

the Escapist

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

This is always a difficult Editor's Note to write, the one for the issues we publish on government and games. Generally, I express some sort of opinion or experience I've had with a topic. This one is hard. It's such a nuanced issue, not to mention it's constantly changing. There's always a new event, a new type of game, a new law being proposed.

Which is, I suppose, to be expected with the industry's age – it's been around long enough to attract the public's eye. It's not just another phase or fad. So now, everyone needs to look at it and see if it's really good enough to stick around.

This is where we need to be really careful. Games, by the very word used to describe the genre, have a little messaging problem. Games are to be played. Children are the only ones who play (not ideally, but the Puritan work ethic demands it so).

So, we need to be a little forgiving to those who are a tad confused about,

unbelieving of or unaware of the large number of adults playing games. We need to learn to speak their language. We need to learn how best to show the gaming industry, so people who are not necessarily interested in **playing** games can still understand the benefits. If we want them to understand us, we gotta work a little.

One does not demand respect, one commands it.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "Is Rape Wrong on Azeroth?" from The Escapist Forum:

I think that, yeah, simply imposing a moral system on a game is a terrible idea. Games in which a pre-defined set of 'bad' actions always have a negative effect, and vice versa for 'good' actions, are often preachy, patronizing, and boring.

That said, I do worry equally about games like GTA, in which bad actions rarely ever have negative consequences, and good ones rarely have positive consequences - and the cases in which they do are mainly in cinematic parts where the player is not making a choice.

- Hegar

In response to "Is Rape Wrong on Azeroth?" from The Escapist Forum:

The idea of a designer being able to create a morality is interesting, and one that I haven't found to have been explored very well yet. ... Of course, we

would have to be careful that such a designer doesn't confuse his true morality with his created one. That could be bad for his home life!

- Boucaner

In response to "Is Rape Wrong on Azeroth?" from The Escapist Forum:

Again, I want to ask: Has anyone, anywhere, found a game that depicts morality in anything other than faction basis? And on a related note, can you define morality, even in the real world, in anything other than a faction basis: I'm realizing in this conversation that much



of out real life morality is based off of what group (religion usually) we ascribe to.

- ZacQuickSilver

In response to "Sympathy for the Devil" from The Escapist Forum:

Although a game engine may not be able to really take advantage of revealing the motivations of the antagonist, it may be used to create a motivational state for the player. If the antagonist is a jerk, then the player will have no issues putting him down. When the antagonist is someone who is trying to achieve a reasonable goal using morally questionable methods, the player can't necessarily view their actions as good or evil.

- Scopique

In response to "Asteroids Do Not Concern Me" from The Escapist Forum:

It's fun to be bad now and then, but it's also fun to play along as the tragic evil figure who's convinced their on the right side. It keeps one's own moral assumptions in perspective.

- Bongo Bill



Playing through the Pain: Treating PTSD with Virtual Reality

by Lara Crigger

On paper, Virtual Iraq sounds like the greatest war game ever made.

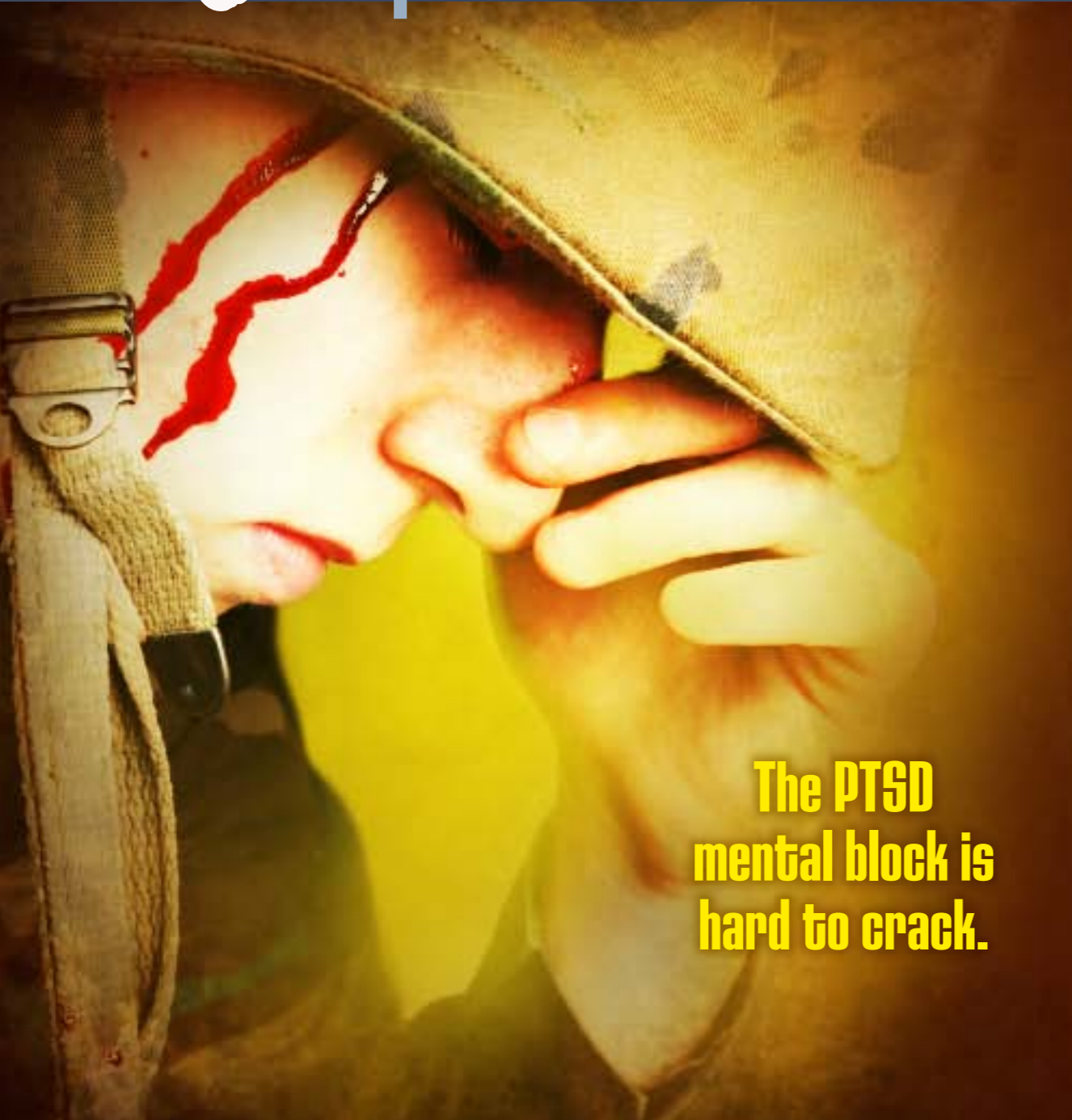
You put on the binocular headset, and you're instantly transported behind the wheel of a dusty Humvee. Yours is the second vehicle in a convoy, and as you bounce along the city streets, you uneasily scan the alleyways and rooftops for insurgents. The rumble of the engine vibrates your sweaty flesh. You smell gasoline, body odor and the faint traces of Iraqi cooking (someone must be making dinner nearby). Over the hum of fighter jets and helicopters, you hear the echoing call to evening prayers.

Suddenly, a rocket streaks toward you, and the Humvee in front of yours explodes, billowing smoke and orange flame. As you scramble for cover, your nose is filled with the rank smell of burning rubber and gunpowder. Shots ring out behind you, but they're hard to hear over the screams of civilians fleeing the explosion.

Virtual Iraq may be the most realistic and detailed war simulator to date, but it is no ordinary videogame.

The program is an innovative therapeutic tool, designed to help thousands of veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder. By immersing themselves in a virtual Iraq, soldiers can confront their worst combat memories head on, to deal with their trauma and reconcile their fears.

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a complex cocktail of anxiety, fear and helplessness that results from exposure to life-threatening events, such as military combat. Sufferers will do anything to avoid situations or cues that remind them of the trauma they've experienced. "The root of PTSD is unprocessed emotional memories," says Skip Rizzo, a clinical psychologist at the University of Southern California. "Those memories come out at night, in nightmares and flashbacks."



The PTSD mental block is hard to crack.

Military personnel - particularly combat veterans - are especially susceptible to PTSD. A study published in the July 1, 2004 issue of *The New England Journal of Medicine* revealed that one out of every eight Iraq war veterans has the disorder. (That study was conducted back when the war was relatively new; current estimates place the rate as high as 20 percent.)

But PTSD remains a taboo subject in many military circles. Oftentimes, soldiers are concerned that if they seek therapy, they risk contempt or ostracism from their peers and commanding officers. Only 40 percent of the Army veterans from the Iraq war who tested positively for mental disorders in the study actually sought medical care; rates were even lower among veterans of combat operations in Afghanistan.

Stigma is just one reason veterans avoid therapy; the therapy itself is another big factor. One of the most effective PTSD treatment methods is "imaginal exposure therapy," or confronting trauma through a set of guided, systematic recollections. Therapists repeatedly walk patients through their most painful memories, asking clients to imagine, describe and

discuss the traumatic event. As time progresses, patients grow less anxious and more confident with their feelings and memories. "It's almost brain-dead simple, this idea that the more you're exposed to something, the more you get used to it," says Rizzo. But this "touchy feely" style turns off many grizzled, combat-hardened veterans.

Moreover, traditional exposure therapy has its limits. Barbara Rothbaum, an assistant professor of psychology at Emory University, has been using exposure therapy for years to treat anxiety disorders, but she says that the PTSD mental block is hard to crack. "Even in the first study we did, some of the people said they knew what they needed to do, but there was no way they could bring themselves to do it," says Rothbaum. "People with PTSD are pretty avoidant."

Rothbaum started exploring alternative methods for exposure therapy over 10 years ago, when she and Larry Hodges at Georgia Tech experimented with virtual reality to treat the fear of heights and planes. They discovered that the virtual reality therapy worked just as well as traditional exposure therapy did, and soon,

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Rothbaum started researching its use for other anxiety disorders, such as PTSD.

Many people still see virtual reality as a parody of itself; the goofy headsets and trippy virtual environments have inspired fads like the Virtual Boy and B-movies like *The Lawnmower Man*. But as a therapy tool, virtual reality has proven exceptionally potent. "We found that people do get better using virtual reality therapy," says Rothbaum. "That it translates into real life."

Rothbaum points out another benefit of virtual reality: "If you think about who the Iraq war veterans are, it's a very video-savvy, electronic generation," she says. "For people who don't want traditional therapy, the idea of virtual reality might be attractive. They might get curious and try it."

Virtual imaginal exposure therapy works much like the real-world version does, but instead of recreating a patient's memories in his mind, his experiences are replicated in a digital environment. Wearing a binocular headset, the patient traverses the virtual world using a game controller. The therapist guides her

through that artificial environment, tweaking stimuli and environmental details according to the patient's specific memories. To keep track of anxiety levels, the patient gives a Subjective Units of Discomfort reading every five minutes, rating her emotional distress from 0-100. As the patient grows comfortable, the therapist includes more stress-inducing stimuli into the virtual world.

In 1997, Rothbaum's company, Virtually Better, worked with Rizzo and designer Jarrell Pair to develop the first virtual reality treatment specifically designed for veterans with PTSD. That application, Virtual Vietnam, was a simple program that allowed patients to enter a virtual Huey helicopter and fly over two locations: a rice paddy and a clearing surrounded by jungles. What they found was that although the graphics were primitive, patients didn't seem to care. "People would come out of the simulation, and they'd tell you these elaborate stories about how they ran to the helicopter when the Vietcong came out of the jungle," says Rizzo. "That wasn't in the environment. People filled in the gaps themselves."

Rothbaum explains that it's the PTSD that inspires patients to make up the missing details. "As long as you tap into some of their fears and get people anxious, they will fill in the rest," she says. The approach proved to be a surprising success. A 2006 paper in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* reported that after six months, 78 percent of the Vietnam veterans who used Virtual Vietnam for therapy had improved mental functioning, opposed to 50 percent who'd used other methods.

Virtual Iraq is the spiritual successor to Virtual Vietnam, although the application is generations ahead of its predecessor in both capability and design. For example, Virtual Iraq features several environments, including a small village, a large city, checkpoints and a Humvee convoy. The therapist also has far more control over environmental stimuli, everything from weather patterns and time of day to the volume and variety of ambient sounds. The graphics, too, are much improved: Virtual Iraq is based off *Full Spectrum Warrior*, a commercially released console game originally intended to train Army officers.



Virtual Iraq goes beyond the audio-visual experience, tapping into other sensory organs. Into the simulation, Rizzo has introduced a vibration mechanism that rumbles the platform upon which a patient sits or stands so as to match explosions in the virtual world. Also, Rizzo's team has built a smell box that pumps up to eight distinct scents into patients' noses, including body odor, burning rubber, gunpowder and rotting garbage. "Smell is a key ingredient here, because sense of smell is directly connected to the limbic system, which is responsible for memory," says Rizzo.

Imprint Interactive, a virtual reality technology company based out of Seattle, has also developed a number of applications for soldiers with PTSD, collaborating with the Army, Veterans Administration and the Office of Naval Research. But the company has also worked extensively to bring virtual therapies to civilians grappling with PTSD. Imprint helped modify a simulation of the 9-11 World Trade Center attacks built by the University of Washington and, more recently, worked with Israel's University of Haifa to develop a bus bomb simulator.

Like Virtual Iraq, Imprint's bus bombing simulation scales in intensity. Clinicians can control several different factors: noise levels, AI reactions, siren sounds, intensity of the bus explosions, etc. It is entirely customizable. "There's a fine line between getting patients to clear the air around their memories and re-traumatizing them," says Ari Hollander, technical director at Imprint Interactive. "You want to gradually reintroduce people to their memories."

Virtual reality exposure therapy is still a new technique, and no paradigms or precedents exist for therapists who want to use it for treatment. From technical design to graphical realism, everything about these applications is mostly trial and error. "All of these things are not well understood," says Hollander. "One of the main goals of our research is to find what does and doesn't work."

But experimentation is costly and slow. Advances in virtual reality technology have been sluggish, and equipment prices are still prohibitively high. Moreover, few people are involved with the research. "We have people who wear a lot of hats," says Hollander, who does 3-D modeling, sound engineering,

scripting, coding, web design and hardware configuration. "I'm constantly running around in little circles, trying to get everything to work."

He adds that one of the biggest challenges facing developers is the design of a user-friendly interface for psychologists and clinicians, who tend to be technology-averse. "Therapists don't know anything about technology. Frequently, they don't even know anything about computer games," says Hollander. "So you have to make this bizarre, exotic hardware as simple as possible to use." This means that the

very flexibility that makes virtual reality so attractive as a therapeutic tool becomes a liability in terms of programming and design. The challenge becomes finding a happy medium between flexibility and ease-of-use.

Virtual Iraq has currently entered the clinical testing phase, with research groups running trials and pilot programs across the country. At Emory, Rothbaum is currently examining the effectiveness



of combining virtual reality therapy with medication. In her study, PTSD patients take a pill approximately thirty minutes before engaging in four sessions of virtual exposure therapy. One group takes d-cycloserine, a drug that reduces fear symptoms; another takes Xanax, a common anti-anxiety medication; and a third takes a placebo pill. The hope is

“What is the smell of death? I mean, I smelled a dead cat once, and I almost puked. The smell of rotting human - I - I don’t know.”

that drugs will prove to be a useful complement to the virtual reality.

Imprint’s bus bomb simulation has also entered the clinical testing phase, but finding appropriate respondents has been difficult. “They had a bunch of trouble in Haifa getting a population of patients who were compatible,” says Hollander. “They kept getting patients who were the absolute worst-case scenario, and so nothing worked on them.”

Rizzo, Rothbaum and Hollander all agree that good feedback is hard to find, but it’s the most critical element in designing these applications. “You can’t design these things from the ivory tower,” says Rizzo. “You need that feedback on what you’ve gotten right and wrong to drive your work.”

But where do you draw the line between reality and virtual reality? How realistic should these applications strive to be? Rizzo admits that the limits are still hazy. He mentions that people have requested he add the smell of burning or rotten flesh to his smell box, and logically, he can see the reasoning. “When somebody’s gone through the whole

thing, and you think they just need that one last experience to really pull out that emotion and deal with it, then maybe that’s when you hit that button.

“But what is the smell of death?” he asks uncomfortably. I don’t know how to answer that question, either. “I mean, I smelled a dead cat once, and I almost puked. The smell of rotting human - I - I don’t know. I’m not sure how far up the hierarchy of exposure we really need to go.”

Although Rizzo asserts that a therapist should do whatever is necessary to help the patient, he argues that realism by itself isn’t the point of virtual reality therapy. “No matter what, we’re not going to exactly replicate and eradicate any memories of what has happened here,” he says. “But how they deal with the pain, that changes how it impacts their life. We’re just helping someone to heal.” [COMMENTS](#)

Lara Crigger is a freelance science and tech journalist specializing in electronic entertainment. Her previous work for The Escapist includes “Escaping Katrina” and “The Milkman Cometh.” Her email is [lcrigger \[at\] gmail \[dot\] com](mailto:lcrigger@gmail.com).



THE DOUBLE X-FACTOR

by Erin Hoffman

"I'm just a person trapped inside a woman's body." – Elayne Boosler

Work in game development long enough, and if you are female, you will inevitably encounter this question: "As a woman, what do you think your role is in the business of making videogames?" I've heard this question in various forms more times than I can count, and it's completely stymied me each time.

The problem is that I don't do **anything** "as" a woman, not anymore than I do anything "as" a multi-cellular organism or "as" a fan of Crab Rangoon – and neither does any woman I know in the industry. The attributes that label my life apply from the outside, not from the inside. And I am willing to bet that the next time you hear someone start a sentence with "As a ... ," something stupid is about to come out of his mouth. Otherwise, why do they need the extra punch of the label? Strong ideas stand on their own.

But the political quagmire associated with being a woman in the game industry, or a member of any minority group, is sadly inescapable. Because

labels come from the outside, they apply to anything you do if you happen to fall into the category to which they apply. The "as a woman" questions are well intended, but they most frequently fall on ears that have no concept of doing anything "as a woman" – or they wouldn't have wound up in the game industry in the first place.

In League with the Enemy

One of the main blockades that keeps mainstream women out of gaming, even on a mindspace level, is the absurd notion that videogames are naturally anti-family. When one of the most prominent family-oriented (and female) politicians engages in a moral crusade against the mind-eroding effects of videogames, this can hardly be a surprise. With games being trotted out as the latest "save the children" demon by political pundits aching for low-hanging fruit, what might otherwise be a simpler issue of individual challenge (which is substantial enough around here!) rapidly becomes intensely political on a larger scale.

We all know it's stupid. We all know there's no evidence supporting the

claims that violent games affect normal people. But politicians will be politicians, and unfortunately there's not much we can do besides wait for the tide to pass. Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll decide that sunshine promotes violent behavior. Don't most killers have a disturbing amount of exposure to solar radiation? Seriously! It's time there was an investigation.

In the meantime, individuals will keep working to spread games to their parents. Titles like Brain Age help distinctly, even if they don't tell gamers anything they didn't know before. Such titles make inroads into expanding demographics until everyone is playing a game of some kind, including Penny Arcade writer Jerry Holkins's mother. Slowly, a crazy notion that games might not be the enemy is percolating its way through the social consciousness, and those whispered rumors represent the vanguard of a coming avalanche in the social mindset toward games.

But the main body of game development still focuses on the tried-and-true foci of mass media: sex, violence and intrigue, and here is where things get a little tricky. Social history and culture would

tell us that it's perfectly healthy for a man to have an interest in sex, and probably for him to be interested in violence, too. "Boys will be boys." But women? One can hardly suggest in proper political correctness that a **woman** might be interested in a little violence. And God forbid a woman should want to play something to do with **sex** – someone call Nathaniel Hawthorne, **stat**. The whitewashed political world would have us believe that any woman who has an interest in such subjects – and it isn't a far leap to include games as a whole as well – must be some kind of deviant.

Hot or Not


Women that are deviants in the world of the politically correct: Enter the "grrl" phenomenon and the media circus. One aspect of the subculture response to the alienation effect has been a strong "girl power" movement that loves to highlight sexy, young women who play games competitively.

But isn't this just another form of subjugation? (Uh oh, she used the s-word, get out the feminist-beating sticks!) It's certainly objectification, and

sure, it's fun to be sexy, but women shouldn't have to do this to keep their cred and be accepted as developers and gamers. A housewife mother of four who loves Precious Moments has every bit as much a right to this industry as a Frag Doll or a live-at-home 20-something with delicious disposable income. But this demographic disappears because it is not as media-glamorous as an all grrl Quake clan with a catchy anarchist-cyberpunk nickname. Come and stare at the spectacle! Women who play videogames! And they're **hot!**

It should come as no surprise that, whatever noble intentions might have been lurking in the marketing neuron high up in UbiSoft's shared brain, the Frag Dolls found themselves sadly but rapidly relegated to booth babe status.

The problem is that if your body type or personal style differs from the Hollywood femme-du-jour, you get called a dog – which, considering the source of these comments, is pretty damn ludicrous on its own – and if you're attractive, it isn't much better. Guys on the internet even seem to think they mean well in drooling over an attractive woman associated in



God **FORBID** a woman should want to play something to do with **SEX** – someone call Nathaniel Hawthorne, **stat**

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any way with the industry, and it can be flattering at first, but in the end, it's the same old debasement, the same old problem in a nicer wrapper: You can only be worth something as a woman if you are – scratch that, if **your body is** eye candy.

Is there anything wrong with the grrl clans? No, of course not, and watching them wipe the floor with cocky adolescent hot shots is a unique and singular pleasure. But we should never fall victim to the illusion that they represent women in the industry, or – and this is worse – that they help solve the problem of gender disparity. A solution to **that** issue would be one that does not involve a photograph clipped to the resume.

The Mirror Ceiling

This is not to say that sexuality, however, is what keeps women out of games; the game development working environment often does that well enough on its own. And it certainly isn't alone in its sins. But the solution, like pulling out of a tailspin at six hundred miles an hour, isn't easy and it isn't simple.

The “feeder” conduits that bring people into games provide a natural starting point. So, let's look at schools. One telling point for diversity is that women excel in professional computing environments, but often struggle in, or fail to enter, technical schools. Real-life development requires communication skill, social skill and teamwork, three things rarely taught in technical instruction facilities. Instead, they focus on an isolating independent project atmosphere that is largely out of touch with the reality of professional software development. Female programmers, some of my friends among them, often find themselves doing the work by accident as part of another job, and then finding – to their surprise – that they like it and are **good** at it.

On a local level, women in business of any kind face a complex social situation – in the United States, at least – fueled by hundreds of years of business history that tried to convince itself it was better off without women. The tendency to nurture, to support and not say “no,” not make demands – all tendencies that incidentally lend quite well to teamwork –



WOMEN in business of any kind **face a complex social SITUATION** – in the United States, at least – fueled by hundreds of years of business **HISTORY**



come from social stigmas that create a minefield in the workplace, and in the case of an industry as male-dominated as the game business, often even stops women from **applying** for jobs in the first place. And these are single women willing to bust tail; the problems faced by working mothers are even more severe.

The concept of “self-sabotage” in the psychology of professional women is heavily established but not easily conquered. The new ceiling isn’t just glass; it’s mirrored, and a woman’s greatest enemy often becomes herself. Not only do women have to fight to retain their femininity – and then fight again to establish their own definitions thereof – once they’re actually in the workplace, they find yet another political battle that must be fought before they can do their job. Do it well, perform assertively, and you run into the dreaded b-word; be hesitant and you “prove” why women “don’t belong.” I would encourage anyone who knows a woman who has worked in the industry for more than five years to ask her about her discrimination stories. What you hear may astonish you.

All Work and No Jane

“So what?” some say. Many people – gamers and developers alike – are “tired” of hearing about women in games. They “don’t care” about diversity or, worse, feel personally threatened by its consideration. What they don’t realize is that the individuals who manage to survive this horrendous gauntlet possess incredible strength of character. As with many situations throughout history, facing adversity tempers a person – any sex, any creed, any color – into fine steel. This doesn’t make the adversity a **good** thing by any stretch, but it does make the survivors uniquely valuable in a world of dwindling daily challenge. And should we be celebrating them? Of course we should! But somehow, that celebration inevitably gets around to the “as a woman” question.

And it’s still the wrong question. The **right** question is: If you were going to make a game, what kind of game would you make?

The reality, alongside the reality of the largely over-25, non-dyed, non-Jazzercised female population in the industry, is not glamorous. It involves a steady, patient, unflinching process of slowly coaxing more young women into

game development through direct mentorship – the same challenges faced in the even slower process of getting more women into boardrooms. This does **not** mean hiring someone of inferior talent simply because they are of a diverse group, as some automatically assume diversity to imply, it just means getting them in the doorway to begin with, and that means reaching out through game content and human resources. What some (white, male, 20-50-year-old) developers need to fully comprehend is that a larger talent pool is **not scary**.

The importance of this effort is clear, even without taking into account that the best-selling PC game of all time was created by a 40-percent female staff. Ask around the investment groups and you’ll find they’re looking for broad audiences; ask around diverse dev houses and you’ll find that their quality of life is often substantially better than it is elsewhere.

But the prevailing reason for the importance of a female presence in the development process is that the future is coming. The internet, once a pretty geeky place to be, has surged with a

highly adaptable, highly hip, highly **lucrative** teen girl presence. If you've got a relative in this age demographic, you've seen what I mean: Blogs, instant messages, text messages, and online communities are how these girls communicate with each other, and they do it with staggering proficiency. Is it really much of a stretch to think some tech-savvy teenage girls might become interested in computer science at the collegiate level? And they'll bring that social dynamic with them. If we really want to know how to bring more women into the game industry, we need to ask the right questions of the **right people**, and that means asking young women of this massive demographic, women **outside** the current game industry.

Of the games that they would make and the games that they would play, I can make three predictions. Ponies will not be involved; pink will be used only sparingly; and most importantly, the current developer generation won't understand – at least at first. Albert Einstein said that the problems of today cannot be solved with the same kind of thinking that created them, and that

applies as well to game development as to astrophysics or world peace.

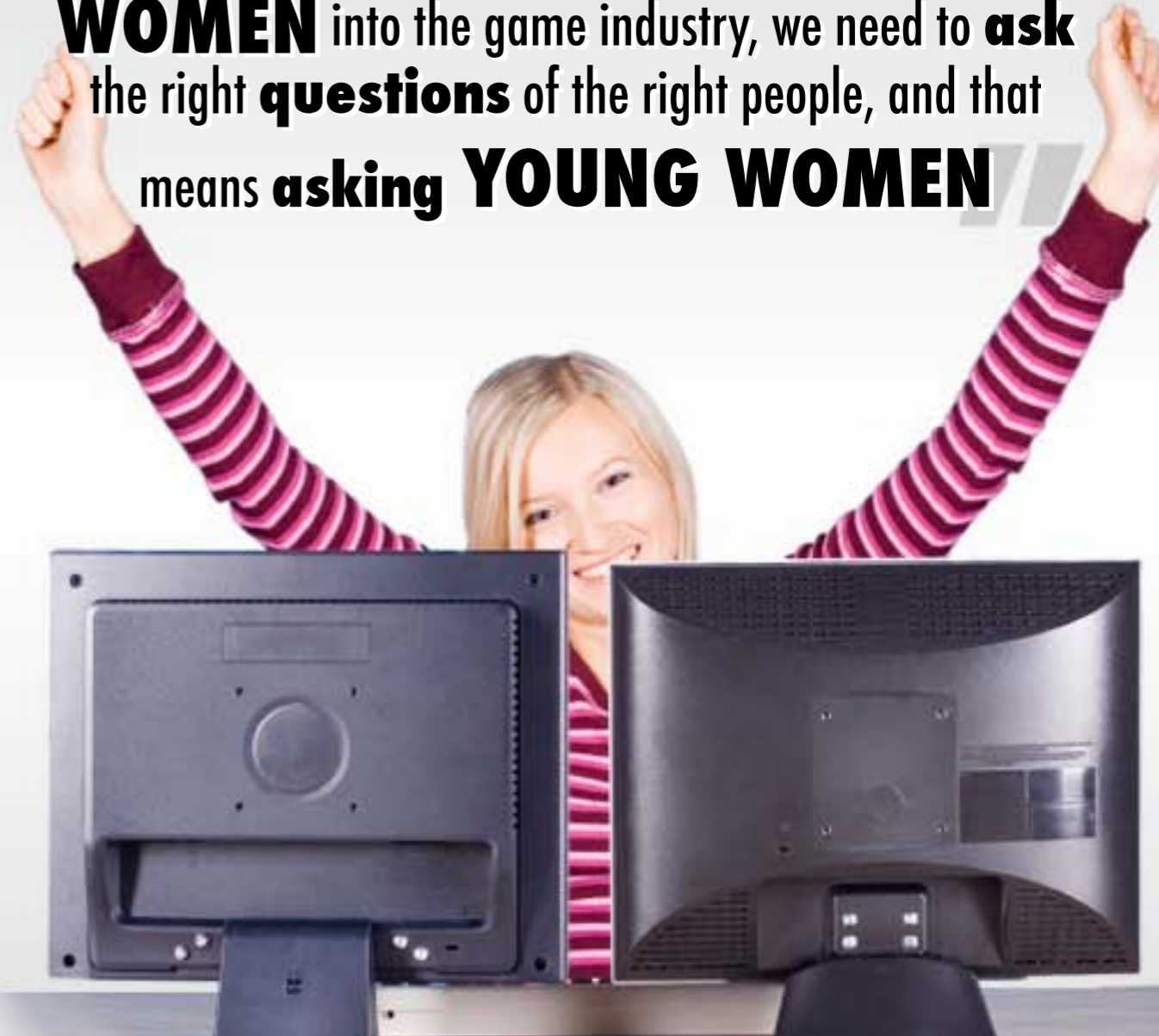
For game development, social gaming represents the next new frontier, beyond the dollhouse play of The Sims and skewed away from the strange loneliness of Solitaire. In an environment where we are rapidly running out of new gaming genres, high-speed mediated social games are the gateway to a whole new world and a whole new definition of game design.

More and more women will enter the game industry every year. The decision each of us has to make individually is whether to continue to fight the inevitable – the fight that lashed out against rock music, comic books and television – as a force for inertia, or to leap wildly with the rushing wave.

And hopefully, in the process, try not to drool too much. [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.

// If **we** really **WANT** to know how to bring more **WOMEN** into the game industry, we need to **ask** the right **questions** of the right people, and that means **asking YOUNG WOMEN** //





Canadian Content

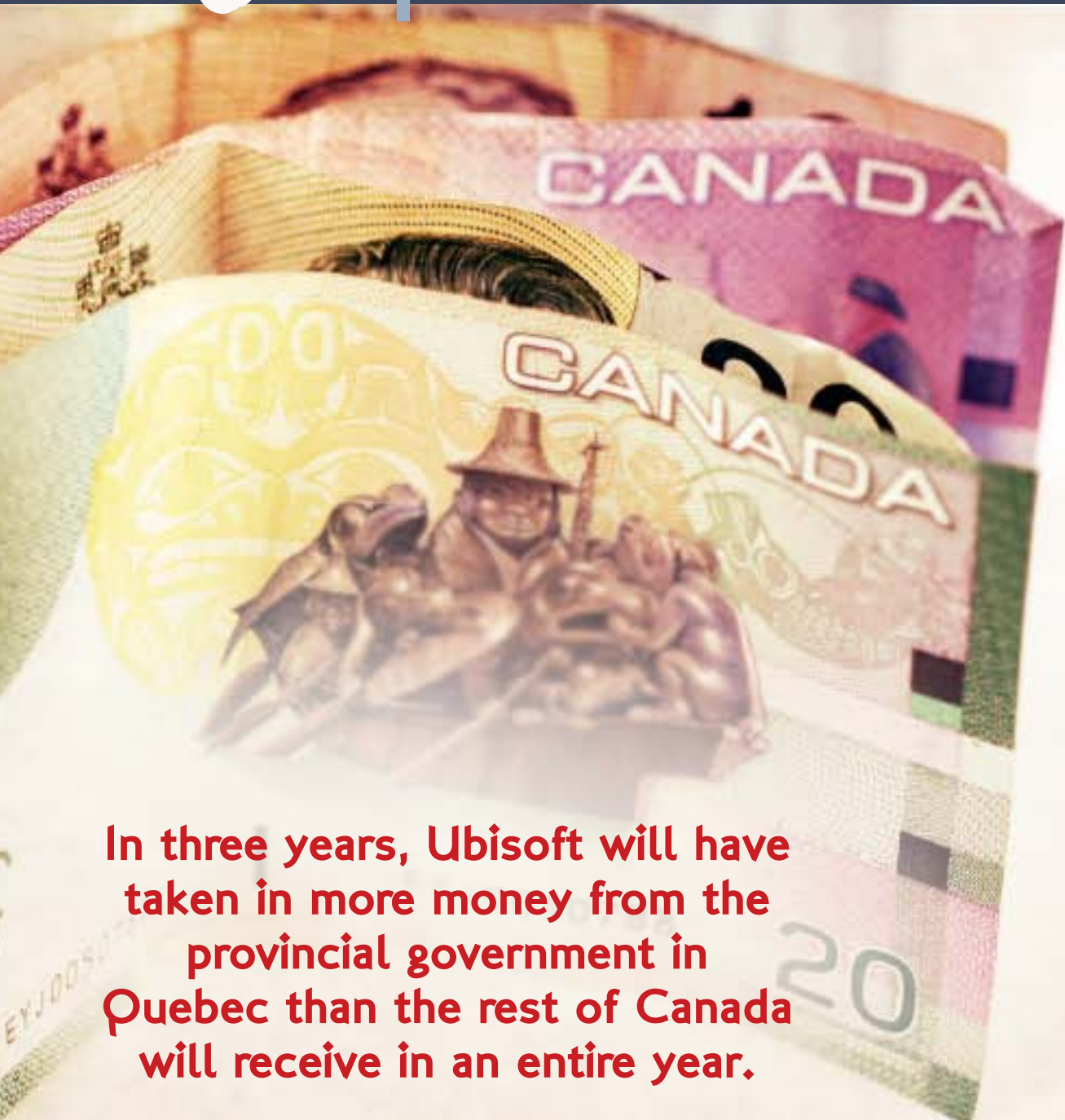
by Dana Massey

I never thought I could make a living in the videogame industry. I played games for fun and dreamed of being an NHL star, a fireman or a history professor. When I tell people what I do for a living, they are baffled that someone can actually feed themselves by working on and writing about videogames. But they're right to be amazed, given the odds. Breaking into the game industry in Canada is about as hard as making it onto a pro hockey squad.

Most countries have funding for the arts. They fund movies, television and even videogames through tax breaks, grants and loans. It's a competitive world, and they will do whatever they can to draw high tech jobs inside their borders. Unfortunately, these initiatives usually favor big foreign companies with a history of game production. Shops like Electronic Arts, Ubisoft and Rockstar dominate the Canadian development landscape, while homegrown successes like BioWare and Epic Games are few and far between. Cooperation with big, foreign companies is necessary, but short-sighted. No one dreams of growing up and working at EA, they dream of being the next EA.

It's a shame; almost all government subsidizing goes to large foreign corporations who want to set up shop. Where a startup might – if you're lucky – employ 30 people for a few years, Ubisoft can swoop in and promise jobs to thousands with as much security as any development company can provide. They get the money. Not that it doesn't help people looking for work, but giving money to large corporations isn't exactly in the spirit of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Ubisoft Montreal received \$6,300,000 over three years from Emploi-Québec, \$5,300,000 over three years from the Quebec Ministry of Education and \$6,000,000 over three years from Investissement Québec as part of their expansion plans. Telefilm Canada's New Media Fund has been set up to help smaller interactive entertainment professionals fund their projects. For 2006-2007, the Department of Canadian Heritage allocated \$14,000,000 to the fund. In three years, Ubisoft – one of the largest producers of videogames in the world – will have taken in more money from the provincial government in



In three years, Ubisoft will have taken in more money from the provincial government in Quebec than the rest of Canada will receive in an entire year.

Quebec than the rest of Canada will receive in an entire year.

There is nothing wrong with huge companies in Canada. EA Canada was named the top development studio in the world for the second year running by British magazine *Develop*. Ubisoft Montreal will have 2,000 employees by 2010. It would be naive to argue that they don't deserve funding. They bring jobs and train Canadians in an industry previously closed to them. But they're not Canadian.

In Canada, there are laws for broadcasters on how much Canadian content must cross the public airwaves. Network television in Canada cannot, no matter how much it wants to, simply broadcast NBC's Monday night lineup each week. It must also include original content created by Canadians. The same goes for the radio. In order to play Pearl Jam, a station also needs to play Our Lady Peace.

It can be argued that those laws have more to do with the sanctity of the public airwaves than content, but it is those same laws that have allowed Canadian artists to mature, develop and, most

importantly, find an audience. Comics like Jim Carrey, Mike Myers and Tom Green started in Canada, while bands and singers like Nickelback, Avril Lavigne and Shania Twain all went on to find international fame after first finding it in Canada.

Shania Twain's songs don't make me cry maple leaves anymore than songs by American country singer Faith Hill. But knowing that someone came from a background similar to yours has an effect on you. These laws aren't about content. They're about national pride and developing a country where children feel they can grow up to be whatever they want.

Because of these stars, Canadians know they can grow up to be comedians and singers. They know they have a chance. The same cannot be said for videogames.

Does anyone know Ubisoft is working on *Assassin's Creed* in Montreal? How about *Splinter Cell* and *Prince of Persia*? Many Europeans would be outraged to learn that EA's cricket, rugby and *FIFA Street* franchises are created in Nova Scotia. They even make *NBA Live* in British Columbia! How, then, can young people outside the United States ever get fired

up about making videogames, if they don't realize so much is going on in their own back yard? Most people have no idea where most blockbusters from the big corporations are developed and assume the answer is in the United States. Outsourcing tends to be a dirty word in the U.S., so it's in the corporate interests of companies like Electronic Arts not to promote the fact that Canadians build many of their most "American" products.

This is why governments need to provide more grants, loans and awards to local entrepreneurs who want to start their own companies and pursue their own dreams. Their products may or may not be blatantly homegrown, but they don't need to be - people from the area will be able to pick up on colloquial nuances in a company's product. Over time, this kind of grassroots initiative can make rules that demand a certain percentage of games on shelves be produced locally. The media is bound to pick up on these peculiar little companies, and eventually, the average local gamer will know he is playing a game made by someone just like him. Just like Canadians know Jim Carrey (and Pamela Anderson ... sorry about that one) came from a background

like theirs, they'll know that these games do, too.

A big difference between the gaming industry and most others is that in most other creative endeavors, the government has some control over distribution. In games, it has no control whatsoever. The model, again, is the movie industry. There are no rules that force movie theatres to stock local content, and the government certainly encourages big Hollywood studios to film in Canada, but, at the same time, they help smaller Canadian companies produce movies. In fact, Telefilm Canada currently has \$93,000,000 (or \$79,000,000 more than "new media" gets) to help fund Canadian films. This doesn't even begin to count the amount of money given to American companies who film in Canada. Check the end of your favorite Hollywood blockbuster's credits. You'll probably see a Telefilm Canada logo at the end.

Governments exist to protect and serve their people and their national identity, but it takes more than a fat wallet to do so. It is up to the government of India to give young Indians a chance to be anything they choose; it is up to the government of Switzerland to make sure the Swiss have similar opportunities. To do that, people need at least a glimmer of hope to forge their own path in whatever field they choose. When it comes to the arts, countries like Canada have done a good job of promoting that belief in fields like literature, film and television. Now it's time for them to catch up and start giving interactive media the same attention. Only then will a little child know, no matter where he's born, that one day they can create the next Mario. [COMMENTS](#)

Dana "Lepidus" Massey is the Lead Content Editor for MMORPG.com and former Co-Lead Game Designer for Wish.

These laws aren't about content. They're about national pride and developing a country where children feel they can grow up to be whatever they want.



the Seed of Road: Runestone's Non-combat MMOG

by Shannon Drake



Imagine an MMOG with actual roleplaying, where players determine the direction of the game itself, and where human interaction and scheming are far more important than beating fuzzy animals senseless. From the beginning, Runestone's *Seed* was built around human interaction — the game didn't even have a combat system — and roleplaying was at the forefront, emphasized in an age when roleplay has devolved into "You can play an elf, if you want. Or, you know, an orc."

Rather than the utopian fantasy daydreams or dystopian science fiction nightmares, *Seed's* story was all too human: A millennia ago, ships carrying carefully chosen DNA that would later birth a colony of people departed Earth in search of new worlds to populate. One ship arrived in the Beta Hyi system and began terraforming a planet within the solar system, but the terraforming went awry. Nonetheless, the ship's computer began hatching colonists. The "seeds" were trapped inside the colony's tower, unable to visit the hostile world outside, and in the meantime, more and more colonists were popping out daily, straining resources. *Seed* was going to

be about classic office and governmental politics as much as it was about being a futuristic space colony simulator. To survive, the colonists would have to band together and determine how to overcome a new world of challenges in both the short and long term.

That was the idea, anyway. Runestone's star burned brightly over the summer of 2006, but a troubled and buggy release (and a lack of external financial backing) laid the company low. On September 28, 2006, Runestone CEO Lars Kroll Kristensen posted a heartfelt farewell to his community. His departing words contained no hint of regret:

I am still fully convinced that a role play-centric game is not only a good idea: It's a great idea. It just needs to be better executed. *Seed* has many of the right qualities for such a game, and I still firmly believe that, given sufficient funding, we could have created a great game. Unfortunately, we will never know.

The servers went dark, and the lawyers and creditors came in and dissolved the company, leaving the Runestone team to

disperse or find work elsewhere. A compelling concept like *Seed* deserves more of a eulogy than a few scattered web pages and some forgotten fiction. I was able to talk to Lars — the last gunslinger from a world that's moved on — once the men in nice suits finished their grim work.

Lars' background is in roleplaying and artificial intelligence, he says. "I have a master's degree in computer science from the University of Aarhus. My thesis was about swarm intelligence," which is the collective behavior of individuals in self-organized systems like ant colonies, swarms of nanobots and, if one stretches, players in an all-roleplaying MMOG. "Indeed, my main interest in computer science is about artificial intelligence." He's also a lover of roleplaying games, which he's "been playing on and off since high school. I've also been rather active in the Danish roleplaying community, helping [with] arranging conventions and stuff."

When it came time to develop a product, an MMOG was "really a no-brainer, since what we wanted to do was make an innovative roleplaying game, focusing on

the social aspects. So a single-player game was out from the get-go." He cited the business model of MMOGs as, "more innovation friendly. With an [MMOG], you need not necessarily go for a mass market product. You can build a nice business around fewer customers, if these customers are paying subscription [fees] directly to you."

Developing the non-combat side of the game required more time, he says. "The non-combat thing took quite a lot more thinking. The thing is that combat takes a lot of focus in a game. Indeed, if you have a combat-based game, the other gameplay (craft, trade, etc.) tends to be **about** combat. You craft weapons and armor, and trade them. You need to fill the game-world with monsters to fight, and these monsters drop loot as rewards for the players. This loot is typically better weapons and armor. This model, while very entertaining and definitely effective in attracting customers, is also pretty much the model everyone else uses." This created a problem. It meant "that before we could get going on innovating, we would have to do what everyone else does [first], and on top of that, innovate."

The design feels very European, especially with the emphasis on politics and collective action versus the rugged individualist ethos of other games in the genre. I asked Lars for his thoughts on it. "I definitely think that there's a very European, maybe even Scandinavian thing about *Seed* and the way it was about being part of a society, rather than just looking out for number one. Obviously, the strong focus and cooperation and belonging to a society was also designed to make people want to roleplay." He cited the politics as another nudge for roleplayers, saying, "As soon as people have something to vote about, they also have something to argue politically about. I definitely think that the fact that *Seed* was made by a Danish team meant a lot in terms of how the game was designed. I also think the fact that our main story writer was a woman played a role."

I asked what led them to that focus on the collective whole, and if they thought it wound up being a detriment to the game in the end. "Well, again, when people are encouraged to cooperate, rather than compete, they have a lot to talk about," he answered. "That is a good



WHEN PEOPLE ARE ENCOURAGED TO COOPERATE, RATHER THAN COMPETE, THEY HAVE A LOT TO TALK ABOUT.

basis for roleplaying, as they could also have very different attitudes toward different questions, based on the persona they have chosen for themselves.” However, he cites the game’s “pseudo-economy” as a problem. “In *Seed*, you could barter all you wanted, but the in-game currency, APs, could not be exchanged from person to person. This was designed to keep all trade going through the elected people (that **could** exchange APs).” While this was an interesting way to create economy in theory, he says, “it basically just made a lot of things difficult for us, and made it impossible for players to ‘set up shop.’”

The state-building dynamic centered on “rings” — guilds — players could join. Rings could vote on issues and try to install their members into the game’s budding government, which was going to be an important part of the game. The players managed to get started before the game’s demise, Lars says. “People made rings and voted for their ring members. This would, I think, have evolved into something like political parties. We were planning to include voting for ‘issues’: voting for or against proposed changes to the game world.

Once such change could have been introducing a real currency. Another could have been changing the way the political system worked. We were hoping to eventually have the players define a political system for their own game-world, maybe a ‘president’ with a short term, or a representative democracy (like we have in Denmark). The players were beginning to exploit these ideas a bit, but didn’t get a chance to take it very far.”


That led into my next question: What happened? They had a unique concept, they had a core of players and they had some buzz. “What happened, or, rather, what went wrong, was that we released a game that quite simply wasn’t sufficiently finished. This caused way too many of our beta players to leave us, and this caused us to bleed money too fast.”

In the meantime, “we were [too] thinly stretched to operate and develop the game all on our own. We tried to fix those too big problems by searching for a publishing partner to help us out and to buy us some extra time to finish. While I think we were getting close to a deal, we ultimately didn’t.” I asked if he felt *Seed*’s demise was inevitable. “I

don’t think it was inevitable,” he answered. “I think we made some mistakes along the way, the biggest one being that we released too early. We had to, for financial reasons, but we probably shouldn’t have, even if it seemed like the only possible option at the time. It is definitely a mistake I will never make again. I [would] rather simply fold a game and a company than release too early again.”

As he’d said in his farewell post, he still didn’t think a roleplay-centric, non-combat MMOG was a bad idea. I wondered why. He cited their buzz before E3, as well as “a community of 25,000 people and 15,000 signups for the open beta test. This was before E3, and this was without spending one dollar on advertising. ... I’d say that alone speaks volumes of how much a roleplay-centric MMOG is in demand. And there aren’t any of them out there now that *Seed* is gone. All the others focus on other things, typically combat.

“I still believe it is a good idea to focus an MMOG on roleplay. Whether that naturally means you must eliminate combat or not, I’m more in doubt about, but I am sure that roleplay is worth



“I [WOULD] RATHER SIMPLY FOLD A GAME AND A COMPANY THAN RELEASE TOO EARLY AGAIN.”

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making a game about.” Looking at *Seed*, he says, “I think it takes a game with more broad appeal gameplay [styles] than the ones we had, and I definitely think it takes a lot more testing and fine-tuning than we had money for. I think the basic idea was sound. I just think we failed on the execution of it.”

The atmosphere in the office around that time was “rather sentimental and sad the last week or so. We had been walking on the razor’s edge for quite a long time, holding our breath and hoping one or more publishers would ‘bite’ at the last minute, so [when] we finally got word from the last ones, we were sort of relieved. We had internally agreed that we didn’t want to limp along. We would either have a solid long-term solution or go out quickly. So the last couple of days were quite sentimental, saying goodbye to the community and reading their postings.”

Runestone was a company built with a strong emphasis on storytelling. Other companies with a similar focus tend to have track records similar to Runestone’s. Is there something about the industry that eats those who focus

on story? “Yes, there is something about the industry that eats storytellers,” he answered. “It’s called ‘gameplay.’ Gameplay has a tendency to overshadow the story aspects of many games: Stuff like accepting in the name of fun gameplay that the hero of a shooter game can easily survive multiple headshots, etc.

“There’s also something in the industry that eats game designers. It’s called ‘storytelling.’ This is often seen in so-called interactive movies: ‘games’ where the interactivity is very limited, in order to be able to tell a convincing story. ... There is a natural opposition between gameplay and storytelling. It’s annoying the living daylights out of me, but I think that the ‘story’ and ‘fun factor’ elements of a game [are] almost always in competition and opposition. I think the perfect MMOG would be the one where some brilliant game designer/storyteller figures out how to tell a strong, engaging story with the gameplay. Not with cut scenes, not with quest logs, not with NPC dialogue trees, but with the core gameplay of the game. I don’t have the formula, and I don’t think the formula is

necessary to have a very good game, but if someone cracks it, I want to play the game.”

As for what’s next for Lars and his team, he tells me, “Runestone is getting split up as a company. We are planning a Christmas lunch, which is a big deal in Denmark; [it’s a] traditional company party.” The team is “keeping in touch via mailing list. Some of the Copenhagen-based game developers have hired some of the guys, while some others are getting jobs here in Aarhus, in gaming or otherwise.” Lars himself is “taking a little vacation and, after that, I want to work somewhere in the industry.” What happened to *Seed* and Runestone haven’t stopped his MMOG dreams, he says. “At some stage, though, I want to make an MMOG again. Probably roleplay-based, if the competition isn’t too stiff when I get around to it.” For roleplayers worldwide, his return can’t come soon enough. [COMMENTS](#)

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



Our fear and loathing of some future generations' pop culture and entertainment is inevitable. Just as many of us have been staunchly defending digital games and proclaiming that critics and politicians just don't get it, we too, will soon be demonizing our children (or perhaps our grandchildren) for whatever new medium/media they choose to entertain themselves.

The moral panic over videogames is never more evident than in instances where youth have been involved in violent crimes. The recent, tragic rash of school shootings has put games and

their perceived potential for negative effects at the forefront of criticism – often as a scapegoat for complex social problems. Ignorance is further demonstrated when critics are quick to judge a game they've never played based on the title alone. The unsubstantiated hysteria over the commercial release of the relatively tame T-rated *Bully*, as well as intentionally satirical amateur/indie efforts like *Super Columbine Massacre RPG*, are just two examples of a growing problem.

To most of us, this is not rocket science. We've all probably used the "before games, it was 'X'" line to defend ourselves – our career, our pastime, our creative output - at social and family functions where we've come under attack for our "connection" to games. I sometimes joke that this has been going on since prehistoric man, with cavepeople shielding their young from horrible attacking saber tooth tiger cave paintings.

Indeed, a predictable pattern of moral panic has been going on for quite some time now. The April 2006 issue of *Wired* magazine had an amusing collection of quotes, each from a critic of yesteryear

condemning everything from novels to the Waltz to the telephone. One detractor questioned in 1926, "Does the telephone make men more active or more lazy? Does [it] break up home life and the old practice of visiting friends?"

Old practice of visiting friends? How quaint.

This pattern has been repeating itself, not over the past few decades, but over the past several centuries – if not millennia.

In *Savage Pastimes: A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment*, author Harold Schechter looks at this very issue. Schechter is a professor of literature at Queens College in New York City and has written extensively on serial killers, violence and pop culture.

While the main thrust of *Savage Pastimes* is to dispel the myth that today's entertainment is more violent or perverse than it was in years past, several chapters are dedicated to giving out examples of entertainment from past generations (like how public hangings were considered good, wholesome family amusement until the late 1800s) and how a pattern of moral panics started to emerge.

Pattern RECOGNITION

THE PREDICTABILITY OF MORAL PANIC

by Jason Della Rocca

In this way, Schechter not only tracks the history of violent entertainment but also analyzes the public outrage each inevitably provoked. By the 20th century, the cultural watchdogs were out in full force, demonizing everything from movies (the Hays Code) and comic books (the Comics Code Authority) and setting up a pattern of equating action-packed entertainment with a variety of cultural ills.

In an interview with the *Inside Bay Area* paper, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign assistant professor Dmitri Williams notes that every new medium has been condemned by the older generation as “a convenient way of assigning blame while ignoring complex and troubling problems.”

And so, two critical questions arise:

1 – How do we break out of the current moral panic over videogames, so we can better address real social issues?

2 – How do we ensure that we do not slip into the same pattern when the next medium of mass entrainment and expression comes onto the scene?

Some tease that the solution to the current panic over games is simply to wait it out. That is, we just have to hang around until the older generation dies off and this will all be a non-issue. While that may be true, mounting attacks on the industry make it hard to see how we could survive from now to then with such a laissez-faire approach. The challenge is in ensuring that games, and gamer culture, are not sterilized and neutered into oblivion before we get to a point where **we** become the older generation.

More likely, it will require a collective, concerted and proactive approach from everyone connected to games – not just “the industry.” Sony Online honcho John Smedley got it right when he said that we need to take the words out of the politicians’ mouths, get off the sidelines and get into the fight. We can’t just rely on *Brain Age* to serve as our Trojan horse.

The recent establishment of the Entertainment Consumers Association and the Video Game Voters Network are two steps in the right direction. And even big guys like Microsoft realize it’s time to get involved: They recently unveiled their “Safety is no game” campaign.

More importantly, it is about bringing attention to all the positive things about games and the diverse range of content available. New trends in lifestyle and fitness games have a role to play, along with advances in the serious games movement. Certainly charitable efforts like *Penny Arcade’s* Child’s Play can do wonders for the perception of games and gamers – if only it got a bit more play in the media.

Maybe we need our own summit to come up with a big – no pun intended – game plan?

In regard to the second question, well, that’s even tougher. No doubt, there will come a time when we all wax nostalgic over how charming the *GTA* series was, and how some newfangled metaverse will turn kids’ brains into jelly. And, in our old age, we’d likely be blind to the fact that we’d be singing the same ol’ song that’s been playing since humans first learned to mix nostalgia with panic.

Plus ça change ... [COMMENTS](#)

Jason Della Rocca is the executive director of the International Game Developers Association. (Opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the IGDA.) He really cannot understand why his 1-year-old daughter keeps smacking him even though she’s never played a video game. You can read his other musings at Reality Panic.

John Smedley got it right when he said that we need to take the words out of the politicians’ mouths.



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