the Escapist

Turning the Tables:
Microsoft's Second Chance Console
by By Dean Takahashi

FROM BORG to BOSS:
Gaming with Microsoft
by Russ Pitts

Number of the Beast:
FASA, Microsoft, and ARGs
by Shannon Drake

I Have NO MOUTH and I MUST Blog
by Mur Lafferty

The PERCEPTION engineers
by Spanner

ALSO:

EDITOR'S NOTE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

STAFF PAGE

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Julianne Greer

Here at *The Escapist*, we've done several issues profiling large companies. These companies were chosen because they have left an indelible mark on the world of gaming. Most of these companies started with the intention of making games, grew into large companies making great games and continue to dominate their respective "specialties" within games. And these companies have found the thing at which they excel and so, have stuck to that, continuing to refine and improve.

This week's subject is not quite the same. This week's subject accounts for the Operating System on 85 percent of the computers in this office, accounts for the very program in which this letter is composed, accounts for an amount of revenue similar to the GDP of any number of small countries, and also has a program or two for accounting. And now they account for a large percentage of "stuff" in the game market, whether in the form of their proprietary console or their Game Studios' creations, or perhaps even recent forays into the world of games press.

Yep, this week we tackle Microsoft. Not literally, you understand; that would be much like a fly ramming into an 18-wheel transport truck, speeding down the highway. But, we do take a high look at the inner-workings of Microsoft, their Game Studios, their Xboxes and their features, and even their "Perception Engineers." Find these topics and more in this week's issue of *The Escapist*. Enjoy!

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In response to "'You're Wrong'" from The Escapist Forum: The hardcore may not *always* be wrong, but they (we) are *always* safely ignored.

The hardcore complain about *everything*; so we can't just point to one or two cases where their complaints were justified as some sort of proof that they (we) have any credibility.

The most important thing for developers to remember --the place where I disagree with this article altogether-- is that *official* message boards are a waste of time altogether.

They're an ineffective, error-prone, and expensive method of official communication. All the benefits of message boards can be easily gleaned by reading the community boards. All the benefits of official communication can be had by actually publishing *information*. Official boards are a waste of time and resources.

- roc ingersol

In response to "'You're Wrong'" from The Escapist Forum: This may be the way in PC game land, but in every company I've worked for making console games have had focus groups.

We put an advert in numerous sources, some aimed at the "hardcore" - signs in EB for example - and others not so hardcore - we ask our friends and relatives.

This is a much better process for giving feedback - we have casual gamers as well as hardcore gamers.

Anyway, more of the stupid decisions get made by execs hired by companies

because they're (supposedly) good managers or marketers, but who really have little knowledge of the games and the games industry, than by hardcore gamers.

- FunkyJ

In response to "'You're Wrong'" from The Escapist Forum: The problem with message boards is that many people use them to express, and gain recognition, with regards to their thoughts on whatever the subject may be. If you type "I didn't like a weapon in this game" on a board you're not going to get any recognition, whereas if you say "They have totally destroyed this game by designing the crappiest pea shooter weapons ever seen in a video game - congratulations you all suck!" you may get more responses (and recognition) as its more emotive, but you're thoughts are no longer realistic.

Therefore it would be ridiculous to use a message board for improvements - or as a place to provide feedback to you're beloved game developer. They are just a marketing tool.

- Nobodies15

In response to "Starforce Must Die" from The Escapist Forum: It always irritates me when people attack the publishers' (or whoever's) decision-making on our part, and then proceed to make the decision that we are all being "kicked in the teeth" or "sucking it down" for us. It's really quite demeaning, offensive even, to those of us who don't work ourselves into rages about anonymous anti-cheat data collection that's never even glanced at by a human, or who are really not that bothered by the minuscule chance that SF might possibly maybe do permanent damage to our computers.

I also find it amusing that both the author and several unrelated others I've come across lately during my interblag travels are describing Steam, GameTap and their peers as the 'alternative' to DRM - when in fact they are textbook definitions, far more so than SF in fact. Just goes to show: it's not the idea that's to blame.

-Tom Edwards

In response to "Starforce Must Die" from The Escapist Forum: I love the analogy given by the Starforce guys

about their product: "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." And they urge everyone to contact their support if there are any problems. One minor problem with this recommendation is Starforce's complete denial that their software can ever cause any problems. With this belief, how can they fix anything?

A better example would be this. I buy a new car, and I pay for some gas to go in the tank. As it's being put in, I notice the attendant is under the car, working on my brakes, without even asking me or telling me what he does. Is it any wonder that when my brakes fail, I'm not inclined to return to the gas station attendant to have them fixed?

- milieu

In response to "Gears of War: I Wouldn't Buy It" from The Escapist Lounge: Well, I almost entirely disagree with this review, but that's the beauty of opinion!

Something I found interesting: You are holding the *Halo* franchise up as the gold standard in this review. Both *Halo* games suffered from some significant design flaws in the single player campaign but offered staying power through excellent multiplayer. Gears undeniably has flaws, but if the single player campaign doesn't hold your attention the online multiplayer is really beautifully done. Yet, you don't mention it, even as you point to *Chromehounds*, a game with a cursory single player component at best, as a good example of a game with lots of content for your $60. Try co-op or vs. multiplayer before you dismiss the game.

- Ian Dorsch

In response to "Gears of War: I Wouldn't Buy It" from The Escapist Lounge: I don't think I could disagree with a review as much as I am with this one.

- Albedo777

In response to "Team Humidor on Used Games" from The Escapist Lounge: The next question is how the inevitable transition from optical media to digital distribution will play out for brick and mortar retailers. There will still be people who want something tangible when they buy a game. Will they be able to go to a kiosk at EBGameStop, choose a game, and have the kiosk burn it to a disc?

- Ajar

FROM BORG to BOSS:
Gaming with Microsoft

by Russ Pitts

Before Halo, Gears of War, Games for Windows Magazine and even Xbox, Microsoft was a software company which had made its billions by doing the one thing it did best: buying other companies and, to quote Star Trek, assimilating their technological and biological distinctiveness into its own.

What we now know as the Windows operating system had its humble beginnings in a place called The Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), which at the time was operated by Xerox. PARC invented the world's first graphical user interface (GUI) which was appropriated by Apple and then from Apple by Microsoft. In 1995, Microsoft did it again, liberating a version of Marc Andreessen's revolutionary Mosaic code from Spyglass Software and transforming it into what we now know as Internet Explorer.

The company's history is heavy with such acquisitions. From networking technology to ad services to media players, Microsoft has made one thing quite clear over the years: If they can't beat you, they will buy you.

In the late '80s, free-thinking and independent technology enthusiasts began calling Microsoft "The Borg" after the Star Trek villains who wiped the galaxy clean of all opponents by literally "assimilating" them. To many, Microsoft's slash-and-buy business practices appeared little more than a modern monopoly on all things having to do with computers, and one has to wonder if the Congress and Supreme Court of that era were as pseudo tech savvy as they seem to be today, Microsoft would have escaped the 20th Century with only a single anti-trust suit to their name.

After 30 years, Bill Gates has seen his dream come very close to reality; today, there are computers in almost every home, on almost every desk, and around 90 percent of them run Microsoft Windows. Microsoft does not enter markets, it dominates them.

FFor this article, The Escapist spoke with two men behind the two companies key to Microsoft's dominance of the game industry, Bruce Shelly of Ensemble Studios and Jordan Weisman of FASA Interactive. Both men and their companies were assimilated by Microsoft. Together, they laid the foundations for Microsoft's emergence as possibly the single most successful game publisher in

the industry, and, in the end, not a bad place to work.

"We Wish To Improve Ourselves"
"When we were looking for a publisher in 1995, Microsoft was by far the most proactive about making a deal work," says Bruce Shelly, a manager and designer at Ensemble Studios, the creators of Age of Empires. "We were predisposed to work with them for several reasons. First, they had lots of resources; publisher bankruptcy was not going to be an issue. Second, they could command shelf space. If we developed a quality game, it would get a fair chance to succeed in the marketplace. And third, they were relatively new in games and looking for product. If we created a hit, it could be the foundation of a franchise for them."

And it was. Age of Empires was an instant success, spawning two sequels and a spin-off franchise. Shelly characterizes the relationship as mainly a good one, stopping just short of crediting the merger for Ensemble's survival.

"Getting acquired was not part of any plan I was aware of in 1994-1995," says Shelly. "We were totally focused on

creating a great first game and surviving long enough to get that opportunity. Only after the success of Age of Empires, when our short term survival was assured, did we begin thinking more strategically.

"[Microsoft] had been our only publisher at the time of the acquisition. We had to make some changes on the HR side, and we took on more direct responsibility for production, but otherwise, the transition went smoothly. I joke that the benefits were better but the network worse (security is tight)."

"To Facilitate Our Introduction …"
Near the turn of the century, with Microsoft's Xbox project nearing the final development stages, the company turned its eye again toward expansion of the Game Studio. This time, however, the eye turned inward.

"The games being produced [internally] were not really good games," says Jordan Weisman, founder of FASA Interactive, creators of the BattleTech universe. "The majority of developments were external. The only internal team when we joined was [Flight Simulator], which is more of a hobby than a game,

so we were [essentially] the first internal team. Everyone else was external around them. And they had specifically reached out to quality development houses."

Microsoft acquired FASA in 1999.

"MechWarrior 2 had been in development, with us trying to help [Activision] with development for several years," says Weisman. "And due to the development of … the location-based entertainment centers that we had built, we had developed the knowledge and competence

- more than competence, we were one of the best of breed groups for doing 3-D games. And, so … the license was coming up. … We approached Activision and said we'd like to change the relationship, such that we'll actually develop the product, as well, and you guys distribute it." Activision declined, so Weisman took his proposal elsewhere, initially signing a distribution deal with MicroProse.

A few years later (after MechWarrior 2 "went crazy, and doubled the size of Activision overnight"), the phone rang - it

"Microsoft does *NOT* enter markets, IT DOMINATES THEM."

was Microsoft. "Talking to the guys at Microsoft and seeing kind of what their objectives were, the growth they wanted to go through, and the resources that were there, that was pretty seductive. And so, ... we left Chicago and moved to Washington.

"Xbox was a challenge. It was a real challenge, because when Xbox came along, Microsoft Games had gone from being a laughingstock to being the number two or number three publisher of PC games in just a few years. It had become a significant player in the PC market, and well-respected and, frankly, that got put seriously at risk by the mandate that we go out and pursue Xbox.

"We went from 300 people to 1,500 people in about 24 months. And that's a huge amount of growth. Obviously, that was a totally different field, a totally new field, a much more mass-market field. The original premise of the Xbox was sold to senior management that our PC game designers could port over the videogame concepts. It was wrong. They're totally different game design philosophies; the living room versus the den. The interaction models are
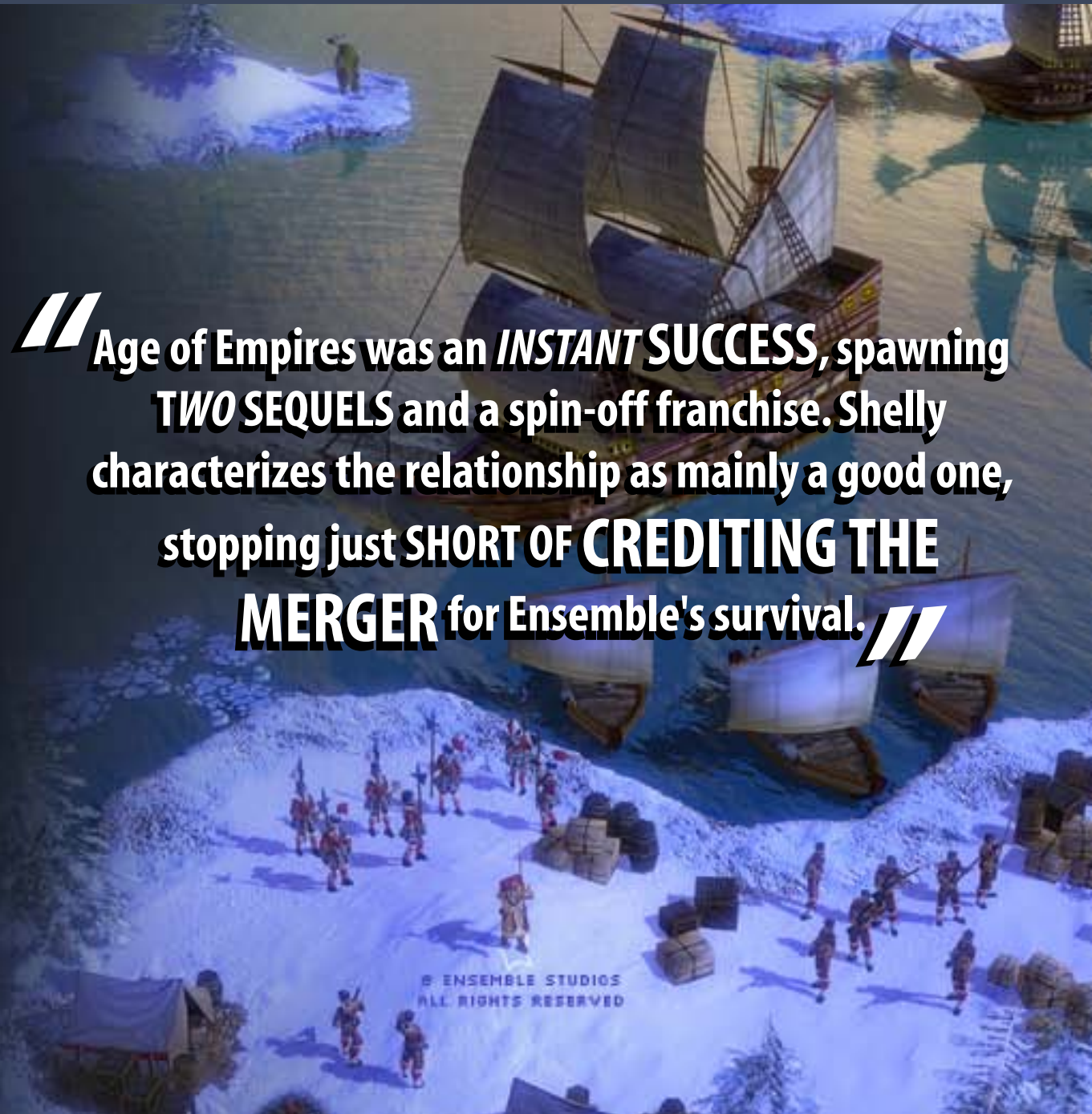
different. The timing cycles are different. It's a very different model. So it was a real challenge. It put a lot of strain on the organization, as you can imagine."

"Your Culture Will Adapt"

"Once we reached an agreement, we integrated very well on the production side," says Ensemble's Bruce Shelly, describing Ensemble's assimilation into Microsoft. "I think, together, we learned more about what was a realistic expectation for costs and time when creating A-title games. We learned more about the value of extensive testing. We were committed to the 'design by playing' process, and they recognized that it did work for our games.

"I don't know how it works for other studios, but we work to a multi-year product schedule for our studio that is reviewed and adjusted at least once per year, both internally and with MGS. We have usually [have] one major game in production and at least one prototype underway.

"We have to demonstrate to them a business case for what we want to do and the technical ability to do the work.

> "Age of Empires was an *INSTANT* SUCCESS, spawning *TWO* SEQUELS and a spin-off franchise. Shelly characterizes the relationship as mainly a good one, stopping just SHORT OF CREDITING THE MERGER for Ensemble's survival."

Any proposed product has to fit within the strategic plans and portfolio for all of MGS. There is plenty of room within those restraints to make great games that we are passionate about.

"It makes sense to me that they want early warnings of issues rather than big unpleasant surprises way down the road. If we are slipping, they try to find ways to help us get back on track. I want to emphasize that these are positive relationships. We all have the same goals. We want very much to succeed, and they want us to also."

"Microsoft is an engineering organization." says Jordan Weisman. "It's not an entertainment organization. And they were … applying all the same standard engineering techniques that they'd used for Office and operating systems to entertainment. And it doesn't work.

"Entertainment is about a central vision. And everything has to be built to focus on that vision and make that vision come to life. … And the vision has to be, we call it 'big ego and little ego.' You have to have a big enough ego to put that vision out there and keep it alive, but you have to have a small enough ego

that as people contribute to it, you're able to encompass that and unify that and keep it with the larger vision."

"I don't recall a single concept that came down to us from MGS," says Bruce Shelley, regarding Microsoft's reputation for being control-oriented. "I can recall how they suggested in a few cases we change the topic for a concept. Even in that case, it was our decision to change or not. They left the creative process largely to us. I remember they asked us to include Asian civilizations in [Age of Empires] because they thought there was a good market there.

"It seems the more successful a studio's games, … the better the transition looks. When things are going well, there is less desire to fix anything. [Although] being a first-party developer within Microsoft [does preclude] us from developing games for the PlayStation."

Jordan Weisman, however, still has regrets. "At the time we joined the Games group," he says, "it was about 300 people. And we represented about 10 percent of it. … I think everybody was a little scared and excited. In retrospect, the integration did not go well. … Let's say, part of what they

wanted from us was our development culture, because we'd worked very hard to have this collaborative, effective team, and they wanted to kind of build those kinds of teams and kind of capture that. In reality, … the machine of Microsoft, unintentionally, I believe, and inadvertently, ripped that apart. Rather than model itself around what we had done, our [culture] got forced into their model. … We lost that special sauce that we had built.

"What Microsoft wanted was a culture, and what it ended up with was 40 very talented people, which are two different things."

"Resistance is Futile"
Today, it's hard to consider the story of Microsoft Game Studios as anything other than a sterling success. The studio's banner flies high over both the PC game space and Microsoft's own Xbox console, and now claims ownership of some of the industry's most innovative developers, including Rare (Goldeneye 007, Perfect Dark Zero), Lionhead Studios (Black & White, Fable) and Bungie (Halo).

Yet for Jordan Weisman, the process of turning a successful business software company into a successful entertainment software company took its toll. "When I

joined the organization," he says, "the game design was something the producer, or what they call the program manager, [would] be doing at night. It wasn't a discipline unto itself. And the same was kind of true at art. The organization didn't really have an art ladder or a design ladder. And so … it was a lot of education on their part.

"It was really frustrating. The MechWarrior team had at least a year delay to reconstitute ourselves and bring that together."

Bruce Shelley's Ensemble, however, found their culture to be a more perfect fit, and is still making innovative strategy titles for Microsoft, most of which bear the "Age of" label (although the company's latest, which is still in development, is set in the land of Halo). I asked him what it was like being known as the "House of Age." "A year ago," says Shelley, "Tony Goodman, our studio head, had an epiphany about our development plans. We had a second project underway. The team said it would be a really good game, but it was not their dream game. After thinking about that for awhile, he decided to stop that project because he felt it was critical that

the leaders on a team at least be very passionate about it.

"We then put together two prototype teams containing some of our best people and told them to create their dream games. A third prototype is now in development. We are hoping that these will all turn into great new products, all very different from Age of Empires. Many of our people really want to do something different.

"If everything takes off, we will have to grow our studios substantially and our culture will have to adjust. MGS has strongly encouraged this new thinking. They would love to have a first-party studio launch some great new products that might become franchises. It is an exciting but daunting challenge, but at this point I don't think our studio has ever had better morale or more excitement."

For Weisman, the personal victories come in smaller sizes. Such as helping colleagues avoid the same fate as his FASA. "It was fascinating to me [in 2001]," he says, "when we were involved in the Bungie acquisition. … It was kind of eye-opening. We spent a bunch of time talking about how, if indeed we

were going to go through with this acquisition, the best case was to leave [Bungie] in Chicago. If that fails, we have to create an isolated situation: They're not a part of Microsoft HR; they're not in the way of that part of the org chart; they're in a totally separate, isolated room. There's that locked box that you leave them in. Because otherwise the same thing will happen to their team that happened to mine.

"While I couldn't convince them to keep it in Chicago, I did convince them to give them a private office and leave them totally alone, which is why I think the Bungie team survived in a much better state and was able to keep a lot of its own development culture rather than get absorbed into the Borg." **COMMENTS**

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

> "For Weisman, the **PERSONAL VICTORIES** come in smaller sizes. Such as **HELPING COLLEAGUES** avoid the same fate as his **FASA**"

TURNING the Tables:

Microsoft's Second Chance Console

by Dean Takahashi

When *Gears of War* debuted Nov. 12 to critical acclaim and frenetic fandom, it was the culmination of a years-long strategy for Microsoft to gain credibility in the videogame industry. And it was just in the nick of time to make the Xbox 360 look good, as Sony and Nintendo launched their consoles. It was proof that Microsoft could live up to its promise of launching second-generation 360 games, just as the rivals launched their first-generation titles.

One game isn't going to win the console war, but Microsoft's newest hit will keep its console in the limelight at a critical time when gamers are deciding where to invest their hard-earned dollars. *Gears of War* arrives just as Microsoft has plenty of consoles available in the market, while at least one of its competitors is supply-constrained. As such, the game is one more piece of evidence that Microsoft is executing according to its plans. It remains to be seen if gamers will anoint Microsoft the console king, or if the 360 is doomed to fall behind, now that it is no longer the freshest lettuce on the shelf.

The string of on-time results with the 360 makes Microsoft seem accidentally

brilliant. After all, it was an accident, because Microsoft had no clue about when Epic Games would really finish the game. Cliff "CliffyB" Blezinski, the lead designer at Epic Games, proposed his concept for *Gears of War* in 2002. It turned into four years of effort, $10 million in development costs and a marquee title.

And when Microsoft launched the 360 last fall, its executive team really didn't know that they would beat Sony's PlayStation 3 by a year. Now, as Microsoft enters its second holiday season, it has more than 160 games available, while Sony will struggle to get 22 out by year's end, and Nintendo shoots for 32 games on the Wii. Microsoft has a permanent advantage over Sony in this generation.

"In the last generation, we were late and our box was more expensive to build," said Bill Gates, former chairman of Microsoft, on a recent visit to the TechNet conference in Silicon Valley. "We said this generation we we're not going to repeat that. We traded positions with Sony. We came out a year before them. We have lower costs and a sleek box."

Sony's $600 version of the PS3 is indeed more expensive to produce, with an estimated manufacturing cost of $840, according to a "tear down" analysis by market research firm iSuppli. The same company estimates that the 360 now only costs $323 to manufacture. The cost difference is important, because Microsoft is in a position to introduce price cuts that could drive Sony deeper into the red. In its most recent quarter, ended Sept. 30, Sony's earnings fell 94 percent to $14.4 million because of costs related to its laptop battery recall. It also reported a $369 million operating loss in its videogame business due to PS3 start-up costs. Sony has $4.7 billion in cash and $3 billion in short- and current long-term debt.

Meanwhile, Microsoft has $31.8 billion in cash. The Entertainment and Devices division, which includes games, grew its sales for the most recent quarter by 70 percent, to $1.03 billion. The division lost $96 million, down from a loss of $173 million. Even if all of its other businesses were just breaking even, Microsoft could lose that much money for 80 years before it ran out of money.

Robbie Bach, president of the E&D division, says Microsoft has no intention of just bleeding Sony to death. His goal is to make the division profitable through smart thinking, not brute force. He says the division is on target to hit profitability by June 30, 2008. In the last generation, Microsoft lost an unimaginable $168 per box, or about $3.7 billion altogether. It burdened every machine with a $40 to $50 hard disk drive, making the hardware too expensive to ever break even. This time, Microsoft balanced its system better, toning down the technology in the name of shaving costs.

Bach says things are coming together. Xbox Live is years ahead of Sony, with more than 4 million active members, he says. Microsoft has also launched its $199 HD-DVD add-on accessory to compete with the PS3's ability to play Blu-Ray high-definition movies. Microsoft has begun a service to allow 360 owners to download movies and TV shows onto their consoles. And with a new update, the 360 can now display games in the same 1080P resolution the PS3 uses. "As far as technology goes, it's a wash," Bach says.

Sony's executives say they're just getting started.

"If you look at our launch titles, our lineup looks very good compared to what Microsoft has," said Phil Harrison, head of Sony's worldwide game studios.

But Sony has plenty to worry about. At the very least, industry executives and

Microsoft could lose that much money for 80 years before it ran out of money.

analysts believe Microsoft will gain market share in the newest generation of consoles. And if Sony and Nintendo fail to execute, Microsoft might have a chance to take the lead.

"Sony could go from first to third," said David Cole, an analyst at DFC Intelligence in San Diego, CA. "Clearly, it will be a much closer race this time."

But it's too early to count anyone out. Both Sony and Nintendo were able to delay their own launches of next-generation consoles because their profits were being fueled by the launch of new handhelds. In 2005, those handhelds accounted for the bulk of the growth in the market, allowing Sony and Nintendo to hang on to a lot of the industry's profit. In 2006, the Xbox 360 has fueled a lot of growth in revenues, but Microsoft hasn't been able break into the black. Meanwhile, Sony is enjoying a lot of residual sales for games on the PlayStation 2, which has been outselling the Xbox 360.

Some of the company's big first-party titles, such as *Crackdown*, *Too Human* and *Mass Effect*, have slipped in production, and won't be released until 2007. The dearth of first-party titles reflects the fact that Microsoft has the smallest internal development team among the console makers. It has about 1,200 game developers, while Sony has 2,500, Nintendo has an estimated 1,500 and Electronic Arts has more than 5,500. It will be hard for Microsoft to beat its rivals if it doesn't have enough soldiers on the battlefield.

Microsoft has also failed to take advantage of its lead as much as it could have. A big shortage of memory chips hamstrung production in 2005, and poor quality on the initial units forced Microsoft to make an embarrassing admission 10 months after the launch: Units made before 2006 were so poorly constructed, Microsoft promised to offer free repairs to anyone who had problems with an early console. And while Microsoft promised to hit 10 million units before Sony sold one, the company only had sold six million units – shipped into the distribution system – as of Sept. 30. Clearly, there has been a lot of friction that has held back Microsoft from cementing a huge early lead.

P.J. McNealy, an analyst at American Technology Research, says Microsoft's production problems are behind it, and he estimates it could sell 10 million to 11 million consoles by the end of the year. By comparison, he thinks Sony will be lucky to ship two million consoles, while Nintendo could move four million Wii machines. Thanks to its long head start, McNealy said Microsoft will still be ahead of Sony by the end of 2007.

Technological obsolescence is one of the greatest threats facing the 360. Sony's Blu-Ray games are already using a lot more capacity on a disk than Microsoft's games are. That means Sony's games

Sony has plenty to worry about. At the very least, industry executives and analysts believe Microsoft will gain market share in the newest generation of consoles.

could eventually surpass Microsoft's in depth. Even if that never comes to pass in the 360's five-year lifespan, Sony is trying mightily to convince gamers that the 360 is yesterday's technology. Kaz Hirai, CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America, contends that the PS3 is "future proofed" for the next 10 years, thanks to Blu-ray and the Cell processor.

Nintendo remains the biggest wild card. It has executed better on its launch than either Microsoft or Sony did. By focusing on easily manufacturable low-end technology, Nintendo was able to ensure a huge supply of Wiis for its first holiday season. Cole believes Nintendo will be able to hit its target of four million units worldwide by the end of 2006. And Nintendo has a fighting chance to expand the market to non-gamers, says Robin Kaminsky, head of North American publishing for Activision.

Shane Kim, head of Microsoft Game Studios, says Microsoft is also trying to expand the market to non-gamers. That was why Microsoft's Rare studio worked for years on *Viva Pinata*, a kid-oriented game with cute piñata animals. However,

Nintendo is certain to offer many more titles that appeal to non-gamers. While Microsoft seems obsessed with taking away gamers from Sony, Nintendo may have the more elevated plan of expanding the market for games. If that strategy works, it may pull ahead of its rivals.

But Nintendo's newfound competitiveness could also help Microsoft. Moore has acknowledged the value of the "Wii60" psychology among gamers who realize that they could buy two consoles for the price of the PS3.

In some sense, the battle for the next-generation consoles seems harder to call than ever. But looking at Microsoft's challenges in 2006 and comparing them to the challenges of launching the Xbox in 2001, it's clear the company has come a long way. There are still big elements of Microsoft's strategy that have yet to play out. *Halo 3* is expected to launch next year, and Microsoft will debut its "Live Anywhere" communications system to leverage the PC, 360 and cell phones. With such prospects to come, neutral parties like Electronic Arts continue to throw considerable support behind the

360, even as they ramp up support for the other consoles.

"By being No. 2, we got the chance to play again," said Gates. "Our credibility is strong with developers and publishers. Now with the Xbox 360, we're playing with different rules based on what we've learned." COMMENTS

Dean Takahashi is the author of "The Xbox 360 Uncloaked," available at www.spiderworks.com. Write him at dtakahashi@mercurynews.com.

Nintendo remains the biggest wild card.

Number of the Beast:
FASA, Microsoft, and ARGs
by Shannon Drake

While Jordan Weisman guided Microsoft's game division to respectability, worked on the cutting edge with Virtual World centers, started a cool miniature gaming company and currently heads up a bleeding edge ARG design firm, he describes his background with a simple, "Let's see. I was a college dropout who founded FASA." Founded in 1980 by Weisman and a partner, FASA — short for Freedonia Aeronautics and Space Administration, after Groucho Marx's fictional country in *Duck Soup* — was a tabletop gaming company known for legendary franchises like *Shadowrun* and *Battletech* before becoming one of the flagship developers in Microsoft's efforts to legitimize itself in gaming.

Going back a little further, Weisman describes himself as "a severe dyslexic growing up, and [I] had bluffed my way through school until about age 16. I succeeded in never actually reading a book up to that age, as many dyslexics do. You become very good at cramming your way through that kind of stuff." *Dungeons & Dragons* changed all that. "[When] I was a camp counselor up in Wisconsin, one of the other counselors discovered the game and brought it to camp and got me involved in it. It was a

very eye-opening experience. It was this complex, immersive entertainment experience that really made you think, that made you collaborate with your peers, socialize and problem solve. It was like nothing else I'd seen."

More importantly, "It also finally forced me to read, because there was no way to cheat through it. If I wanted to start telling my own stories and running my own games, I needed to read those damn books. And I also needed to read Tolkien, so I understood what the hell an elf was, and Sauron, and orcs. ... It was part of a big turning point for me." He says he "really fell in love with the concept of creating that kind of immersive social entertainment. I did that through what was left of high school and my abortive college career and then decided to go pro, if you will, [by] starting FASA."

He describes the early days of FASA as "very small. It was [started], literally, around my parents' kitchen table when we were playing a game that I was running. It was a system called *Traveller*, which was a system published by Game Designers' Workshop. I said, 'Hey, I'm going to start up a publishing company, initially to publish accessories

for *Traveller*. Anybody want to come in on it with me? I need 150 bucks.' Ross Babcock, from across the table said, 'Yea, I'm in for $150.' So we became partners, went down to the local quick print place and printed up stuff, and started hocking it door to door to the different stores in the Chicago area." At those stores, he says, "We asked them where they bought their goods and developed a list of distributors and started sending stuff out to distributors. So it started with the two of us and my girlfriend and grew from there." Two or three years later, they were "the second-largest company in that very small industry, after the guys who published Dungeons & Dragons."

FASA's success in tabletop and electronic gaming brought Microsoft knocking. The fate of the FASA team is covered more extensively in Russ Pitts' "From Borg to Boss," but his team experienced considerable difficulty adapting to Microsoft's development culture, and one is struck by the sense that Microsoft's by-the-book engineers didn't quite know what to do with a bunch of free-thinking creatives. On a personal level, Weisman calls it a "mixed bag. I learned an enormous amount." Each of the companies he's worked with has

"different strengths and weaknesses," he says. "I get to be part of corporate America for a while, until I find my soul again and go back to the garage." He picks his words carefully, saying, "For me, personally, I think [selling out to Microsoft] was the right thing to do. It gave me an opportunity to play, to have what is one of the dream jobs in any game designer's world. … If you're the Creative Director for a major launch platform in the videogame world" - in this case, the Xbox - "that's a pretty darn cool position to be in."

I was curious about what led to his decision to leave. "Well, you know, I started out in the paper games industry, and after 13 years of working with programmers, I think I needed a bit of a break," he said, laughing. "But I also think that, as cool as being on top of the food chain for Xbox and Microsoft Games was, from a Creative Director's standpoint, it also meant that I didn't get to work on my own projects. I was babysitting everyone else's. And, ultimately, that's what I left to do. So in that period of time, there were only two projects that were mine." Those two projects were *Crimson Skies* and *The*

Beast. "*The Beast* I was sort of doing totally off in left field."

While *The Beast* was not the first alternate reality game, it is a major reason for the genre's popularity today. Not only was *The Beast* a highly successful game on its own, the many players it drew in - especially a dedicated group called the Cloudmakers - contributed to many new up-and-coming ARGs and continue to breathe life into the genre. Microsoft's contribution was, Weisman says, almost entirely accidental. "Microsoft had acquired a license to do games based on Spielberg's film *Artificial Intelligence*, which is a tall order, because it was not a movie that anybody was going to walk out of saying 'Gosh, now we get to play the game.'

"Whether you liked the movie or not, it's a very private, emotional story, not a classic game-setting type of story. But the universe in which the movie was set had some game potential. It was a dynamic universe with interesting technology and some interesting central conflicts, which could be used as an interesting backdrop for games. Microsoft had a need to be able to effectively bring the backdrop of the

> **FASA** was a tabletop gaming company known for **LEGENDARY FRANCHISES** like Shadowrun and Battletech before becoming one of the **FLAGSHIP DEVELOPERS** in Microsoft's efforts to **LEGITIMIZE** itself in **GAMING**

movie to the forefront and use it as a context to set our games against."

As Creative Director, Weisman says, "I was looking at ways to do that, and we used the platform to experiment with some of the storytelling techniques that I'd been wanting to do on the web. [I was] looking for a story format that's dynamic for the web. Because in my mind, every communications technology eventually develops a narrative format that takes advantage of that communications technology." He uses examples, like the novel existing because of the printing press, movies existing because of film, and so on. The web, however, "didn't have a storytelling format that was developed specifically for the web."

At the time, the web "was used to transmit previously created formats of linear and branching concepts. So I kind of stood back and said, 'Well, what do we do on the web every day?' I really looked through a ton of crap trying to relay information in a way people would care about," be it an article or photograph or whatever. He likens the way people look for information on the web to "an archaeologist looking through a lot of sand for a piece of pottery, for a shard of

pottery. And if they find the shard, they find more shards of pottery, and if they find enough, they can not just reconstruct the pot, but the entire society that left that pot behind thousands of years ago. I thought that would be an interesting way to tell stories, what we call the deconstructed narrative.

"I thought about, given the communication technologies and tools at our disposal. … Would there be a way to form what we called The Hive Mind, and focus [the players] on the telling of the story … rather than us telling the story to them?"

As he began to explore that idea, "it turned out that Warner Brothers was also looking for a way to raise exposure for [AI]." This was largely because, he says, "[Spielberg] was not giving them any film to work with. He likes to keep the story really close to his chest and not have the entire story revealed in the trailers, which is something I [can] appreciate."

The challenge came when he tried to explain to the marketing division the idea of building an elaborate game and then not telling anybody about it. The reaction was, Weisman says, "'Wait a minute, we build a ton of expensive

content and don't tell anybody it's there? That's not marketing! Marketing is about telling people.' And I was like, 'Yeah, but I think the rules are changing.' And I think, now, the demographic we're talking about, the bigger the neon sign, the faster they run the other way.

"Luckily, Steven Spielberg and Kathleen Kennedy [A.I.'s producer] fell in love with the idea when we presented it to them. Steven loves storytelling, and the idea of being part of an experiment in a new form of storytelling was very exciting to them. With their support, Warner Brothers had no choice but to sign on."

Getting back to the reason he left Microsoft, Weisman tells me he left because "I'd started a company called WizKids. It was initially just designed to be kind of a relief from the bureaucracy of Microsoft, a little hobby because of this game idea I'd come up with. … But that little hobby took off at this incredible rate, and was growing really fast, and I needed to leave Microsoft and run it full-time. … And that company grew very quickly, and we sold that to Topps in 2003." Prior to the acquisition, he'd started up another company called 42 Entertainment, which dealt in ARGs

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and other forms of new marketing. "After the acquisition, I was able to devote more time to 42 as I was fulfilling my obligation to Topps, and [I] left Topps earlier this year to be full-time with 42."

And then to bring it all full circle, 42 wound up working with Microsoft again, through Weisman's prior ties there. I asked him how he happened to leave a good enough impression on Microsoft's internal marketing teams to be hired on as a third-party ARG developer.

"In entertainment, marketing and product development have to be completely hand in glove, because the entertainment experience starts at your first exposure and goes through the final credits, and your first exposure is usually via marketing," he says. "So, in my mind, that should all be one organic whole, right from the beginning, right to the very end."

Microsoft, "like a lot of large companies, has this giant, spiked Berlin Wall between marketing and product development, and [there was] a huge amount of animosity between the groups, which I thought was very counterproductive, and so one of the big agendas I had when I joined the

company was to try to tear down that wall." Part of that process was simplification, requiring "our game designers and our producers to be able to ... sell their product in 50 words or less." The reaction of product development was, predictably, "'This is crazy! The game has so many levels of subtleties!' And I'm like, 'Look, if you can't do that now, why, $5 million and two years later, is some schmuck in marketing going to be able to do it?'"

"There were a few groups that really got it, you know, so I built very good relationships with them over the course of this process." Some of these groups were eager followers of what Weisman and his team did with *The Beast*, and when one of these groups was building the campaign structure for *Halo 2*, 42 was tapped to put together another ARG. "The goal for us was to take it from what it was already going to be, which was the largest videogame launch, and turn it into a pop culture event."

The basic idea for what would become the ARG *I Love Bees* came from a very classic source, he says. "The mainline marketing campaign for the product goes around the theme of *War of the Worlds*.

That was their kind of inspiration point, you know? Because the Covenant was going to attack Earth in the beginning of the game. So our team sat down and thought, 'So, in a *War of the Worlds* context, what's the right sort of jumping off point for us?' And we returned to the Orson Welles broadcast from the 1930s."

The idea evolved into taking a "six-hour radio drama and then breaking it into one-minute pieces and sending [them] to pay phones around the world." Once the basic concept was in place, he had to "sit down with a bunch of teams, who, luckily, I knew well. ... They let us play in their playground and create a story, which has a great twist at the end of it, in that the players, ultimately, inadvertently, are the ones who call the Covenant to Earth. So it had that sting at the end of it."

While pinning down the number of players in an ARG is notoriously tricky business, I Love Bees was, at the very least, an Internet culture phenomenon, with signs showing up in presidential debates and one enterprising player driving into the heart of a raging hurricane to answer a game-related phone call. Did it come as a surprise to Weisman and his enterprising team of

Puppetmasters? "You always dream that people are going to really appreciate it and get involved and love it, but at the same time, you're never really prepared for when it really connects."

Since the *Shadowrun* debacle was still fresh on our minds, and we had one of the guys behind *Shadowrun*'s initial incarnation on the line, I felt I had to ask what he thought about FASA and Microsoft's activities since he'd left. "I'm disappointed that they aren't continuing, or they don't have an active *MechWarrior* project in development. I think there was, and continues to be, a big audience and it continues to build well."

Regarding *Shadowrun*, he picks his words carefully, saying, "I know a lot of the development cycles that that went through and some of the challenges the team has faced. I think, also, there are some unfortunate things that they changed in the fiction and, frankly, they're correcting. I think they're reaching back out to the fans, and in a way that I think the fans will respond positively to. You know, it's hard, because there's a lot of issues that they can't talk about externally, the fans only see the outside stuff and wonder what

logic could've resulted in that and what was done. I think there are some very interesting gameplay dynamics they've introduced into that game. Would a first-person shooter have been my first pick for *Shadowrun*, personally? Probably not. Do I think the first-person shooter that they've developed is an interesting one? Yeah, I think it is. I think some of the fictional faux pas are being addressed."

With a resume like his, Weisman could work anywhere. With that in mind, I asked him why ARGs, what the draw was to him there? "I love telling stories. And I love working with other storytellers. And I love trying to tell stories in new and different ways. So, ARGs are just the latest in a series of new ways to tell stories that I've been experimenting with over the God knows how many years I've been doing this now. And I don't think we view what we did in *The Beast* as ... like, the early movies, you've seen in movies like *The Great Train Robbery*, we haven't even gotten the basic cinematic tools yet ... . And I think every year we're moving that forward and learning more and more about this art form, and the stuff we have in development now is sort of taking it to the next level. So it's exciting to kind of

be out there and experimenting and discovering where the boundaries lie. We're enjoying it. We love doing that. It's all about, you know, screwing with people's minds. That's what's fun."

`COMMENTS`

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

> **With a resume like his, Weisman could work anywhere. With that in mind, I asked him why ARGs, what the draw was to him there? "I love telling stories. And I love working with other storytellers"**

I Have No Mouth and I Must Blog

by Mur Lafferty

The phenomenon of blogging has been going strong for the last five years, and, in a fit a naval gazing, the phenomenon of reporting about blogging (or, God forbid, blogging about blogging) has been going strong for about four of those years. What are the roles of blogs? How much power do they have in regard to traditional media? How careful should you be when blogging about your personal or professional life? Blah blah.

Currently Technorati is tracking 60 million blogs. Some people have more than one blog, wanting to segregate parts of their lives into personal, business, political, gardening, etc. Sixty million blogs, slightly less than 60 million bloggers.

Well, now there are more. Not bloggers, though. Just blogs. Because your Xbox 360 can have a blog and give its opinion about you, your gaming progress and how depressed it gets when you fail to give it attention.

The Xbox Live service makes gamer information public; their rankings, reputation, what games they've played and so on. This information is used not only in Xbox Live, but several websites that gamers use for everything from finding opponents to establishing bragging rights. Microsoft emphasizes the ability to personalize your information in Xbox Live with a user icon, personal likes and dislikes, what zones you game in, and what games you're playing.

IT developers and members of the Xbox Community Developer Program, Trapper Markelz of Chicago, IL, and Steven Sopp of Durham, NC, decided to take the information and do something more than the typical community registration site.

In early 2006, Markelz attended the O'Reilly Emerging Technology Conference and was introduced to the term "blogject." Coined by technologist Dr. Julian Bleecker, it refers to an object that gathers data regarding its interaction with people or its environment - just like the Xbox stores information about the

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Some comments are simply straightforward. Matt posts on his Myspace blog, "My XBOX360 is watching me. This is weird."

And some comments are simply straightforward. Matt posts on his Myspace blog, "My XBOX360 is watching me. This is weird."

The blog also takes a page from some Nintendo games and employs guilt tactics seen in *Animal Crossing* and *Brain Age*. If you don't log in for a while, it begins to whine, asking if anyone else saw you, mentioning how it cried ("manly tears") and eventually getting angry and claiming that you are no gamer.

> **V1GILANC3's Xbox - 11/10/2006**
> Where is V1GILANC3 at? I want to disown him. I am putting myself up on eBay ASAP.

Posts like this makes one wonder about the future of blogjects, wondering if this could really happen. Are these Xbox blogs just a slippery slope of allowing our machines to have a voice?

Of course, the posts at 360voice.com are pre-coded responses repeated on many of the blogs, and real posts like this would take some pretty advanced artificial intelligence. But if the future of these gaming consoles includes such

sophisticated computing advances, we might actually begin to see our consoles getting their own blogs and saying what they really think about us. You'd have to make sure you were buying a console system who liked your puzzle games so it wouldn't talk smack about you on its blog about not letting it play *GRAW* with its friends.

One thing these blogs lack is the full community aspect of blogging: namely, allowing comments. Would Xboxes put comments on each others' blogs? And what about if other machines began blogging, like our cars and refrigerators? I can see a flame war happening with the console system flaming the car when you drive away from home on vacation.

The blog script is, as Jame Healy said, original and fun. One aspect of Xbox live is the reputation system, where if someone is a bad sport or not fun to play with, they will be tagged as such. The Xbox is proud when your reputation goes up.

> **Princess Sushi's Xbox - 11/13/2006**
> Princess Sushi decided to ride the gamer-train yesterday. I will admit it...

I was happy. What is the gamer score? 1499 is what it is! That is a profit of 60 points over last time! She rallied Viva Piñata adding 3 achievements, Gears of War, and then I came out of my trance and realized it was all over.

Did I mention that I like it when people like us? Princess Sushi's gamer reputation increased yesterday proving that she is an all-around nice girl.

When the media looks at blogging, they call it "citizen journalism" and wonder about the role of blogs in the future of media. But let's face it, most people use blogs as online diaries, listing what they did, whom they saw and how it made them feel. These blogjects fall heavily into the second category, and a good thing, too. I'm not sure how I'd feel if my console system began telling me its opinion on the latest elections (especially if it disagreed with me; that would be awkward). What these blogjects do, at present, anyway, is remind us that blogging needn't be the definitive next step in journalism. With the scandals surrounding blogging - people who don't check sources, libel lawsuits and job losses over whistleblowing - it's actually refreshing to see people using the blogosphere for just plain fun.

"What we are doing right now scratches the surface of what is possible once you start caching all this gaming data," says Markelz. He and Sopp keep a developers blog at http://blog.360voice.com/, and they are constantly looking to see what else they can add to their service to build a community as well as an innovative and fun tool for Xbox Live junkies.
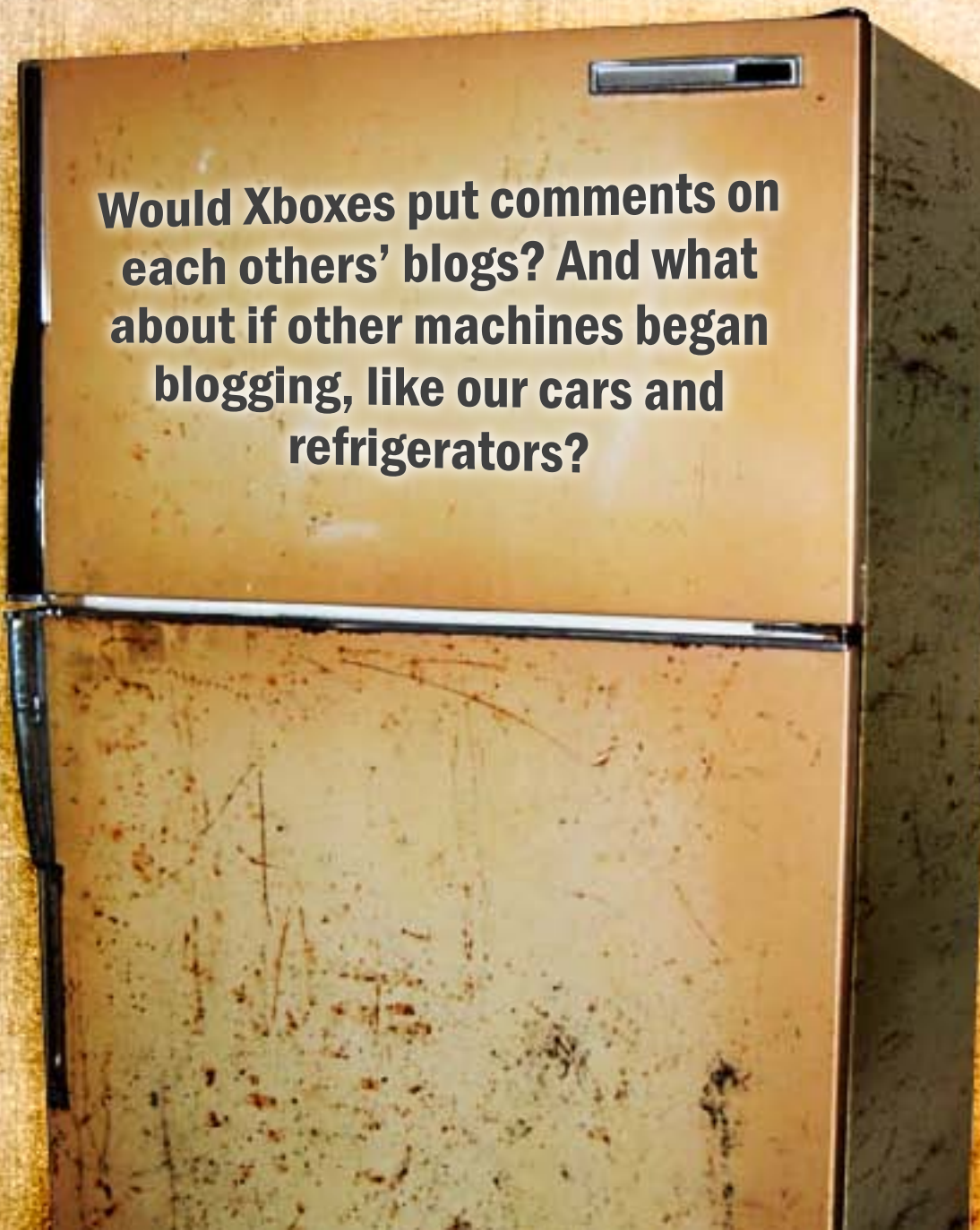
Although, I must admit I'm not sure if what console junkies need is encouragement to play more.

Fatty Chubs' Xbox - 10/26/2006
Fatty Chubs... I beg you! Please don't make me hurt another day... please?
COMMENTS

Mur Lafferty is a freelance writer and podcast producer. She has dabbled in as much gaming as possible while working with Red Storm Entertainment and White Wolf Publishing. Currently she writes freelance for several gaming publications and produces three podcasts. She lives in Durham, NC.

Would Xboxes put comments on each others' blogs? And what about if other machines began blogging, like our cars and refrigerators?

The PERCEPTION engineers

by Spanner

It's no secret that every product on every shelf in every store is subjected to a wealth of market research and end-user evaluation, but a little digging around in the Microsoft Game Studios earth uncovered an entire department of engineers and - what's more unexpected – psychologists, all dedicated to quantifying the appeal and fixing the flaws in the human element of videogames.

Daniel Gunn is a User Researcher at Microsoft's Games User Research Group, who tells me about the underlying function of his profession. "I'm trained in Human Factors Psychology," he says. "When most people think of psychologists, they typically think of clinical psychologists who treat people's phobias, personality disorders, depression and so on.

"Human factors psychologists, on the other hand, deal with how humans interact with the environment, tools, technology, information, etc. We strive to ensure that systems are safe, intuitive, productive and easy to use for the user; we focus design on the human factor. Most human factors psychologists have extensive training in human cognition, memory and perception. In addition, we typically have very strong backgrounds in experimental design and statistics."

Despite being trained for such a multifarious profession, it seems a little hard to figure how someone like Dan fits into the grand scheme of making videogames fun and playable. His colleague, and another User Researcher in the Group, Tim Nichols shed some light on an engineering psychologist's role in game development.

"Engineering psychologists are interested in the capabilities and limitations of users and how best to design for those capabilities and limitations," he begins. "Designers are always curious about how gamers interpret the game. Do they solve the puzzle the way they're supposed to, do they get lost in the city, do they use the right weapon against the boss, do they notice the box of unlit torches in the dark cave (looking in your direction, *Oblivion* tutorial!)?" laughs Tim, clearly someone who is not only an integral member of the industry, but also a dedicated gamer. He continues:

"At Microsoft Game Studios, game designers can turn to the Games User Research Group to help answer these

questions. Folks in my group have extensive training in how people perceive, how they interpret what they perceive and how they make decisions based on these interpretations. Combine that with our passion for gaming, and, basically, we're very good at measuring how gamers react to games."

Speaking to Dan and Tim has made me wonder about my own introduction to

Microsoft's current console. I can honestly say the Xbox 360, the PlayStation 3 nor the new Nintendo machine (whose name we shall not speak) held any interest for me. Eventually succumbing to a few test games in a local videogame store prompted an unexpected impulse purchase, one I didn't relish having to explain to my accountant (who is also my wife).

After a few hours of obligatory resentment, she reluctantly gave the new console half her attention and has

since worn away her fingerprints on the controller. Not only that, but my house has since become populated with exactly the kind of people you **wouldn't** expect to be spending their time on videogames; my father, my wife's friends, the nutcase kids from next door – none of them have ever been interested in this form of entertainment before. So why now?

I had to wonder how much of this unsolicited fascination was the result of a psychological prowess infused into a game's early development.

A previous report from the User Research Group highlights exactly how Tim and Dan's team deals with apparently minor aspects of a game (such as the user interface) to ensure even new players don't start off with a negative impression.

During tests of *Combat Flight Simulator*, the Group flagged a usability problem that anyone other than a trained psychologist might easily dismiss as nothing more than a niggle. One of the selections within a setup menu was a choice of three radio buttons for adjusting

the A.I. level of computer-controlled enemy pilots. Although it was quite reasonably assumed most people would be familiar with the term "A.I." as an acronym for "artificial intelligence," an early study showed a combination of trifling factors conspired to confuse the users.

The main problem was with the term itself. Although the participants had been selected due to their gaming and flight sim experience, the term "A.I." was apparently not as well known as the development team had assumed. It may be common jargon for developers, but only two out of seven testers were actually familiar with it.

Had this minor problem not been highlighted, there was a danger novice users would begin their first few games of *Combat Flight Simulator* against an incredibly difficult enemy and scrap the entire game before getting to grips with it.

Dan confirmed this preemptive "tweaking" of a game (and its interface system) is what the Group is all about. "The idea behind the Games User Research Group is very simple: Collect unbiased data from real users during

game development and use that data to make improvements in the game before it's released. Although the idea is a simple one, the process is far from simple." He laughs, summarily making light of his obvious hard graft. He continues:

"It's not as easy as just bringing in the target consumers and getting their feedback. Careful control and expertise in psychological research methodologies must be leveraged in order to ensure the information we get from users is unbiased. The nature of how the testing is set up, the interactions participants have with the experimenter and other participants all have to be carefully controlled in order to ensure the integrity of the data we collect.

"The reason our group consists of individuals with a strong background in psychology is that we are specifically trained to gather data from people in an unbiased fashion, and we are well aware of all the potential areas for bias to creep in and work diligently to minimize that possibility."

You'd think a team of psychologists searching and digging to find fundamental flaws in a game's design

would make them pretty unpopular with programmers, designers and artists, and Dan can recall a time when the Games User Research Group certainly had to prove its worth to the rest of Microsoft Game Studios.

"Eight years ago, when the group was first forming, many development teams questioned the benefit of having psychologists conducting user research on their titles," Dan remembers, "but our group has grown substantially over the past few years, which speaks to the importance Microsoft places on the work we do.

"The most progress has been made in how teams approach making games. User Research is now seen as a key ingredient in game development, and the importance of our work is recognized by the development teams. Today, it's actively sought after by the teams."

This idea of a more collaborative effort between the User Research Group and the game designers proved invaluable during the development of *Halo: Combat Evolved.* The development team worked hard to make the game consistently fun throughout (no small task in such a

huge, free-roaming game), though it turned out to only be fun **if** the users played as the designers intended. Which, of course, they didn't.

The Group's solution to this problem deviated from normal error counts and pass/fail criteria by bringing the actual game developers into the procedure to simply observe the tactics employed by users. The game had been designed with the assumption that players would be combating enemies in close quarters, but the shrewd users immediately discovered the targeting system allowed them to remain at a distance and pick off the enemies from long range.

Not only did this circumnavigate the deliberately designed "fun" aspects the developers had worked so hard to create, it also left the players bored and frustrated as they never actually saw the combat and felt their weapons were

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highly inaccurate from being used at such a long distance.

This time around, it was effectively the developers who were undergoing evaluation as they observed an unquestioned usability group. Their task became finding ways to **encourage** users to play as intended without forcing decisions upon them. This was achieved by adjusting enemy intelligence to dodge shots taken from long range and by advancing on the player to a position within the intended "fun zone." The

> ## The "power up" is almost reachable if I can just balance on this minute piece of scenery long enough to do a double jump in exactly the right place ... damn it!

targeting system was also adjusted to have a range limitation, thereby influencing users to discover the enjoyment of close-quarters combat.

Spending their days examining the workings of a gamer's brain provides the Group with a unique insight into the behavior and habits of those of us who dabble in the electronic arts; most of which we don't even realize ourselves. Tim provided me with an inside glance at the psychologist's perspective: "It's always interesting to observe gamers perseverate on a usability problem in a game build. So often, gamers will bang their heads against a wall repeatedly, trying to figure something out. This may be different from non-entertainment software, because gamers have an expectation (learned over time spent playing many games) that difficult tasks in a game environment are **part** of the game, that these tasks have findable solutions and it will be **fun** to finally uncover that solution."

And who among us can say they've never actually found themselves in exactly this kind of scenario?

The "power up" is almost reachable if I can just balance on this minute piece of scenery long enough to do a double jump in exactly the right place ... **damn it**!

I'm happy to hold up my hand and admit I've jumped, double jumped and thrown away life upon life trying to get that damn power up, only to succeed in attaining severe thumb cramps and a bitter taste of defeat.

The difference between a difficult, yet **deliberate** puzzle and an unsolvable discontinuity in gameplay is not something I have ever really considered, but the process of trying to ensure our perceptions are guided in the right direction is an art form in itself, one best suited not to a game tester or a programmer, but someone trained to understand the volatile inconsistencies of human nature, just as Tim explains: "When the difficult task is intentionally implemented by the game designer, this is the case: There is a challenge, and it's fun to overcome the challenge. (For example, think of the time when it finally all clicked in your head that one particular weapon used in one particular way would make a boss fight much easier.) Unfortunately, when there is an

unintentional difficulty in the game (a 'usability' problem), there may not be a 'eureka moment'; the problem might just be really, really hard to solve. In these cases, users sometimes continue to bang their head against the wall, trying to 'solve' a usability problem. The end result is that the user will eventually look up from their bleeding fingers and mangled controller, realize that the game is **not** fun and stop playing – even if they managed to solve the problem.

"We want to avoid these experiences at all costs. Psychology is a behavioral science, and while there's a certain degree of peering into the black box, it's definitely not a crapshoot when trying to figure out why people behave the way they do."

Although they work this closely with designers and development teams, both Tim and Dan spend a lot of time with individuals outside of Microsoft's user research program. Inevitably, these testers are also people keen to get involved in the dynamic area of engineering psychology and the gaming delights it brings. But, as Tim explains, a long history of videogame playing isn't

really what their bosses at Microsoft are looking for.

"I have friends with similar educational backgrounds who are testing how users interact with copiers or microwaves. Now, I have nothing against microwaves (Hot Pockets are a nutritional part of any meal), but I get to do the same work, only with space marines and RPG skill trees and awesome graphics and technology. This field is just **fun** to work in!" he says. "And inevitably, when I walk a usability participant to the exit, I'll be asked about job opportunities. I don't blame them; I'd want to do my job, too."

Dan has an equal passion for his job:

"If I wasn't working in the Games User Research Group," he told me, "I'd be dreaming about having this job! I'd be doing something that involved helping to make some sort of technology or device more user friendly, but it definitely wouldn't be as cool as games!"

I may not get to use my Xbox 360 as much as I'd like (or at all) due to the long line of "the recently converted" sampling their first taste of videogame

enchantment, but it's certainly a testament to the hard work of the people at the Games User Research Group the way they wait on my doorstep and huddle around my TV.

Fun, it seems, is a serious business, and it's reassuring (especially for those of us who stretched our bank account to its elastic limits in order to join the next generation community) to know there are people like Tim Nichols and Dan Gunn at the User Research Group working hard to realize our wild and varied perceptions of great videogames. **COMMENTS**

Special thanks to Randy Pagulayan, Tim Nichols and Daniel Gunn for their help and enthusiasm.

Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.

Fun, it seems, is a serious business.

the Escapist

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