hedge and inside every mailbox lurks a cameraman snapping photographs. Black helicopters patrol in indeterminate routes, too far away for the player to identify where they're looking, but close enough to remind you that you're always being watched. Men wrapped in trench coats with blank, green faces - possibly government agents - have assumed every occupation, from telephone repairman to homemaker, in an endless hunt to find The Milkman. It's clear from the architecture of his mind that Boyd feels he is always being watched, that someone out there constantly conspires against him.

But the most disturbing piece of this mental puzzle - the part that makes "The



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without the benefit of this **surreal MENTAL** imagery, from the trench-coated men to the sinuous suburban roads, it would be **impossible** for a player to understand Boyd's particular **experience of INSANITY**

"Milkman Conspiracy" more than just some eerie, demented vision and transforms it into art - is the fact that Boyd is right. There is a conspiracy, and Boyd himself is the one behind it.

Buried in a tomb deep underground rests The Milkman: the physical manifestation of Boyd's brutal, ultimately unstoppable rage. Out of the remains of his sanity, Boyd has erected a defense mechanism - the conspiracy - to protect the whereabouts of this anger, so that for his own safety, he cannot access it. But the overwhelming number and the persistence of the trench-coated men, whom Boyd has also created, indicate that he is desperate to unleash it once more. Boyd's paranoia is not his true mental illness. It is merely a symptom of his psychotic rage.

But without the benefit of this surreal mental imagery, from the trench-coated men to the sinuous suburban roads, it would be impossible for a player to understand Boyd's particular experience of insanity. The graphics here are not particularly realistic; they're not even that pretty. But they are real. The visuals resonate with the inescapable truth of what they represent. And it is this

disturbing reflection of insanity that makes Psychonauts a work of art.

Great art is a mirror, bouncing our experiences back toward us. Through the funhouse mirror of Psychonauts, we see our minds as a child might see them: distorted, hyper-real and in colors almost too bright to bear. Ugliness and beauty intertwine, as if they are one and the same, and we see what's important - what's real - in a way that makes it more easily digestible. Psychonauts is a tapestry of madness, which few other games - or even other works of art - could match. Through it, we learn to appreciate the potential of the human psyche for corruption, dysfunction and even heroism; the experiences it shares feel far weightier, far more relevant than those from a mere game. We feel them innately, on a subconscious level, resonating in the depths of our souls.

As Boyd would say, the milk is indeed delicious. [COMMENTS](#)

*Lara Crigger is a freelance gaming journalist whose previous work for The Escapist includes "The Short, Happy Life of Infocom" and "Escaping Katrina."*

## “ I DIDN'T LEAVE GAMES, THE GAMES LEFT ME ”

by Shannon Drake

Amidst the flannel and depression of the mid-'90s, there was Earthworm Jim, a surreal world of toilet humor and offbeat jokes in an entertainment culture drowning in seriousness. While Shiny expat Dave Perry usually gets the credit for the games, the creator of Earthworm Jim is artist and animator Doug TenNapel. His expertise ranges from cult-hit videogames like Earthworm Jim and The Neverhood to comics (GEAR, Creature Tech) and television (Catscratch), but he's been noticeably absent from the gaming scene in the last few years. As a fan of his style and his creations, I wanted to find out how he got into the industry and how he wound up getting out.

He describes himself as someone who has drawn for his entire life, "just about every day." He got his education at Point Loma Nazarene College, where he earned a fine art degree. Outside of that, he says, "I've taken some classic portrait classes and some intensive figure drawing classes to help supplement my education. Most of what I've learned about art has been during production. Production forces me to finish drawings

and make them appealing as possible." Going pro was a lifelong aspiration. "I've always wanted to be an artist professionally, I just didn't dream that many people would ever pay me to draw," he says, describing himself as a fan of Disney animation. "That was an early goal of mine: to be a great animator. Little did I know that my lazy California roots and lack of persistent training would prevent me from that kind of greatness."

TenNapel's videogame career began with some freelance work. "I did some freelance animation for David Warhol (Loom) on some early Nintendo games. I got my first big job with Bluesky Software in San Diego to work on the Jurassic Park game for Genesis," he said. "I always loved videogames since the first time I played Pong at the local pizza parlor. I spent my summers in high school working in the berry fields to make a few bucks to ride into town and play Pac-Man at the arcade." His work on Jurassic Park eventually led to a stint at Virgin, where he met Mike Dietz and Ed

# the Escapist

Schofield, who, indirectly, contributed to the creation of Earthworm Jim.

"Earthworm Jim was my job interview at Shiny," he says. "I had only known Ed Schofield and Mike Dietz for a few months when they left Virgin to start Shiny with DP [Dave Perry]. I had met DP a few times, and we were kindred spirits since we were both 6'8," but DP had some really aggressive scams in mind, and I was still just an animator on the Jungle Book videogame." However, he says, "I was dying to get out of Virgin and wanted to be with Ed and Mike on whatever they were doing. Mike wasn't convinced that I was their man yet, so he asked me to come up with a character to see if I had the animation chops. I was desperate for a job, so I put on Fleetwood Mac's Rumors and hit play."

Before the album finished, he says, "I had created Earthworm Jim, Pscycrow, Professor-Monkey-For-A-Head, the Princess, Queen Slug for a Butt (DP named her) and Peter Puppy. Like I said, this stuff is easy, and I didn't know then that these characters could all occupy the same universe, so I was just blowing stuff down. Earthworm Jim was the most

interesting of the characters, though each was a sort of animal with very human characteristics. EWJ became my lead because he was a weak, vulnerable worm in a powerful battle suit! How cool is that? It was very videogamey, though I hadn't seen anything like it I in videogames. I did a walk cycle and presented him to Mike and Ed, who took him back to Dave Perry. I got hired (thank God. No, I'm not talking about you, DP) and then my real animation bootcamp began. Mike and Ed were working on a vastly improved system of animation than we were using before, and my drawing needed to rise to the occasion. We did some figure drawing, and I did a lot of animation.

"At the time, DP was paying generously, so I could kind of work on my craft. Those early days at Shiny were incredibly fun, and I grew to deeply love my teammates. We worked hard ... often 18 hour days even on weekends, and we made one of the greatest games of all time." He describes the Shiny team as "the right team at the right place at the right time with the right character," adding, "Earthworm Jim changed a bit over time, especially since Mike and Ed

did much of his standard (run, jump, shoot) animation, which is really how the look of a character is described. I was more in charge of the bad guys." He cites Mike and Ed as his inspirations, saying, "There are few inspirations in gaming, but I've always enjoyed my work-mates Mike Dietz and Ed Schofield. We challenged each other on Earthworm Jim to really push our animation skills. They have been mentors both in animation and in real life because they are skilled artists but also successful family men, a rare combination."

When I asked him about the process of designing a character, because it can't all be Fleetwood Mac and desperate drawing, he said, "Well, there's a tough question. You're asking about 'the blue spark' that fires and magic happens. I don't know exactly how it happens, but I know it's extremely easy for me to create characters and worlds. It's something I've always done and it's one of the few things I'm really good at. The process is always done with a pencil and paper, and since I draw every day, I create critters every day. The public has only seen very few because there are only very few that a business is willing to



put money into to bring them to your eyes. Nobody has paid for you to see my best work, but you get the idea of what I'm about from what you've already seen."

Curious, especially with such halcyon talk of days gone by, I asked what happened, why Dave Perry and Shiny get most of the credit for his characters. "After five months of production on the Earthworm Jim game, I still hadn't assigned the character to Shiny, so it was getting dangerous for them to still be doing the character unless they were going to take it by force and challenge me to take it back. Dave and I shared works and Mike D. was kind of the referee. [Dave] needed the rights to the character, and I wanted to make sure I controlled the character, so he didn't get whored out to make porn or who knows what. I also wanted credit as creator, and I wanted to make a small per-cartridge rate. DP ended up agreeing to a signage of rights where we shared creative control, I got a small per-cart rate and credit where marketing deemed convenient. We were both teary-eyed because we needed the other to compromise, and I'm a lover, not a

fighter, so I bit the bullet and trusted him. It was the single biggest business mistake of my entire career."

According to TenNapel in a separate interview, he retained "a small level of approval and creative control which I contractually have to share with Dave 'Earthworm Lance' Perry. They're supposed to pay me a minimum royalty on every Jim thing sold but Interplay's lawyers have loop-holed their way around having to pay me a cent." The rights to the franchise have traveled with bankruptcies over the years, from Interplay to Infogrames, then to the re-born Atari, and TenNapel has been largely out of the loop. Games made largely outside of his control include Earthworm Jim 3D, described by Gamasutra as "a success neither commercially nor critically" and the largely forgotten Earthworm Jim: Menace 2 the Galaxy.

He's quick to add, "Now, I have to unpack that, because it's not fair to just make DP out to be a rip-off artist, but at the same time, I didn't have legal representation and I had to trust his

**“it’s extremely easy for me to create characters and worlds. It’s something I’ve always done and it’s one of the few things I’M REALLY GOOD AT”**



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**[and] that, I think, is the BURN that keeps on burning**



handshake on my role as creator. ... That said, I burned myself out of control of my character, [and] that, I think, is the burn that keeps on burning. If you hate incarnations of EWJ, it's probably because they're jacking with stuff that is out of my control, and when I had control, you loved the character ... because I get Jim better than others.

"I can't let your readers think that this is the end of the story, because while I cut myself out of some of Jim's profits, even my tiny slice landed me a quarter million dollars and a fine salary, notoriety and incredible training working with DP. He's a generous employer and a good friend, just not a perfect friend. And even today, when I pitch a show to JJ Abrams [Alias, Lost], he shakes my hand and says, 'You created Earthworm Jim?! Have a seat and let's talk.' So Jim is the burn that continues to burn with what I can't do with him, but he is the gift that has opened every career door I currently walk through. We can play the would've, should've, could've game all day, but I'm in a good spot today, and it was all because I was willing to shake DP's hand that day instead of exercising my rights and putting his nuts in a vice."

I asked him if he had any bad feelings about the deal, or about Dave Perry. "When s--- companies cut me out of control of my own character, recreate the character, don't want to pay me to work on the character and I have to ask someone else's permission to do a movie of my character, I have some bad feelings about signing that deal in 1994 ... because that's where I signed away some of those rights and left the character open for idiots to destroy. But DP and I get along fine, and we had fun for the short time we worked together on Jim PSP. It was going to be the greatest game of all time, along the lines of the original Jim, using much of the original team. I don't know what it's going to be now because they won't show it to me."

Besides Earthworm Jim, he's worked in a variety of media, from comics and standard animation to the Claymation work in The Neverhood. I asked about his reason for this exploration. "It's because I love to tell stories, no matter the medium. I go where I'm invited to sit at the campfire and do my thing. Sometimes, people want me to crack a videogame; sometimes, people want me to crack a movie or TV show; [and] when

nobody wants me to do anything, I crack a story in comic form. The thing that I'm good at is finding a connection with a broad audience without selling out creative ideas. I'm very similar to my audience in this way, I have conservative leanings but I don't like to be bored by endless 'me too' creations." He cites comics as his favorite medium, saying, "Hands down, graphic novels are the greatest storytelling medium at my disposal. I can't tell a story by myself without getting someone else's permission and money in any other medium, since they are cost prohibitive. Can I animate a TV show by myself? No. But I can make a graphic novel that would cost \$400 million to make into a movie by myself in my studio with ink, a brush and six months of free time. Graphic novels are the storyteller's wet dream."

With that in mind, I asked him about the recent resurgence in comic books as a medium. "I think comics' recent success is due to illiterate executives who don't like to read so many words without pretty pictures. I could read H.P. Lovecraft, but that's too much work, so I'll read Hellboy instead, thank you. (And by the way, I think Hellboy is better

literature!) Comics aren't as deep, but we don't have as much time to get our media fix, so we go for the cheaper crack, since it's not as hard to get as heroin. I think execs (and our general audience, myself included) find comics easier to read, so more of them get picked up and passed on to hyper ADD audiences used to MTV editing styles."

Regarding his own GEAR, he says, "I'm sure a lot of people have thought at one time or another that their cats (or their lives) would make stunningly entertaining comics/television, yet in most cases, this is a bit of an exaggeration." The difference between his "cat stories" and others, he says, is because, "all of my stories are intensely personal, but I put a skin on them to help communicate my humanity to a broad audience. I could turn my butt into a hero's journey that would make you cry, if I had enough pages to set up my butt's plight. I write what I know, and I like to tell stories about my cats in GEAR because we all anthropomorphize our animals and make them into bigger heroes than the poop-machines [they] actually are."

In a previous interview, TenNapel said, "I love my fans, but never ever design a game for your fans." Curious in this age of all-out pandering. I asked him about it. "My Earthworm Jim and Neverhood fans are voracious," he said. "They go completely nuts when they even think about the game and the characters, and this is fine; I love those people. But at some point, they just love the feeling they got when they were with the characters, and it's not my job to recreate the environment for their inner 9-year-old to get his jollies. In many ways, videogames are just another kind of drug. ... Players can receive a high that is not unlike a drug or an orgasm, and they may associate this with my character. So, now I didn't just create a beloved character, now I'm their dealer supplying them with junk. I'm not a pimp, I'm a storyteller. And I can't help it if I make kick ass games that you get addicted to. Yeah, they're that good. So I try to keep my fans' desires and impulses out of the forefront of my mind when I make something new.

"After all, before I made Earthworm Jim I was drawing Drew the Iguana, a comic character I made in college that had a



**“ I can't help it if I make KICK ASS GAMES  
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THAT GOOD ”**



**“To quote the Joker:  
‘THIS TOWN NEEDS AN  
ENEMA’ ”**

fan base of 30 people. If I only served those fans and just made Drew the Iguana, I never would have gotten around to EWJ. When I made EWJ, if I stayed there I never would have made Neverhood or Creature Tech or GEAR or Tommysaurus Rex or Catscratch. I don't get anywhere imitating myself, and I encourage my fans to also move on and enjoy variety, in addition to EWJ saturation. It is in the spirit of creativity that I keep making new stuff that entertains millions of youth around the world. My audience deserves the very best from me every time I set pencil to paper; this is my duty and my pleasure. When I have fun making characters, they always come out better than characters I make at gunpoint. I hope my fans see that by not creating exactly for them that I'm actually making better stuff for them!"

That brought me back to the gaming industry. I'd noticed that in early interviews with him, he seemed very enthusiastic about being involved with computer games. Later interviews had a much more jaded feel to them, as seen above. And there was the fact that he'd been out of the industry for a while. I wanted to know what happened and why

he left. "To be accurate, I didn't leave games, the games left me. When I was in games in the '90s, it was still a cottage-run industry, and now it's a bloated, retarded, perpetually adolescent rip-off factory.

"I've always been willing to make games out of my love for the medium, but the industry isn't really interested in telling good stories, or even making great games, for that matter. That's a generalization that applies to 95 percent of the gaming industry. Yes, you who are reading this right now; admit it, it's just a job, and that over-the-shoulder shooter you're making right now sucks, and it's going to be camouflage on the shelf if you [get it out by] Christmas. Tell your boss to hire me to fix it, and have your camera ready for when he gives you the bird. Save that picture, and when you game gets killed by bad reviews, send that picture to his share-holders, because he's part of the problem and I'm part of the solution. To quote the Joker: 'This town needs an enema.'

"If I seem like a grouchy old man, it's because I love and respect the medium of games, and I expect so much more

from interactive content. It doesn't cost a lot to bring competent vision into a game company, but people don't want to spend \$250,000 that will save a \$16 million game. And it's not like in-house gamers don't know what they're doing, either. At every company, there are kids who can design their asses off, and they will not be cut loose on creation because they are too busy doing the Spider-Man 6 vs. Supertampon game."

What would it take to get him back? The answer is simple, he says. "Some company with enough money and clout to hire me to make something spectacular that is original, simple and plays well. I fart this stuff out every day."

[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.*

## Artistically SPEAKING



by Mur Lafferty

Did you know salt used to be used as currency? That's where the term "worth his salt" came from. And heck, to us, it's just salt. It's on every table. It's thrown over the shoulder when spilled (hence, spilling more, which has never made sense to me). It's ubiquitous. And yet it was once sought after so heavily, trade routes were established solely to get more salt and other spices.

Nowadays, when we make a good steak, we put some good, chunky kosher salt on it. It adds considerable flavor and texture. We don't say the salt is good, but Lord, if it's not there, we notice. Steak, whether it's Old Bessie or Kobe beef, is bland. You don't notice it if it's there, and yet you notice if it's gone.

Tabletop game art is the same way. The art has nothing to do with the gameplay. When someone discusses a game, they rarely say, "The gameplay was crap, but the art was so good, it was totally worth the \$60!" And yet, if the art was crap, there would have been little visual pull to the game and little reason to purchase it.

Some games nearly serve as works of art themselves. Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* board game was illustrated by the same concept artist that worked on Peter Jackson's movies, John Howe, which gave a visual feel to the game that everyone was experiencing in the movie theaters at the same time. Similarly, the board game *Arkham Horror* has horrifying depictions of H. P. Lovecraft's many monsters, from the shoggoth to the Dunwich Horror (and of course Cthulhu, which is scary enough to frame itself). It makes one wonder if graphic designers Scott Nicely and Brian Schomburg had nightmares while working on the game.

One of the best things about tabletop art is that it doesn't need to be Monet to be effective. Cheapass Games has been making games for years based on the assumption that you already have pawns, dice, money and poker chips at home, so there's no reason for them to sell you more. They release games printed on cheap cardboard, usually in black and white and packaged in white envelopes.

James Ernest, President, Art Director, game designer and general Grand Poobah of Cheapass Games, farms out a certain percentage of art for his games.

"I get a lot of my game art from free sources and clip art," Ernest says. "It really just depends on the needs of the project. If I need a picture of a caveman, I can probably get that anywhere. If I need an evil candy-maker who looks like Liberace, I have to make a phone call."

(Incidentally, the candy-maker game he's referring to is *Enemy Chocolatier*.)

When Ernest needs to make that call, he looks for reputable artists, as he doesn't take submissions. "First, their work must be good," he says. "I'm an artist myself, so I trust my own opinion. ... Aside from the quality, which seems paramount, an artist should be reputable, available and inexpensive. Or, whichever one of those is most important at the moment."

One of the illustrators Ernest turns to when he needs something more complicated than a caveman is Cheyenne Wright, the creator of the aforementioned *Liberace* candy-maker.

Wright is a freelance illustrator who is the colorist for Phil and Kaja Foglio's comic book, *Girl Genius* ("It's my job to take Phil Foglio's penciled pages and turn them into candy-colored, gaslamp fantasy goodness."), as well as illustrator for the Cheapass Games James Ernest's *Totally Renamed Spy Game* and *Secret Tijuana Deathmatch*, among others.

Wright was an artist who got started early, describing his high school self as "that guy that did everyone's character sketches." Unfortunately, he compared himself to pros Larry Elmore and Brom, both famous fantasy artists, and found himself so lacking he didn't consider a career in illustration.

Lucky for gaming, Wright hit upon the feeling many creative types get – namely the "Good Lord, I may not be perfect, but I'm better than that!" feeling – when he attended *Origins* in 2000. "I went to a booth to buy the latest book from a publisher whose games I really liked. ... As I walked away, I opened the book and saw the art for the first time. It was really bad. Like ballpoint pen on a cocktail napkin bad. I turned right around and gave the guys at the booth a

card with my website address on it. ... When I got home from the con, they had already emailed, [asking] me to send them more samples of my art. Within three months, I was working on my first book."

Wright says the creative process for games is different for each game and each publisher. Generally, however, he gets an order of several pieces he must draw. He does several simply from creative memory; the technical pieces he will have to look for reference art to aid him. Often, he will get a request that is a bit difficult to swallow.

"I'll look at the order and be completely lost on how to tackle it," Wright says of these requests. "Or I'll have no idea how to convey the art director's intent. Oddly, these pieces will often be the ones with the most detailed descriptions. Too much detail for me to fit into a 4x6-inch drawing. Things like, 'A barbarian stands on a pile of his fallen foes. Behind him, a tattered banner flutters in the wind. He is wounded in seven places but raises his sword defiantly. Reflected in the wet metal of his blade we see another wave of attackers ready to sweep over him -

“If I need an *EVIL* candy-maker who looks like *Liberace*, I have to *make a PHONE CALL*”



but they are afraid.' These sorts of orders make me laugh."

Ernest prefers to lend detailed guidance to his artists. "As an art director, you need to be comfortable expressing what you want, because otherwise you can't be sure [what you'll get]."

Board game companies aren't the only tabletop games that rely heavily on art: RPGs can live and die by their art. You can write the best source book in the world, but it's unlikely to sell if the gamer is staring at stick figures on every third page.

RPGs require more art than illustration, as the page layout and borders are elements that separate the pro books from the amateur. Most fledgling RPG designers assume that game design is all you need, but a good artist is nearly vital. White Wolf Games, publishers of Mage, Vampire and World of Warcraft among many others, values several abilities in their freelance artists.

White Wolf Production Manager and Art Director Matt Milberger says, "We look

for storytelling, technique and style, as well as appropriateness to the game worlds we have. [The amount of guidance we give] depends on how much they have worked with us. In the early stages, we might be more hands-on, making sure the artist understands the world which we have created. Our vampires, werewolves, mages, etc. all have a unique look and feel. Once we feel the artist understands the look and feel of our worlds, we tend to take a more hands-off approach and allow them to explore our worlds."

While Cheyenne Wright could get higher paying work elsewhere (he did a T-shirt design for Food TV's geek god Alton Brown that paid his rent for a year), he continues to illustrate for games. He stays with it for the reason most people in the tabletop industry do: merely for the love of it. "That's the big secret of the game industry," Wright says. "All of us could be off doing bigger, 'better' things. But we love games. So we stay long past the point of total sanity loss."

Wright does admit that there are things that need fixing in the industry. In

"That's the **BIG secret** of the game industry," Wright says. "All of us could be off doing **BIGGER, 'better'** things. But we love games. So we stay long past the point of total **SANITY LOSS**"



“Don't be afraid to **SHOW YOUR STUFF AROUND**. There is always going to be someone out there that is better than you, but *there [are]* also **20 guys** worse than you *getting* **STEADY WORK**”

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Europe, tabletop gaming is much more respected than in America, where the majority of the public still assumes it to be a child's pursuit (although I'd like to see a kid tackle the rules to the massive war game War of the Ring). "I'd like to see the pen-and-paper tabletop game industry get the respect in the States that it has overseas," he says. "I want it to be as big as the video-drone game industry. I'd like to be able to tell people that I do art for games and for them to not immediately assume that I mean videogames. Maybe if we were that big and could pay out that kind of cash, we wouldn't be suffering the brain-drain that we are."

Besides those irritations, Wright wouldn't give it up. Making tabletop art is simply fun. His favorite part is when the art directors give him some leeway on the art.

"Sometimes, I'm brought into a game early enough that not everything is set in stone yet, or sometimes the writer is

stuck on ideas," Wright says. "They'll let me just do crazy design work. I just draw characters and monsters all day, sending the writer sketches and getting to see how my art changed the game.

"I did art for a game called Rippers, which was about Victorian monster hunters. One sketch I did early on was of a Victorian lady in a big poofy dress, wearing a skull mask and carrying a pepper-pot pistol. It was just a weird little idea, but the writer really liked it and folded it into the game's mythology. By the time the game came out they even had a 28mm figure of her sculpted."

Since most gamers want to know the big secret to getting into the industry, Wright has a bit of advice: "If this is what you want to do, do it! Don't be afraid to show your stuff around. There is always going to be someone out there that is better than you, but there [are] also 20 guys worse than you getting steady work."

We're not yet to the point that art is used as currency the same way salt once was, but like salt, game art adds spice that we'd sorely miss if it wasn't there. What would gaming be like without visuals of our bizarre Liberace candy-makers, our Mexican wrestlers and our nightmare-inducing elder gods to spark our imaginations? Thanks to the work of people like Wright, Ernest and Milberger, we won't have to find out. [COMMENTS](#)

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





Videogames are fantastic achievements of science: a library's worth of meticulously crafted code, impossibly small circuits wired to create a virtually infinite architecture, vast amounts of data etched into plastic disks with precision light years beyond that of a master craftsman. A videogame of any era represents the best of that day's science and technology. Without art, however, you're left with a high-tech light and noise machine; all sound and fury, signifying nothing. Truly great games, like all great works of art, have a spirit; the piece of its creator that he wanted to share with the world. This force can be so powerful, it can in turn inspire others to share the artist's vision through the lens of their own minds.

These visions of videogame worlds both seen and unseen are collected at a specific address: the gallery of Lifemeter Comics. Lifemeter houses a repository of videogame-inspired fan art where quality takes precedence over quantity.

Built on a LiveJournal framework, visitors can see the latest art updates on a

homepage and can join a community of members that leave comments and critiques. The archived artwork on Lifemeter is classified in two ways: the Comics Gallery that features short strips of game characters in an array of situations from humorous to tragic, and the Lifemeter Art Gallery, which contains dozens of pin-ups in a range of art styles from ink and pen to watercolors to computer generated images. Each work is "signed" by the artist, who also provides a link to his previous work.

I recently had the chance to sit down with the site's three founders, Zack Giallongo, Dave Roman and Stephanie Yue, to discuss Lifemeter and its place in gaming culture.

**The Escapist:** First, thanks for taking the time to sit down with us. Let's start at the beginning. What was the genesis of Lifemeter? What was your inspiration?

**Lifemeter Comics:** Lifemeter evolved out of conversations we had during comics and anime conventions. We were remarking on the rise of nostalgia [for



classic games] in modern videogaming culture, from people wearing Mario and Zelda shirts to full blown cosplayers dressing up as their favorite characters. We then began to create sample art for our artist's alley tables, while finding out that many young, struggling artists have sketchbooks full of videogame character art done from the memory of a childhood spent playing videogames. ...There had been no place [where] all game characters were collected before Lifemeter.

**TE:** A lot of the art on the site concerns the earliest days of gaming. What is it about the 8-bit characters that makes them popular to draw?

**LC:** The early 8-bit characters were all sprites, and for the most part, were half-formed ideas. The interpretation of [those characters] involved a lot more imagination, as their videogame worlds weren't that fleshed out, so you have to fill in the details. It's interesting how different it can be from person to person.

**TE:** So is it all driven by nostalgia?

**LC:** It's primarily driven by nostalgia, but there are some modern games that

display a unique visual style; for instance, *Jet Grind Radio* or *Shadow of the Colossus*.

**TE:** What are some of the other "art-house" style games that inspire contributors?

**LC:** *Katamari Damacy*, *PaRappa the Rapper*, *Animal Crossing*, but it's not limited to niche games. *Yoshi's Island* and *Paper Mario* also generate a lot of work. The characters in the more mainstream games inspire a lot of artists both old and young, since some have grown up with them, while others are experiencing the classic gameplay for the first time and enjoying just the same experience we did when we were young.

**TE:** Who do you feel you cater to?

**LC:** We don't have a real target audience, but we try to avoid anything explicit.

**TE:** Are you trying to create a family atmosphere, or are you avoiding trouble?

**LC:** Art on Lifemeter is supposed to have the impression that this stuff [the art and comics] could actually happen to the

characters, which is why we reject submissions, for instance, [of] Mario trying to score cocaine off of a Goomba, and we've gotten plenty of those. We try to keep it in the game world, since there is a lot of that kind of stuff out there already; parody, slash-fic or other adult content.

If we included that stuff, we'd have to be more particular about whom we allow visiting the site. [We] like to think that videogames are for everyone. There are specific games for adults only, and they are becoming more and more popular, but for the most part, videogames appeal to both kids and adults, and [we] like the idea that all ages can visit the site.

**TE:** What makes Lifemeter different from large artistic community sites like deviantART or a Yahoo group?

**LC:** We are editorial about it. The people who submit [art] are generally professionals, and there is an expectation of quality of what gets [posted] on the site. It's not a sketch blog or a message board. We need the art to tell a story or have a really strong voice. ...Originality goes a long way.





**TE:** What about legal issues? Any cease and desist letters so far?

**LC:** Surprisingly none, yet. .... We didn't want to upset copyright holders or jeopardize our professional careers ... [Surprisingly,] the reaction so far has been very positive. We never expected ... *Nintendo Power* to not only [approve of us] but to give us a recommendation. They told their readers to check the site out. They were one of the first magazines to call us and ask if they could write about [us]. We've found that the creators of the games get excited about [the art] in the same way that we do, and they understand that we are celebrating them and not exploiting them or parodying them. If anything, we are helping people remember games they haven't played in years, and maybe getting them to go out and buy them again. It's almost as if we are an advertisement for gaming itself.

**TE:** What about the future, will a higher profile bring problems with copyrights and licenses?

**LC:** We actually hope that the only letters we get are offers for freelance work from publishers, but if we were to receive [cease and desist letters,] we would take it on a case by case basis. If Konami knocked on the door and said they don't want and *Metal Gear* fan art, since they are publishing their own *Metal Gear Solid* comic, we would oblige, since they are being specific and polite about it. But it would take a real assault from the major publishers, Nintendo, Capcom, Sega and others, to really shut us down, but that would be the best advertising of all: "Industry rallies to shut down fan art site!"

[We] can't imagine anyone coming after, for example, *Adventure*, which could even be in the public domain by now ...I can't imagine anyone getting really upset about it. It's just a drawing, and it's not like we are making money off it. [We] can't imagine that we are any kind of competition.

**TE:** Tell us about the publishing of the *Lifemeter* mini-comic.

**LC:** We wanted something that people could hold in their hand. As great as the

internet is, sometimes you want something you can touch and hold and look at in front of you.

We debated about [charging for it,] ... [and] whether or not we [wanted] to make any sort of profit. For the most part, the comics are self made, photocopied and stapled ourselves. We're not sure the money we may have made on the minis has even covered the cost of site maintenance. If we make a little money back, it kind of balances out; if we lose money, we can't do [Lifemeter] at all.

**TE:** Where do you see Lifemeter in five years?

**LC:** Still existing [laughter]! The most realistic goal would be a collection of work, an actual book for sale that's approved by the copyright owners. Also, in a less tangible way, we would like to see people involved with Lifemeter get hired by [gaming companies] to do a story for them. A lot of these games have backgrounds that don't really get played out, and there might be room for people to flesh the games out, so [we'd] like to see Lifemeter helping artists that way.

[We] hope we are helping to raise the consciousness of people about the connection between art and videogames. The idea of videogames as art is still relatively new, but there is still a lot more that can be done for the medium so it doesn't bastardize itself by appealing to the lowest common denominator. Gaming culture is worth celebrating. [COMMENTS](#)

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