

# the Escapist

The  
**FOURTH  
DIMENSION  
GAME**  
of  
**DEVELOPMENT**  
by Erin Hoffman



Football as  
**MADDEN 07**

by Jon Schnaars

*Red vs. Blue*  
**Makes Green**

Rooster Teeth's machinima hit draws imitators  
- including (eventually) Hollywood  
by Allen Varney

*world,*  
**interrupted**  
by Jim Rossignol

**Science Fiction  
MAKES GREAT GAMES**

by Greg Tito

**ALSO:**

**EDITOR'S NOTE**

**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

**STAFF PAGE**

## EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

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

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

It is this need for flexibility that has brought forth the recurring Editor's Choice issues you'll find scattered throughout the calendar. These issues are literally a mix of some of our favorite Homeless Articles over the last few months – and this one is no exception.

This week, Erin Hoffman returns to discuss the fourth dimension of game development. Jon Schnaars demonstrates the often disregarded contribution sports games, specifically those in the *Madden* series, have made to the strength of "real" sports. With three words – and several more explaining those three – Jim Rossignol shares three years of experience playing MMOGs. Allen Varney examines *Red v. Blue*, the Halo-based phenomenon taking the machinima world by storm. And Greg Tito explores the ways games have pulled from other art on their journey to becoming art itself.

Cheers,



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

**In response to "The Milkman Cometh" from The Escapist Forum:** I've played *Psychonauts* and I can see why you associate "art in videogames" with the Milkman Conspiracy stage. What I want to say is that the joy of

navigation, the realness (if there is such a word) you feel because of the procedural feedback you get when you try to snoop around in the Milkman stage is what makes the game a new kind of art.

Conspiracy theories are not new, neither are crazy people who you have to deal with to get on with your life. Graphics depictions of such people's minds is not really new either. But the freedom to run, jump, live and die in such a mind is what makes the experience unforgettable.

- lietkynes

**In response to "The Milkman Cometh" from The Escapist Forum:** I can only comment on my experience with *Colossus*, but what I hear you guys describing of *Psychonauts* could be indicative of the large palette of games as art.

Wandering and manipulating any sphere of play is to wander inside the vision of the development team. Wander's awkward lunges, exhausted panting and half-determined, half-frightened gait highlight his mortality in his environment. That's noteworthy because





most heroes of his ilk are rendered immortal, or worse, swaggering.

I love that Crigger notes [*Shadow of the Colossus*] as a study on death. It's an overwhelming, almost heartbreaking experience. And I think one of the reasons it is so effective is the physics that flesh out the avatar interacting with the environment. Do you think that's why so many GTA clones fall short of being satisfying experiences? The lack of a truly visionary manipulation of worlds?

- nbarbour

**In response to "I Didn't Leave Games ..." from The Escapist Forum:**

I was initially excited to learn that the creator of EWJ was also responsible for one of my favorite new cartoons, *Catscratch*. Upon further reading though, I began to see yet another disgruntled, ranting and self-absorbed lapsed developer.

Doug, I think the biggest disservice "DP" did you was to inflate your ego and salary so fast that you have no perspective any more. If your love of making games was bigger than your head, you'd get out there and do

something like Telltale or Garage Games are doing instead of demanding to be treated like royalty for making some interesting characters almost 10 years ago.

I yell because I care.

- meathelix

**In response to "I Didn't Leave Games, the Games Left Me" from**

**The Escapist Forum:** Disagree completely - I love *The Netherhood* and am really excited that Doug worked on that and *Earthworm Jim* - two of my all time classic favs!

There's a real uniqueness to *The Netherhood* and a an acceptance that it's not going to be a number one smash like the big shoot `em ups - *Doom 3*, *Quake*, *Halo* etc. Instead it's a really cool, special little game - one which makes gaming less stifled and more interesting.

I cant help but feel *Earthworm Jim* could have gone further down that road if Doug had been allowed more control over it. It's pretty disgusting that now he's not even allowed to see what they're doing with his character. I'm not saying that capitalism is always bad and

that the people with the money don't know what they're doing - just in this case I think they should have left well alone.

Here be beauty, there be pie charts ... that kind of thing. Leave the creative people to do what they do best and we might have a few more games like *The Netherhood*.

- pixie\_lady

**In response to "I Didn't Leave Games, the Games Left Me" from**

**The Escapist Forum:** While I can't really shed a tear for someone who says, "I'm so damn good, you should come and get **me**," I also feel like TenNapel sounds like a lot of artists who make their money off of people looking to make a lot of money, for better or worse.

Of course "the suits" are gonna screw you out of your creations, that's why young & naive creative types need legal council (or at least more than a handshake).

- EvN





## The FOURTH DIMENSION of GAME DEVELOPMENT

by Erin Hoffman

"There is nothing so powerful as an idea whose time has come."

– Victor Hugo, *Histoire d'un Crime*

To state the obvious: The game industry is hit-driven. You've heard the statistics: Fewer than one in seven games actually turns a profit. But what, exactly, makes a hit? Investors regard the blockbuster game phenomenon with a sort of mystical awe, and part of its very definition seems to be invested in its unpredictability.

Every genre has one, and most have a few. In first-person shooters, we recall the *Doom* and *Quake* franchises. The crown jewel in this line, *Deus Ex*, even if it didn't pass the crate test, poised itself at the perfect apex of timing and execution, earning itself a permanent place in the pantheon of gaming history. But the well-rendered *System Shock* is frequently recognized as its direct predecessor – and, by some, even as a better game. The two can be qualitatively compared to some extent, but it is a raw fact that, for their time periods (which could account for differences in construction), the games were light years apart in terms of commercial success.

This phenomenon is hardly restricted to one industry. Some of my fellow children of the '80s may recall a made-for-TV movie that had all the makings of greatness: *The Worst Witch*, which, among other things, starred Tim Curry as a flying Dumbledore-like Grand Wizard in a flowing cape. Truly, what more can one ask of cinema? Look it up; this movie was *Harry Potter* 20 years too early.

Many fantasy fans could also tell you that, despite his only recent blockbuster publicity, George R. R. Martin was at his best with *A Game of Thrones*, first printed nearly 10 years ago. But these are the good examples. Novels had the good fortune, at least in bygone times, to be backed by publishers that would support a fictional world through its fruition, waiting, as with Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*, for that moment when the franchise's solid quality would catch the wave of public popularity. In games, we more frequently note the counterexamples: games that, despite superb execution and solid marketing, failed to hook the public's heart in their infancy.

The most recent example of these, *Beyond Good and Evil*, has been the

subject of much discussion throughout the gaming world. Critics loved it; a core group of players worshipped it. There was no marketing failure: Ubisoft flooded all the standard channels with Jade's lovely mug. So what in the hell happened?

It is, unfortunately, painfully simple: *Beyond Good and Evil* was the right game at the wrong time.

## Bubbles from the Murk

Carl Jung, in his work on analytical psychology, defined what he initially called the "collective unconscious" as basic psychological constructs – including symbols – shared universally between human beings. Ask a series of your average Joes about what a "tree" means to them and you will generally get a consistent answer, because we all, on a certain level, share basic experience. This basic experience influences creativity, both on an individual level and a social one; J. R. R. Tolkien called this "leaf-mould of the mind."

Douglas E. Winter, in his introduction to *Prime Evil*, further extends the application of this phenomenon. Winter, who works in horror, asserts that horror

is not a **genre** but an emotion, and as such, the images that influence that emotion shift with the generations. Prior to the sexual revolution, vampires flooded our fear-consciousness, but shortly after, they vanished from the media scene until their recent resurgence, also paralleling a constriction of sexual liberty following the "free love" of the '70s and the rising specter of AIDS. Fiction, such as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, reflected anti-communist hysteria in the 1950s. In a backlash against the rise of suburbia and conformist dystopia in the U.S., the '70s saw the rise of the zombie; the '80s saw what Winters termed a "soulless insanity" in subjects such as Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*. In the wake of a surge in conservatism, zombies are back again, and their reappearance in the collective media scene certainly bears interpretation. The things that we fear – as well as the things that we idolize (pirates, anyone?) – tell a compelling story about what lurks beneath our daily thought.

When we add technology to this mix, we get an additional layer: I'm sure there's some psychological interpretation one

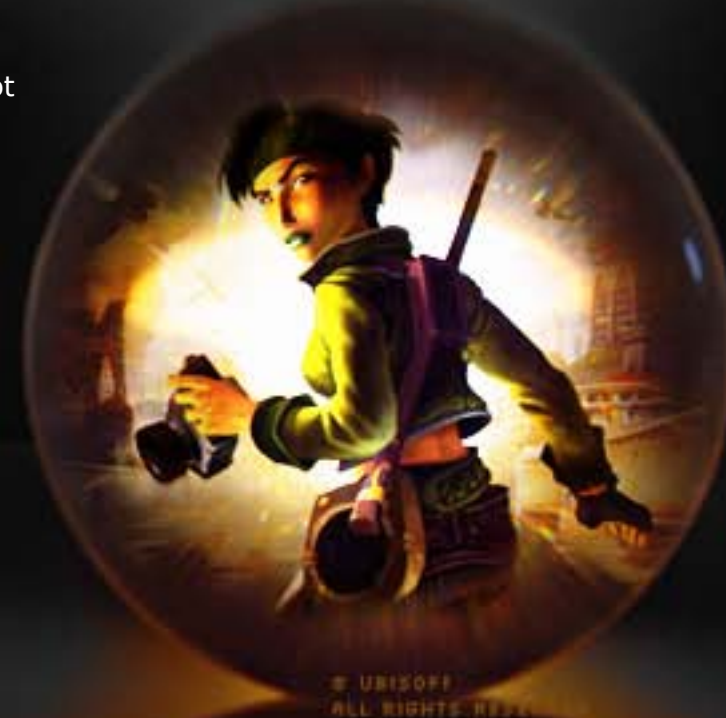
could derive from the near-simultaneous releases of Pixar's *A Bug's Life* and DreamWorks' *Antz*, but more apt was the simple fact that the 3-D technology driving animation at the time lent itself particularly well to the rigid bodies of insect characters.

Games, as they continue to evolve in terms of technology and audience, progress toward a threshold of societal relevance. We, too, pull from the leaf-mould, and looking back on landmark successes in the game industry invites inspection: In *Fallout* and *Deus Ex: Invisible War*, we see a recurring post-apocalyptic theme, and it is perhaps not

**Not all games hinge their success on overt or covert societal commentary, but when these forces surge in our subconscious, they inevitably surface through our creativity.**

coincidental that in a time of great political and ideological division, the current dominant videogame force is faction-based *World of Warcraft*. (I play Horde, favoring the peaceable but drastically misunderstood Tauren, and you can make of that what you will.)

Not all games hinge their success on overt or covert societal commentary, and I am certainly not accusing Blizzard of making political statements with bovine humanoids – but when these forces



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**“Beyond Good and Evil was a brilliant game!” you might say. “Psychonauts was glorious! Isn’t that enough?”  
Unfortunately, it isn’t.**

surge in our subconscious, they inevitably surface through our creativity. Even *Katamari Damacy* breathes an air of resonance: Would its gentle, carefree style have struck us so deeply had the world itself been less in a state of complex turmoil? Because escapism is such a large factor in interactive entertainment, games themselves have the potential to carry this subconscious resonance effect to an even greater degree. The things that we wish to escape **into** are driven by the currents of our subconscious minds.

#### **Pieces of the Pie**

Of course, there are other factors, so let’s get back to the money. A blockbuster hit can’t just be a tirade on the state of society – and in fact, one of the things that all of the blockbusters have in common is that their societal implications are **not** overt. They are stealthy, sneaking into our minds ninja-like and tapping a tuning fork on our thoughts.

But a game also has to be well-rendered. *Deus Ex* had plenty of companions in its genre, but none with such excellently honed gameplay and story. In order to climb into the ranks of the pantheon, a game can’t rely on the emergent effect

of societal resonance; first and foremost, it has to be well executed, and even after **that** it has to make it to its audience, which means it has to be well marketed. And these latter two effects are most commonly what game deliverers focus on, since they can more concretely be controlled.

However, even innovative technology isn’t enough on its own. Innovative technology **and** innovative gameplay might not even be enough. Witness *Graffiti Kingdom* and its predecessor *Magic Pengel*: procedural animation and darn fine gameplay shipped in a product a full two years before Will Wright introduced *Spore* at the 2005 Game Developers Conference. But how many copies did they sell?

“*Beyond Good and Evil* was a brilliant game!” you might say. “*Psychonauts* was glorious! Isn’t that enough?”

Unfortunately, it isn’t. If a game doesn’t reach commercial success, developers might be proud to have their names in the credits, but a credit isn’t going to put their kids through school. And in terms of the actual games themselves, success in the marketplace is one of the only



things that can ensure the survival of an IP or game franchise.

### **Dancing in the Rain**

*"Timing has a lot to do with the outcome of a rain dance."*

– Internet Proverb, "Cowboy Logic"

Another interesting aspect to this phenomenon is its pragmatic acknowledgement through – of all things – piracy management. *Spyro 3: Year of the Dragon* provides the example that still lives in infamy.

Game piracy is a bigger issue than many gamers would like to admit. It's hard to get an accurate assessment of exactly what percentage of games are pirated when played, and there are differences in genre, but general consensus puts piracy rates at about 20-30 percent. This represents a large loss, and particularly for the sales-driven game industry, piracy can cripple a title. We could argue over the exact impact piracy has, since certainly the more a game is played the greater its popularity becomes, and this actually **drives** further sales, but for now, let's focus on the basics: Game developers are behooved to fight software piracy where they can.

The developers at Insomniac, even after the heavy piracy hit they took with the preceding *Spyro 2* – which was cracked in a little over a week – did not realistically aim to prevent piracy entirely; they knew this was impossible. Instead, they set out to delay it. They added "crack protection": key points where the game itself checks for modifications to its code rather than simply checking to see if the game is run from its original disk. This latter technique is simply "copy protection" and is a standard feature on most games, including *Spyro 2*. This intricate bit of checksum voodoo became known at the time as the most thorough game protection measure ever attempted. In fact, through their efforts the developers even won themselves a bit of by-blow publicity, as discussions on *YOTD's* adamantine protection flooded game-copying forums.

Despite these elaborate protections, however, ultimately the developers bought themselves just two months. But those two months proved critical, as indeed the first two months of any game's life cycle are critical: 30-50 percent of a game's total revenue typically comes within that window,



**especially** for the games that are released during the holiday season (which comprises a staggering 80 percent of the market each year). When it comes to turning a profit, there has never been a question; timing is **everything**.

## So What do we Do?

One might say, quite understandably, “That’s all great, but what do we do with this?”

The answer is – in all likelihood – not much. It is a truism that every overnight success is years in the making. Ingrained ADHD in our media culture would like us to believe otherwise, but track backwards from every blockbuster, and you will find a chain of events spanning years that built it to its cresting point. Therefore, the complexity involved in engineering such a thing is astronomical and peppered with land mines at every turn.

“Trend trackers” in various industries do look at the social fabric and attempt to predict hits, often with success for which they are richly rewarded. One such tracker passed along Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* to Jerry Bruckheimer. Creative folk, generally,

don’t have much control over their muses – but they do have control over when they allow the muse to take hold. Perhaps the only strategic tactic one might pull from the observation of this phenomenon is one that I know some game developers practice: holding an idea until the time is right. We all have treasured little eggs of the Most Brilliant Game Ever stashed away in the backs of our minds, or in some cases elaborately diagrammed on zealously guarded notebooks. But I wonder how many designers, amateur and otherwise, deliberately wait for a turn in the tide of social consciousness – which might present itself in several forms, some as simple as the off-hand suggestion of a publisher that a certain theme is hot – before hauling them out.

And then, of course, even if you **do** have the right idea at the right time, a thousand other things can go wrong. This is, after all, game development, the strange alchemy of money, sweat and tears.

However, all of this remains valuable from a contextual standpoint. Games are not, as some might assert, harmful or mindless entertainment; such thoughts

are part of a fleeting paranoia that vanishes as soon as its political convenience wanes. As creators and consumers of this media, we too vibrate when the drum of social consciousness is struck. There was a time when we were ready for *Diablo*; in 2000, the **world** was ready for *The Sims*.

The question that remains is: What will we be ready for tomorrow? [COMMENTS](#)

*Erin Hoffman is a professional game designer, freelance writer, and hobbyist troublemaker. She moderates Gamewatch.org and fights crime on the streets by night.*

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# Football as **MADDEN 07**

by Jon Schnaars



Writing last August about the release of *Madden NFL 2006* in his column, "The Daily Quickie," former ESPN.com contributor Dan Shanoff made a stirring declaration: "Virtual is the new reality." A postmodern statement if ever there was one, Shanoff explained this remark by explaining that in today's football environment, the action in *Madden's* reality meant as much to some fans as the plays that transpired around the country between Sunday and Tuesday.

As tended to be his modus operandi, Shanoff was challenging "the purists who think the only thing that matters is the one on the TV screen on Sundays." Fandom, he quipped, was a full-time job, the burden of which fell to football-centric activities throughout the NFL's week-long droughts: Videogames and fantasy leagues carried fan interest from week to week, and in the case of games, over the seemingly interminable off season.

Videogames have altered the football landscape in ways that could not have been predicted when *10-Yard Fight* hit arcades in 1983. Over the past five years, Electronic Arts, the NFL and ESPN have leveraged *Madden*, football's flagship game series, to solidify a sports

entertainment empire that encompasses what is one of the premier examples of media convergence. And in so doing, they created a new breed of NFL fan, one that seeks to know and consume football entertainment beyond his own market; a fan that devours up-to-the-minute stats and injury reports, competes in six fantasy leagues and dies a little inside when his team loses the Super Bowl.

Shanoff is a writer who likes to paint with a broad brush and speak in absolutes. In this case, however, his seemingly pithy comment contained depth beyond what most game critics have collectively said about the best-selling series in gaming history — he just might not have realized it. Accepting his axiom as truth, the question we might ask is why? Was the stirring loyalty and emotion that fans felt for their videogame teams merely the result of a few overzealous gamers, or were their reactions, and indeed interactions, rooted in something much deeper?

## **Madden 07 as Convergence**

In December 2004, EA signed what may go down as one of the most profitable development deals in history when it



## The NFL has not been shy about its ambitions of spreading into new global markets.

came to terms on a five-year contract with the NFL and NFL Players' Association (NFLPA). By signing this agreement, EA secured exclusive rights to include the NFL's teams, stadiums and players in its games. This strategic move meant that EA no longer needed to worry about competitors, and left them to focus on building out their NFL-related offerings. Likewise, the deal gave the NFL a measure of security, as they knew their brand would be attached to a popular, established franchise.

A month later, EA followed up the NFL deal with an even larger one: a 15-year exclusivity deal with the ESPN media brand. Since its first telecast on September 7, 1979, ESPN has permeated virtually every possible media platform from print to the web and most recently, mobile phones. Just as *Madden NFL* has come to be synonymous with football gaming, ESPN defines sports journalism and entertainment for an entire generation of fans.

By bringing together all three parties, *Madden 07* provides a penetrating look at media convergence at work. In his recent book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins, director of MIT's Program in Comparative Media Studies, defined media convergence as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."

Convergence can work in many directions and can be spurred by many different parties, but in the case of *Madden*, the NFL, ESPN and EA had constructed a holy grail, an irresistible package that would draw droves of football fans into the franchise. As Jenkins states, "convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content." *Madden* provides the blueprint to that search.

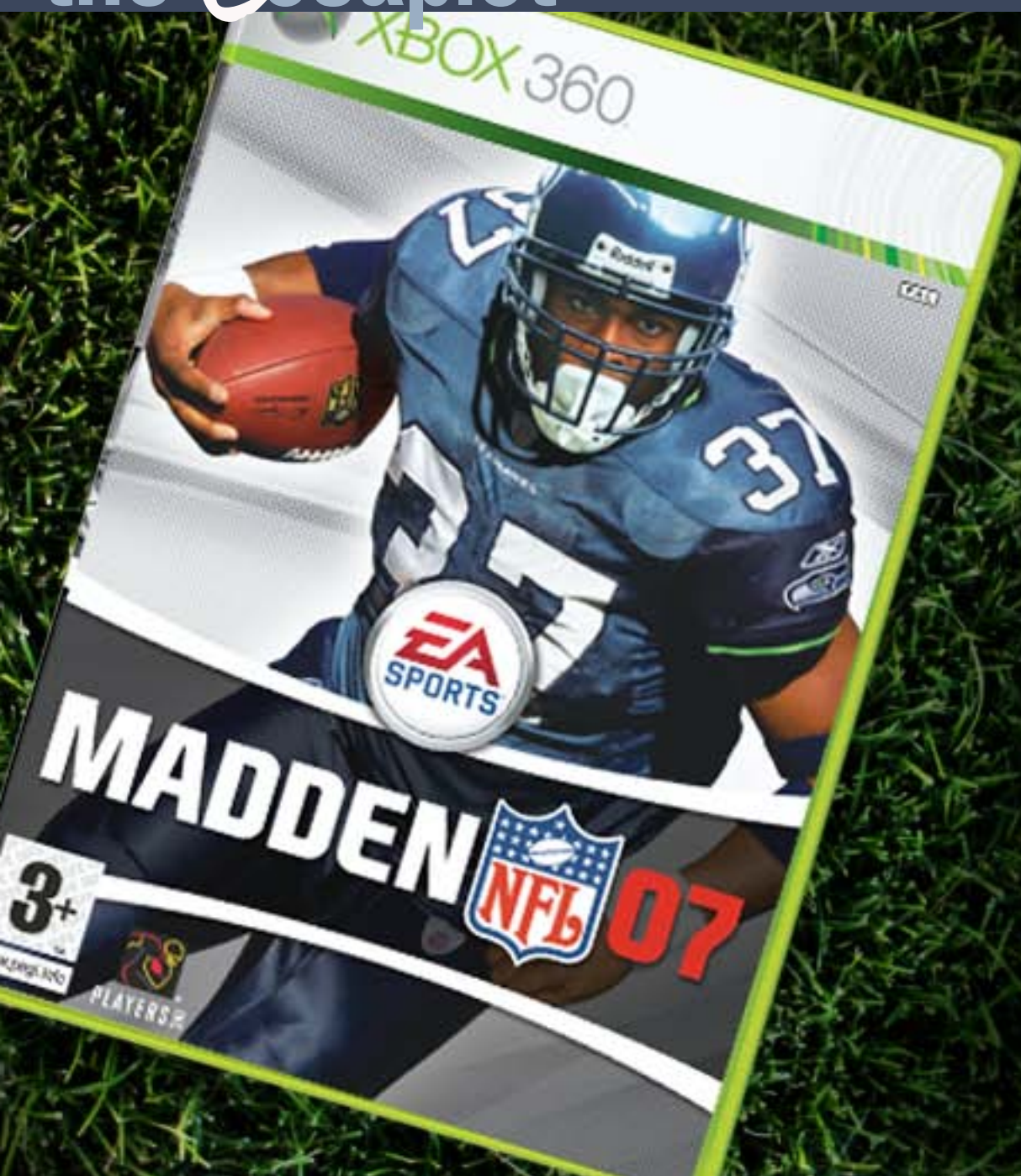
Fans of American football have enjoyed the NFL since the league was founded in 1920. And in recent years, the NFL has

not been shy about its ambitions of spreading into new global markets and expanding its offerings beyond the games played between September and February. The league's own television network was established in 2003, and for the first time, the NFL began producing original content and taking greater control of their brand. Their website has also become a force on the web, with a stable of writers and former-player-commentators who churn out proprietary content to compete with the very sports journalists who had previously served as the default voice of the league.

Likewise, ESPN has firmly established itself as the "World Wide Leader" in sports coverage. After years of success with one cable channel, they've expanded to six, as well as ESPN Plus coverage, two HD simulcast channels, a pay-per-view network and an international channel. ESPN now also appears on Disney's broadcast network, ABC. The sports entertainment line now extends far beyond the reach of the cathode tube, too: The ESPN family includes one of the most highly trafficked sites on the web, a book imprint, a







restaurant chain and a magazine, among other endeavors.

Through the work of both ESPN and the NFL, football fans can now look to virtually any medium in search of the pigskin-centric entertainment they crave. Videogames, however, a \$10 billion dollar industry, presented a new and in many ways underutilized market for football content producers. In this new era of convergence, videogames represented a keystone that would help the NFL and ESPN create fans in their ideal image.

### **Convergence as Fandom**

Now, I've spent months, if not years, of my life playing EA's *Madden* games. I very distinctly remember the edition that sent me over the edge, from a mere *Madden* player to *Madden* devotee: it was *Madden 96*.

To casual players, the game probably didn't seem all that different from previous years. Sure, the graphics changed slightly, giving the players a lankier look than before, and the rosters had been upgraded, but otherwise, it was just business as usual for a new edition. The one element that changed

dramatically, however, was the player creation section. The ability to create a player from scratch has always been one of the features to which sports gamers are drawn. When you get bored or just need a break from standard play, you can start to mess around with different body shapes and abilities: the plodding RB, the outrageously tall QB, the wrecking ball D-end. The act of designing a character and then using him in game situations brought a new level of agency to the game; as if you were playing with part of yourself.

*Madden 96* threw a monkey wrench into the works, though. Instead of designing your player by adjusting his stats as you liked, you had to run him through a batch of drills to determine his attributes. It may have seemed almost counterproductive because it forced gamers to focus a lot of attention on a non-integral part of the game, but what I saw was a whole new connection with my creations.

My fictitious players were no longer merely numbers on a slider to be adjusted at my whim. They were products of hard work and often tireless practice. If you made it through three



drills, your player excelling at each, but then flubbed the pass catching drill, well, you had a piss poor receiver on your squad. Players took shape not just in your imagination; it still played its part of course, but these fictional characters were now being grown in the reality of the game.

This feature was gone by *Madden 97*, most likely to conserve precious memory in what were still rather puny cartridges, but we can find the ancestors of those old features in today's game. The player creation drills made possible the idea of mini-camp drills, which were added in 2003, and more recently, the Superstar mode that debuted in last year's edition. In fact, one might view Superstar mode as the direct descendent of *Madden 96's* player creation process.

In Superstar mode, you take control of a player from the very beginning of his career — even going so far as to choose the DNA pool that most adequately fits your vision for your new player. Run him through drills, participate in some interviews and take an I.Q. test before heading to the draft. Perform well and you might work your way into a high selection and a potential role in your

team's game plan — otherwise, enjoy your time on the bench.

Superstar mode represents a massive step in the move toward media convergence. In the game space, you inhabit your new player's apartment. Check your cell phone, surf the web for stats and even manipulate your appearance in the mirror — it's all part of the day-to-day life of an NFL player. There are also milestones to achieve, and unlike the goals of traditional season or franchise modes, the goals in Superstar mode are of a personal nature. Sign with an agent, meet specific performance goals, earn playing time. The overall success of the team becomes less important in this regard.

This subjection of the team's performance in favor of the individual marks an important distinction in the grand scheme of the NFL as sports entertainment. If each fan, viewed from the perspective of the NFL and ESPN, is a potential consumer, a major goal of both organizations is to broaden the consumer's interest in the product. Die-hard team loyalists, those most hardcore of the hardcore fans, aren't necessarily the best consumers. If his hometown

team tanks over the course of a long season, there's a strong chance that consumer's interest will fade, not to say anything of what could happen if an entire fan base was to become disenchanted over the course of several seasons (I'm looking at you, Cardinal fans). Instead, it is beneficial to create greater market opportunities for football in general.

Superstardom is one of the most palatable ways that happens. We see it with the overemphasis on flashy players like Chad Johnson or in the drowning buildup around certain games (The Manning Bowl, T.O. returns to Philly). These are narratives centered on characters that any fan can appreciate, and they help guarantee that even though Oakland might not win a game, Oakland fans will still tune in to *Sportscenter* or the NFL Network to see what happened with the story of the

**In Superstar mode, you take control of a player from the very beginning of his career - even going so far as to choose the DNA pool that most adequately fits your vision for your new player.**





week. Because we buy into these stories, we then search out more information as we consume football entertainment via any number of mediums.

This type of entertainment has been evolving for years, but it is only with the proliferation of the web and the strength of end-of-life editions on current consoles that we can truly see the critical role that games like *Madden* play in the convergence shaping fans' experience. In *Madden's* Superstar mode, you are challenged with writing an individual player's narrative, always striving for that most glorious of achievements, the Hall of Fame. The feature's very inclusion in the game points to the stake that EA, and by proxy the NFL and ESPN, has in continuing to establish this type of connection with their audience.

## Fandom as Football

While the use of Superstar mode as an example may make it seem as if I'm painting these trends in a negative light, the opposite is true. The upsurge in entertainment related to professional football has meant that even the smallest of niche followings are served. Sure, we have to put up with egocentric

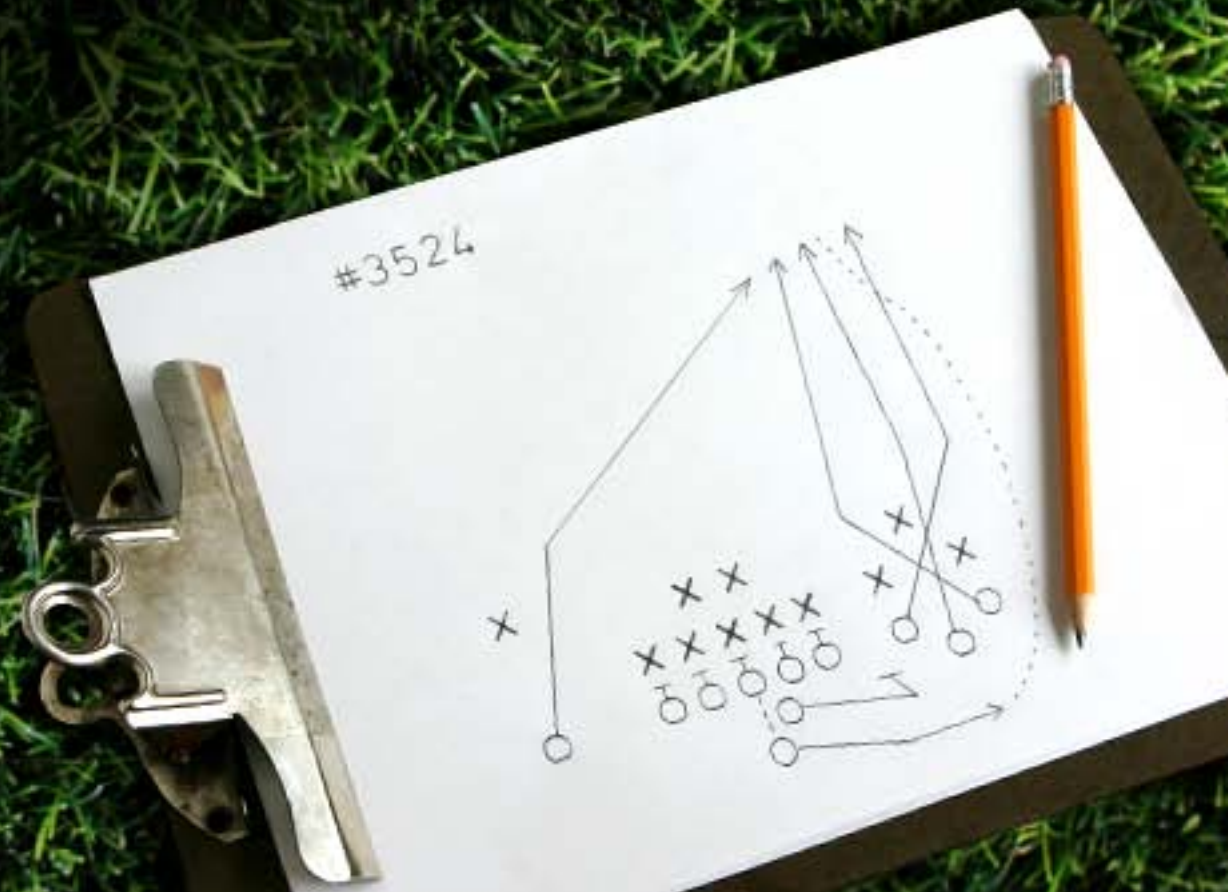
end zone celebrations and weekly stories about Brett Favre's possible retirement, but this new atmosphere has created new markets for creative corporate and independent content producers. It has led to the proliferation of fantasy leagues, which have brought in their wake entirely new journalism centered on statistics. For every fan, ESPN and the NFL have a story, and if they don't, they're working on one.

Our experiences playing the game help to shape our understanding of football more than any other single medium. As hardware has advanced, so too have the analytic tools we're equipped with when we tune in to Sunday's games. *Madden NFL*, quite literally, defines not only what we know — formations, route names, game management strategies — but what we **need** to know about the game. *Madden* doesn't just set us on a path of discovery across new media, it shows us what exactly we should be looking for.

Superstar mode might serve as the strongest example of the convergence at work, but the Franchise mode illustrates more effectively how those convergences are working to redefine fandom.

Individual players might get the headlines and help sell papers, but today's fan knows that the real stories are in the game's nuts and bolts. Blocking schemes, using the run to set up the pass, dropping lineman back on a zone blitz — these are concepts bantered about on pre-game shows and in beat writers' columns, but in *Madden*, they are game plans and strategies to be utilized or ignored.

In Franchise mode, though, you can go beyond the depth of on the field action to micromanage every aspect of your team. Everything from the salary cap to the price of parking has now become your concern, and this is reflected in the NFL-centric coverage that we find across other media. Even the recent





fetishization of the amateur draft shows up in the game. ESPN has made a star of Mel Kiper Jr., a man whose entire year is spent researching and reporting on the NFL Draft that takes place over two days in April. He's in the game, and he's going to help you through your team's draft. Get familiar, because ESPN hopes that you'll seek out his real-life contributions and analysis when draft day rolls around.

These elements are no mere sideshow to the football action, either. I often find myself allowing the AI to simulate my games so I can focus more attention on the management aspects of the game. This spotlighting of the business serves to establish yet another potential niche of football that can be marketed and sold. The NFL Network stays on the air in the off season, and ESPN senior writers Len Pasquarelli and John Clayton need something to talk about as they make their daily reports over those long spring and summer months. *Madden* and EA's partnership with ESPN has also helped springboard the latter's newest web venture, ESPN Video Games, the fruit of another partnership with 1up.com that ESPN hopes will become your one stop

shop for all things sports gaming. And what might you find there? How about write-ups of simulations of this week's games run through *Madden 07*?

As has been their charge ever since John Madden lent his name to Electronics Arts, the game's developers strive for realism, and that pays off in a football simulation that now so closely approximates the true NFL experience that Dan Shanoff can declare "Virtual is the new reality," and ESPN can use simple game simulations as content. It shouldn't come as a surprise that many of us take our *Madden* Franchises or Superstars so seriously - we're just well informed consumers getting our football fix. Besides, in the real world, when my Eagles screw up, all I can do is scream myself horse at Andy Reid. *Madden 07* offers me the chance to send him packing. It might be virtual, but it can still be therapeutic. [COMMENTS](#)

*Jon Schnaars is a freelance writer with interests in genre and representation in gaming. He blogs full-time about issues in psychology and mental health for Treatment Online.*



**ESPN has made a star of Mel Kiper Jr., a man whose entire year is spent researching and reporting on the NFL Draft that takes place over two days.**





## Red vs. Blue Makes Green

Rooster Teeth's machinima hit draws imitators  
- including (eventually) Hollywood

by Allen Varney

You have to wonder, why doesn't Cartoon Network produce its shows the way Rooster Teeth Productions creates its comedy hit machinima series *Red vs. Blue*? Nielsen Media Research says the cable network pulled in one and a quarter million viewers a night, prime time, in the week of September 11th, 2006. Bet they spent a bundle on their original programming for those nights – *Teen Titans*, *Camp Lazlo*, *Xiaolin Showdown*, the Adult Swim block, and all the rest. Sure, Cartoon Network can charge tens or hundreds of thousands for a 30-second ad spot, but even so, it's hard to swallow the price tag for all that animation: \$150,000-plus per half-hour, over \$600K for a two-hour block.

Meanwhile, the audience for *Red vs. Blue* is currently over a million, comparable to Cartoon Network's, and with its DVD sales, plus semi-annual sponsorship fees from some percentage of its half-million forum accounts, Rooster Teeth may well beat the network in clear profit per two-hour block. Rooster Teeth's total production costs: the price of four Xbox 360s, four copies of *Halo 2*, desktop computer with video capture card, editing software and Wal-Mart microphone – top to bottom, maybe

\$4K. By Cartoon Network standards, basically zero.

OK, the comparison is admittedly stupid. A cable network must fill hours of air time daily; the six guys at Rooster Teeth, who have just started *Red vs. Blue* Season 5, produce just a few hours of material a year, five minutes a week. Due to a nondisclosure agreement with *Halo* publisher Microsoft, they don't talk about their income, so it's pure guesswork whether they clear more profit annually than Cartoon Network does nightly. And, of course, the network can rerun its cartoons forever, amortizing animation costs to a pittance; Rooster Teeth must use bandwidth, lots of it, to deliver *Red vs. Blue* and its other series, *The Strangerhood* and *PANICS*. Oh God, does Rooster Teeth use bandwidth. In a single month in 2004, they pushed 488 terabytes. Yes, **terabytes**.

You could list a dozen ways Rooster Teeth's little operation in Austin, Texas, won't undermine cable's dominance. That's not the point. This comparison illustrates how an indie (not to say "amateur") sitcom, created in a videogame engine with practically no money or resources, is reliably building

numbers that rival the lower echelons of cable TV.

How long until someone realizes that in Hollywood?

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Among many measures of Rooster Teeth's success is a comprehensive suite of *Red vs. Blue* Wikipedia entries. The main treatise, one of the encyclopedia's Featured Articles (under "Media"), recaps the origin and premise of the series, as well as the entire 78-episode run since its premiere on April Fool's Day, 2003. Each season has its own article with meticulous episode summaries.

Still, as with most attempts to summarize comedy, these efforts miss the essence, the *prana* of the subject. Episode transcripts help, but without the voices, you can't parse the vibe. *Red vs. Blue* (*RvB*) features sharp dialogue delivered with flair and cesium-clock timing. Almost uniquely, amid hundreds of machinima shorts apparently voiced by semi-literate *Jackass* rejects, these actors actually **understand what they're saying**.

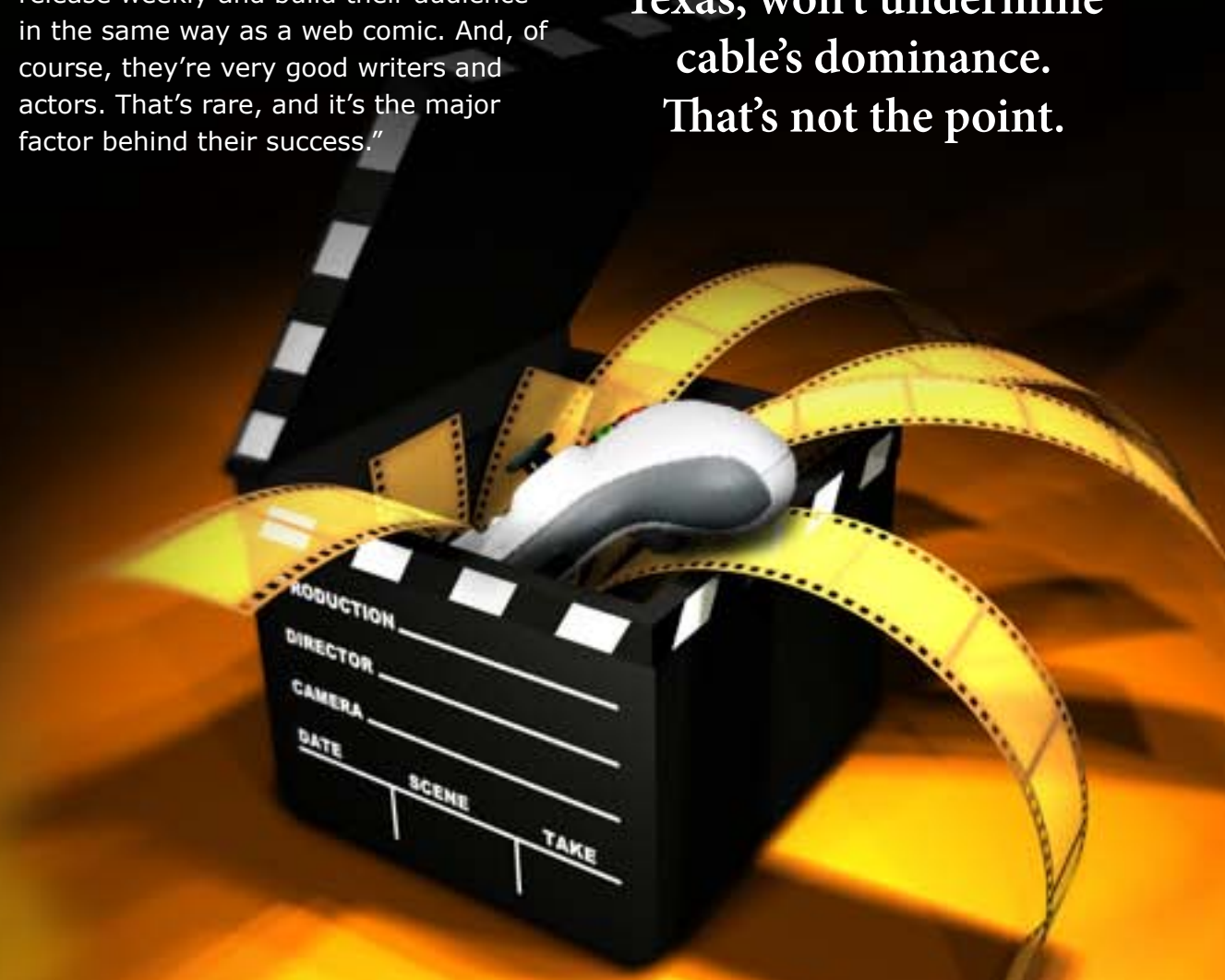
The direction stands out, too. "I think the attention to detail that we pay to every episode really helps," Rooster Teeth's Gustavo "Gus" Sorola said in a December 2003 interview on Machinima.com. "Sometimes hours of work can go into a shot that just appears on screen for two or three seconds, but in the end it really pays off."

"In many ways, *RvB* is comparable to a Blizzard game like *World of Warcraft*," says machinima pioneer Hugh Hancock. "The idea of doing a sitcom set in a computer game isn't new; what is new and brilliant, though, is the polish and quality of the product. Other people have made game sitcoms, but very few of them have actually been, you know, funny. *RvB* consistently is, and that's what makes it different."

"They've tapped into the perfect market – they're using games to make films about games. Their audience are gamers, 100 percent of whom already in tune with and accepting of their production techniques. Their first episode, which really is the make-or-break for a machinima series, is absolutely stonking, perhaps the best

thing they've done – pretty much the canonical example, still, of smart, tight comedy writing within machinima. They've got a smart distribution method, combined with carefully thought-out scope for their films, meaning they can release weekly and build their audience in the same way as a web comic. And, of course, they're very good writers and actors. That's rare, and it's the major factor behind their success."

**You could list a dozen ways Rooster Teeth's little operation in Austin, Texas, won't undermine cable's dominance. That's not the point.**





Given this professionalism, ordinarily you'd expect the Rooster Teeth creators to capitalize on their web success by moving into traditional media – you know, a cable series, books, a licensed magazine, audiobooks, et al. But so far, they seem happy to stay on the web.

Maybe they figure this is where the action is. Maybe they're right.

\*\*\*

Machinima production is charging forward on many fronts. Machinima.com, which streams hundreds of thousands of films each year, offers a long list of machinima production companies. Some of them – not as many as you might think – use the *Halo* engine, taking inspiration from *Red vs. Blue*. *Fire Team Charlie* reached a respectable 19 episodes, some quite long, before conking out in January 2006. *Sponsors vs. Freeloaders* is meta-machinima about the support, or lack of it, provided by Rooster Teeth sponsors.

It's not all comedy, either. *The Codex* is a drama in 20 parts, with a prequel (*The Heretic*) about to start production. Dennis Powers has used the *Halo* engine

to create a multi-part drama, the *Halo CE Chronicles*. Then there are oddities like *This Spartan Life*, a talk show staged live on a public *Halo* multiplayer server; host Damian Lacedaemion and his guests pontificate while avoiding weapon fire. You can find plenty more at *Halo Movies* and *Halo Grid*.

Yet *Halo*, like *RvB* itself, represents only one theatre in machinima's invasion. "The impact of *RvB* on comedy machinima has been considerable, and on *Halo* machinima, huge," says Hancock, though "no one has really equaled Rooster Teeth's success. They're a medium-sized community on the web themselves, above, beyond and separate from the rest of the machinima scene."

Rooster Teeth hasn't reshaped the community. "There isn't really a single machinima community," Hancock explains. "Instead, there are a lot of disparate but similar communities and a small number of umbrella organizations, notably the Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences, which try to serve all of them. Whilst we see a lot of movies being made which were obviously influenced by *Red vs. Blue*, the output from the communities around games like



**You'd expect the Rooster Teeth creators to capitalize on their web success by moving into traditional media. But so far, they seem happy to stay on the web.**

*The Sims 2* and *The Movies* dwarfs that in quantity. The impact [*Red vs. Blue*] has had on the *Sims 2* music video scene, for example, has been minimal to none. Likewise on the old-school machinima people who grew up with *Quake 1*."

Aside from Rooster Teeth, the most interesting machinima company today may be Hancock's own Strange Company

in Edinburgh, Scotland. Strange recently released Episode 9 of *BloodSpell*, a full-length fantasy feature film in the *Neverwinter Nights* engine. Writer-director Hancock describes *BloodSpell* as "the largest machinima production ever." *BloodSpell* is currently competing with Rooster Teeth in the new GameShadow awards. Other successful filmmakers include Rufus Cubed Productions, whose *Return* and "Billy Maclure" films (done in

## Buying into Machinima

Lots of people fantasize about going into the film industry. If you start in machinima now and don't stink, it's likely within a few years, the film industry will come to you.

What's most inspiring about Rooster Teeth is, these guys were nobodies. They didn't have film degrees or powerful connections or anything except a few Xboxes. They stumbled into machinima, found they had a knack for it and then – the important part – went for it, full blast, with all their heart. Why not you, too?

Start with a good script and a clear idea of your story's direction. (You might want scriptwriting software like the free Celtx.) Compared to filmmaking, there's not that much to learn about machinima techniques, and it's all on the web. If you're an *RvB* fan, try Rooster Teeth's own Forum FAQ and help thread, then move on to Machinima.com's FAQ.

Depending on the game engine you choose, you'll need one or more game computers or consoles, plus an editing computer with a video capture card (about \$200). Buy a cheap noise-cancelling microphone for \$20 or a professional mic for \$100 or so. You'll want the free Audacity sound editor and some video editing software – either low-end freeware like Windows Movie Maker or, if you can afford them, gold-plated professional programs like Adobe Production Studio (\$1,700) or, for the Mac, Final Cut Pro (\$1,300).

*World of Warcraft*) have gotten close to a million downloads; "Deviation" from Hard Light Films, which clocked over half a million; and "Anna" from Fountainhead Entertainment.

But for all this activity, not many other machinima titles will hold a film fan's interest. Given the low barriers to entry, why haven't we already seen an explosion of great machinima, a thousand hilarious Reds vs. ten thousand brilliant Blues? For the same reason we didn't see a million great novels after we got word processors, or a flood of tremendous indie films when video cameras got cheap. It's hard work! Go to Lionhead's *The Movies* site and blow a heart-sinking half-hour browsing some of its thousands of two-minute mediocrities. You'll confront the perennial problem with user-generated content: Most creators stink.

Here, professional filmmakers will eventually see an opportunity. They'll look at *RvB*'s success and smell serious money, at least by indie movie standards. And, unlike Hollywood's past

ventures into gaming (full-motion video cutscenes, anyone?), they might not screw up this one – because, for once, their storytelling skills really do apply. But for starters, they'll certainly consult with machinima makers already skilled in the form.

The field is wide open. Often, by the time we hear of fortunes being made in a new way, it's already too late to get in. But in machinima, the barrier to entry remains absurdly low, the need for professionalism desperate. If you're funny or interesting, can voice-act well, and produce reliably over the medium term – and you don't quit – there's absolutely nothing blocking you from success.

To restate: How long until Hollywood realizes **that**? [COMMENTS](#)

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





## world, interrupted

by Jim Rossignol



In the past few years, PC game journalism has been dominated by one thing: the sheer amount of time it takes to play massively multiplayer online games. Of course, you can go off and hide in a corner, pretend to be an expert in one of the many other genres that make up the great messy corpus of PC gaming, but you'd be kidding yourself that it was going to work out for you in the long term. Editors, sub-editors, writers, readers: They all want to know what is going on with MMOGs. Hell, they may not even care to play them, but they want reviews, anecdotes and flavors to be delivered by **someone**. They want to see inside and get reports from those virtual places. These internet explorations make interesting times for games, and even if you're not there to see it all, you certainly expect someone else to be. That someone has, for the last three years, been me.

Now, if I were (on pain of sudden evisceration) challenged to supply one word that really summed up the experience of playing as many MMOGs as possible during a 36 month period, that word would be "overwhelming." A

second word (on pain of public humiliation) would be "disappointing," and a third (just to complete the set) would be "significant."

Explaining the overwhelming part is easy: *Lineage II* takes over 2,000 hours or so to get to its final echelons, the level 70s. It's not quite as ludicrous for *World of Warcraft's* level 60, but nevertheless, the thousands of quests and 16,000 kills that are required to get to the later stages really do begin weigh heavily on even the sternest gaming constitution. Then there's *Second Life* and the need to learn how to use a CAD program to get along and feel productive. Even if you don't become a builder, you'll still need to negotiate dozens of unfinished shops, unruly journalists and weird avatars trying to make 3-D porn if you want to survive in *Second Life*. It's all a bit much.

But then we might consider *EVE Online*, where you die horribly if you poke your nose into the wrong solar system, and where every transaction and mission is as stressful as refinancing your house. This is less a game, more a second job.



# the Escapist

"Bored? Why not try commanding space-logistics operations in a universe that only you can see."

And this is where the disappointment comes in. MMOGs promise a world of imaginative enterprise, but they end up failing to deliver. *World of Warcraft* looks, to the untrained eye, like a world of limitless fantasy adventure, but is in fact quite the opposite. It is a world severely **limited** fantasy adventure. You can only kill the designated monsters, no matter how hard you might try, and you'll even end up lining up for the privilege of killing certain popular beasties; less a fantasy epic in which you are the hero and more another dose of linear *Diablo*-esque monster clubbing, but this time with lots of other people getting in the way.

*EVE* is more *Space-Truckers* with tax returns than it is *Starfleet*, and *City of Heroes* is a world in which all heroes can really do is mince about in warehouses, looking for weak ninjas. Most disappointing of all, perhaps, is *Auto Assault*. We all want to be able to live the road-warrior existence of *Mad Max* (in the second film, obviously) and play

out post-apocalypse fantasies in our own desperate dust-caked corner of the future. But, well, let's just say *Auto Assault* **isn't** like that.

And this final observation of what might have been is where "significant" comes in. The first draft of this piece had me writing "suggestive" in that slot, and neither word is quite right. What I mean is this: MMOGs have, more than any other game I have encountered, suggested ways in which gaming might progress. They're disappointing in all kinds of new and unusual ways, but that's because they offer us an amazing insight into **what could be**. The fact is: We're really still in the most basic infancy of this technology, and no one has really figured out how to make it work to its fullest. *World of Warcraft* might seem incredibly polished and immensely successful, but it is also one of the keenest demonstrations of where the boundaries currently lie and how we might be able to go beyond them. *Warcraft's* kill-quest-loot model is an aged and limited concept, which has escaped extinction for far too long. Likewise, *EVE Online* and *City of Heroes*

are each flawed in their own ways, but they nevertheless provide maps into possible gaming futures.

*EVE* demonstrates that you don't need a rigid level structure for a roleplaying world to make sense. The false and counterintuitive hand-me-down from *Dungeons & Dragons*, the linear hierarchy of leveling up, does not **have** to be how online games are structured. The fact they almost all use this concept is because it is a shortcut. It's very easy to set up and equally easy for players to understand. But *EVE* has thrown all this out and suggested a few ways in which skills can still develop over time, but don't alienate people through leveling.

Partly, this is down to the time-based training system (you click and wait, rather than grind through quests until you level up), where simple skills take a few minutes to train and complex skills can take months. But it is also down to the way in which combat occurs. Level-based systems mean that high-level and low-level characters must not be allowed to fight, whereas *EVE* relies instead on complex group mechanics. Learn a



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It's rather telling that the areas in *Second Life* that get some of the highest traffic are those **in which a game has been built.**

couple of basic abilities, and you'll contribute as much to the battles as a top-end character. *EVE* suggests that what an MMOG needs is not a vertical structure, but a horizontal one. Characters get better at certain things, yes, but more importantly, they get better at **more** things.

There's another, very different lesson to be learned from *Second Life*. The great "build your own" world experiment has shown that player-created content probably needs a game built around it to make the most of it. In fact, it's rather telling that the areas in *Second Life* that get some of the highest traffic are those **in which a game has been built.** Sure, there's all that stuff about the 3-D web and the like, but for us to want to spend lots of time making things, it would be nice if the "thing" had a definite purpose. In *Second Life*, about the most creating something could do is raise some virtual cash or furnish a polygonal villa. That's

not game enough for most of us, and *Second Life's* potential, as a leisure process, becomes truncated.

Player-created content needs to be integrated into a world in some other way, a way that means that co-operation and competition have some distinct goals. *EVE's* player-owned structures suggest a way to do this, by granting sovereignty and allowing players to exploit game-resources to their own ends. The problem for *EVE*, of course, is the structures and game-mechanics that have been built up over the years are so poorly integrated, only a tiny number of people have the patience to get anything out of them.

It's far easier, by comparison, to get something out of designing a really beautiful outfit in *City of Heroes*. This, I think, is where player-created content in online games should be looking. Create tools that work and that allow individual projects to be accomplished quickly and effectively, in a way that makes us feel like we did something unique.

And then there are the insights of *Guild Wars*. I've long ago tired of *Wars'* soft-



focus fantasy world, and its lack of humor and slightly irritating character design never really struck the right chords with me. What it did do, however, is demonstrate ways in which instancing can be used in gaming worlds to help them make a little more sense. One of the great travesties of *Star Wars Galaxies* was the moment in which you were sent out into the wilderness to club a log. The stump of your target caught fire and then disappeared, all to a blaring John Williams score. You didn't feel like a hero, you felt ridiculous. (Especially if you got killed by a butterfly on the way home.)

*Guild Wars*, meanwhile, doesn't doom you to start with such preposterous tasks – you are not at the bottom of a very long ladder, killing things that higher-level characters are glad to ignore. Instead, it creates a world in which real drama is taking place and where things will change forever. It does this by creating instances of the world for each party that goes off to adventure. The payoff, of course, is that it loses a sense of massively-shared world that games like *World of Warcraft* seem to capture so deftly. And there is a suggestion of a happy medium, too: *City of Heroes*


mixes the two approaches with startling effect. Catching a train out of town is just one way that it creates challenges that are **just for you**, while the city as a whole feels like a bustling, shared environment. The next generation of MMOGs could be vast, open and explorable, but also avoid forcing players to line up to kill monsters.

I believe **all** the MMOGs suggest something about what the technology of putting thousands of people into the same game can accomplish, but I also believe that **none** of them have yet used that technology satisfactorily. This is, in part, because these games have been so ambitious, they have opened up immense spaces of possibility – spaces far greater than their capacity to fill them. The current generation of MMOGs almost seem like exercises in elements of what is to come, giving our imaginations fuel enough to see where the technologies of online gaming might take us.

The development studio that crafts a world to rival *Warcraft*, character-creation to rival *City of Heroes*, economics and breadth to rival *EVE*, and

exploding vehicles to rival *Auto Assault* will, I think, have built a triumph of a game. But is such a hybrid even possible? Perhaps not. Only time (and a few more experiments in MMOGs) will tell. [COMMENTS](#)

*Jim Rossignol is a writer and editor based in the South West of England. He writes about videogames, fiction and science.*



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# SCIENCE FICTION

Makes **GREAT GAMES**

by Greg Tito



Innovation comes through art. Sure, there are scientists and technicians that aspire to discover new things on their own, of course. But there are also ideas and concepts that are so far-fetched, the only people who are capable of visualizing them are the dreamers, the painters, the writers or the videogame designers.

*Star Trek* inspired numerous technological innovations. Remember, humans hadn't even made it to the moon when that fated first show aired in 1966. Very few people thought communicators or tricorders would ever be real. Yet, here we are in 2006, and neither seems particularly far-fetched. We have cell phones and pocket PCs, which aren't too far off from their fictional 23rd century counterparts. Granted, the warp drive will probably never be created (faster-than-light travel violates several Einsteinian laws), but, hey, Gene Roddenberry, *Star Trek's* creator, needed something to move the plot along.

This trend of life imitating art is evident in the world of computer games, as well. It's no secret that science fiction fans and gamers have a large overlap. The same goes for science fiction writers and game designers. More than once, I've read something in a novel and seen a similar concept or idea appear in a videogame several years later. For example, the super resource Tiberium in the *Command and Conquer* series is inspired by Melange, the strategically important spice in Frank Herbert's *Dune*. But science fiction novels have inspired game designers in more than just minor plot elements or gameplay details.

*Ender's Game*, by Orson Scott Card, detailed a young boy who undergoes vigorous tactical training in Battle School. There, children are taught advanced studies of trigonometry and science, preparing them for the ultimate attack on the Buggers. But the most compelling part of Battle School, both for the students and for readers, is the mock battle system run by the school's instructors. Students are organized into armies of 40, with one student as the commander, and pitted against each other in a



weightless environment. If a combatant is shot by one of the game's rifles, the suit around him freezes, effectively taking him out of the game. It's like a futuristic paintball game.

I read Ender's Game in 1997, when I was in college. My roommate, amazed that I hadn't yet read such a masterpiece, wouldn't let me leave the room until I agreed to his inhumane demands to consume Card's genius. As I flipped through the pages, I realized how much of Ender's tribulations in the mock battles were mirrored in the games I was playing at the time. *Command and Conquer*, *Warcraft*, even *Dune II*, which I played in high school; they were all derivative of the ultimate real-time strategy game Card described.

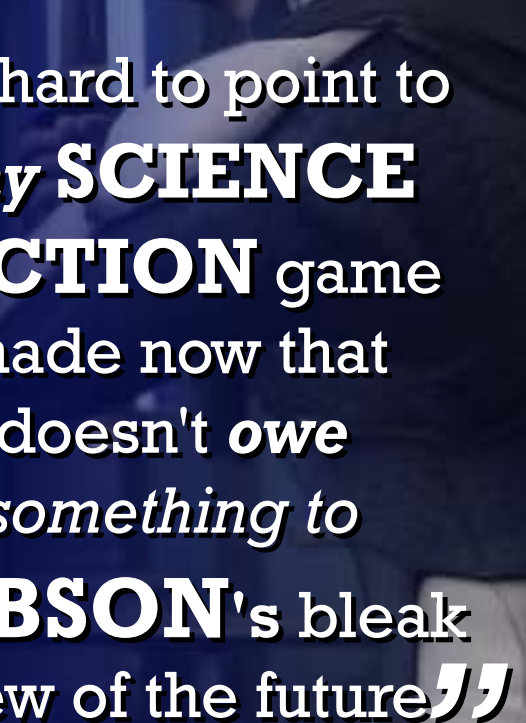
William Gibson romanticized computing in a way never seen before in his 1984 classic, *Neuromancer*. Sure, *Time Magazine* named the PC as Person of the Year in 1982, and Apple announced its new Macintosh computer with an infamous commercial during Super Bowl XVIII, but using computers on a regular basis was still for the very rich or the very nerdy.

*Neuromancer* depicts a dystopian view of our world in the near future, in which technology is completely integrated into almost every facet of human life, not always to humanity's benefit. Characters jack into the "matrix," cybernetically enhance themselves and obsessively watch "stimsims," VR representations of soap operas. All of these advances, which once seemed great and magical in the sci-fi of the '50s, somehow seem dangerous and dehumanizing rather than luxurious.

*Neuromancer* and the sub-genre it epitomized, cyberpunk, did something else, though. Its negative worldview, film noir-ish anti-heroes and hacker chic accomplished what no game designer, marketer or computer maker had yet to do: It made computers cool. Suddenly, the 14-year-old kid with a Commodore 64 posting on a *Star Trek* BBS in Holland or programming minigames in Basic had something to point to when his parents or teachers or The Man asked what the hell he was doing. William Gibson not only invented the term cyberspace, *Neuromancer* brought the idea of an interconnected network of computers to the forefront of every conversation about the future of computing.

It's hard to point to any science fiction game made now that doesn't owe something to Gibson's bleak view of the future. *Shadowrun* and *Anarchy Online* come to mind as the most derivative, but even *Halo* and *StarCraft* exhibit tinges of cyberpunk. Games also get a nod from Gibson as the progenitor of the computer network in this oft-quoted snippet, "The matrix has its roots in primitive arcade games."

*Snow Crash*, by Neal Stephenson, is sometimes referred to as a post-cyberpunk novel. It contributed a lot of the same ideas *Neuromancer* did, but it did so just as the internet was entering the public consciousness. Published in 1992, *Snow Crash* is recognized as popularizing the term avatar to describe an individual's online persona. Stephenson refers to the advanced computer network which supplants the internet as the Metaverse, a virtual alternate reality of sorts in which people and corporations can purchase real estate, just as on Earth. Many real-world projects, such as Active Worlds, a 3-D browser, and *Second Life*, have tried to replicate Stephenson's ideas by creating their own Metaverse. While still mostly



“It's hard to point to **any SCIENCE FICTION** game made now that doesn't owe **something to GIBSON's** bleak view of the future.”

# the Escapist



the domain of hobbyists and programmers, there is a very real possibility that the internet's successor will be three-dimensional and that it will mirror Stephenson's vision.

But there already exist absorbing worlds in which you can choose how your avatar looks, travel to exotic places, meet and socialize with people from all over the Earth, and even fight one or two of them. One can argue that modern day MMOGs are little Metaverses scattered across the internet landscape. The way Stephenson describes action and combat in the Metaverse between Hiro and Raven is not unlike how Orcs and Humans battle now in *World of Warcraft*. These games are not as viral or user-created as the Metaverse, but it's possible that MMOGs will become much more integrated into our internet experience. You'll soon be able to shop at the Amazon Superstore dressed as your in-game avatar, browsing past shelves of beautifully rendered Blu-Ray packages. Reach out and pick one up, and the trailer will play in front of your dazzled digital eyes. You might even meet a few of your guild mates in the virtual mall courtyard

where you can try to recruit a few hotties to group with you the next time you feel like dragon hunting.

Both in *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash*, a user neurally connects to the networks directly, giving over all sensory input from his mundane eyes, ears and mouth. The same is true in Tad Williams' *Otherland* series when characters connect to the net. But Williams goes one step further and portrays a new advanced network, *Otherland*, in which the sensory substitution is so acute that it is indistinguishable from real life. The characters soon discover that if they are virtually killed while in *Otherland*, their bodies expire in real life. Talk about spending too much time on the computer.

The first *Otherland* novel was published in 1996, right about when graphical MMOGs emerged. Although MMOGs grew out of text-based MUDs and were already in development before *Otherland* hit the shelves, I can't help but wonder if Williams' vivid descriptions of a fictional game called Middle Country didn't spark a few designers' imaginations. In the novel, Orlando Gardiner is suffering from



a debilitating, fast-acting, terminal disease. He escapes from his reality by spending most of his time as Thargor, the svelte barbarian hero famous throughout Middle Country for his amazing feats of strength and courage. Orlando inhabits his avatar and ranges across the realistically-detailed countryside, fights evil creatures, meets people in roadside inns and avoids his parents in real life. When I read *Otherland*, I yearned to play a game like that, but like the monster-infested chess game played by R2-D2 and Chewbacca in *Star Wars* (Dejarik HoloChess for you

purists) and the 3-D hologram airplane battle from the bar in *Star Trek III*, this game would remain a figment of a shared imagination until someone with the programming chops to bring it to a sort of reality came along. Enter: Commodore 64 classic *Archon*, a slew of fighter plane simulators and *World of Warcraft*, for lack of a more ubiquitous MMOG.

True creativity flows not from the mind of one man, but from a wellspring of dreams and ideas fed by the consciousness of an entire civilization. As science fiction inevitably becomes

science fact, so, too, does it feed the stream of gaming's creativity. For years, games have struggled to receive mainstream recognition as an artistic medium. Some day we'll see the stream reverse itself; when the well begins to be fed by the games, and creations from the minds of our industry brightest and best take their places beside Ender, The Metaverse and Otherland. When that day comes, widespread recognition will not be far behind. Games will have finally become firmly ensconced as a vital cultural institution. [COMMENTS](#)

*Greg Tito is a playwright and standup comic residing in Brooklyn, NY. He is currently splitting time between World of Warcraft, a new D&D 3rd edition campaign and finishing one of his many uncompleted writing projects. He also blogs semi-regularly at <http://onlyzuul.blogspot.com>.*



**“ TRUE creativity flows not from the mind of one man, but from a WELLSPRING of dreams and ideas fed by the consciousness of an ENTIRE CIVILIZATION ”**

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