

the Escapist

StarForce must die

Gamers are deleting the world's most hated copy protection - but what about the attitude behind it?

by Allen Varney

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EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Ahhh, The Community. It is simultaneously the reason for and the bane of the existence of entertainment producers (no, not just games), media publishers and politicians the world over. It is an odd grouping of people, publishers, producers and politicians, but the truth is, we do not exist without a community. We also get no rest with a community; a community keeps us on our toes, calling us on our every slip-up, purposeful or not, and wanting ever more from us in the form of product, information and promises.

I'm not complaining – it is what it is. In fact, the careful dance between community and the “owner” of said community can be quite entertaining and exciting. Trying to guess what the community wants, and guessing correctly, is exhilarating. Watching the speculation of a community about some new Thing being released or revealed is highly amusing, especially if you have the inside info.

But there is a flipside to all the fun. Guessing what the community wants incorrectly sucks. That speculation by the community can sometimes do more damage than good, i.e. overhype, incorrect speculation being accepted as fact. And undoing erroneous speculation or negative rumors is tough business.

Knowing this, people have always had to pay attention to the community. But that alone is no longer enough. In the past, our communities have been severely limited by geography. The farther away someone was from you, the harder it was to maintain a relationship – the travel time was longer, the post took longer, the phone calls were more expensive.

Enter: The internet.

It hasn't made travel take any less time, but it's made ticket booking easier. Email is a button away in many homes and at the workplace. With IM and message boards, phone usage has declined, as have phone bills. I can contact nearly anyone I know in an instant.

I can also contact people I don't know at all in an instant. I can find a forum, website or chat room dedicated to pretty much any topic I'd want. I can and do talk to several people from many different countries everyday. People from several dozen countries read this site every month. All of a sudden the world is a much smaller place.

And dealing with communities has become an entirely different ball of wax. We now have people of all different walks of life – religions, ages, native languages, socioeconomic status – mingling together on the forums of the internet. Creating a solid community that feels comfortable for different cultures, but similar interests is a difficult task. This, layered on the careful dance mentioned earlier, makes Community one of the most challenging aspects of business today. And for this reason, we've chosen to focus on community in this week's issue of *The Escapist*, “Block Party.” Enjoy!

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Response to “Hurry Up and Blog Me” from The Escapist Forum:
Bloggers aren't journalists.

Bloggers are to journalism what your grandmother is to medicine. That is, like your gramma, bloggers can provide remedies to some typical problems you might have. Gramma knows what to do when you have a cold or a sore throat. Bloggers are good at telling us how many people are in line for a PS3 or why they think the latest *Gears of War* review is unfair. But bloggers, like grandmothers, are not professionals at what they do and lack the required amount of training to do the job a professional would do. Gramma can't treat you after you fall down the stairs or come down with pneumonia. Just like we shouldn't do away with doctors, we shouldn't do away with trained journalists just because a bunch of people have started keeping online diaries.

- arrr_matey



In response to "Game Journalists on Game Journalism" from The Escapist Forum:

I would really like to see some true criticism. Example: *Gears of War*, best game ever and maybe it is. But, it's got ridiculous things like guns with glowing parts that would give a soldier's location away, 4 inch thick body armor but nothing projecting the most important part of the soldier - his head, robots that appear and disappear for no reason, missing scenes "we found the resonator" (O RLY? when did that happen), women that show up in a combat zone without shielding, Cities that look like Roman ruins and yet all the buildings are full of automated doors.

I'm only picking on *GoW* because it's the most recent game but many games are filled with story/setting BS like this and yet "game journalists" rarely bring it up. We don't except these kinds of things in other media. They exist in other media and they are called out on it. Not in games though. Why?

- greggman

In response to "Game Journalists on Game Journalism" from The Escapist Forum:

I think the thing we should be

criticizing is not that *Gears of War*, or indeed any specific game, has these continuity errors, but that the game industry by and large considers it acceptable for a game to have a plot even more threadbare than the female lead's costume in a summer blockbuster. Why, in short, the no middle ground between the fluffy and the cerebral is so bare. Why the only times when the story isn't just used as a half-assed excuse for the gunfights (in such times when a story would add any value to the game, that is) is when it's deliberately created for the purpose of telling that story.

- Bongo Bill

In response to "Game Journalists on Game Journalism" from The Escapist Forum:

How can we expect meaningful criticism (appreciated by adults, that is) when the latest, greatest games are tamed down and catering to kids? Will an independent videogame company risk its livelihood on a game made strictly for a mature audience?

When we talk about videogame journalism being in its adolescent phase, it's also a reflection on the products the industry offers. However, I think game

journalism should challenge and educate developers/publishers to make more intelligent offerings... and grow the industry.

I think *The Escapist* is doing a great job of this.

I'd like to see a game review site solely written by critical minds, taking the



gaming industry to task. So, *Escapist* ... when are we going to see a game review section to your portal?

- Echolocating

In response to "Miss Video Game" from The Escapist Lounge: It's perhaps a little terrifying that everyone chose to ignore the gender implications of said contest, and what it says about gaming culture.

- Dr. Wiley

In response to "Miss Video Game" from The Escapist Lounge: I was never a big fan of pageant type things anyway, so this doesn't endear me anymore. I'm a girl and I play video games. Does that make me a gamer? I like to think so but I'm not going to debate with anyone about it. In addition to considering myself a gamer, I am also a feminist and a contest like this one makes me cringe.

A pretty picture does not a gamer make, obviously. I tend to think of gaming as more of a passion than something

someone can just "qualify" for by X amount of hours or money spent. It's not a definition but it's a start. I like to consider myself a gamer and my significant other would definitely agree I'm sure. Whether anyone else cares is irrelevant to me, but I know I love lots of games for many reasons and I'm not going to join a contest to make myself feel more like a gamer.

- luminousshadow11

In response to "team Humidor on Used Games" from The Escapist Lounge: The only people that really benefit from used game sales are retailers. Some would say that the consumer benefits too and to an extent they do. They get to buy their games for a few dollars less in the short term, but in the long term the developers are shorted and we end up with less innovative games and publishers unwilling give new ideas a chance.

My mom always says "you get what you pay for."

-Lex Darko

In response to "team Humidor on Used Games" from The Escapist Lounge: If book publishers can cope with used books market, why not game publishers?

- iod





StarForce must die

Gamers are deleting the world's most hated copy protection
- but what about the attitude behind it? by Allen Varney

I think all responsible should have their heads cut off and sent to their mothers. They are scum and should be accountable for the full worth of anyone's PC who is affected by their DRM BS. Anyone who thinks otherwise deserves death also.

- "ME BIGGD01" commenting on Geek.com post "DRM causes big trouble again," March 22, 2006

Piracy, or filesharing, is computer gaming's West Bank, a bitter cycle of struggle across generations. Even choosing a term, "piracy" or "filesharing," can revive the debate, which began on Usenet in the 1970s, then moved to 1200-baud BBS FidoNet feeds - to roundtables on Compuserve and GEnie - to Slashdot and Digg and a hundred forums. The argument has become ritualized, a pathological fugue state. In every era, in every iteration, combatants unflinchingly, compulsively restate the exact same points, often in precisely the same order:

- It's theft;
- no it's not, it's copyright infringement;

- yes it is, pirates take income from the creators;
- no they don't, the pirates wouldn't have bought the game;
- without copy protection, the companies would go broke and stop making games;
- copy protection punishes honest users and doesn't stop pirates;
- blah blah, yammer yammer, mama mama please make it stop!

Yet in this spastic litany, one topic has finally united both sides: the widely used Windows copy protection software StarForce.

Choke It Down, Gamer Kid

Thirty publishers have used StarForce copy protection on over 150 PC games, including popular titles like *Splinter Cell 3*, *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*, *King Kong* and the *TrackMania* series. Some publishers even use StarForce on demos intended to be distributed widely and freely, to prevent hackers from using the



demo to crack the protected full version. Consumers unwittingly install StarForce's hidden drivers along with the game software. In theory, you need never become aware StarForce is on your hard drive. In theory!

To about the 80th percentile, gamers – or anyway, the gamers who post online – passionately loathe StarForce. In any forum topic about StarForce, embittered players across the spectrum speak in one voice about crippled operating systems and ruined CD drives. Many players report they bought honest, legal copies of StarForce-protected games, could not make them run and finally, in desperation, visited pirate sites to download no-CD cracks or warez versions. A dominant theme in these posts is resentment toward StarForce and game publishers for screwing up their customers' computers without warning. Publisher representatives seldom post to apologize or ask details.

Some complaints mention the system's combative publisher, Moscow-based StarForce Technologies Inc.. Among providers of copy protection, who are usually subdued, StarForce Technologies gained a high profile in January 2006

when public relations manager Denis Zhidkov threatened to sue Cory Doctorow, contributor to mega-popular blog Boing Boing, for calling StarForce "anti-copying malware" and thereby violating "approximately 11 international laws."

In a post on CNet in November 2005, Zhidkov (after threatening to sue another user) claimed, "The percent of users that had compatibility problems with StarForce is 0.3%." (For a million-selling game, this would be 3,000 users. Zhidkov was citing an October 2005 Ubisoft study that called the problems "consistent with any Windows application.") "The drivers are installed with the protected software," Zhidkov said, "and it is up to the software developer how they will be uninstalled. StarForce offers many ways to make the integration of protection flexible and user-friendly. And if some developers choose to select the option of manual driver uninstall, it is their sole right."

Zhidkov was responding to, and implicitly confirming, a point by the user "W0lfe": "StarForce is asserting, on the game's behalf, that the game's owners' rights are more important than the users' right

to know, and control, what happens on their system. ... [Users] should be presented with clear notice of what StarForce wants to do to their system and possible side effects – they shouldn't be left to wonder why some of their other software/hardware suddenly doesn't work correctly."

Clear notice? Not likely. On issues of copy protection, most game publishers maintain a stony silence. For this article, I contacted nearly a dozen companies that use StarForce, asking them to summarize their position on copy protection and to comment on the idea of listing a game's copy protection on its package. Not one company replied.

They may have asked themselves, "Why should we? We don't have to tell anyone anything."

My Way or the Highway

Steven Davis, CEO of gaming security firm SecurePlay, has written about StarForce on his popular blog, PlayNoEvil. Speaking to *The Escapist*, Davis says the StarForce controversy diverts attention from the larger issue. "Several major game companies are the real culprits. They allowed, very

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effectively, the StarForce brand to be the focus of consumer ire about anti-piracy. That we are talking about a small Russian programming firm, and not the huge companies that use the product, is a testament to the effectiveness of this tactic – the StarForce Trojan Horse.”

Meanwhile, game publishers keep invisibly messing with your computer – because it’s their “sole right” – and really, how can you stop them? Regarding Digital Rights Management, aka Digital Restrictions Management (DRM), it’s unclear whether you have enforceable consumer rights. Companies aren’t even obliged to list their DRM in a game’s documentation or End User License Agreement (EULA), let alone on its package; yet by accepting the EULA, you legally accept the copy protection. In a 2004 FiringSquad interview, StarForce Technologies’ Abbie Sommer said, “Our product is licensed to our customers [the publishers], and becomes part of their product, so the user, by accepting the terms, is giving approval.”

Fabrice Cambounet, producer for Ubisoft’s *Heroes of Might & Magic V*, in a choke-it-down post about StarForce on the Ubisoft company forum, asserted this like

immutable natural law: “When you install a game, you have to install all of its libraries; you don’t get prompted on each of them. Either you agree to install the game, including its protection, or you don’t.”

StarForce itself is only a symptom, and the disease will continue until we address its cause: the industry’s obsession with front-loaded, fast-selling hits. Big publishers earn a huge percentage of a game’s total revenue in the first few weeks of release – because they’re good at working you into a lather in advance, so you must-must-**must** own hot new games the instant they debut. In theory, DRM keeps cracked versions off the filesharing sites long enough to boost sales in those first precious days. In theory! In practice, nearly every triple-A game hits every self-respecting pirate site within hours of release, if not before release. The effect on sales is one battleground in gaming’s incessant piracy debate.

Regardless, if leading retail publishers stopped using StarForce tomorrow, they’d still rely on other DRM systems like SafeDisc, TAGES and SecurROM. Putting this stuff on your machine is their “sole right.”

Games that follow a different sales strategy need worry less. The Stardock Systems space strategy game *Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords*, released in March 2006, drew attention partly because Stardock CEO and designer Brad Wardell publicly disavowed all disc-based copy protection for the game. “I’m not a crusader against copy protection,” Wardell told *The Register*. (Stardock’s utility software WindowBlinds uses product activation DRM.) “It’s just business. We make more money on a game like this – a single-player, turn-based strategy game – if we don’t put stupid copy protection on it.”

Seemingly in retaliation, a moderator on StarForce’s copy protection forums posted a link to a pirate site hosting an illegal copy of *GalCiv II*. Another StarForce moderator later apologized and removed the link. Wardell says he contacted the pirate site and persuaded them to remove the illegal copy.

Today, months after the game’s release, *Galactic Civilizations II* is still selling well, aided by Stardock’s frequent online updates. Brian Clair, Stardock’s director of Games Publishing, told *The Escapist*, “We have no regrets at all on not using



StarForce Responds

The Escapist contacted Moscow-based StarForce Technologies to learn how the company is doing amid controversy. Public relations manager Denis Zhidkov answered:

"We have significantly improved our overall image this year. We started with going through Microsoft certification and passed 'Designed for Windows XP' tests. Shortly after that, we received a U.S. patent for our optical media protection technology, as well as two Russian patents. We are growing each year, and 2006 turns out to be even better than we expected. We are definitely pleased, especially considering the unexpected challenges we faced last spring.

"We are doing our best to make the most compatible and reliable systems that please the publisher and the end users; however, it is not always possible, simply because copy protection will never be popular. Imagine this – your car breaks down, and instead of taking it to the mechanic to be fixed, you go online and start complaining. Such behavior cannot make anything better. People that seem to run into problems with StarForce-protected products need to contact directly our support service: support@star-force.com."



copy protection on the *Galactic Civilizations II* discs. We're gamers ourselves, and we don't like the harsh DRM and copy protection methods that make legitimate buyers feel like they've done something wrong. We ran a poll of registered users on GalCiv2.com, and thousands of people said not having CD copy protection helped make the difference in their decision to purchase the game."

If There's a Lawsuit, We Win

Game journalists invariably frame the protection issue as "anti-piracy" instead of "why do we choke it down?" Still, ferocious community opposition to StarForce, in particular, has brought some change.

French gamer Laurent Raufaste runs the oldest of several "boycott StarForce" sites. Along with a list of protected games, Raufaste hosts forums for uncensored information exchange. "Before, the population concerned by StarForce was widespread on every publisher's forum around the web, and every post related to StarForce was moderated or simply deleted by the moderators. The Boycott Starforce website and forum are safe from easy

moderation." Now, he says, "There are many examples showing that the boycott, and the increasing focus on the cons of StarForce by the gamers, has forced some publishers to change their mind."

Community reaction has worked, but indirectly. Raufaste says his boycott site helped inform American customers of StarForce's problems; "it was only a European problem before mid-2005, and I kinda hoped the U.S. customers would help in making the publishers change their mind. That's when a class action was started."

The outcry against StarForce succeeded only when it lured hungry lawyers. In March 2006, in U.S. District Court in northern California, Los Angeles attorney Alan Himmelfarb initiated a \$5 million class action lawsuit against Ubisoft, alleging its StarForce drivers can compromise Windows system security. Himmelfarb had previously filed a November 2005 class action against Sony BMG after Sony secretly infected half a million consumer PCs with its Extended Copy Protection rootkit. Twelve days after the StarForce filing, Ubisoft – after ignoring the months-long anti-

StarForce firestorm on its *Heroes of Might & Magic V* forum – tersely announced it would drop StarForce protection from *HoMMV* and future releases. As other lawyers have started sniffing around the class action money tree, other publishers have started publicly disavowing StarForce.

Even so, some publishers grow ever more brazen. Inside the box of *Battlefield 2142*, Electronic Arts inserts a sheet that blithely informs you it will collect information on your surfing habits, so IGA Worldwide can deliver in-game ads (in the game you just bought for \$50). Then, EA tells you, in CAPITAL LETTERS, to choke it down: “IF YOU DO NOT WANT IGA TO COLLECT, STORE OR TRANSMIT THE DATA DESCRIBED IN THIS SECTION, DO NOT INSTALL OR PLAY THE SOFTWARE” – that you just bought for \$50 – “ON ANY PLATFORM THAT IS USED TO CONNECT TO THE INTERNET.”

Blogger Bill Harris commented, “I wonder how much of this we will take. Gamers in general seem to be extremely complacent and entirely willing to get kicked in the face (or, in this case, somewhat lower). Is there a point at which even we get fed up?”

It’s possible intrusive copy protection, and maybe even the piracy debate, will finally wind down when online game distribution overtakes retail sales. Customers will authenticate purchases not through DRM, but online through services like Valve’s Steam, WildTangent and GameTap. This only begs the question, what will game publishers next shove onto your computer? Ad-service spyware, EA-style? Anti-cheating measures? In 2005, Blizzard secretly installed its Warden sniffer on at least four million *World of Warcraft* clients. If you play *WoW*, maybe you’re fine with that. The point is, nobody asked you. What won’t they ask you about next?

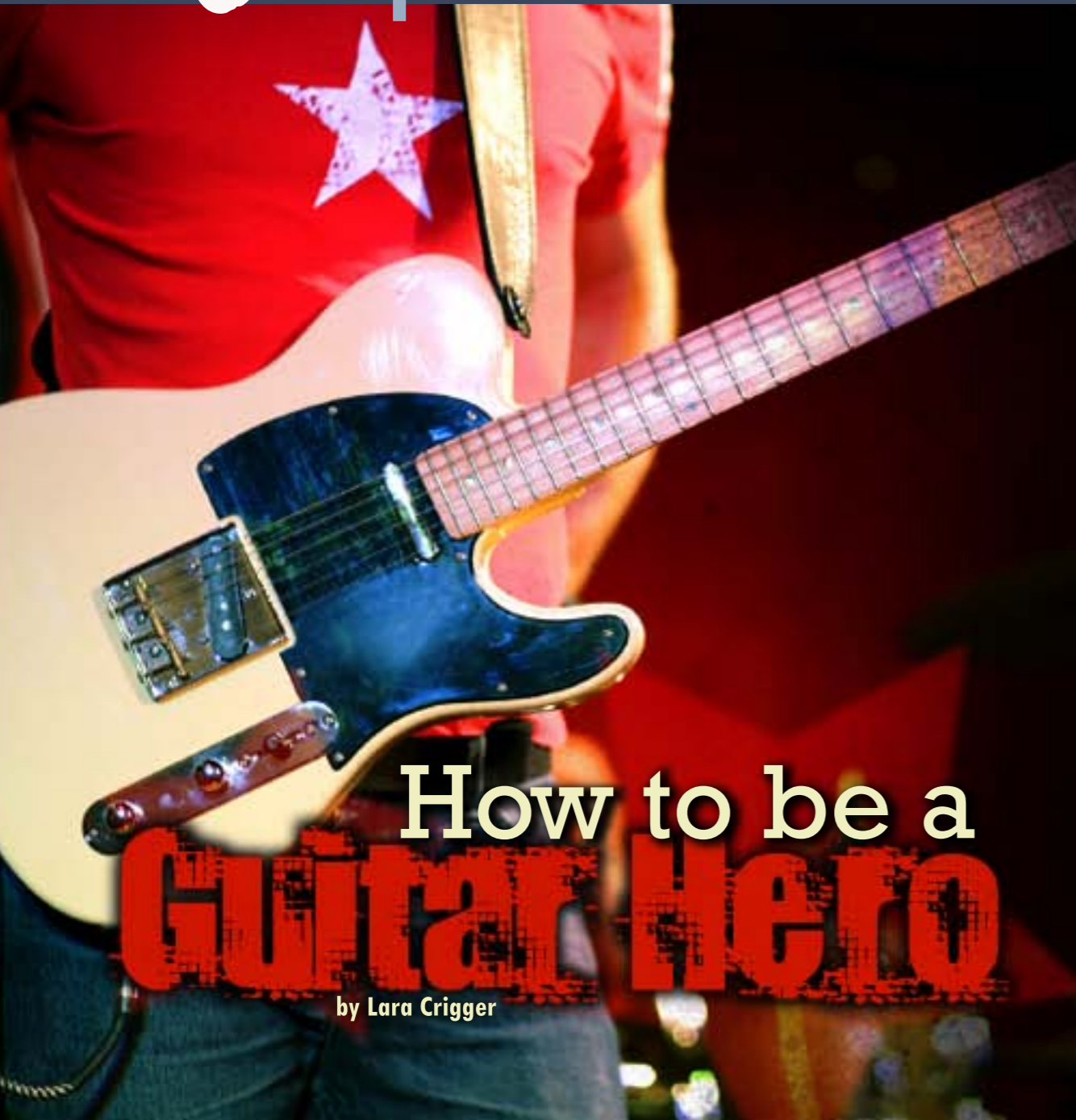
StarForce, whether it survives or dies, changes nothing important. In the name of combating piracy or cheating, or of serving ads – or, really, just because they can – publishers will keep deciding what to install on your machine, as is their sole right. And you, the honest gamer, will keep choking it down. [COMMENTS](#)

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

A DRM Bill of Rights

Bill Harris, a financial professional in Austin, Texas, has written about StarForce in his unpretentious yet addicting game blog, (mis)named *Dubious Quality*. Commenting to *The Escapist*, Harris says, “Our rights as consumers are getting absolutely trampled. And the kind of protection we need is just common sense.” Harris suggests this declaration of principles:

1. If the copy protection scheme is not clearly labeled on the game box, and I decide **not** to install the game because of the copy protection, I should be able to return the game for a refund.
2. Any copy protection that’s going to be installed on my system should be clearly identified – not by one line in a five-screen licensing agreement, but by a separate identifier entirely.
3. After copy protection has been installed, I should receive a notification **every time it runs**. And it should **never** run unless I’m trying to start the game.
4. If a copy protection program does find something it deems “suspicious,” it should notify me immediately. And if the game isn’t allowed to start as a result, there should be a screen telling me where I can go for more information.
5. Any copy protection that adversely affects the performance of my hardware is not “copy protection” – it’s malware.



How to be a

Guitar Hero

by Lara Crigger

You know who Brownbag Johnson is. That's his wailing guitar in "Cheat on the Church", the Graveyard BBQ song that won the first "Be A Guitar Hero" contest. You know because you rocked it out: You shouted the words to its shrill opening sermon; you head-banged your way through the whining glory notes; you felt your fingers cramp and burn on those never-ending, face-melting riffs. Admit it: You played the **shit** out of that song. And every time you did, you felt like you were 18 feet tall with cajones the size of cantaloupes and throngs of adoring fans prostrating themselves at your bedroom slippers. Basically, you felt like you were Brownbag Johnson.

But when Brownbag Johnson played his own song, he felt more like you. "Let's put it this way: Our bass player's little brother - who's only 8 years old - can kick my ass at it," he laughs. "Even though I wrote the song, I'm not totally kicking ass at the game."

Ever since *Guitar Hero* descended upon an unsuspecting public last year, regular joes like you and me have become conquistadors of rock, sweating out our souls over plastic guitars. The game sold over a million copies and schooled

thousands of rock neophytes in the Pantheon of Metal Mythology: Ozzy, Pantera, Motorhead, Megadeth. Thrashing in unison, we threw up the horns for everyone from Palmer to Hendrix, and somehow, without even completely realizing it, we all started thinking, "Man, Boston can totally **crush** it."

But even better was that secret thrill upon purchasing yet another indie gem in the Unlock Shop. Really, who didn't stomp around their living room in Kubrick-esque glee to "Caveman Rejoice"? Or kick it hoity-toity style with "Eureka, I've Found Love"? And who among us could resist the lure of that mournful organ and that thin, unintelligible growl in Graveyard BBQ's dirtcore anthem, "Cheat on the Church"?

Tracking the Indie Scene

From the beginning, producers planned a *Guitar Hero* tribute to bands in the indie scene, because, after all, every Hall of Fame mega-group must start somewhere. "All great bands start off as small up-and-comers," says Ted Lange, associate producer for RedOctane. He worked on both *Guitar Hero* games and helped run the "Be A Guitar Hero" contest. "What better way to support

rock music as a genre," he asks, "than to turn people on to new bands that may one day be headliners?"

The original *Guitar Hero* included 17 unlockable indie tracks (metal deities Zakk Wylde and the Black Label Society notwithstanding). Some songs were relatively easy to acquire: Many of the bands, like The Acro-Brats and Anarchy Club, feature musicians who moonlight as Harmonix employees. For the other slots, however, developers scoured the local Boston scene, approaching dozens of bands in the hopes of finding someone crazy enough to sign up.

However, now that the franchise is established, Harmonix doesn't need to search so hard. For the second game, which expanded its indie offerings up to 24 tracks, the company was deluged by mp3s from bands hungry for videogame immortality. "It's really great. You never know when you're going to hear the next big thing," says Lange. "Sometimes, we find the rare gems in the sea of music we get."

RedOctane and Harmonix's quest for songs also included the promotional "Be A Guitar Hero" contest, which ran for

both games and promised the winner a primo slot in the indie set-list. The only requirements for entry were that submissions had to be "hard rock" or "heavy metal," with a featured lead guitar. Committees from both Harmonix and RedOctane then whittled the songs down, choosing the winner based on sound and ease of adaptability into the game.

Dirtcore Pioneers

Although the contest drew many submissions its first year, Lange says that selecting a champion was easy. "Graveyard BBQ was, without a question, the winner," he says. "As soon as we heard that first slide on the guitar, we knew we had something unique."

The band, on the other hand, had been utterly ambushed by its own success. Graveyard BBQ had actually formed as a joke in 2003. Four good friends would get together and pretend to be redneck yokels, complete with fake beards and Confederate flags, while slinging out some serious tunage.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the graveyard: The audience loved it. "It started out as a few select shows, but



it kept escalating," says Johnson, lead guitarist. "We had no expectations for anything like that, but we just kept going with it." Soon, they ditched the fake beards and concentrated on perfecting their thrash-metal dirtcore sound. Before long, the band had enough material for a full record, and one year after forming, the group recorded their first album, *Greatest Hits, Vol. 1*.

Johnson recalls discovering the "Be A Guitar Hero" contest through The Noise Board, a local scenester forum often frequented by Boston musicians and businesspeople in the industry. On a lark, the band sent RedOctane a CD with a few songs, including the fan favorite "BBQ Nation", as well as "Cheat on the Church." "Again, no expectations; just send it in and see what happens," recalls

Johnson. "Sure as shit, we landed a gig on the game."

When Johnson learned that "Cheat on the Church" had been chosen, "it was pretty much the best thing that's ever happened," he says. "Obviously, to see your song, which you pretty much wrote out of your bedroom, in a videogame that has been exposed to millions of people - that's just surreal."

Winning the "Be A Guitar Hero" contest marked a turning point for the band. Before *Guitar Hero*, no one - especially the members of the group - had taken Graveyard BBQ too seriously. Although they'd achieved some local notoriety, the group had never toured, been interviewed by any publications, or even released a second album. "But once it exploded like



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that, with the whole *Guitar Hero* thing, it was just so huge," says Johnson. "[The band] turned into its own monster."

Hits at the Graveyard BBQ website and Myspace page skyrocketed. Fans started to demand tour dates, cover songs, t-shirts, guitar tabs and CDs. Album sales also rose - which presented a unique problem, because, until recently, Graveyard BBQ had no management. "I'm literally selling CDs out of my bedroom," says Johnson.

Above all, Johnson notes, concert attendance exploded. He attributes at least half of the band's new fanbase to the *Guitar Hero* exposure. "People were curious to see us," says Johnson. "A lot of people that played the game had no idea that we were from the Boston area. So it's definitely been a big exposure bang for us." Fans have even asked him to sign their *Guitar Hero* controllers after concerts, which he happily does.

From the beginning, producers planned a *Guitar Hero* tribute to bands in the indie scene.

Graveyard BBQ doesn't reappear in *Guitar Hero II*, but the band continues to hunt for more exposure and fame. They've just signed with new management, and, although they still need a new keyboard player, they're currently shopping around for a record deal. In early November, they went into the studio to record their second album, which has been in the planning stages for over a year. Once the record's released, Graveyard BBQ plans to hit the road nationally in support. "At this point, we're full throttle," says Johnson, with barely contained glee.

Overall, Johnson can't say enough positive things about his band's *Guitar Hero* experience, and for good reason: The game essentially transformed Graveyard BBQ from a "hokesy-jokesy side project," as Johnson calls it, into a real-life rock show. Johnson fully admits that the band owes its current success to the franchise. "Without it, I'm not saying we wouldn't have people interested in the band," he says. "But *Guitar Hero* was such a huge thing that it's definitely aided in building a buzz for the band."

The question is: Will history repeat itself for this year's winners?

The Next Generation of Raw

"This year, the turn-out was insane," says Lange. "We listened to more mp3s than you can imagine. It's tough when you can only choose one."

That one happened to be "Raw Dog," by The Last Vegas, off their 2006 album, *Seal the Deal*. Unlike Graveyard BBQ, The Last Vegas has been pursuing mainstream fame for quite some time. Started back in 2001, the Chicago-based band toured the States constantly over the last three years; they also completed a seven-week European stint over the summer. Their sexy, frenetic sound - a chimera of biker rock, punk and raunch - has spawned rave reviews in national publications like *Village Voice*, *Bass Player's Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly*. They've even appeared on MTV's G-Hole, with music featured on Fuel TV and MTV's *Pimp My Ride*. These guys mean business.

Before they'd entered the "Be A Guitar Hero" contest, the band had heard of the game but never played it, says John Wator, lead guitarist. "We spend all our time traveling around," he explains. "We don't really have a lot of time for videogame stuff."



LAURA ROYLAND
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their song in *Guitar Hero II*. Initially, Wator was shocked. "Honestly, it was a lot harder than I thought it would be. You think, 'Well, I wrote the song, I shouldn't be that bad!'" he laughs. "I was just on the middle level, too. There's definitely some people out there who will blow me away playing the game."

"It's really fun, though," he adds. "Definitely up my alley." I ask him what the band liked best about the game, and he replies, "Chad [the lead singer] was a big fan of 'Shout at the Devil,' but personally, I enjoyed any song that let you use the whammy bar a lot."

Wator laments that the indie scene is difficult to escape, and for most bands, mainstream success will always be elusive. Still, he's cautiously optimistic about the *Guitar Hero II* exposure. "When you're on this level, it's really hard to get out to new people, especially younger kids, because they can't come out to a lot of clubs that we play," he says. "Now you get this opportunity, where people might not even be looking to find a new band, and they come across something that perks their ears and makes them think, 'Hey, that's kind of cool.'"

They'd only heard about the competition from a friend, who forwarded them the Harmonix email explaining the contest rules. Intrigued, Wator submitted "Raw Dog," but he figured nothing would come of his entry, since the odds were stacked so high against the band. But sure enough, "Raw Dog" blew everyone at Harmonix and RedOctane away.

As part of the winner's package, The Last Vegas traveled to New York City to conduct press interviews and test drive

As of press time, the launch publicity boom hasn't hit The Last Vegas just yet, but Wator can't wait. "Pretty much the whole experience of this has been great," he says. "Anytime you get something like this that can open more doors, that's pretty exciting."

Tomorrow's Guitar Heroes

Lange affirms that as long as the *Guitar Hero* franchise continues, it will definitely include indie bands. "We're always going to support the indie scene," he says. "The indie scene is where most great bands start."

As the *Guitar Hero* franchise moves to the next-gen systems, particularly the Xbox 360, online content distribution may prove surprisingly promising for future indie bands. Some of the material that couldn't fit into *Guitar Hero II*'s final release will appear on Xbox Live - including, suggests Lange, maybe a few

tracks from the companies' indie archives. "We're still planning everything out," he says, "but with downloadable content, we can do a lot."

As for the indie bands themselves, both Johnson and Wator were impressed by how accessible *Guitar Hero* is for non-musicians. Johnson says he likes how the games inspire people who've never picked up a guitar in their lives. "It's opened up so many avenues for people to really get back into rock 'n' roll," he says. "To pick up a guitar and mess around with it, and turn yourself into a guitar hero." [COMMENTS](#)

Freelance journalist Lara Crigger, whose previous work for The Escapist includes "Playing Through the Pain" and "The Milkman Cometh," had way too much fun writing this article. She plays a mean Expert-level "Symphony of Destruction."

Wator laments that the indie scene is difficult to escape, and for most bands, mainstream success will always be elusive. Still, he's cautiously optimistic about the *Guitar Hero II* exposure.



“You’re Wrong”

by Dana Massey

opinion should be ignored. Your thoughts must be digested – it’s hard to ignore loud screaming - but discarded.

It sounds harsh and definitely won’t be a popular opinion, but the most dangerous thing a developer can do is listen to his hardcore community.

The hardcore can and have led developers astray. Before a game undergoes production, developers write what’s called a design document. Detailing various technical and operational aspects of a game, it functions as the team’s battle plan, but it’s hardly a static document. It is fluid, evolving as development progresses. It is on the

strength or weakness of these documents that good or bad games are born.

Too often, though, perfectly good games get confused, turned around and bashed over the head by those who claim to love them most. It’s tragic, really. They enter beta, with all their bright ideas and shiny new toys and then some 14-year-old screams, “This sucks!” At a company with strong leadership and vision, this is read, digested and considered, but rarely do they succumb to the mighty weight of one 14-year-old and a few of his buddies. At a not-so-steady company, a post or 10 like that can be fatal.

Welcome to a world of reactionary development. Every time the community screams, the developers shift focus and try to put out that fire. Suddenly, the game is no longer in development, but rather in commercial service, and this is wrong. Testing phases are for testing and there is no way to say with any idea of accuracy that something truly does suck until all the spices are in the pot.

Games are huge undertakings. Clever designers, like good cooks, need all the different ingredients to work together for the final result to be appetizing. Like

cooking, you cannot just go “voila” and have the whole friggen game there. It takes time, it takes massaging, it takes patience.

You, my hardcore friends, lack patience.

The hardcore, for the most part, play games in beta the way they’d play any old game they got from Best Buy. They try to get better, they try to win. When they find something boring, they scream and yell. Yet, for some reason, those egocentric screams are fatal.

It is extremely hard to build a work of art while people piss and moan about how much they hate it. Imagine Leonardo da Vinci with a group of art critics in his studio as he painted the *Mona Lisa*. He’d end up with a brown canvas. When too many people are yelling contradictory opinions, and developers try to accommodate them all, they get a brown canvas; something that is entirely innocuous, but completely pointless. These are also known as unremarkable or - dare I say - bad games.

Yet it happens every day, and I blame the increased importance of online communities for the current dilution and

You’re wrong and should be ignored, but don’t worry, you’re loved.

If you’re reading this article, you’re likely a hardcore videogame fan. You read message boards, and you’re not afraid to tell developers what they’re screwing up. I’m here to tell you that if you’re a member of a specific videogame’s community, your

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sameness of so many games, especially in the MMOG genre.

So, the skeptic may point out that I am basically suggesting developers ignore the very people for whom their games are made. Not exactly.

I suggest only that game developers ignore their hardcore fans. By hardcore, I mean anyone who uses videogame-related message boards. Like it or not, the people posting are not a representative sample of your community. There's a reason no one believes that girls play videogames despite constant studies saying the opposite. They have better sense than to dive into the acid culture that exists on most videogame message boards. They'd most likely just get asked if they're "hawt." There goes half the audience from that sample so many game developers listen so intently to.

I am all for interaction between developers and their customers. The *Vanguard* development team implemented feedback forms in their beta test that asked people what they thought of what they just experienced. It's a

snazzy little trick, right there in the client. That is good feedback. Kind of. The only problem there is this: Only the hardcore beta test. How many vaguely interested Wal-Mart shoppers camp forums waiting for a beta sign-up? Not many, I would wager, but it is these people that end up paying the bills and it is they that developers need to keep happy.

Videogame developers need to avoid the temptation of showing off their toys until they're totally painted. Bean counters won't like it, but beta tests should not exist until the game is nearly ready. They should not be about development, only polish. If studios want to know what prospective players think, they should learn some lessons from other industries and show it to representative focus groups once it's done.

The nefarious trick for videogame developers is to ignore their community without telling them. It's evil, it's underhanded, but if you can still fool the hardcore into buying into your brand, so much the better. In order to get them, they need to think they were only **this far away** from getting their names in the credits.

It can be done. The trick is to have smart community relations people. These are people who can rationally use a message board to talk to players. There, they post, they discuss and they explain. They let the community know they're reading and that they're not wasting their time.

In reality, though, the community better be wasting their time. Community management is public relations when it's at its best and cause for reactionary development when it's at its worst.

Developers must learn to stick to their guns and see their visions through. Half-finished products are always going to inspire hate, and no matter how much it stings, making drastic changes in response to community complaints invites disaster. When the hardcore yell

You, my
hardcore
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patience.

that something "sucks," developers must learn to tell them how much they love them and tuck them in for the night.

 COMMENTS

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





Deathmatch making

by Jim Rossignol

Richard and I sat on opposite sides of a huge mahogany desk. In his world, he was a success. He had been the vice president of a large international bank, and now he owned his own financial consultancy group, of which I was an employee. His manner suggested he had some serious news.

“We’re going to have to let you go,” he said. “I don’t feel there’s really a place for you here. I’m sorry.”

And that was the end of my unpromising career in finance. In Richard’s world, I was a failure. But I didn’t care. I had been sacked because my attention was focused elsewhere: *Quake III Arena*.

id Software’s *Quake III* was honed to a special kind of perfection over years of patching and layer after layer of mod coding. It was transformed from the basic idea of people running around in an arena blasting each other with outlandish weapons into a competitive experience which has yet to be paralleled by gaming science.

I was happy to be fired, because I clearly had better things to do. I might have been an unemployed bum with an ever-decreasing bank balance, but I had a *Quake* team to run. In that, at least, I was determined to be a success.

Yet, I hadn’t started out all that seriously. At the time *Quake III* landed, I was playing the deathmatch version of hoodlum-shooter *Kingpin* and explaining to my Dad that yes, these were real people in the game and no, he couldn’t use the telephone tonight. I joined a team, a “clan,” and was happy to irregularly play in matches on Tuesday nights.

Soon, I was the top scorer in our team, and I was pretty pleased to leave my online gaming at that. As other games came out, though, the *Kingpin* scene began to disperse. Just to support my weekly habit, I found myself looking

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beyond *Kingpin* for the first time. I decided I liked the techno-goth horror look of *Quake III*. I hadn't enjoyed *Quake II* all that much, but hey, maybe this would be different.

It was. While *Quake II*'s deathmatch had been oddly ponderous, with rockets that strolled along like pedestrian bricks, *Quake III* was twitchy, precise, **faster**. I was suddenly presented with a different order of challenge. I was hugely excited and asked the remaining *Kingpin* players to try this incredible new game.

They did, but for various reasons, they were uninterested or uninspired. I continued to play organized competitive games of *Kingpin*, but I soon realized that the older game was small potatoes compared to what was going on in *Quake III*.

In *Quake III*, I had been on a server where one player had killed 20 others before my map had even loaded. He was talking about high-end clan play to other gamers on the server. He killed multiple assailants at will. He was showing off. I was in awe.

Soon, I became acquainted with a couple of players who weren't particularly good but were keen to learn. I had rapidly picked up tricks of the game and spent all day browsing forums and reading advice on gaming websites (instead of doing my work at the financial consultancy). I began to train my friendly newbies in the art in which I myself was only just beginning to excel. They, too, progressed quickly. Each night, we searched for empty game servers on which to practice together.

Then, one night, I dueled a player I had never met before. He was a far better player than I, which was no surprise, but it was the first time I had played a genuinely talented player who wasn't already in a clan. Did he want to join us? "Sure. ... When do we start?" And so the team was born.

Suddenly, we were contenders. From being just a few people messing around in the casual space, we transformed ourselves into a practiced team. We played systematically for four hours, three times a week. We registered with the now-defunct "Barrysworld" (a non-profit player-run gaming organization) and entered into competitive gaming. We

were able to book servers on which to play privately, and our time gaming on open servers meant that we were quickly acquainted with other teams – many of these wanted sparring partners with whom to practice. After a few trial runs, we signed up to the leagues, entering at a fairly low rung, as befitted our obvious inexperience.

By this time, I was obsessed. I was a player-coach, unable to focus on anything beyond making my team stronger, faster and more efficient. In those early days, there was almost no broadband internet in the U.K., and most of the team played via dial-up modem. I meticulously researched the ways in which modems

could be tuned for better response and greater signal stability. I rebuilt the *Quake III* configurations of the team, fine-tuning the setups as one might fine-tune a race car. Visual embellishments were stripped away, leaving a flat, polygonal caricature of the original game – all the better to see our enemies.

Dial-up modems also meant that for the first few months of play, voice over IP communications (now standard in online gaming) were impossible to use. The team developed a huge array of "binds" – messages sent to the team at the touch of a key. For instance: "I HAVE THE FLAG, WILL GO LOW." The team

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responded with a practiced defense of the low route on a capture the flag map. Our best players dove headlong into enemy blockers, splattering them across the level as the flag carrier sprinted for the enemy base.

It was frenetic. Adrenaline was limitless. I was ecstatic.

Technical issues dogged us constantly, but they were nothing compared to the time I had to put into **people**. We had to play on public servers constantly to look out for new talent. We were competing against dozens of other clans to recruit decent players, but we were also competing internally. If the best players got too good, they would want to move on to a more proficient team, and many did. It was my task to balance egos in a way that made sure everyone was happy. If I didn't field less talented players regularly enough, they would not feel valued and end up leaving for other teams that needed them or would quit the game entirely. We had to make sure we had practice partners we could beat at least 50 percent of the time or morale would collapse. I was, in effect, running a sports team.

We lost players, we recruited more, we upgraded to broadband, we mastered new maps and new techniques. We won Razer mice and GeForce graphics cards – we even designed our own tournament-level map.

Eventually, we elected one player to be a full-time in-game coach. Inventive modders had created the possibility for one player to spectate four or five other gamers' views on his screen at any one time. Immediately, all pro *Quake* teams adopted it, and we **had** to have a coach to compete. Adapting to a constant stream of verbal information from a single player who could see it all was bizarre and to this day unparalleled in my gaming experience. It was also the moment when I realized just how far we had come: Nothing else was like this, anywhere in history, and we were at the heart of it.

After many months of gaming, we eventually found our highest achievements in the second division of the European leagues. We were, perhaps, in the top 1,000 players in Western Europe. It was almost too much for us, and each match was a 40-minute

ordeal of split-second timing and agonizing combat management. Every victory was a triumph and every loss a disaster. Exhausted, we took a voluntary drop in league placing in the next season and never quite recovered. People slowly dispersed into other games, and, eventually, I closed the books.

And all this lost me my job.

Was it worth it? Giving up gainful employment to not even be a significant success in a gaming scene that would dissolve into nothing with the passing years? Hard to say, but I eventually told this story to stubble-faced men in a room full of gaming paraphernalia in the west of England. A week later, they called to offer me a job as a game journalist. Not everyone would call that a happy ending, but it was good enough for me. [COMMENTS](#)

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

I was, in effect, running a sports team.



How to **Win Friends** *and Influence Gamers* by Ryan Shwayder



What is a grassroots effort, in relation to gaming? They're essentially methods of getting people to play your game by appealing to the community in a variety of ways. To me, grassroots efforts focus on one thing: the gaming community and treating them the way they deserve to be treated.

Working for an MMOG developer, communities are incredibly important to the longevity of our games, so we want

to keep them happy. Word of mouth is one of the best ways to get new customers for any game, and players trust other players more than they do the company trying to sell them something.

During my time at SOE, we had a few really big community-centric wins. The most significant one had to be the SOE Fan Faire--a gathering of the members of online game communities from SOE games in the real world. That's right, people actually met each other and socialized in person. Such events helped build a tight-knit community that transcended the bounds of a single game, strengthening not only the game's brand, but the company's.

In addition to the Fan Faire, we ran Community Summits. Influential members of the community were identified and flown out to speak one-on-one with developers, give feedback, receive feedback, get to know each other and generally have a good time. These small events are amazing for spreading the love from the top down - happy community leaders help lead to happy communities.

I've always made sure to keep in contact with key members of the fan base,

whether it's via email, instant messenger, phone, or any other medium. Being accessible is invaluable. I also wrote Letters from Blackguard monthly, sent via snail mail to community leaders, which included a personal message, a gift and even a signature from your's truly.

Last summer, the community team at SOE came up with a great idea: an event during Comic-Con designed to draw fans closer together. Thus, the SOE Block Party was born, where hundreds of players came, drank, tossed baseballs at me in a dunk tank, played the games and hung out. It was a great way to foster a good community-developer relationship on minimal budget, which reflected well in the media as well as our players.

There's no doubt that focusing your attention on community leaders will grant you big returns, but what about the everyman unconcerned by what happens on message boards and just wants to play your game? Despite the massive size of MMOG communities, it's not that hard to reach out personally to hundreds or even thousands of people at one time.

On occasion, I would make an in-game appearance with my avatar, Blackguard.

Whether it was leading a snowball raid all the way from the gates of Freeport to the stone walls of Qeynos or doing battle with a famous dragon from the game, every time I appeared in the game, I got an amazing response. Sometimes I would simply log on and chat with people. I loved doing it, and players loved being part of it. What's more, I probably spent all of one hour a week to make such a huge impact.

The way you treat your players when communicating with them is also very important. I've always made sure to be upfront and honest when communicating with players. They are intelligent. They see through the BS. Tell them the truth, and tell it to them as early as you can. I never made false promises I knew I couldn't keep.

I also make sure to be fun and open with players. The post that went over better than any I can remember was "A Closer Look at SOE," in which we played on a post made by a player and made fun of ourselves, complete with pictures.

But there's no success without failure, and during my time at SOE, I definitely had a few. In one particular case, we got

it in our heads that it would be a great idea to contact guild leaders from other games and offer them free access to EQII. Bad move. It backfired, earning us negative press and very little positive response (if any). Long story short, some guild leaders took great offense to us approaching them, and it engendered a lot of ill will toward SOE and the game. It took a whole lot of effort and returned badly, even though we never expected anyone to be insulted when we offered them free stuff.

For future reference, here are some general guidelines when you build your next community and want to take it further than the norm:

Do things that are genuinely kind.

Give the military a discount on their subscription, give students a discount on their subscription, give seniors a discount on their subscription. Create family plans that allow for a certain number of accounts to fall under one blanket, making the per-account subscription cheaper. Donate a portion of the proceeds to charity. People know when you're truly trying to be a helpful company, and that builds reputation.

Spread connectivity to your game further. Let people chat with players in-game from their cell phones via text messaging, email, etc. Keep everyone in touch, and they'll want to keep playing and spreading the word.

Keep up with the trends. Blog, make podcasts, create videos for the game, make MySpace pages and simply make sure to take advantage of every free or cheap method you can use to get to players.

Don't ever ignore your game's community. They are the lifeblood of an online game and should be considered more than just customers. Stay in touch with the players, and treat them with respect. Be honest, and don't be afraid to have fun - after all, that's why we play games in the first place! [COMMENTS](#)

Ryan Shwayder has been named Community Relations Manager/Designer at GMG and will be working to establish the company's presence through the web and other media. He volunteers his time for local IGDA chapters and is well-known for his game development blog at Nerfbat.com.



“Despite the **MASSIVE SIZE** of **MMOG COMMUNITIES**, it's not that hard to **REACH OUT** personally to **hundreds or even THOUSANDS** of people at one time.”

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