

A woman in a black top hat and a man in a suit holding a knife. The woman is in the foreground, looking slightly to the right. The man is behind her, holding a large knife vertically in front of his face.

the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

We all have one. You know, the characters in games where we played the bad guys. And lots of times, they are our favorites. Mine is Diva; the game, *Cyberpunk 2020*, a tabletop role-playing game.

First, a little background on Diva. Really, she was misunderstood, see? When she was young, she was involved in an accident which cost her her two legs and the lives of her mother, a high-fashion model, and her millionaire father. Her uncle took her in, raised her and nurtured her need for vengeance, for the loss of her parents, at the loss of her legs (though they were replaced with nifty bionic ones), and at the theft of the fortune that was rightfully hers.

This need for vengeance was handy for her uncle, a Chinese mafia bigwig, who used her considerable talents for removing barriers to his progress in the ranks. Yes, it was handy until the day Diva learned it was that very uncle who was responsible for her parents, her legs, her lost fortune, and her near-psychosis due to overwhelming amounts

of cybernetics added as part of her uncle's training (one of the game mechanics was as the cyberware increases, your human empathy, and therefore psychological intactness, decreases). So, naturally, she snapped. It's really quite a sad story.

But it made for a delightful backdrop of role-play. She was essentially a sociopath who joined up with a group of mercenaries in the hopes that one day she might gain access to her uncle. She trusted no one and cared only for vengeance. Her favorite possession was her sig sauer pistol that once belonged to her father. She was beautiful and seduced people at will – it was a means to an end, usually the seductee's.

Among her exploits: She dispatched of a boatful of corrupt river police while her groupmates tricked them into going below deck, one by one, to their doom. She once uttered the words, "I may die, but I'm sure as hell gonna take you out first," to one of her groupmates who betrayed her. She stealthed into a building held by six hostiles holding several dozen civilian hostages, dispatched all of the hostiles to solve the situation, but at the same time made sure to hit her mark (the

real reason she went in) so she could collect the \$18,000 bounty.

OK, so maybe she was a little bit more than misunderstood. But why did I like playing her? Because she wasn't me. At all. There was nothing in her personality that remotely resembled my own. This was truly escapism. There were a couple of key motivators I could latch onto, a background from which to build, and I left my real life behind on those Friday nights.

Sure, the play was sometimes stressful in its own right, but in a completely different way than my everyday stress. Yes, occasionally, we got really swept into the action, such that we got angry and yelled at each other – the "I'm gonna take you out first" night was one of those. But that doesn't mean we've all since become a band of mercenaries. The game's ability to pull us out of this life to another was its brilliance, what made it our favorite.

Playing "bad people" is the ultimate trying on another identity for a time, escape of self. But in that escape, we also better learn what our self is. We learn better our shape, our lines we do not wish to cross, what feels possible,

and what simply isn't. To some, that knowledge may seem scary or dangerous. I proffer it is not. It is what one does with knowledge that makes it bad. And it is without fear of this knowledge, that we present this week's issue of *The Escapist*, "Good to be Bad."

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The following was received by The Escapist from a designer at Doublefine, the makers of Psychonauts, who asked to remain anonymous. He sheds a little light on the design theory behind the level of Psychonauts addressed in Lara Crigger's article "The Milkman Cometh" issue 67 of The Escapist.

We've taken to calling him "Deep Doublefine." --Ed.

To the Editor: Hi -- I just read Lara's article and enjoyed it very much. I also



was blown away by the Milkman [Conspiracy] when I [played it]. My reading of the level is slightly different from Lara's and I wanted to share it.

The clues in the game point to the fact that the Milkman is not of Boyd. Boyd's memory vaults make us suspicious, and then we see the censors fighting the milkman's agents, and after that we see the milkman taking over, then leaving Boyd. I think in some ways Boyd's story would have been stronger if the milkman had been his repressed but naturally-occurring rage; it would have more real-world resonance.

I agree completely that one of the best things about Boyd's story is that his paranoia is real -- "just because I'm paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get me"! But it's difficult to tell and only becomes somewhat clear at the end of the level, and then again near the end of the game.

The level lacks censors. Their absence is of course a clue that this is a mind less healthy than previously encountered, but the clue likely registers as a vague feeling of emptiness and foreboding and only becomes clear after the fact.

At the end of the level we find out that the suspicious g-men are actually censors in disguise. This is surprising and brilliant because so many things are flipped on their head in that one moment.

Throughout the game, the player is taught that the censors are, if not evil, at least antagonistic to the player. And those G-Men certainly seem suspicious: but we learn that the G-Men are censors in disguise, hiding from the squirts. They are the good guys. The squirts are the evil agents (although this was more obviously and humorously telegraphed).

We also learn that Raz fails. He doesn't make Boyd better; the best you can say is that he accidentally initiates the struggle between the foreign Milkman and the native censors. You can hop back into his head watch Boyd struggling to regain control of his mind; I find it hard not to cheer, but sadly, when I see the fight. The censors don't look like they're going to win, and of course I know they don't.

Thanks for reading.

- **Deep Doublefine**

In response to "World, Interrupted" from The Escapist Forum: Having spent many hours in WOW, some in Eve and City of Heros, and many in Guildwars, I have to agree with you about the limitations of the games. The one redeeming element of WOW is the social interaction that you can get with developing friends and partners in the



game. Guildwars can also have this element, with guilds and such.

- Imertz

In response to "Football as Madden 07" from The Escapist Forum:

Interesting article. I'm a bit more skeptical of EA and the Madden series, however. I feel that EA these days tends to go on autopilot for their yearly updates (especially with Madden), knowing full well that the name alone will move plenty of units. This is compounded by the fact that they no longer have competition due to the exclusive NFL license. So we now have the NFL as filtered through the EA lens. As to whether that's good or bad is up to the individual to decide, however is lack of competition ever a GOOD thing? Your mention of 10 Yard Fight (a great game) got me reminiscing about *Tecmo Bowl*. I am a longtime fan of football videogames, and *Tecmo Bowl* had a certain simplistic magic that was something special. There have been great versions of Madden, sure, but the games these days tend to be so complex it can be a turnoff.

- AF_Whigs

In response to "I Didn't Leave Games, the Games Left Me" from The Escapist Forum:

Whether his ego be justified or not aside, he's the first "professional" dev to speak sincerely (perhaps, at least since Lord British?) of how he feels in regards to the treatment he's received from his peers, how his IP was used, the control over creativity he was relieved of, and how all those companies are treating games nowadays as neat-o-business and zero care for it as a form of art and entertainment.

- Ramification



Method to our madness

by Tom Rhodes

One has to start from the position that people are generally good. Good to themselves and good to others.

And yet, there are times when otherwise respectable individuals feel the urge to do something terrible. How many of us have felt the urge to beat the hell out of our boss at work? How many of us have gotten into a heated argument with a friend and just wanted to strangle him? Thankfully, aside from some unfortunate incidents, we don't. We try to live with the acerbic supervisor and make up with our friends.

Yet, our need for violence in our lives is undeniable. Though perhaps not embodied physically, violence in popular entertainment has been with us since time immemorial. Cave paintings depict men on the hunt for buffalo and other animals, spears in hand. Grecian urns

show acts both sexual and violent. Shakespeare's plays were almost always filled with depraved human beings, betrayal, suicide and murder.

Why do these themes haunt us, and how does this impact our current culture?

The Man with the Briefcase

Jack Thompson, a practicing attorney in Miami, has become the most polemic figure in gaming, second to none in terms of his influence and reach, not to mention his mouth. Famous today for his work in trying to wipe out violent gaming and link it to every kind of act of depravity and desperation, no matter how tenuously, his original claim to fame was handing former Attorney General Janet Reno a note asking if she was homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual.

Thompson has argued, both in court and through the media, that violence in gaming leads directly to violence in the real world. In other words, gaming is bad. And, as we all know, anything that's bad can be spun by politicians to their advantage, almost always in service of protecting the children. The politicking of gaming has become so divisive that a

website devoted entirely to the topic, gamepolitics.com, has exploded in popularity since it started in 2005.

The Terror Connection

In mid-September, the Global Islamic Media Front, which describes itself as a "jihadist mouthpiece," released a game entitled *Night of Bush Capturing*. The game, which is a first-person shooter, has six levels of combat, each one displaying firefights with American troops on a U.S. encampment. Jihadist songs loop in the background as the player fires his way through each level. The game's concluding battle is with a character representing President Bush. The site proclaims the game is distributed for "terrorist children."

Suffice to say, this was not a good time for such a game to debut. Games, especially first-person shooters, are under more scrutiny now than ever before. This would almost seem to prove the point that violent games are used to train and influence young people.

In a converse game, the army's official FPS, *America's Army*, ranks players on their marksmanship, with levels going

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from "Unqualified" and "Marksman" to "Sharpshooters" and "Experts."

Reaction to the former game has been mixed, with some giving it a pass as being typical terrorist promotional BS, and others having stronger, more visceral responses. On the popular conservative blog The Jawa Report, commenter "Leatherneck" wrote: "I have a little game I play called, How Many Moon God Worshipers Will Die During Ramadingdong."

Media violence and its effect raise many troubling issues. For those of us that enjoy violent games, we are stuck with transferred guilt. Does our consumption cause murder and mayhem? And, if it does, would it be, as the film *Equilibrium* posited, "a price [we'd] gladly pay?"

Maybe violent media, while not affecting all, affects some. If this is true, we should be seeing a great increase in youth-related violence and crime.

Not so. MIT Professor Henry Jenkins compiled data relating to videogames and violent crime and found that, "According to federal crime statistics, the rate of juvenile violent crime in the

United States is at a 30-year low." And, while school shooters are often gamers, youth in general play videogames at a high rate, with about 90 percent of boys (the vast majority of shooters) partaking. Similarly, studies proclaiming an impact on aggressiveness from videogame playing can be criticized for a multitude of reasons, from methodology to the conclusions themselves. For instance, most find a correlation, rather than a cause-effect relationship, which could mean "aggressive people like aggressive entertainment."

Furthermore, studies suggest that, even in primates, a distinction is evident between play fighting and actual violence. Similar to the way past generations enjoyed playing cowboys and Indians but were aware of the difference between that and real shootouts. Life and death are not so easily affected, and children, though they are impressionable, still understand that one is play and one is real.

Adults are similar in their ability to disconnect reality and fantasy. It has been estimated that 51 percent of women have had rape fantasies. Conversely, 44 percent of men have had

fantasies about dominating a partner. But would any of these people actually enjoy being raped or raping in real life? Assuredly a very small percentage do, but most are just using their fantasy life to arouse themselves. Such fantasies, while common, don't mean that they impact reality in any real way (other than having an uncomfortable conversation with a lover about how you want to spend that evening).

But why do we crave violent media? It's ingrained in not only our current culture, but past literature and entertainment. One need only flip through Shakespeare to appreciate that violence and death were par for the course in theater productions and books. Even with this, we appear to be living in one of the least violent times in world history. The murder rate in medieval Europe was eight times higher than that of today.

This, however, doesn't stop the crusade to purge our society of such entertainment, sometimes forcefully.

Even in primates, a distinction is evident between play fighting and actual violence.



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We Don't Need no Thought Control

The Center for Media Literacy has produced several articles on media violence. One, by Temple University Telecommunications professor George Gerbner, proffers that the alternative to our current system is "elected or appointed representation in either advisory or policy-making capacity over the programming policy of TV systems." In other words, Congressional veto power over what people get to see.

Curiously, the article also says that Congress should use anti-trust and civil rights powers to crack down on the systems that "impose violence on creative people and foist it on the children of the world." The funny thing is, there is already regulation in place blocking obscene content from all free-to-view-and-listen networks: The FCC, as a regulatory body, can impose heftier fines on network TV and radio than ever.

In a bit of irony from earlier this year, network news programs had to censor President Bush when he said to Tony Blair, "See, the irony is that what they need to do is get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this shit, and it's over," speaking of his frustration with the U.N. There wasn't much of a public outcry in reaction to the fuax pas.

Yet, under the Broadcast Decency Enforcement Act of 2005, which he had recently signed, the networks had to bleep the President in order to avoid record-setting fines, while cable news networks and the internet showed it unsullied, making it one of the most popular clips on CNN.com and video-sharing sites.

Yet, in spite of the attention focused on "decency" in broadcasting, nothing could have prepared the public for the ruckus surrounding Hot Coffee. The *Grand Theft Auto* series of games, already under fire for their graphic and apathetic portrayal of violence against random bystanders, police and the public at large in a consequence-free zone, suddenly received pressure from both the violent **and** the sexual angle when a hacker discovered a mini-game depicting a sexual act in a hidden portion of *GTA: San Andreas*.

Several Congressmen, scenting blood in the water, took action and had the FTC investigate. As a result, Take 2 Interactive and Rockstar Games, the companies that publish and produce the games, agreed to have the rating change from M (Mature) to AO (Adults Only), costing them \$24.5 million in returns of the title.

Yet still, that didn't seem to be enough in the quest to Protect the Children. Legislation all over the country has attempted to block sales of videogames to minors, all of which have been unsuccessful, due to the unconstitutionality of the laws passed.

But despite the best efforts of Congress and renegade lawyers, we still love our violence. And maybe we can learn from that. Who doesn't enjoy that feeling of gleefully running over a pedestrian? Of course, that's only in the game world. Very, very few of us would look to imitate that in real life, and those that do were likely disturbed before they ever got their hands on violent games.

I began by saying that I start from the position that people are generally good. Yet those times when terrible things happen test that stance, as they test us all. However, in our quest for answers, we should not forget that our second greatest freedom, after being able to say whatever we want, is the ability to choose what we want to listen to.

The people who want to censor and condemn should remember one very important part about television, the internet and media in general: The power button also turns things off. [COMMENTS](#)

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Like many gamers who grew up in the '70s and '80s, my formative gaming experiences came not on the computer or the console, but on pen-and-paper, in the basement of a friend's house playing whatever RPG we happened to be into at the time. It was during one such session that my brother, the game master, confronted my character with a very carefully crafted encounter. Below, in a small valley, lay a group of centaurs who

were preparing to burn a small halfling at the stake. Now, I had no notion of this person's guilt or innocence, and I had no idea if the centaurs were administering justice or just being cruel. But instead of riding down into the valley on horseback and demanding an explanation as my brother had expected, my character instead quietly dismounted his steed, carefully got into a protected position in the hills above, and began to rain down missile attacks on the unsuspecting centaurs.

I thought nothing of the moral implications of such a decision: I had the tactical high ground! Charging down into a pack of potentially hostile centaurs would not only have meant giving up the combat advantages of both height and surprise, but could also very well have been suicide! I had already learned by the tender age of 10 that the background story of what was happening down below mattered little; the GM had presented me with an obstacle to overcome, and my skill lay in accomplishing that task in the most efficient manner possible. Why risk a long parlay that could result in close combat? Better to simply deal with the centaurs in the safest and most expedient manner possible. Obviously,

he didn't intend for me to just let the poor halfling burn, guilty or not, or else he wouldn't have created this situation in the first place.

The issue of morality in games has been with us for a long time and will be with us for a long time to come. Of course, it wasn't always thus when it came to **videogames**. In 1978, no one really questioned the fact that one of the neatest ways to shoot aliens in *Space Invaders* was to shoot through your own cities, presumably killing thousands of innocent civilians. I did not ask myself if the UFO shooting at me in *Asteroids* was really a bad guy or just trying to protect his planet from all the rogue space debris I was generating. And **computer** games were no exception either: Most of them expected you to kill just about anything that moved and/or pick up everything you could find that wasn't nailed down. If the plot featured a bad guy like *Mondain* or *Mangar the Dark*, there was no question that he was **pure evil** and must be destroyed at all costs.

All of that changed in 1985 with the arrival of *Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar*. Still hailed today as a landmark event in

IS RAPE Wrong on Azeroth?

by Bruce Sterling Woodcock


computer gaming, *Ultima IV* introduced the player to a system of morality that was an essential element to the game. At the very start of the game, the player was required to answer a series of questions that posed various ethical dilemmas, which in turn determined their character's starting class. In order to win the game, the player had to not just overcome digital obstacles, but to conduct his character in a manner consistent with eight virtues: Honesty, Compassion, Valor, Justice, Sacrifice, Honor, Spirituality and Humility. While the true moral value of such a system has been debated frequently over the years, the virtues and principles they were founded on continued to play important roles in the rest of the *Ultima* series, right up to the present day.

Since then, many games have featured not only a sense of morality but actual moral choices that arise during the course of play. However, such games have often brought mixed reactions from players. While most of us enjoy dealing with moral and ethical situations presented within the context of a good story, there seem to be two distinct camps when it comes to determining how those situations should be

integrated into the game: moral choices with gameplay consequences and moral choices without gameplay consequences.

Those who advocate moral choices with gameplay consequences often see games as useful in teaching or advocating a certain set of behaviors. In the simplest cases, the decision presented is bimodal: Make the right choice by trying to talk your way out of trouble with a cop, and you're rewarded with more gameplay; make the wrong choice by opting to try to run away, and your character gets arrested and you lose. In games with more elaborate stories, the choices are multimodal, allowing the player to experience a variety of different but equally "successful" endings.

For example, in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, the player is faced with a variety of decisions that lead his character down either the Light Side or the Dark Side, culminating in an ultimate decision at the end of the game to either become the Hero and defeat evil, or embrace the darkness and seize the Sith throne for himself. In *Deus Ex*, a player may choose from three different endings: merge with Helios, join the Illuminati or bring about a new Dark



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Age. The subsequent and often stark consequences are vividly illustrated for the player to ponder.

But those who advocate moral choices without gameplay consequences would counter that many of the situations presented above are not **really** moral choices in any meaningful sense. Because the gameplay is so tightly coupled with the choice made, the result is simply an exercise in pushing the right button to get the result you want. In the bimodal case, the choice is often no choice at all; one must make the "correct" decision in order to continue playing the game and "win." And games that feature multiple paths are really no better – players simply choose whichever ending they feel like enjoying, or even save the game and go back again and again to access all the endings. Much like my pen-and-paper days, players aren't really engaging in moral consideration at all; they're just following the most advantageous path available to them.

Instead of such contrivances, consider a game like *Doom 3*. At one point during the game, you'll come across a man stuck in a reactor room. A simple press of a button on the brightly lit computer screen can either free him or subject him to a most terrifying, gruesome death. Whichever you choose actually makes no functional difference: The game continues on, and events unfold the same either way. Some gamers would argue that this is actually more of a **true** moral choice, because the consequences of your actions take place entirely within your own sense of self.

More recently, while I was playing *The Godfather* and battling with the game's

rather imprecise targeting system, I found myself accidentally strangling an innocent woman who was passing by, instead of the well-dressed gangster I had intended. As I dragged her lifeless body into the nearby alleyway, I felt a growing unease in the pit of my stomach. Had I just turned the game into a serial murder simulator? I explored this possibility further, finding out just how many innocent women I could murder without raising too much heat from the police. Within minutes, I became quite disgusted with myself and couldn't even stand to play the game again for a day or two.

There were no real long-term consequences for killing multiple innocent civilians in the game; indeed, some amount of "collateral damage" was expected and built into the mechanics of the game so the player wouldn't be unduly punished for a few stray bullets. But the resulting freedom of choice actually had a much more profound effect on me than any cutscene of being arrested and hauled off to jail would have.

In 1985, noted philosopher Michael Ruse wrote an article entitled "Is Rape Wrong on Andromeda?" in which he postulated

that if intelligent alien species existed on other planets in the universe, they might have different notions of morality than our own. Taking his cue from the growing field of what is now known as evolutionary psychology, Ruse argued that much of what we consider moral is shaped by hundreds of thousands of years of evolution and natural selection. Indeed, many biologists today believe that a variety of beliefs and behaviors like justice, fairness, mutual cooperation, reciprocal altruism, proportionality, inclusive fitness, kin favoritism and even the instinct to protect children all evolved from basic biological behaviors that made those who followed such principles more likely to survive and pass those values on to their offspring.

So, it stands to reason that extraterrestrial morality would be shaped by a set of different environmental pressures, and that an alien's resulting moral code may be quite different than ours as a result. In a society where simple biology dictated that females only came in heat one day

a year and were responsible for all of the child rearing, the males may have no choice but to engage it what we would consider rape simply to ensure the survival of their species. As their species became sentient, a whole complex system of morality may arise to justify such behavior in a way that most of us cannot fully fathom. This is not to say that such behavior is either right or wrong in an objective moral sense (assuming you even accept that such a thing exists), but simply that it is, for lack of a better word, appropriate behavior in that particular context.

How does this relate to games? To put it simply, the environments we experience inside games **are** other worlds, and many of the avatars we play in them are essentially alien creatures who may

seem human from time to time but are not entirely so. Their actions may not always map one-to-one with our sense of reality, and something that is not acceptable in our world may be entirely appropriate within theirs. Of course, by this I do not mean to justify or endorse in any way the harassment or "griefing" by one player of another in a multiplayer game; those are actions with real-life intent, directed at another real-life person, with real-life consequences. But within the context of the reality of the game itself, it may be entirely acceptable for a warrior to attack a seemingly unsuspecting centaur or for a hoodlum to shoot a hooker.





Back in March at the annual Game Developers Conference, I sat in on a roundtable discussion of the issue of sex in games. One of the participants was a woman who worked for a media watchdog group whose primary concern was ensuring that sex, when portrayed in television or movies, was dealt with realistically and responsibly. While not trying to impose a morality in the sense of advocating either “Yes, unrestrained sexuality is great!” or “No, sex outside of marriage is wrong!” they were interested in making sure that the consequences of having unprotected sex, like pregnancy and STDs, were appropriately shown. At first blush, such a goal may seem quite reasonable, even admirable, to most of us. In recent years, the organization has set its sights on videogames and wanted to advocate these same principles to game developers.

Now, while I do appreciate the societal value and importance of the work her organization does, as soon as I heard

her proposal I had an immediate sense that it simply wasn’t right for the game industry. In movies and television, most of what you see is intended to be a representation of real life; even if it involves characters in fantastic situations, they are usually humans who would be subject to the same sorts of moral dilemmas and consequences as the rest of us in the real world. But when it comes to videogames, much of what they portray is distinctly **not** real life; indeed, one of the powers of the medium is that it lends itself more easily to conjuring up such worlds. Games are often escapist fantasies where much of their appeal lies in is the very fact that you can do things that you couldn’t or wouldn’t do in reality.

While a realistic portrayal of the consequences of sexual acts may be appropriate for *Beverly Hills, 90210*, it’s not necessarily appropriate for, say, a fantasy-themed RPG. Did Aragorn really have to worry about catching an ancient elven STD from Arwen? Is the societal prohibition against interspecies sex really applicable when it involves, say, orcs and taurens?

In the end, I believe the true objection many of us gamers have is **not** that

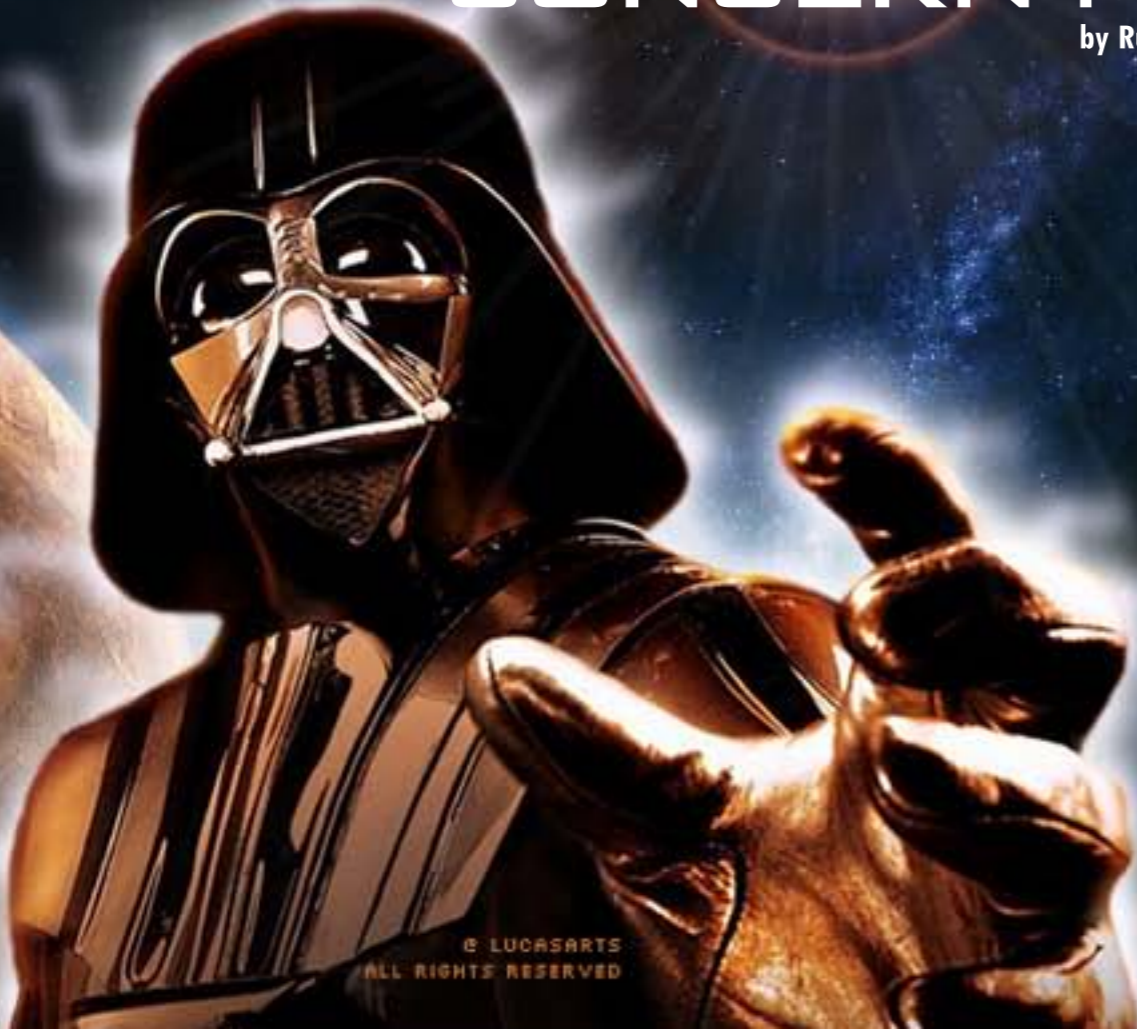
there shouldn’t be any morality in games at all; in fact, moral choices, be they with gameplay consequences or without, can actually make playing a game a much more compelling and enjoyable experience. Nor is it because most of us object to the moral guidelines that other non-gamers seek to implement; while some of us may disagree on certain particulars, you will probably find widespread agreement on most general moral principles. The problem we have is when someone presumes to impose an **external** morality, not just onto one particular game, but across **all** games as a whole. There is simply no one morality – at least, no one **human** morality – that applies to all the varied and fantastic landscapes and creatures that comprise virtual realities, be they bits trapped in an electronic computer or flights of fancy confined to the realm of our own imagination. [COMMENTS](#)

Bruce Sterling Woodcock is a computer and videogames industry analyst, researcher, consultant and author, focusing on massively multiplayer online games. He is best known for his ongoing tracking and analysis of MMOG subscription numbers on his web site, MMOGCHART.COM.

ASTEROIDS

DO NOT CONCERN ME

by Russ Pitts



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"Almost there," I tease, as I set my sights on another X-Wing fighter. I use the onboard computers, a marvel of modern technology, to match my speed to his and ease in behind him.

"Just a few more seconds." The effect is startling. It's as if I've glued my craft to his, and no matter how much he squirms, no matter how he tries to evade, I'm on him. I now begin the long dance of jockeying into just the right position for a clear firing solution.

"I can't shake him," I imagine him saying in my best impression of a whiney-ass farm boy turned would-be Jedi.

"Luke, pull out!" warns his advisor at headquarters (again, voiced by me), but he doesn't. He's cocky and arrogant. Sure that he'll be the "Hero of the Rebellion," the fool.

I switch from missiles to guns and fire off a shot.

In the fall of 1994, I was about as far down on the roster of cool as one could get without hitting the disabled list.

I'd taken a break from my less-than-stellar undergraduate work and had moved back in with the folks, ostensibly to save money while I worked a lousy retail job and tried to "find myself." But what had seemed like the perfect solution to life's problems while stoned out of my gourd in my best friend's dorm room, had turned out to be an existential cul-de-sac.

I hadn't written anything worth reading in over a year, my retail gig was just as boring as algebra class and my fledgling acting career had rapidly stalled due to a paralyzing fear of going to auditions. About the only thing I had going for me was my girlfriend of several years, until she eventually decided to dump me to spend more time watching football.

After only a few weeks, it seemed I'd been set adrift on the sea of life. I was no longer a student, a writer, an actor or a boyfriend. My confidence was in

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freefall; my identity gone. I was precariously balanced on the knife's edge of complete irrelevance, and like every teenager-turned-adult who'd come before me, and all who'd come after, I was sure that my problems carried weight far beyond their significance. So I did what any sane, barely-post-adolescent person would do: For the good of all mankind, I used the money I'd been saving to buy a life raft in the form of a personal computer.

Enter: the Packard-Bell 486 DX2. The thinking was that I'd finally have an actual word processor on which to write, rather than relying on the finicky electronic typewriter I'd had since I was 13, or the hit-or-miss method of writing manuscripts by hand, using a fountain pen on legal pads. (My handwriting was so horrible I often couldn't read it myself.) But of course, once I had the thing out of the box and had plugged in all of the plugs, connected all of the connectors and pressed the switch, the first thing I did was play games.

I'd come home from Circuit City with three boxes that day. The first contained the computer and monitor. The second

and third: a copy of LucasArts' space sim, *TIE Fighter*, and a CH Flightstick Pro.

I'd been a gamer off and on since I'd been able to hold a controller, had played on most consoles made to that date and had even monkeyed around with Commodore 64s and Apple machines belonging to friends, but that Packard-Bell was my first true foray into the exciting and terrible world of PC gaming. I foolishly expected to be flying through space, blasting Rebel Scum, mere minutes after arriving home, but this, as you probably already know, was not to be.

DOS games of that era often required a "clean boot" in order to run on a Windows machine like my 486 DX2. In spite of the "2," it just didn't have the muscle to run *TIE Fighter* in a window. This meant that I had to make a "boot disk," a floppy disk which would program the computer to circumvent the Windows operating system and instead allow the machine to boot up in DOS. Problem: I didn't have any floppy disks.

An hour later, I was back to try again, and a few hours after that, after tapping the limit of my sparse understanding of

BASIC programming, I'd "optimized" the configuration files so that my boot disk would actually work and the damn game would actually play.

I'd gotten up at the crack of noon that day to celebrate my victory over the creeping tendrils of mediocrity by purchasing a top-of-the-middle-of-the-road PC and the year's hottest game. It was well after dark by the time I actually fired it up, but as soon as I did, I knew all of the trouble had been worth it.

The LucasArts logo appeared on the screen, followed immediately by music I'd have known anywhere and the slow crawl of yellow text up the screen. Instantly, my own world faded away; my fears, my disappointments and my unrealized dreams detached from my mind and fell about 10 feet behind me. I was no longer Russ Pitts, live-at-home, retail working, failed student and breakup victim. I was TK421, *TIE Fighter* pilot, Imperial Naval Officer and generally evil badass.

There's something liberating about being a bad guy. You're not restrained by the same morality, the same rules of

**I FOOLISHLY EXPECTED
TO BE FLYING THROUGH SPACE,
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SCUM, MERE MINUTES AFTER
ARRIVING HOME**



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behavior as we are in our normal lives. And let's face it: The bad guys always have the best-laid plans. I often find myself rooting for the bad guys in films, in spite of the horrendous agony and emotional distress they inevitably cause. Because seriously, an underwater volcano base complete with space shuttle launching pad? No amount of patriotic, save-the-world mumbo-jumbo tops that. And no amount of living-by-the-rules, saving money, studying and "taking me to football games" "satisfaction of doing the right thing" on that particular day could top being the bad guy in my favorite movie universe of all time.

On that day I learned two things about myself that have remained true to this day. The first was that I am irrevocably a gamer. The second: When given a choice in the matter, I will always choose the dark side.

Sorry, Universe, their side goes to 11.

I've blown away his shields, but his wingmen are coming on strong. I break off to thin them out a little.

They go down easy, their pathetic training shooting womp rats in Beggar's Canyon back home is no match for the extensive training regimen of the Imperial Navy. I gleefully imagine their muffled Wilhelm screams as they die horribly, exposed to the vacuum of space ejecting from their crippled craft.

"Stay on target," I say, laughing, as I re-engage the leader.

With his escort gone, he's lost a bit of his cool. He's jinking wildly and varying his speed. He's harder to lock onto but still no match for the power of my evilness. With a few easy twitches of the Flightstick's HAT control, I redirect power from my shields to my blasters and blow him out of the sky.


His X-Wing incinerates around him, pieces of it twirling away into space as I go to full throttle, fly straight through the fireball and start scanning the

blackness for more rebel scum to kill. There are none; I am victorious.

John Williams's haunting, martial music surges, and I feel a twinge of pride. I grip my joystick tightly, stare out through my cockpit at the blackness of space and prepare to reclaim this sector in the name of the emperor to the accompaniment of a stuttering, triumphant horn section.

I'm a TIE fighter pilot. And to steal from Roddy Piper, I've come to kick rebel ass and chew bubblegum. But I'm all out of bubble gum. [COMMENTS](#)

Russ Pitts is an Associate Editor for The Escapist. He has written and produced for television, theatre and film, has been writing on the web since it was invented and claims to have played every console ever made.



**I WILL ALWAYS CHOOSE
THE DARK SIDE.
SORRY, UNIVERSE,
THEIR SIDE GOES TO
11.**

Sympathy for the DEVIL

by Kyle Orland



“Know thy enemy, know thyself, know victory.”

As tactical advice, Sun Tzu’s famous maxim applies to a majority of videogames. Knowing that Piston Honda blinks just before throwing an uppercut helps you know victory. Knowing that the mothership fires two small shots before throwing up its shields helps you know victory. Knowing how many whip strikes it takes to defeat Dracula helps you know victory.

But what about the kind of knowledge that transcends the tactical – the kind of knowledge that lets you truly understand your enemy’s motivations and background, his hopes and fears? As far as most games are concerned, such knowledge is unimportant. The enemy exists only as a part of the environment – a set of pre-programmed rules to be figured out and bested. It’s enough to know that Piston Honda wants to send you a “TKO from Tokyo” or that Cats thinks you have “no chance to survive make your time.” We want to know the enemy, just not, y’know, **personally**.

This is in stark contrast to other forms of storytelling media, which routinely

include antagonists that are known for more than malevolence. Conflict is inherent in every story, but most well-told tales are not just a simplistic battle of good vs. evil. A hit TV series like *Friends* might feature characters with competing goals, but there are no characters that are completely morally reprehensible. A hit game series like the Mario games, though, can get by for decades with an antagonist that kidnaps royalty and casts destruction upon the land seemingly out of sheer boredom.

Even in stories where there is a clearly-defined evil, we can usually understand the bad guy’s motivations, even if we don’t agree with their methods. Most viewers can at least relate to the revenge and greed driving Simon Gruber in *Die Hard: With a Vengeance*, even if we would never attempt murder and massive theft ourselves. Other stories actively encourage the audience to root for the bad guy, finding the underlying humanity in normally vilified characters like mobsters (*The Godfather*) or psychopaths (*The Silence of the Lambs*).

As a medium, games are different in this regard. In games, the bad guy is, almost by definition, the one you’re not

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controlling – the “other” that is trying to destroy or limit you. If you’re controlling a cop, the gangsters are the bad guys. If you’re controlling a gangster, the cops (and, sometimes, the other gangsters) are the bad guys. There is no moral ambiguity – most games are designed so it’s you and your character(s) against the world by default.

No wonder so many game makers create paper-thin, cartoonish justifications for their virtual enemies. No matter how well-defined and believable a game villain is, his motivations will almost always pale in comparison to that of the protagonist you’re actively controlling. Knowing the misunderstanding that causes Sephiroth’s psychosis and rage in *Final Fantasy VII* doesn’t prevent you from preventing him from destroying the Earth in the final battle. Knowing that Otacon will be crushed by the death of Sniper Wolf in *Metal Gear Solid* doesn’t give you the option to spare her life and sit down to a tea party.

Like a Greek tragedy, most game narratives march inexorably toward the final condition of “you win” regardless of what this might mean to the fate of a

likable, non-playable bad guy. Given this inherent rule of standard game design, the question regarding enemies becomes not “Why are they doing this?” but rather, “Do we really want to know?”

How can a game designer/storyteller get around this problem? Open-ended game design is a solution, but often only a partial one. Yes, you can spend days being a law-abiding pizza-delivery boy in *Grand Theft Auto III* or a humble fisherman in *The Legend of Zelda*, but if you want to move the story along, you have to go down the relatively narrow path the game proscribes – i.e., defeat the bad guy.

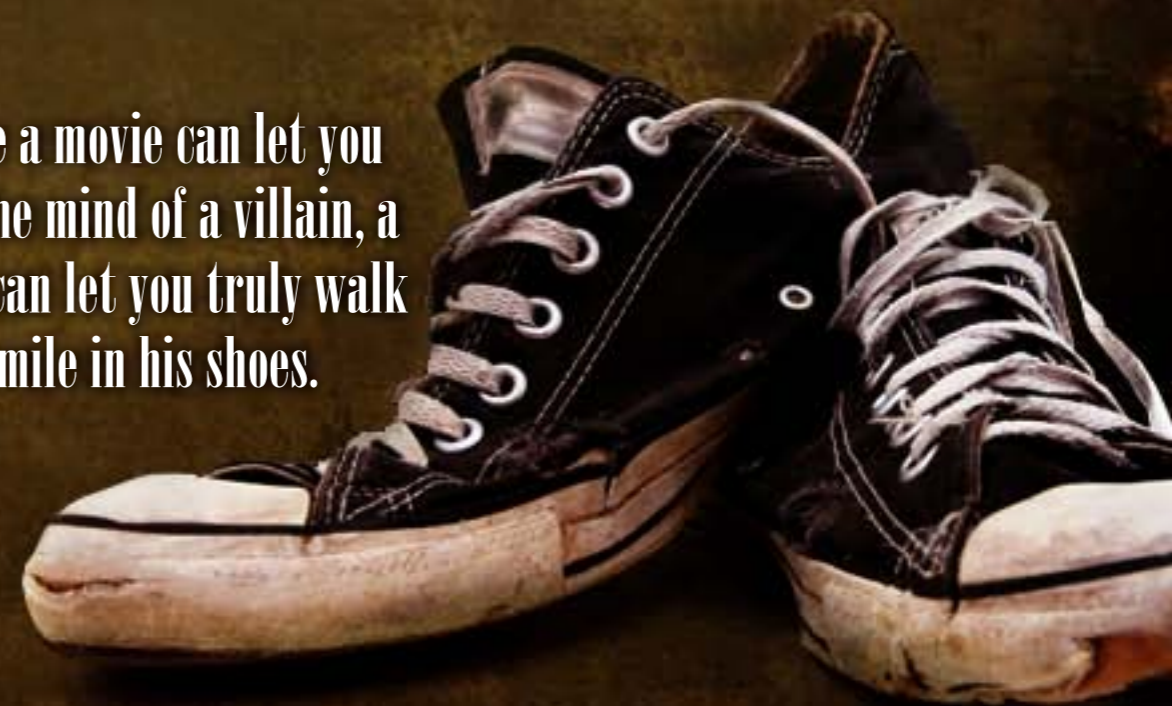
Eliminating the predestined defeat of the enemy often means eliminating the story altogether, leaving the narrative and goal to be defined completely by the player, as in most simulation games. In theory, this opens the game up to unlimited scenarios, but in practice all it really does is add a “you lose” ending to the “you win” of more linear games. Allowing your people to be overtaken in *Civilization* does indeed subvert the traditional storyline, but not in a way that’s fully satisfying to most players.

(“I’m glad the Romans sacked my capital. They obviously wanted it more.”)

But *Civilization*’s multiple selectable nation-states demonstrate one way to make a sympathetic antagonist in a game -- namely, making him the protagonist. While videogames are limited by forcing the avatar’s point of view on the player, they are also superior to other media in that they allow the player to truly experience a conflict from all sides. While a movie can let you into the mind of a villain, a game can let you truly walk a mile in his shoes.

**While a movie can let you
into the mind of a villain, a
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a mile in his shoes.**

Multiplayer games have exploited this advantage for years – while it’s possible to argue that *StarCraft*’s Zerg or *World of Warcraft*’s Horde are the “evil” side of those games, it’s not an easy argument to make to a devoted player of either race. Even simpler games can exploit this difference – M. Bison is an unplayable “bad guy” in *Street Fighter II*, but once you can control him in *Champion Edition*, he becomes just another potential avatar in the fight against all comers (even though his



ending reveals that he wants to wrap the world in "the darkness of one man's evil").

Single-player games make balancing the morality calculus more difficult. While it's easy enough to allow players to choose between a good or evil character at the beginning of a game, this choice again locks the player into a single point of

view, requiring the player to replay the game multiple times to fully experience all sides of the equation. Games like *Fable* and *Black & White* partially fix this problem by allowing a player's alignment to change throughout the game, but at any one moment the player is still only experiencing one side of the dichotomy.

How do you combine the personal experience of the game and the detached gaze of the camera? One of the most daring experiments in this regard is *Indigo Prophecy* (*Fahrenheit* to our European readers). Though players start the game as possessed murderer Lucas Kane, the point of view jumps quickly

and often between him and police officers Carla Valenti and Tyler Miles, who are investigating his case. Actions performed as one character affect the success of future missions by the others, and in the beginning it's unclear to the player which character, if any, he should be rooting for. Are the police the bad guys because they try to thwart you as Lucas, or is Lucas the bad guy because he's trying to thwart you as the investigators? It's impossible to choose, because they both represent you, and what self-respecting person thinks of himself as the bad guy?

More than multiple viewpoints, though, *Indigo Prophecy* succeeds in having believable characters because it is focused on human interactions rather than endless battles. Far too many games feature hordes of expendable enemies that are barely around long enough to form a wisecrack; good luck forming a believable character structure around them. The ones that do stick around longer are usually just more powerful versions of the throngs of chattel, similarly waiting to destroy or be destroyed.

What self-respecting person thinks of himself as the bad guy?

To truly understand your enemies, in virtual life as in real life, you need to be able to engage them in conversation as well as battle. Games like *Indigo Prophecy* and *Knights of the Old Republic* use branching conversations to engage non-player characters, but this method inherently limits what you can say and how the characters can respond. Every path in the question-and-response tree is predetermined, each discrete branch penned beforehand by a writer.

To really introduce moral ambiguity into a game, you need a system like that in *Facade*, an art/research project by two artificial intelligence experts. The game invites you into the home of Grace and Trip, a couple in their 10th year of a deeply troubled relationship. The evening starts pleasantly enough, but the resentment between the couple threatens to destroy the civility and possibly the relationship.

You are forced into the viewpoint of the guest, but you aren't limited in what you can say or where you can try to lead the conversation. You can take Trip's side and harp on Grace's insecure need for

validation, or you can comfort Grace and defend her from Trip's passive-aggressive barbs. Or you can strive for a balance, picking apart both parties for their petty concerns. Or you can make a pass at the hosts, earning a quick dismissal.

Facade is notable because neither non-player character is the clearly defined bad guy. You're not caught in a battle between good and evil, but between two deeply flawed, deeply sympathetic people. The conflict is more awkward than that of most games, and also more real.

Why aren't more games like this? Well, it took a team of people five years to develop the 20,000 lines of dialogue in *Facade*, and even then, the two main characters tend to repeat themselves after only a few plays. Apparently, it's a lot easier to design a good gun than to design a good, free-flowing conversation.

But despite their limitations, games like *Facade* and *Indigo Prophecy* show that there is at least the potential for videogames to allow players to divine personal as well as tactical knowledge of an enemy. There is potential for a future

where game villains aren't just remorseless killing machines, where the bad guy is a sympathetic character that's striving for acceptance and understanding, just like us. When the "love thy enemy" ideal becomes truly integrated in our games, we'll be able to grok our villains so fully, we won't be able bear destroying them.

It's enough to give you preemptive nostalgia for the days when Soda Popinski's only goal in life was to "make you feel punch drunk." [COMMENTS](#)

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

There is potential for a future where game villains aren't just remorseless killing machines.





Playing as a True Predator

by Shannon Drake

Steven Spielberg, purveyor of Serious Oscar Contenders and moving melodramas about little kids with no father, is also responsible for one of the most effective horror movies of all time. *Jaws* terrified a generation. Anyone old enough to remember 1975, or anyone subsequently frightened around the family VCR, still feels a little quiver in his belly when he puts a foot in the ocean. The legacy of the great white shark was tainted by a series of increasingly terrible sequels — not to mention a mediocre NES game — and disappeared into the cold, black depths as time passed and the legend faded.

But all that was made in the '70s must return to walk the Earth once more. So, shark rises from the dead. Shark goes into game. Our shark. Majesco's *Jaws Unleashed* came out as a budget title, but it proved to be a very good one. *Jaws Unleashed* isn't an epic RPG about one boy's struggle to overcome his oversized hair and mysterious past, and it isn't an entry in the games-as-art debate. It's precisely the game a generation of bloody-minded adolescents played in their minds when the NES' *Jaws* proved to consist entirely of sailing around aimlessly before dying for no

apparent reason. It's about swimming around as a really big shark while killing people and eating them in incredibly graphic ways. Bite off a swimmer's leg, and he screams and bleeds, maybe even clutching at a bloody stump as he struggles to swim away from the unforgiving jaws of the Great White. It's all those sick *Jaws* fantasies come to life or, as I've called it previously, Grand Theft Auto: Great White Shark.

Appaloosa Interactive, formerly Novotrade International, is the developer behind the shark, a startling departure from their most famous series, *Ecco the Dolphin*. While *Ecco* is all about saving cute sea creatures — discounting the time-traveling alien storyline — *Jaws* is all about **eating** cute sea creatures. And boats. And people. And giant squid. And whatever else happens to be in the water. *Jaws* is the Bizarro *Ecco*, and I found that Kadocsa Tassonyi, Project Manager at Appaloosa's offices in Hungary, was quite happy to talk about his company and how they went about capturing the spirit of a great white shark.

He describes Appaloosa as a "full-service game developer," formed in 1983, with its headquarters in Palo Alto, California

and development offices in Budapest, Hungary. "Over its 23-year history, Appaloosa established itself as a creative and reliable [developer] of video and PC games, and original character creation/development through a long line of award-winning interactive entertainment products, with a track record few can match." He gives a figure of 120 published products, including *Contra* games for the PlayStation, as well as games for Sega consoles, including the MegaDrive, Genesis and Dreamcast. They also work with licenses, and "dozens of popular licensed characters" have found their way into Appaloosa's games. As for Ecco, he says, "We worked on several Ecco titles. The last one was *Ecco: Defender of the Future* for PS2 and Dreamcast. Within the *Jaws* team, there are team members who worked on the Genesis and Mega-CD versions of Ecco games, as well. All Ecco titles were developed by Appaloosa."

As for *Jaws* himself, and the Bizarro Ecco theory, Kadosca says, "*Jaws* is definitely different than Ecco. It bites and tears everything in its way, and we built the game around this behavior. *Jaws'* enemies are not just humans trying to

exterminate it, but also hostile sea creatures like hammerhead sharks, orcas and even a giant squid." In fact, just like Ecco, "*Jaws* has to defend itself and react to the hostile environment," though *Jaws* has to eat enough to keep from starving, and what *Jaws* eats is people. And it's not all self-defense, as he's eager to point out, saying, "Players eager for some extra destruction can also find plenty ... to hunt by roaming freely through the open ocean." That may include people, boats and other things that break or bleed.

To contrast it with the Ecco games, he says, "It was a rule in the Ecco games to not feature humans. In *Jaws*, eating humans is one of the most important features, so we worked a lot to make it as satisfying as possible. Because of the close interaction with the human world, from the beginning of the project, we decided to extend the game territory from underwater-only to above and below water, so the player can meet, attack and destroy different kinds of boats, machinery and buildings in a variety of ways." Kadosca acknowledges that "it's [something] of a guilty pleasure to play as Nature's most feared predator.

That's most likely because people are afraid [of], yet fascinated by, sharks.

"Combine that with the uniqueness of playing as an animal in a mature videogame, and it's easy to understand why the concept itself is so compelling." Elaborating, he says, "We like rock bands, action movie heroes, etc. Being a 'bad guy' in our imagination is tempting, because of the many rules that control our life and behavior. Playing as the bad guy offers gamers a way to 'break the rules' in a game the way they never could in real life. During our focus tests, the players were really excited about playing as the shark for the entire game." Indeed, among those who've seen or played *Jaws Unleashed*, the reaction is half-horror, half-starry-eyed 5-year-old-boy "Cooooool."

I asked if the team felt the need to try and make something compelling story-

Being a 'bad guy' in our imagination is tempting, because of the many rules that control our life and behavior.



“None of us dropped by the pool to bite people’s legs.”



wise, or if they thought swimming around and eating people would be enough. “The game primarily focuses on the giant shark that eats people,” Kadosca said without a hint of irony. “But there are also many side challenges that provide ways for the player to try out the shark’s various capabilities. There is also an underlying story that plays out via Story Missions: Environplus is disturbing the ocean life around Amity Island with the vibration of its oil drilling machinery. This makes the sharks more hungry and aggressive.” Jaws is an environmental crusader, eating people to save the world. “The player faces more and more powerful enemies as he advances in the game — police, coast guard and harbor patrol show up to hunt the shark, depending on how destructive Jaws has been.”

As for designing the mechanics of the game, where Jaws can eat people in various fun and creative ways, he says, “the game was created for mature gamers, so it made sense to deliver an experience that played off playing as a true predator. Victims can be torn apart, and there are special moves like ‘Surface

Throw and Catch’ or the ‘Corkscrew’ move that more advanced players can earn after completing story missions and side challenges.” One of the hazards of working in a killer’s mind is that it can prove to be a little too engrossing. I wondered whether any of the developers got a little **too** into the design process, and he was quick to assure me that “none of us dropped by the pool to bite people’s legs. The fact that you play the game as an animal and not as a human being helped keep things in perspective.”

The game’s perspective is unique, allowing the player to explore the ocean through the “lifeless eyes” of a true predator and a perfectly evolved killing machine. For the team at Appaloosa, it was a very different experience, but one they seemed to enjoy, and now Jaws swims the oceans once more. Swimmers, boaters, oil drillers and cute bottlenose dolphins: Be on your guard. [COMMENTS](#)

If you have a problem, if no one else can help, and if you can find him, maybe you can hire Shannon Drake.

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